

Precarity, health and migrant/immigrant worker struggles in Canada: Challenges for organizing

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Abstract: Alongside the racialized nature of temporary foreign worker programs a recent study shows that the work racialized Canadians are able to get is more likely to be insecure, temporary and low paying (Block and Galabuzi, 2011). Given employment is a social determinant of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2004; CSDH, 2008) and the nature and conditions of employment influence health and well-being through a variety of pathways, the racialized and gendered labour practices and policies of temporary foreign workers and many immigrant workers in Canada are directly and indirectly impacting workers' health. Drawing from struggles of racialized temporary foreign workers and immigrants supported by Montreal's Immigrant Workers Centre, this paper discusses the relationship between labour precarity, immigration status, exploitative labour conditions, and their implications for health, as well as the role of education and action in struggles for workplace justice and access to health and safety coverage.

Alongside the racialized nature of temporary foreign worker programs which have undergone significant expansion, a recent study shows that the work racialized Canadians are able to get is more likely to be insecure, temporary and low paying (Block and Galabuzi, 2011). But there has been little focus on the specific and broader health implications for either categories of these workers. With a few exceptions such as the work of Grace-Edward Galabuzi and Habiba Zaman, there has been relatively little focus on the impact of racialization on shifts in the nature of work in Canada.

Drawing from struggles of racialized temporary foreign workers and immigrants supported by Montreal's Immigrant Workers Centre, this paper discusses the relationship between labour precarity, immigration status, exploitative labour conditions, and their implications for health, as well as the role of education and action in struggles for workplace justice and access to health and safety coverage. It considers a number of aspects of what Galabuzi (2006) describes as Canada's 'creeping economic apartheid'. For example, when temporary foreign workers lose status, they lose access to healthcare. Some of these are workers who have stood up against exploitative conditions at work. Alongside, this, in the case of many racialized immigrant workers hired by temporary labour agencies, policymakers and labour law generally assumes the employer to be a unitary entity, which is not the case for agency workers' employment relations. Regardless of whether or not they work for a temp agency, workers supposedly have recourse to the Commission des Normes du travail/Quebec labour standards board (CNT) if their rights are violated. However, according to the CNT, in such cases it is unclear who is responsible and each situation is determined according to many different variables. This uncertain and legally complex

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situation acts to deter complaints: employers are protected from complaints against them and have no responsibility for workplace conditions. Besides the personal risk of job loss that workers face when grieving against their boss, the uncertainty of who is responsible further deters action. Without these protections, agency workers are often exposed to high-risk jobs without proper equipment and training. While employers and agencies try to avoid associated costs of such training, responsibility is downloaded onto individual workers. To cite one recent study, the Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et sécurité du travail (2011) found that the accident rate for temp agency workers was 10-11 times higher than for other workers. Another concern is that Emploi Québec, the government agency which manages social assistance and job referrals, has referred immigrant workers to temp agencies, thus providing a pool of immigrant labour to these kinds of jobs.

Given employment is a social determinant of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2004; CSDH, 2008) and the nature and conditions of employment influence health and well-being through a variety of pathways, the racialized and gendered labour practices and policies of temporary foreign workers and many immigrant workers in Canada are directly and indirectly impacting workers' health. "Social determinants of health are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness and struggles and suffering. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics" (World Health Organization). The working conditions and labour policies shaping the temporary foreign workers employment will be examined for their influence on several aspects of health.

In sum, our paper addresses the conditions, challenges and organizing strategies which workers themselves are using to contest precarity and the conditions of their employment, including the role of organizing by/with migrant workers to expand access to entitlements and on-the-ground resistance which migrant workers are undertaking to demand rights and entitlements from the Canadian state.