From “Canadians First” to “Workers Unite”
Evolving Union Narratives of TFWs

Jason Foster
Athabasca University
St. Mary’s University

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Background

- Changes to TFWP, economic boom lead to influx of TFWs in 2000s

Chart 1: TFWs Resident in Canada
Program growth led to increased political debate about its role in labour market
  ◦ Has become permanent feature of economy
  ◦ Concerns about wage suppression, union avoidance

TFWs are vulnerable workers with restricted labour and citizenship rights
  ◦ Concerns about exploitation

Economic crash intensified controversy
Method

- Narrative Analysis of public statements by union leaders and officials (quotes in articles, guest columns, letters to editors)

- Search of 21 media outlets (16 major dailies, 2 national newspapers, 2 wire services, MacLean’s Magazine) between 2006 and July 2012

- 182 articles/items in total
Narratives

Three broad narrative arcs:

1. Initial Reactions: Canadians First
2. During the Boom: Vulnerable TFWs
3. After the Crash: Conflicted Stories
1. Canadians First

- TFWs replacing Canadian workers
  - Lowering wages
  - Union avoidance
  - Undermine workplace safety

- Focus is on consequences for Canadians and unions

- TFWs partially to blame for being willing to work for less
“We're not talking about supplementing numbers here. We're talking about replacing Canadian construction workers. This is not a union issue anymore. This is a Canadian issue.”
Paul Walzack, Alberta Building Trades Council, Calgary Herald, April 16, 2006

“It's inappropriate and entirely unacceptable that Canadian employers are using federal and provincial immigration programs to gut living standards for Canadian workers.”
George Heyman, President BCGEU, Canadian Press, August 31, 2006
2. Vulnerable TFWs

- TFWs are vulnerable, exploited workers needing protection
  - Rights violated
  - Broker fees
  - Broken promises

- Calls for TFWs to be given labour, citizenship rights

- TFWs as passive, union as active
“The program, as it now stands, marginalizes temporary workers and creates a precarious workforce without the full rights of other workers in this country and opens them up for abuse by their employers. These workers should have the rights for fair wages and safe workplaces, the right to join a union and the right to remain in Canada and apply for citizenship”

Rick Clarke, N.S. Federation of Labour, Canadian Press, April 16, 2008
“We welcome foreign-trained workers provided that British Columbians and Canadians have been offered the work first, and that foreign workers are not used as a source of cheap labour.”


“The program ensures no responsibility for the treatment of the workers once they arrive in Canada and are put to work. ... they don't know what their rights and responsibilities are and they're completely vulnerable to their employers.”

Wayne Peppard, Vancouver Sun, February 24, 2007
3. Conflicted Stories

- Elements of both previous narratives
  - Concern for Canadians re-emerges, but TFWs’ welfare remains salient

- Reveals a complex, conflicted relationship with issue

- More diverse responses. For example:
  - “Temporary foreign worker is a bad word to me.” Ian MacIsaac, Carpenters Local 1178 (N.S.), Globe & Mail, May 23/11
  - I am concerned that we may be potentially exploiting them. ... It is serfdom for the modern age. Alex Shevalier, Calgary District & Labour Council, Calgary Herald, September 20/11
“My heart goes out to temporary workers who have lost their job and face (leaving). But as the economy slows, the fewer jobs should be made available to Canadians.”

Gil McGowan, Alberta Federation of Labour, Canwest News Service, February 25, 2009

“The primary victims are migrant workers who lack access to many of the rights and protections accorded to Canadians and can be paid less. Beyond that, all workers and their communities are threatened by the government's low-wage strategy.”

Ken Georgetti, CLC, Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, May 18, 2012
Conclusion

- Evolution tracks the struggles of a movement grappling with a new and strange issue
- Exposes inherent tensions between protecting members and advocating social justice
- Suggests business vs. social unionism dichotomy more complex than thought
Thank you.