

The Changing Face of Farm Labour in British Columbia: Exploring the Experiences of  
Migrant Quebecois and Mexican Agricultural Workers in the Okanagan Valley

by

Geody Cassandra Leibel  
B.A. Honours, Okanagan University College, 2005

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in the Department of Anthropology

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the type of farm labour desired by the North American agricultural industry and the strategies used to procure that labour have undergone significant changes. Rather than relying on immigrant or domestic workers, many growers are now choosing to import temporary foreign workers under contract programs such as the Canadian Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (MSAWP). This thesis discusses the implementation of the MSAWP in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, a region that has for many years depended upon the labour of migrant Quebecois workers to harvest its crops but has for several years experienced severe agricultural labour shortages. Based on fieldwork which explored the experiences of Mexican and Quebecois migrant farmworkers in the Okanagan, it is suggested that the valley's labour shortage has largely been created by the agricultural industry and government, neither of which have improved the conditions of farmwork to the point where agricultural labour would appeal to Canadian workers, and that the MSAWP's implementation has a number of implications, both positive and negative, for agricultural labourers and farmers in the valley.

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**Dedication**

For my mom - I couldn't have done this without you. Thanks for listening, never failing to tell me exactly what you think, and attempting to proofread the rough drafts of countless essays. I don't blame you for falling asleep. And for Froylan. You changed everything.

"We used to buy our slaves. Now, we rent them from the government."

~ American farmer commenting on the *bracero* program

(Garcia 1980:230)

"We are men and women who have suffered and endured much and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The color of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process...all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, we are not agricultural implements or rented slaves, we are men."

~ Cesar Chavez, in an open letter to E.L. Barr Jr.,  
President of the California Grape and Tree Fruit  
League

(Horwitz and Fusco 1970:14)

"Historically, agricultural workers in the Okanagan Valley, including the Quebécois, have been exploited and abused. That history is now being repeated with temporary workers from Mexico who, in some cases, are treated like slave labour. Farmers have chosen to deal with the labour shortage that has been caused by the mistreatment of Quebécois workers by hiring foreign contract labour rather than addressing the needs and issues of domestic farmworkers. But as long as Mexican workers are treated in the same way as other workers in the valley have been, they will only solve farmers' labour problems in the short-term. What we have in this valley is not just a labour shortage, but a shortage of farmers with realistic expectations."

~ Observations of an Okanagan farm labour  
advocate on B.C.'s implementation of the  
Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker  
Program

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Running in a long narrow cleft between the Cascade and Monashee mountain ranges in British Columbia's interior, the Okanagan Valley is unlike any other region in the province. It is one of Canada's only deserts, but the dry stretches of bunch grass, antelope brush, and ponderosa pine that grow in the sandy soil of the valley bottom are interrupted by a chain of cold, deep finger lakes and a brilliant green patchwork of vineyards, orchards, and vegetable farms. Even with the lakes and the fruit trees, the valley is dry and hot, with a climate more similar to that of California than any location in Canada. It is also similar to California in terms of its agricultural industry, which produces a variety of tree fruits, ground crops, and wine grapes.

Indeed, it is agriculture that makes the Okanagan unique within Canada and for which it is best known. Yet, while much is heard about the products of that industry, little is said about the farmworkers whose labour makes their existence possible. Throughout the valley's history, Okanagan farmers have relied on various groups of migrant workers for agricultural labour, a situation that remains unchanged today. However, due to the countrywide labour shortage, farmers' dissatisfaction with migrant Quebecois farmworkers, and increasing vineyard acreages, the agricultural labour force in the Okanagan Valley is now undergoing a transition from migrant Quebecois labourers to temporary foreign workers hired through the Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (MSAWP). This trend is closely linked to changes that have occurred within North American agriculture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transforming farming into a corporate industry that demands high productivity and low-cost labour. It is also tied to

North American consumers' continued demand for cheap food and governments' implementation of policies designed to satisfy that demand. On a larger level, the importation of temporary agricultural workers is embedded within the processes of globalization that have resulted in the mass migration of people from developing to developed countries in search of work. Consequently, both MSAWP and Canadian agricultural labourers have much in common with each other and with migrant farmworkers throughout North America, while at the same time differing in several ways.

