

Time for action, not apologies

The *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, recognized annually on March 21, is about the need for action, not apologies.

Two years ago, the Canadian government issued a formal apology to Chinese Canadian families for the head tax, an element of the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1885. The



act required payment of a “duty” of \$50 for each person of Chinese origin entering Canada, with few exceptions. This was later raised to \$100 and again to \$500 – at the time the equivalent of two years’ wages at some of the most dangerous, gruelling, and unmonitored job sites in Canada. The tax remained in place until the act was replaced with a new *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1923, often called the “Chinese Exclusion Act” for its even harsher immigration restrictions.

So much for apologies. Fast-forward to 2008 when many of the workers brought to Canada under the federal government’s expanding *Temporary Foreign Worker Program* (TFWP) to fill mainly low-skill jobs are paying under-the-table head taxes to local job brokers for the opportunity. As for the 19,000 migrant agriculture workers brought here each season under the *Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program* (CSAWP), they continue to work under the threat of being sent home at any time if they raise even legitimate concerns about their working conditions.

Like their Chinese brethren a century ago, most of the workers in Canada under these programs are mainly out of the sight and the awareness of Canadians. They are often ghettoized in small communities across Canada, hidden away in workplaces where a lack of communication in their own language keeps them ignorant of Canadian labour and health and safety laws, usually being paid less than Canadians doing the same work.

Canadians have to stop pretending that this kind of discrimination is OK because of “labour market shortages”, and that the government’s rationale to provide business with a bottomless pool of cheap labour amounts to anything other than workplace racism. For landed immigrants and other racially-marginalized Canadians, the picture can be similar, typically earning less and finding it harder to get ahead than other workers.

A proven solution to this kind of systemic racism has been organizing. Forming a union in the workplace permits workers to be treated with equal dignity and respect, and to improve their lives with equal opportunities. As trade unionists, we have to be there to help them. Our fight against racism is fought through listening, solidarity, organizing, and helping to obtain the same rights and rewards for marginalized workers that other Canadian workers enjoy.

No more apologies. Actions speak louder than words.

In solidarity,

Wayne Hanley
National President



Fatal farm van driver, owner charged

Just hours before the one-year anniversary of the tragic van crash that killed three farm workers in Chilliwack, B.C., officials charged the driver of the overcrowded van as well as the company that owned and operated it. Each was charged with four counts each under the province’s *Motor Vehicle Act*.

The charges come on the heels of a report on its investigation of the crash by *WorkSafeBC*, the province’s compensation board. The report is available online along with an animated recreation of the crash at www.worksafebc.com.



Following the report's release in early February, it was announced that an as-yet undisclosed fine of as much as \$500,000 was expected to be levied against the employer.

"This devastating incident is just one more example of what can happen to workers in Canada's agricultural industry," says UFCW Canada National President Wayne Hanley. "It seems clear from the compensation board's report that the employer was criminally careless in its treatment of the workers, and the full weight of the law should be brought to bear if guilt is determined."

The 15-seat van was being used to transport 16 workers plus the driver on the Trans-Canada Highway in heavy rain on March 7, 2007, when it swerved into a passing transport, and then was hit by a second transport as it slowed, flipping it onto its roof on the highway's median. There were no seatbelts in the vehicle, and its tires were improperly inflated, with poor tread. The driver also did not have the training or licence to operate a vehicle with more than 10 passengers.



PXL members win first agreement

Workers represented by UFCW Canada Local 175 at PXL Cross-Linked Foam in Cobourg, Ont., have won a first contract that provides wage increases ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.00 an hour, plus new paid holidays and a number of language and procedural improvements. The 25 members at PXL, who make closed cell polyethylene foam products used in the automotive, air conditioning, packaging, and construction industries, joined the union through the efforts of the Ontario Organizing Council in 2007. Additional details are available online at www.ufcw175.com.



Denied health care, former migrant dies

Alberto García, the Mexican migrant farm worker who fought unsuccessfully to receive full cancer treatment in Canada, died in February in his rural village of San Matías Cuijingo (pictured) in the state of Juchitepec. He was 39, and is survived by his wife Mirabel and three children. UFCW Canada had been amongst those advocating for him to continue receiving treatment in Canada, but he was returned to México in December 2006 when his visa expired.



"This is a sad end to a shameful story," says UFCW Canada National President Wayne Hanley. "Brother García was working in Canada, at the invitation of Canada, and he should have been entitled to ongoing Canadian health care for his illness. Migrant and temporary workers deserve the same rights as Canadian workers."

García fell ill in May 2006 while working in a Simcoe, Ont., greenhouse under the *Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (CSAWP)*. He received health care in a London, Ont., hospital until he was forced back to rural México, where he could not afford chemotherapy or even palliative care.



Alberta Tories bring out the brooms

The Alberta election earlier this month was seen going into it by analysts as the best opportunity in decades for a shift to the left in the traditionally Conservative province. But after election day, Ed Stelmach's Tory government not only prevailed, but made major gains at the expense of the Liberals and NDP. Occupying 60 of 83 seats in the legislature at dissolution, the Conservatives swept back to power with a gargantuan 72 seats. Former NDP leader Ray Martin (*Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview*) and MPP Doug Elniski (NDP, *Edmonton-Calder*) both lost their seats, while current NDP leader Brian Mason (*Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood*) was re-elected, and Rachel Notley was elected to the only other NDP seat in *Edmonton-Strathcona*. That seat had been held previously by former party leader Raj Pannu. Liberal representation dropped from 16 seats at dissolution to just nine, with the Tories' remaining three seats coming from one Wildrose Alliance seat, one independent, and one vacancy. Detailed and historic results are available at www.nodice.ca.



Upcoming dates

- March 17:** National Council Workplace Rights Committee meeting, Renaissance Toronto Airport, Rexdale
- March 18:** National Council Women's Advisory Committee meeting, Renaissance Toronto Airport, Rexdale
- March 20:** National Council Education & Political Action Committee meeting, Renaissance Toronto Airport, Rexdale
- March 21:** *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*

For more, please visit us at www.ufcw.ca.

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