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Temporary foreign workers: positive and negative impacts

February 11, 2012 - 4:34am **BY HOWARD RAMOS**

During the fall of 2011, the Conservative government implemented a number of dramatic changes to the Canadian immigration system. Pundits and critics filled much newsprint weighing-in on many of the changes, but few commented on the rapid increase in the number of temporary foreign workers coming to the country.

Unlike immigrants, temporary foreign workers come to Canada on restrictive visas and do not have the rights of permanent residents. Their admission to the country and employment are contingent on not taking opportunities and jobs away from Canadians.

Statistics on temporary foreign workers vary widely, depending on how they are compiled. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, in 2000 there were 177,781 temporary foreign workers in the country. By 2010, the number was 432,682 — a 140 per cent increase. According to Immigrant and Settlement and Integration Services, based in Halifax, the number of foreign workers entering Nova Scotia has almost doubled in the last five years, from 1,495 to 2,795.

When most Canadians think of temporary foreign workers, they likely think of field workers in Canada's agricultural belt or caregivers. A 2007 parliamentary report, however, shows that this is far from the case. In fact, "elemental workers and labourers" accounted for just over two per cent of temporary foreign workers. By contrast, about a quarter were "intermediate and clerical workers," another quarter were "professionals," and about a fifth did not state their skill level.

This means temporary foreign workers are employed in a cross-section of the labour market.

As the Canadian population ages and its birth rate remains low, the country faces a future tsunami of labour shortages. The temporary foreign worker program is increasingly seen as a quick means to divert it. As many of its supporters note, many migrants do not want to immigrate to Canada; they simply want to earn money and return to their homelands — something temporary visas promote.

Supporters also point out that immigrants have historically faced a devaluing of their human capital, often working in jobs that do not take advantage of their skills and credentials. It is a problem that has been well documented. Because most temporary foreign worker visas are contingent on an employer showing need for workers and offering them employment, such devaluing should not occur, and this form of migration should more seamlessly integrate migrants into the economy.

The Conservative government is quick to note temporary foreign workers wanting to stay in the country long-term have the option to apply for permanent residence if they take advantage of the new "Canadian experience" categories of immigration at the end of their visas. Whether this is common or not remains largely unscrutinized.

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Despite all of these possible benefits, the temporary foreign worker program also presents a number of problems. For example, the 2007 parliamentary report on the topic shows that the United States is the top source country for male temporary foreign workers, and the Philippines is the leading source country of women. This illustrates gender and racial components to how temporary foreign workers are admitted and potentially what jobs they will work.

The report goes on to note that language is often a barrier for temporary foreign workers, which can impede interaction with local populations and create obstacles in workplaces. It also notes that tension is seen with respect to temporary foreign workers experiencing racism and harassment. The same report also warns that temporary foreign workers may contribute to an overall lowering of wages.

Because many companies rely on third-party recruiters to attract these workers, Canadians should be concerned that the country's immigration system is being outsourced and marketized by placing immigration decisions in the hands of corporations and businesses rather than the state. The cost of allowing companies to recruit temporary foreign workers is high, both with respect to the potential of exploiting workers and in terms of creating a foreign underclass — a problem that has sparked tension in many European countries.

Concerns over exploitation were raised in the initial consultation phase of amendments to the Labour Standards Code and can be readily inferred by the proposed regulations outlined in the Nova Scotia's recent discussion paper on Regulations for Recruiters and Employers of Foreign Workers. These include provisions to prohibit employers from "eliminating or reducing a foreign workers' wages, benefits and other terms or conditions of employment" and to prohibit the practice of retaining foreign workers' passports or work permits. Clearly these are practices that have been used in the past and need to be stopped. The government of Nova Scotia should be applauded for taking initial steps to protect temporary foreign workers; however, more needs to be done.

A longer In Focus report on this issue can be downloaded free at www.policyalternatives.ca/offices/nova-scotia.

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By **HOWARD RAMOS**



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