This thesis explores the experiences of Mexican and Quebecois migrant farmworkers in the Okanagan with the aim of understanding why the MSAWP was implemented in the valley and what the implications of that implementation will be for both agricultural labourers and farmers in the valley. I argue that some of these implications are positive; for instance, there are indications that some farmers' resistance to joining the MSAWP and their desire to continue attracting Canadian labourers has resulted in an improvement in housing and wage rates on some farms. In addition, the arrival of large numbers of Mexican workers in the valley has attracted some media attention and has made farmworkers' issues more prominent in local discourse. However, the chapters to follow will show that the MSAWP also has a number of negative aspects that seem to be impeding the addressing of such issues. As a result, it appears that the experiences of both Quebecois and Mexican farmworkers will continue to be characterized by exploitation and abuse at the hands of farm management, poor living and working conditions, restricted social relations, racism, and discrimination.

In the remainder of Chapter One, I will review the literature within the social sciences that focuses on migrant farm labourers working within the North American

system of industrial agriculture and then discuss the theoretical orientation and design of my study. To facilitate a deeper understanding of migrant farmworkers' situations in the valley currently, Chapter Two will briefly examine the history of migrant farm labour in the Okanagan and will then describe the valley's present agricultural structure. Chapters Three and Four will look at the experiences that Quebecois and Mexican SAWP workers have as migrant agricultural labourers in the Okanagan. Chapter Five will explore the factors underlying the popularity of the MSAWP among Okanagan farmers, as well as the implications of the program's adoption for Quebecois pickers, Mexican workers, and the valley's farming community. Chapter Six will offer a general conclusion and some observations concerning the probable future direction of agriculture and agricultural labour in the Okanagan. In closing, a number of recommendations which farmers, farmworkers, and social service providers in the valley felt that the B.C. agricultural industry and the government should act on if they expect to find a lasting solution their labour dilemmas will be summarized.

### **Literature Review**

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to make use mainly of the literature within the social sciences that discusses migrant labour in the context of industrialized commercial North American agriculture. As my focus is on foreign and domestic farmworkers in Canada, I feel that the North American literature surrounding agricultural labour has the most to offer in terms of constructing a relevant framework for the analysis of the data collected through this project. In Canada, there is a small body of work that focuses specifically on the MSAWP and other guestworkers, and a slightly larger one that discusses domestic farmworkers. In the U.S., migrant Mexican farmworkers have been

the subject of numerous studies, while agricultural guestworkers from other countries and American farmworkers have also received some attention. Further, where guestworker programs are concerned, there are more similarities between Canada and the U.S. than between Canada and other countries where temporary agricultural labour has been studied (Wong 1984:93). Migrant Mexican workers have been a key source of farm labour in the U.S. for decades and the MSAWP has a great deal in common with the American *bracero* and H2-A programs, which were designed to bring Mexican farmworkers to the States under temporary work visas (93). At the same time, the U.S. has populations of domestic migrant farmworkers that are similar in many ways to the Quebecois. In addition, the structure of both the agricultural industry and the farm labour market is much the same in Canada and the U.S. (Winson 1993). For all of these reasons, the results of the research that has been conducted among both guestworkers and domestic migrants in the U.S. can be more directly applied to my analysis than the findings that have been made in, for instance, Western Europe (Martin and Miller 1980) or South America (Saint 1981).

The bulk of migrant agricultural labour studies carried out in North America have focused on California and the Midwest, a trend that was initiated among anthropologists by Goldschmidt (1947), whose now classic study of three communities in the San Joaquin Valley compared areas controlled by large corporate farms with those where small family farms predominated. Thomas's (1985) and Kramer's (1987) case studies of, respectively, lettuce and tomato farming, described the subsequent "farmerless farm" phase in California agriculture, which saw the development of farms that were controlled by a corpus of corporate executives, managers, and foremen and worked by migrant

labourers. Thomas (1985) also analyzed the links between labour markets, labour processes, political inequality, citizenship, and organizational structure in the US agriculture industry that facilitate and perpetuate the provision of temporary migrant workers to farmers, re-examining theories of dual and segmented labour markets in the process. Similarly, Burawoy (1976) has compared the interrelationship between citizenship and mobile labour in the U.S. and South Africa.

Other studies, such as those undertaken by Fischer (1953) and Friedland and Nelkin, (1971) offer detailed descriptions of the technical, cultural, and social dimensions of labour-intensive agriculture, but have been criticized for confining their analyses to particular migrant crews, crops, states, or communities (Griffith *et al.* 1995:22). Griffith *et al.* (1995) sought to give this type of detailed local study a more regional and national scope through the application of an “ethnosurvey” approach, which combined ethnographic work, participant observation, and survey research to seven research settings.

