

On Occupational Health and Safety

How clean are your carrots?

by Jennifer DeGroot and Gustavo Mejicanos

Imagine a job that requires you to leave your family for up to eight months at a time. Picture yourself speaking a different language than your boss. Consider living where you work and never being able to leave or receive visitors without your boss' permission. Imagine knowing that should you raise any concerns you could lose your job and be sent home.

This is Diego's story. (We have changed his name in order to protect his identity). Diego - and approximately 400 people like him - come to Manitoba each summer through the Seasonal Workers Agricultural Program (SWAP), a federal arrangement between Canada and Mexico (and various other countries) initiated in 1964.

The well-being of Manitoba's seasonal workers is almost entirely at the whim of their employer. Most earn minimum wage. Despite the long hours there is no overtime pay. Part of the cost of their travel to Canada is deducted from their pay cheques.

The workers pay Employment Insurance and taxes, but are denied access to EI benefits, health care and the other benefits their income taxes help support. Seasonal workers are not covered by Manitoba Health Insurance.

Although some workers have spent the majority of their working life contributing to the Canadian economy - up to 25 years in some cases - they are not allowed to become permanent residents or citizens. At any time they

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may be sent home, if they are injured, the employer determines there is not enough work, or if they talk to a union organizer. Nonetheless, two years ago a group of SWAP workers managed to join a union.

Recent media reports state that workers at Mayfair Farms in Portage La Prairie chose to decertify after the long struggle to unionize. What those reports don't talk about is the threats that workers received when they expressed interest in unionizing. At least one strong union supporter was denied return to Mayfair Farms this year.



The day before the decertification vote the Mexican Consulate - who has a vested interest in keeping workers in Canada, as their remittances are a major source of national income - held an ominous closed-door meeting with workers at Mayfair Farms. Early this summer the Mexican Consulate visited all farms with seasonal agricultural workers in Manitoba, letting workers know that should they unionize they would be blacklisted.

The lack of permanent status, the ever-present threat of being sent home, their isolation and their inability to communicate in either official language leave them among the most exploited of Canadian workers. Yet, they keep coming back. As Diego explains; "I know I'm exploited here. At least if I work here my children eat. At home I'm exploited and my children don't eat."

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In Memoriam
Patricia Hebert
September 8, 1954 - June 24, 2009



Pat Hebert joined the Occupational Health Centre as our librarian in November of 1991. She was always willing to use her research skills to help workers answer their questions about issues at work. Pat was a strong believer in everyone's right to know about

any hazards in their workplace that could affect their health. Over the years we came to rely on her instincts and abilities to seek out and find that extra nugget of information that would help us with our work.

Pat also served terms as shop steward and Health and Safety Representative for the Occupational Health Centre's employees. For many years she was closely involved with her professional association serving on various committees.

We will miss her contribution to our work.

Opportunity to Participate in Rural Health and Safety Groups

The Occupational Health Centre is looking for workplaces in rural Manitoba to participate in health and safety groups to share information, resources and best practices at the community level with the goal of improving everyone's safety programs.

The initiative has been providing free teleconference education sessions and on site services. For a list of previous education sessions, presentations and resources, please visit www.mflohc.mb.ca : Special Projects: Safe Work Groups in Rural Manitoba.

By participating your workplace will

- gain an awareness of health and safety issues
- reduce injuries, WCB claims and related costs
- network with others in your community and similar workplaces throughout the province

- be recognized as a community leader for workplace health and safety.

We are looking for more workplaces in the following areas:

- Eastern Manitoba – Steinbach area
- Interlake and Selkirk area
- Parkland – Dauphin area
- Western Manitoba – Brandon area
- Northern Manitoba – Thompson area
- Southern Manitoba - Morden/Winkler area

If you're interested in participating, please contact Andrew Dolhy at 926-7906, toll free at 1-888-843-1229 or by e-mail at adolhy@mflohc.mb.ca.

Upcoming Events

Occupational Health Centre presents
Hazards: Identify, Communicate, Control
A Rural Safety Group Teleconference session
October 21, 2009
9:30 am -11:00 am
For more information call Andrew Dolhy toll free at 1-888-843-1229 ext. 227

Occupational Health Centre presents
Management Commitment and Buy-in for Your Safety Program
A Rural Safety Group Teleconference session
November 18, 2009
9:30 am -11:00 am
For more information call Andrew Dolhy toll free at 1-888-843-1229 ext. 227

Occupational Health Centre and Safe Communities Winnipeg present
Workplace Violence Prevention for Health & Safety Committees
A free one-day training session
November 19, 2009 or November 27, 2009
For more information or to register go to www.mflohc.mb.ca or call Diane Gagnon at 926-7904

Occupational Health Centre presents
Benefits of Self-Scheduling
A public presentation by Laura Devlin
December 1, 2009
9:00 am - 10:00 am
275 Broadway
For more information call 926-7909

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Workers are keen to get as many hours as they can while they are in Canada - up to 110 hours/week. A major gain for unionized workers had been the equal distribution of overtime hours. Without a union, in periods of work shortages, only those workers closest to the boss, such as crew foremen, would work overtime. With a union, overtime hours were shared equally. The union contract also ensured that workers who became sick were taken care of, instead of being sent home.

