

Chapter 9

Permanently Temporary: The Production of Race, Class, and Gender Hierarchies through a Study of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program

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ABSTRACT

Canada's immigration policy radically shifted under Stephen Harper's federal Conservative Party government, which ruled from 2006 to 2015. The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) is one key example of how migrants are increasingly entering Canada through a racially structured hierarchy of citizenship that privileges whiteness, while increasing the precarity of racialized migrants as they live, work, and contribute to the Canadian economy. This chapter offers a detailed policy analysis of Canada's TFWP, focusing on how the program marginalizes migrant workers as "un-Canadian" by placing them in racial, gender, and class hierarchies of belonging. This paper will discuss and outline recent changes and developments in Canada's TFWP, specifically those related to migrants classified as 'lower-skilled' workers. While some labour needs in Canada can be read as truly temporary (for example, where workers were required to construct venues for the

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2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games or other short-term construction projects), the lack of accountability within the TFWP in Canada has led to some occupations being misleadingly framed as ‘temporary’, thereby creating a class of migrant workers who are “permanently temporary.” I will argue that the labeling of racialized migrants as “temporary workers” offers employers a structural incentive to keep wages systematically low and maintain poor working conditions, all couched under a guise of “competitiveness.” In this light, “temporary” work becomes synonymous with low-wage exploitation, and continues to strengthen a historic racist nation-state project in Canada. Further, this paper will argue that giving temporary status to migrant workers, rather than permanent residency, serves to limit access to social rights and services, only deepening their levels of exploitation. Finally, I argue that recent increases in TFWs is a symptom of a global trend towards the neoliberalization of citizenship, which has seen the unethical individualization of rights and the privatization of services across many fields.

INTRODUCTION

Immigrant communities have a long tradition of being marginalized and subjugated in Canada for the purposes of capital gain. While the hyper-regulation and marginalization of migrant communities has been central to the Canadian nation-building project throughout Canadian history, I would like to focus on a specific site of that subjugation. Embedded within a broader context of shifting immigration and labour policy in Canada, this paper will look at a particular trend that has (re)emerged within Canada’s immigration system – the trend towards building a permanently temporary non-citizen migrant workforce, coupled with an increasingly neoliberalized framework of citizenship. Exploiting the labour of racialized peoples is not a new phenomenon in white supremacist capitalist societies, but now operates as a modernized policy regime that normalizes the systematic production of subjugated racialized people that has recently deepened in scope through Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Specifically, I grapple here with questions of policy regulation, racism embedded within existing policies, and general shifts within Canada’s immigration system that recruit migrants to work but discourage access to citizenship, belonging, and material state supports. I will sketch an outline of Canada’s contemporary TFWP while critically interrogating neoliberalized understandings of citizenship in Canada that allow for this form of precarity and marginalization to be structured into Canada’s labour market.

My intention is not to duplicate the work of other scholars who have thoroughly outlined the discriminatory history of Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW)

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