Much of the research concerning migrant agricultural labour in the U.S. has concentrated on Mexicans, who have provided American farmers with a continuous labour supply both legally, under the auspices of initiatives such as the *bracero* guestworker program, and illegally, as undocumented immigrants (Massey 1987; Hansen 1988; Howell 1982; Pfeffer 1980; Zats 1993; Chavez 1991, 1994; Piore 1979; Portes 1978; Garcia 1980; Wells 1981, 1990, 1998). Basok (2000b) also offers an interesting discussion of the *bracero* program, comparing it with the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in an attempt to illustrate why many *braceros* remained in the U.S. illegally, while almost all SAWP workers return home. In a similar vein, Papademetriou,



Martin and Miller (1983), Miller (1986), Miller and Martin (1982), and Bustamante (1984) have criticized the tendency of American guestworker programs to import 'temporary' labourers who do not leave the country when their work term has expired. Other farmworker populations that have attracted some academic interest include West Indian and Jamaican guestworkers (Foner and Napoli 1978; Wood and McCoy 1985; Griffith 1986) and African Americans (Harper, Mills, and Parris 1974).

In Canada, studies of migrant agricultural labour, both foreign and domestic, have been located in Ontario, and to a lesser extent, on the Prairies. Much of this work has been done by Satzewich (1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1991), who has studied the various groups of migrant agricultural labourers employed throughout Canadian history, and Basok, (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002) who conducted fieldwork among seasonal workers in the Leamington vegetable industry. Arat-Koc (1992), Bolaria and Li (1985), Whyte (1984), Smit, Johnston, and Morse (1984), Parr (1985), Winson (1993, 1995, 1996), Wall (1992), and Haythorne and Marsh (1941) have also written on the subject. The reach of the research has been expanded westward by Laliberte and Satzewich's (1997) discussion of coercion and paternalism in the recruitment of Native migrant labour in the Alberta sugar beet industry, Smart's (1997) exploration of the experiences of Mexican SAWP workers in Alberta, Shields's (1988, 1992) analyses of class struggles between industry, farmers and workers in B.C., Bolaria's (1988, 1992) descriptions of B.C. farmworkers' health, safety, and living conditions, and Basran, Gill, and MacLean's (1995) examination of the issues confronting Indo-Canadian farmworkers and their children in B.C.

Most of the Canadian work surrounding migrant agricultural labour, such as Bezaire's (1965) investigation of labour shortages and grower lobbying, has been

concerned with the various contract and guestworker programs designed to supply farmers with labour. The Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Programs have drawn the most attention in this regard, having been analyzed by Binford (2002), Basok (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002), Colby (1997), Wong (1984), Preibisch (2004), Cecil and Ebanks (1991, 1992), and Whyte (1984). Again, these studies have been primarily situated in Ontario, with the exception of Smart's (1997) project in Alberta. Regardless of where in Canada they were carried out, such studies have reached similar conclusions, linking the implementation of guestworker programs to the increasing flexibilization of labour, the rise of globalization, and the consolidation of farms into industrial agribusinesses, while at the same time indicating that guestworkers often encounter poor working and living conditions, racism, social exclusion, and paternalistic employers.

The unfreedom of farmworkers, unionization movements, issues of development and underdevelopment, and migrant networks constitute several common threads running through the migrant agricultural labour literature generated on both sides of the border. The degree to which migrant agricultural labour is unfree, and, consequently, vulnerable to coercion, paternalism, and deproletarianization, frequently constitutes the theoretical core of studies conducted from the perspective of political economy. A large body of work, including that of Brass (1997, 1999), Knight (1987), Archer (1988), Miles (1987), and Rao (1999) has been generated around unfreedom, particularly that of peasants and workers in non-agricultural sectors who are ensnared in various forms of coercive wage-relations in underdeveloped countries. Less has been said about domestic and foreign agricultural workers' unfreedom in North America, but Cohen (1987), Angelo (1995),

Basok (1999, 2002), Bolaria (1992), Satzewich (1991), Wall (1992), Smart (1997), Wong (1984), Mann (2001), and Krissman (1997) have all taken up the subject to some extent. For the most part, the distinction between freedom and unfreedom has been presented as an either/or dichotomy, with migrant contract labourers being categorized as unfree. However, some have argued that such a concrete distinction cannot be made, and that the separation between freedom and unfreedom should instead be viewed as a continuum (Basok 1999; Smart 1997).

