

EI + FTWP = BAD POLICY

Thursday, June 4, 2013

The Conservative government of Stephen Harper is pursuing a deliberate policy of creating a low-wage economy in Canada. The cuts to Employment Insurance, massive escalation of the Temporary Foreign Worker program, and the ongoing attacks on unionized workers combine to drive down wages while increasing insecurity. Employers get to hire unemployed workers and migrant workers at lower rates. There are five jobless workers for every job vacancy reported by employers, and youth unemployment in Toronto stands at 17%.

The new rules make it harder to qualify, and will require most unemployed EI claimants to accept job offers at significantly lower hourly wages than in their previous job. The shock will come when people find that turning down a job with wages 30% below what they earned may result in being cut off benefits. That will happen for so-called “frequent” claimants after just 7 weeks, or after 18 weeks for “occasional” claimants. Someone who takes a lower wage job may then have to accept an even lower wage during a subsequent claim, as well as travelling up to 100 km. to work.

At the same time, the Federal government is making it easy for employers to use the Temporary Foreign Worker program to evade investing in recruitment and retention efforts, or to pay decent wages and benefits. Three quarters of the new jobs created in Canada in 2010 and 2011 were filled by temporary foreign workers. The fact is that this program is neither a legitimate immigration policy, nor a strategy to address the labour shortages that employers allege exist in some industries.

In recent years, the number of people coming to Canada under the FTW program has tripled, and the evidence of abuse continues to mount. If these workers’ skills are needed they should be able to live and work here like the rest of us, with full legal protections - not fenced off in low-wage, un-policed job ghettos.

The challenge for the labour movement is to ensure that as we criticize this program and fight for social justice, we don’t fall prey to the anti-immigrant backlash and racism that is implied in some of the criticisms of the Temporary Foreign Worker program. We need to see this as a fight for the whole working class.

In light of the RBC case and the public outcry that followed, the Harper Conservatives clearly want this issue to go away. The recent announcement of quick fixes does not fix anything at all. It puts some window-dressing on a badly flawed program and diverts our attention from the need for more permanent immigration – and decent jobs, not precarious and temporary ones. At the same time Employment Insurance is being reduced to shredded safety net that fails most workers when they are between jobs.

We must stand united as workers and as communities, and change the direction the Harper Conservatives are trying to take our country.