

Quebec's lead has been key for foreign farm workers

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Migrant workers are often described as Canada's "disposable workforce." Particularly true of migrant workers in the agricultural sector, the work is tough, low paying and seasonal.

However, there has been a consistent effort in the province of Quebec to improve migrant-labourer conditions — and this is significant in light of the larger reality of foreign temporary workers in Canada, and timely in view of how the growing season in Quebec agriculture begins just a few weeks from now.

The campaign to improve migrant-labourer work conditions in Quebec has been led by labour advocates inside of the Quebec legal system, and by the labour movement, notably the Quebec branch of the United Food and Com-

mmercial Workers Union (UFCW).

The UFCW has 1.3 million members in North America in a wide range of industries, including agriculture, but also food retailing, bartending and manufacturing. In Quebec, the UFCW has a long and successful history, which is a consequence of Quebec's pro-labour legal system.

Before UFCW Canada was established in 1988, the seeds of its growth were sowed in Montreal at a convention in 1983. It is therefore fitting that the UFCW has remained an important player in Quebec labour.

In a significant ruling in March 2013, Quebec Superior Court handed down a favourable ruling on a UFCW challenge to the Quebec Labour Code. The decision, in more specific terms, upheld a certification application made by UFCW Local 501 to represent migrant agricultural workers at L'Écuyer/Locas farm in Quebec. While the ruling has repercussions for the right of migrant agricultural workers to unionize in Quebec, it may influ-

ence other provincial courts in Canada to make similar rulings. In fact, the Quebec ruling was given greater strength in April 2013, when the former Parti Québécois government announced it would not appeal.

The Quebec experience shows how the UFCW and the legal system worked to improve the rights of migrant agricultural workers.

If viewed as a phenomenon of globalization, migrant agricultural labour poses obvious co-ordination challenges for any union seeking to certify workers. However, the UFCW's success in Quebec showed what can be achieved in this regard. In July 2013, for example, UFCW Local 501 applied for a union certification of the migrant agricultural workers of Les Productions Horticoles Demers Inc.

UFCW Canada says it is committed to "ensuring that all working people ... immigrant, migrant or Canadian born — can pursue the benefits of the Canadian experience." This statement foreshadows the emphasis that

UFCW Canada will place on the future organization of migrant workers in this country.

Given that there are roughly 300,000 migrant workers in Canada, it is reasonable to assume the UFCW will seek to certify a sizable portion of this unrepresented working population.

The UFCW defines social justice as "fighting for the rights of people who are exploited." From this definition, it is reasonable to forecast the UFCW will continue to support those experiencing marginalization inside of Canada, no matter where they are from.

While the UFCW has been successful in extending representation to Quebec's migrant agricultural workers, Quebec's labour-friendly legal structure proved to be a critical ally in the fight for union certification.