Linked, if not always explicitly, to the concept of unfreedom is the research that explores migrant farmworker movements and unionization attempts. Some of the first American research in this area, such as Garcia's (1980) study, followed labour initiatives like Cesar Chavez's United Farmworker Movement and the formation of the National Agricultural Workers' Union. Canadian researchers who have studied farmworker organization, including Satzewich (1991), Wall (1994), Parr (1985), Mitchell (1975), Stultz (1987), and Shields (1992), have been more interested in explaining the failure of farm labour to effectively organize than in the organizational movements themselves. However, the American and Canadian studies arrive at similar conclusions, contending that, in addition to the impediments imposed by the nature of seasonal agricultural employment and the structure of industrial agriculture, the state and farmers engage in strategies that have effectively blocked the long-term success of worker unionization. In addition, the lack of unions and the therefore limited ability of farm labour to effectively advocate for change is often pointed to as one factor underlying the poor working and living conditions, as well as the health risks, encountered by migrant workers in Canada and the United States. The work of Bolaria (1988, 1992) in Ontario and B.C. and Mines

and Kearney (1989) in California, for instance, revealed that the living and working conditions of both domestic and foreign migrant labourers are deteriorating, while their health risks have been heightened by factors such as the widespread use of pesticides and herbicides.

Social scientists have also been intrigued by issues of development and underdevelopment associated with migration, but have mainly discussed such issues as they relate to the flows of people and resources from rural periphery areas to urban cores (Kearney 1986:338). Those development studies that concern migrant agricultural workers in North America usually explore return or circular migration (Reichert 1981; Gmelch 1980; Cornelius 1991; Wood and McCoy 1985; Basok 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Binford 2002; Colby 1997). The majority of these studies have taken Mexican communities and workers as their subjects and have found that returning workers invest their savings in land and housing, rather than in what Kearney (1986:346) terms “productive infrastructure” within their communities; further, the workers tend not to acquire agricultural skills that are transferable to their home regions while they are away. As a result, the effect of migration on sending communities tends to be either negative or neutral (Basok 2002).

Related to circular migration are migrant networks, which have also been the subject of inquiry within the social sciences. Many of these studies have had an urban focus, but Mines and Massey (1985) and Mines and Kearney (1982) have discussed migrant networks in a rural American context. In addition, Kearney (1980) and Stuart and Kearney (1981) have developed the concept of the Articulatory Migrant Network to address the issues of agricultural migrants’ movements into various geographic,

economic and social spaces and their subsequent remittance of earnings and goods to sending communities. Davis and Winters (2001) add gender to their analysis, outlining the differences in how male and female Mexican migrants form and use networks. In Canada, Basok (2002) has described migrant networks somewhat differently, positing that they are an important element ensuring the continued flow of agricultural workers from developing to developed countries.

In closing, it should be noted that most North American migrant agricultural labour research, particularly in Canada, is gendered male. This can be attributed to the fact that the majority of migrant farmworkers, especially those hired through guestworker programs, are men; female migrant labourers tend to be concentrated in other sectors of the economy, such as the garment industry (Ortiz 2002). Nonetheless, women do work as migrants in agriculture, and have been studied by Barron (1999), who discusses how the work of migrant women in U.S. and Canadian agriculture has been influenced by the implementation of NAFTA, as well as by Morokvasic (1984) and Phizacklea (1983).

### **Theoretical Orientation of the Study**

In terms of theoretical orientation, the majority of migrant agricultural labour studies conducted in North America tend toward political economy. Political economy links the distribution of power with productive activities such as farming, focusing on how political structures, combined with market forces, perpetuate local and global inequalities (Stubbs and Underhill 1994; Jenson et al. 1993). It also examines the relationship between the use of migrant workers and the structure of the capitalist system, the processes of racialization embedded within that system, and the denial of access to

citizenship rights which accompanies both the former and the latter (Wall 1992; Bolaria and Li 1985; Mann 2001; Satzewich 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1991).

The political economy paradigm provides a strong theoretical basis for analyses of agriculture and migrant labour in Canada, where unequal economic growth between Northern and Southern countries, processes of globalization and transnational migration, the development of new labour procurement strategies, and political considerations at both the provincial and federal levels have all shaped the decision to implement the MSAWP (Basok 2002). Accordingly, the data that was collected over the course of this project will be situated within and analysed through the literature and theory of political economy.