Unfortunately, the important gains that the unionized workers achieved were offset by the employer's decision to undermine the union by reducing the work week to a maximum of 70 hours. This sudden and arbitrary reduction in the work week meant that workers lost up to 30% of their income, a move Mayfair Farms knew would be devastating to workers trying to send as much money as possible to their impoverished families. Clearly this was a very effective strategy in reducing union support. Now that the union has been decertified, workers are only protected by provincial legislation.

To the credit of the current provincial government, agricultural workers are finally included under Employment Standards legislation. This grants them protections such as minimum wage, a day of rest and vacation pay. Workers compensation is also now compulsory for agricultural workers. The new Worker Recruitment Act, the first of its kind in Canada, ensures that anyone hiring migrant workers be registered with the Employment Standards Branch.

But there is much more to be done. Workers should have immediate access to Manitoba Health Insurance. Strengthened by the new Worker Recruitment Protection Act, the Manitoba Government should exercise its duty to monitor conditions at

farms. Immediate measures should be put in place to end blatant union-busting. Workers need the right to appeal a dismissal before being repatriated as well as full coverage under Manitoba Labour Standards, including the right to overtime and holiday pay, and the right to a working visa that would not bind them to a single employer. Finally, the Manitoba Government should develop a strategy that would allow workers like Diego and their families to become Canadian citizens.

The next time you open your fridge and pull out a carrot or onion, take time to remember Diego and his friends. It is up to all of us to demand that those who grow our food are treated with justice and equity and not as second-class citizens.

This article is reprinted with permission from Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative-Manitoba's Fast Facts (August 20, 2009). The article also appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on August 14, 2009.

Jennifer deGroot is a member of a new coalition supporting Manitoba's seasonal agricultural workers, and a research associate for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mb.

Gustavo Mejicanos, P.Ag. is Coordinator of the UFCW - Agriculture Workers Alliance support Centre

did you know...?

October 5 to November 1, 2009

is Canada's Healthy Workplace Month
for more information and ideas on
how to celebrate go to
www.healthyworkplacemonth.ca

**I want
to help!**

I will support the
Occupational Health Centre to help Manitobans
protect their health and safety at work.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Prov _____

Postal Code _____

Please make your cheque payable to the
MFL Occupational Health Centre
102-275 Broadway
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 4M6



OHC's Resource Centre: new and improved!

It's now easier to find information on health and safety hazards at the Occupational Health Centre's newly renovated Resource Centre.

The Occupational Health Centre (OHC) continues to have the most extensive workplace health and safety print resource centre in western Canada. This collection is now better organized and up-to-date, making it easier for you to find what you need.

We are also connected to a wide range of health and safety databases from around the world. We can help you find and interpret the information you need to improve health and safety in your workplace.

Get on line

Use the computer in our Resource Centre to search databases for the latest research and reports.

Get our fact sheets

We have over 40 fact sheets on a wide range of health and safety issues in a number of languages.

Come visit us!

Our Resource Centre is open to the public, Monday to Friday 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. You can look up information in the latest articles, books and magazines. Our staff can help you in your research.



Do you have an article, information or story about workplace health and safety that you want to share?

We reserve the right to edit. Send your newsletter contributions for "Focus on Occupational Health and Safety" to Karen Hamilton at khamilton@mflohc.mb.ca or fax: 956-0848

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If at any time you wish to be added or removed from our mailing list, please call (204) 949-0811 or fax to (204) 956-0848.

The MFL Occupational Health Centre (OHC) is a community health centre focused on promoting the health of Manitoba workers. We are a non-profit, charitable organization funded by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and by donations from individuals and unions. We are committed to working with all Manitobans who are interested in creating safer and healthier workplaces.

The OHC provides the following services to Manitobans:

- **medical services to help you find out if your job is making you sick**
- **education and assistance to workplace health and safety committees to identify and resolve health and safety problems.**
- **special initiatives with immigrant and Aboriginal communities**
- **information and library services, Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm**

Healthy Workplaces Healthy Workers Healthy Communities