Demand for foreign labour and the consequent migration of workers has typically been approached from three perspectives within political economy (Basok 2002:4). The first of these, exemplified by the work of Castles and Kosack (1985), relates the employment of foreign labour to shortages in the surplus population of workers available in a country. A second approach, known as segmented market theory, links the employment of foreign workers to the need to fill jobs in vulnerable economic sectors, which, because they are characterized by poor working conditions and low salaries, are not desired by domestic workers (Piore 1979; Cohen 1987). The third perspective indicates that the demand for (im)migrant labour is fuelled by global restructuring, which involves the outsourcing and downsizing of businesses and the formation of transnational corporations in an attempt to reduce production costs; as a result, many jobs have become low-wage, insecure, and unattractive to domestic workers (Sassen-Koob 1985; Fernandez Kelly 1985).

A fourth theoretical perspective, focusing on the freedom and unfreedom of migrant labour, has been used by Basok (1999; 2000; 2002) and Satzewich (1989; 1991) as an analytical alternative to the three approaches outlined above. Unfree migrant workers can be defined as “foreign-born persons who seek to relocate themselves to different sites of production but whose work and stay within a social formation are subject to temporal constraints imposed by the state” (Basok 2002:14; Satzewich 1991:38). Consequently, such workers are unable to change jobs and must be willing to provide labour whenever and wherever it is needed. Unlike immigrants, temporary migrant workers are not granted the rights of either citizenship or permanent settlement by the states that receive them, and do not have access to liberal democratic rights (Basok 2002:38). Further, unfree labour cannot circulate in the labour market and is often seen as necessary only when labour markets are unable, in Miles’s (1987:199) words, to “deliver labour power at a price which permits the creation and appropriation of surplus value, making it necessary to recruit and retain labour by the use of political and legal compulsion and constraint.” It can, therefore, be argued that the unfree labour of migrants is a structural necessity only if they are hired because domestic and immigrant workers could not be employed under the same conditions in a capitalist society (Basok 2002:14).

Why certain categories of workers, such as migrant agricultural labourers, are willing to accept the conditions of captivity that are imposed upon them as unfree labourers has been a recurrent question among researchers (15). Using the framework of political economy, some have attempted to answer this question in terms of economic need, pointing out that the conditions of economic inequality that exist between developed and developing countries force many citizens of the latter to seek employment



abroad and to accept the exploitative working conditions they often experience (Bonacich 1972; Piore 1979; Cohen 1987). The literature that has resulted from research investigating migrant agricultural labour in the Canadian context echoes this contention and adds to it, indicating that workers who are unfree and tied to a specific employer through labour contracts such as those contained in the MSAWP do not have the option of refusing employers' demands at the risk of losing their jobs (Binford 2002; Basok 2002).

Further, because the employer controls the migrant worker's visa, contract agricultural labourers are placed in a state of what Tuddenham (1985:39) refers to as "economic peonage," where "the worker maintains his or her legal status at the sufferance of the employer, who determines whether that worker returns again the next year... a worker wishing to retain legal status is bound to do as the employer desires." Consequently, contract workers like those imported under the MSAWP become, in Griffith's (1986:881) terms, part of a "captive labour force" and must remain with the same employer for a predetermined period or abandon any hope of improving their economic circumstances through participation in the program (Howell 1982:136). Thus, in Wong's (1984:87) terms, the MSAWP is a "bonded forced rotational system" which moves labour in a circular pattern between the sending and receiving countries.

Another strand of thought within the theoretical literature of unfreedom compares seasonal workers to illegal migrants, frequently thought to be the most exploited and vulnerable labour force, and asserts that seasonal workers are equally, if not more, vulnerable and exploited (Wood and McCoy 1985:138). Indeed, Tuddenham (1985:38), in his discussion of illegal migrant labour in the United States, questions the frequent



assumption in this literature that undocumented workers are easily exploited. He argues that “the rigors of undocumented status tend to self-select workers who know their own worth, demand to be paid accordingly, and because they are free to change employers, will seek the better job” (38).

Guestworkers, in contrast, cannot change employers if the working conditions are not to their liking (38). For instance, Calavita (1992:58) comments that seasonal farmworkers such as the Mexican *braceros*, who were imported to the U.S. between 1942 and 1964, operate outside of the free labour system, are contracted for short periods of time, and are delivered to the employer to do specific tasks as the need arises, “thus providing an important element of predictability, stability, and above all control, in what is otherwise an unpredictable production process.” She notes that while illegal immigrants often desert their jobs in crops with extremely poor working conditions, *bracero* workers, were, like those hired under the MSAWP, confined by law to a given crop and employer (56).

In comparison with free workers, unfree labour is highly appealing to farmers, which at least partially explains the increasing use of temporary foreign worker programs as a labour procurement strategy in North America (56). Indeed, applying the theory of unfree labour to Canada, Basok (2002) argues that it is the workers’ unfreedom that not only farmers but also governments value most. Mexican workers, who are recruited by the Mexican Ministry of Labour and allocated to the growers by the Canadian state, are valued by Canadian farmers because, unlike domestic workers, Mexican migrant labourers comply with their conditions of unfreedom, remaining until their contracts

expire, not taking time off, and providing farmers with a cheap, dependable, docile labour force (Basok 1999; Satzewich 1991).

It has also been noted that unfree labour is far more attractive to governments than is illegal immigrant labour and that legislators structure contract labour programs in a manner that benefits farmers and politicians but leaves workers open to exploitation (Satzewich 1988; 1989a). Contract labourers whose work permits expire after a set period of time are less likely to remain in the country illegally than are other (im)migrants (Basok 2000b). This enables governments to avoid the settlement of undesirable populations within their borders, populations that might later become a burden on the state's social welfare system (Miller and Martin 1982; Basok 2000b). Temporary foreign workers can be used until they are no longer physically able to do the work, at which point they are returned to their countries of origin, thus freeing the country in which they were employed from any provision of long-term social benefits or medical care (Stuart and Kearney 1983; Zats 1993; Binford 2002). For instance, though deductions are made from MSAWP workers' pay for Income Tax and the Canada Pension Plan, they are not entitled to any of the benefits that accrue to Canadians who pay the same taxes (Basok 2002). Rather, the burden for the care of injuries that may have been received while they were employed in Canada falls on the workers' families and the Mexican government (Binford 2002).

While providing the state with workers that are inexpensive in a social welfare sense, contract programs that provide unfree labour also allow governments to satisfy the interconnected demands of the farm lobby for cheap labour and consumers for cheap food. Several researchers working from a political economy perspective have applied the

theory of cheap food to their analyses of unfree agricultural workers, arguing that the increased number of temporary agricultural work permits issued in Canada, as well as U.S. farmers' continued reliance on Mexican labour, both legal and illegal, can be partially explained by consumers' demand for inexpensive food (Shields 1988, 1992; Mitchell 1975; Stewart 1974). Growers usually attempt to lower their production costs by decreasing the amount that they spend on labour, which continues to represent one of their largest expenditures (Shields 1988:97). Various strategies have been implemented with a view toward lowering labour costs, but temporary foreign worker programs are fast becoming the strategy of choice within North America, particularly in Canada.

Smart (1997) suggests that farmers' desire to keep food prices low through the securing of low-wage, dependable, and, preferably, unfree labour has been intensified by the signing of free trade agreements such as the NAFTA. In Canada, free trade has heightened the reliance of farmers on multinational firms as purchasers and placed them under considerable pressure to keep the prices of their produce low, as there is always the possibility that agribusinesses will shift their operations elsewhere if the domestic costs of commodity production rise too high (141). At the same time, free trade has encouraged the large-scale importation of foreign produce, forcing Canadian farmers to compete for a market with fruit and vegetable producers in Mexico, California, and other low-wage countries (Shields 1988:97). As a result, agricultural lobbyists have demanded that governments implement contract labour programs so that Canadian farmers can remain competitive in the global marketplace (Smart 1997).

The research that I conducted in the South Okanagan indicates that a combination of the factors identified by researchers as underlying the North American agricultural

industry's growing reliance on guestworkers are at play in the valley. Consequently, each of the approaches taken by those analyzing migrant agricultural labour from the perspective of political economy has something to offer in terms of understanding the changes currently occurring within the Okanagan's agricultural labour force. For this reason, the discussion to follow will draw on each of the ideas mentioned above to some extent, but will take the theory of unfree labour as its main focus. Following Smart (1997) and Basok (2002), the position will be taken here that Mexican SAWP workers in the Okanagan are both free and unfree and that their "neobondage", as Breman puts it (Ortiz 2002:396), not only increases their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation but also makes them a highly attractive workforce to farmers and governments.

### **Description of the Study**

This study was designed answer two questions: what were the factors underlying the implementation of the Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (MSAWP) in the Okanagan, and how will the program's adoption affect migrant farmworkers and farmers in the valley? Working within the broad framework established by these two questions, the study sought to achieve three main objectives: First, to investigate whether the implementation of the MSAWP in the Okanagan has been accompanied by the same issues surrounding worker mistreatment that have been of concern in other provinces and on the Lower Mainland. Second, to describe and compare the experiences of migrant Quebecois and Mexican labourers in the Okanagan Valley in terms of working and living conditions, racism, discrimination, exploitation, and employer-employee relations. And third, to discover what the changes in the migrant labour force indicate about the future development of the Okanagan agriculture industry.

The research was conducted in the area surrounding the Southern Okanagan community of Oliver over the course of the 2006 growing season, which began in early May and ended, with the exception of grapes, in late October. It seemed best to focus on the Oliver area for a number of reasons. Located at the extreme southern end of the valley, it has the highest concentration of farms, orchards and vineyards in the Okanagan. It is where Quebecois migrant workers arrive first and in the largest numbers when they come to the valley and where the only migrant labour camp in the Okanagan, Loose Bay, is located. In addition, it is where most MSAWP labourers have been contracted to work.

The methods used to conduct the project were qualitative and ethnographic, involving a combination of formal interviews, informal conversations, observation, and the monitoring of local media. There were four participant groups, French-Canadian and MSAWP migrant farmworkers, farmers, and local agencies providing charity and social services, each containing a sample size of ten. While they were not originally included in the research design, I also asked three crew bosses to participate in the study after it became apparent that they had a significant effect on the experiences had by Mexican workers.

Although the sample sizes were small, it was necessary to limit the size of the groups for two reasons. In practical terms, the number of participants I could contact and interview was restricted by time and budgetary constraints. More importantly, it was necessary to know the participants well and to establish a relationship of trust with them in order to gather accurate data. This was particularly true in the case of the workers, many of whom were initially suspicious of my motives and were unwilling to answer my questions truthfully, if they would answer at all. I attempted to gain a broader range of

opinions by speaking with social service providers and farmers, who passed on what they had heard from farmworkers and the wider farm community. It is also my hope that because they were drawn from a variety of farms, picker camps, and agencies the participants are fairly representative of the range of opinions and experiences found within the larger populations to which they belong.

Several strategies were used to locate and recruit participants. I contacted a number of farmers by telephone and then visited their farms to have a brief conversation and evaluate whether they could contribute to the project. Many of these farmers in turn recommended others who they felt should participate in the study, and I visited them also. Farms included in the study ranged in size from a small family farm of fifteen acres to a large corporate vineyard covering thousands of acres, and produced a range of crops, from vegetables to tree fruits to grapes. Some hired only Quebecois or local workers, others relied solely on MSAWP labour, and the rest brought in all three types of worker. I was able to retain the same farmer sample over the course of the study.

I selected Quebecois migrant workers by visiting the central migrant labour camp, camps located on farms, and gathering places in town, and asking the workers to participate. It should be mentioned that although most migrant domestic farmworkers in the Okanagan are from Quebec, a number come from other provinces or countries. However, because they form the majority within the valley's migrant farmworker population, this study focused on Quebecois workers. For the purposes of discussion here I will refer to the migrant domestic farmworker population in the Okanagan as Quebecois, though I am aware that it is not exclusively so.

The initial sample of domestic farmworkers was made up of four men and six women who ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-nine. For some of the workers, this season was their first in the Okanagan, while others were returning for a second year. Over the course of the summer, they worked on numerous farms of various sizes, some of which also had MSAWP workers. It was difficult to maintain contact with this participant group due to their frequent moves from farm to farm in search of work, as well as their tendency to take trips to other parts of B.C in between jobs. One man returned to Quebec before the final set of interviews was conducted in September and was replaced with a woman, but I did manage to keep in touch with the other nine by phone and e-mail and speak with them before they left the valley.

It was somewhat more challenging to find Mexican migrant workers who would agree to participate in the study. Since many were either housed in remote areas that were difficult to locate or on farms where the gates were locked after farm hours, I found it necessary to ask farmers for their permission to speak with the workers. In cases where this was granted, the workers were often reluctant to speak with me out of fear that so doing might jeopardize their continued participation in the MSAWP. They were particularly wary of the consent form that I asked them to sign as a condition of participation in the project and did not like the idea of putting their name to anything that might connect them to the interview. Eventually, my interpreter and I interviewed ten men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five employed on five farms that varied according to size and crop. Some were returning to the Okanagan for a second year, others had worked in different parts of the country, and the rest had never worked in Canada. Unlike their Canadian counterparts, the conditions of the MSAWP meant that



the Mexican workers were obliged to remain resident on one farm for the duration of their employment, so we were able to interview the same sample in both May and October.

Charity and social service providers were selected mainly through referrals from farmers, workers, and the recommendations of the service providers themselves. They were initially contacted by telephone and then spoken to in person, and were involved in a number of ways with agricultural labour issues and addressing the needs of farmers and farmworkers. Three were involved in some capacity with Loose Bay, one was a member of a church group that provided free meals for migrant farmworkers, two worked in Oliver's labour employment office, two were active in a farmworker advocacy group, and two were counselors at the Women's Centre and the Francophone Association. Meeting with this group was unproblematic and the participants did not change over the course of the study.

Two sets of semi-structured, formal interviews were conducted in May, September and October with each participant group. Since my knowledge of both Spanish and French is basic, an interpreter was required for the formal interviews with the Mexican workers. Use of an interpreter was not required for the interviews with the Quebecois workers because only those who were fluent in English were asked to participate in the study. Interviews with the Quebecois and Mexican migrant workers occurred in a group format after working hours in the communal living conditions of the camps. They took place over a period of several days and were conducted as a series of three focus groups which centered on the topics that were being explored through the research. Although the interviews were structured around sets of questions, they



proceeded more in the manner of conversations than interviews, and, as a result, lasted anywhere between one and four hours.

The interviews with farmers and social service providers took place on an individual basis in a number of locations, from packinghouses and coffee shops to, on one unpleasant occasion, a tomato field that made up in heat what it lacked in shade. These interviews were completed in one day, typically in one to three hours. Depending on the preference of those being interviewed, the conversations were either tape-recorded and transcribed or written down in my field notes. The taped interviews with Mexican workers were translated and transcribed by my interpreter.

In the months between the formal interviews, informal conversations took place with the Quebecois and Mexican workers, farmers, and crew bosses. Observation of the Quebecois' and Mexicans' living and working conditions, as well as their interactions with each other, crew bosses, farmers, and local residents occurred over the course of the study as I visited the workers on the farms and in town. At the same time, I listened to the area's radio broadcasts and read the Oliver newspaper, the *Chronicle*, to get a sense of how the local media was constructing the events unfolding within the valley's agricultural industry. The conversations that took place with the study participants during the workday and in social settings were recorded in my field notes, as were the observations that I made when I visited the farms.

It should be mentioned here that I did not spend an equal amount of time with each participant group. As the summer progressed, I found myself spending the most time with the Mexican workers. There were a number of reasons for this; on the most practical level, the Mexican workers were simply easier to talk to, due to MSAWP

regulations that effectively confined them to farm property. I could usually locate the men without much difficulty, as they always returned to their bunkhouses in the evenings, and were happy to talk as they had little else to do. The Quebecois, who were free to work and live where they pleased, were far more challenging to find. They often relocated their camps to other farms at a moment's notice, and I had a number of participants go off on spur-of-the-moment weekend jaunts to Victoria and Vancouver. Their evening activities never followed any sort of pattern or routine, but typically involving as they did marijuana, beer, and loud music, were not conducive to conversation. Had it not been for the technology of cell phones, which enabled me to contact and meet with them wherever they happened to be, I would have lost touch with the Quebecois participants immediately.

Added to this, I seemed to develop a better rapport with the Mexican workers than with the Quebecois, particularly as I learned more Spanish and was able to have longer conversations with the former. Once their initial suspicions had lessened, the Mexican workers were willing to welcome a stranger into their midst as a potential friend and ally, and, eventually, to share their problems, hopes, and dreams with me. The Quebecois participants remained more aloof. In many ways, the Quebecois picker community is a very closed one, and full entry can only be gained if one is a young Francophone from Quebec. As a western Anglophone, I was treated politely, but not really included as a member of the group. By the end of the season I would have described the Mexican workers as friends, but the Quebecois pickers as acquaintances. Consequently, I feel that in this thesis I have provided a richer ethnographic picture of the Mexican workers than

of the Quebecois. Given the way that events unfolded in the field, and the fact that the main focus of the study was the MSAWP, I think that this is understandable.

Much of what I saw and heard while I was in the field seemed, in way, to be history repeating itself. The Okanagan agriculture industry has been characterized by recurrent labour shortages caused in large part by the poor working and living conditions, racism and discrimination encountered by migrant farmworkers in the valley. Each shortage has been alleviated by the arrival of a new wave of migrant workers from a different source, but only temporarily. Young people from Quebec and men from Mexico are the most recent groups to become agricultural labourers in the Okanagan, but they are experiencing all of the same problems that were faced by their predecessors. Therefore, to place the experiences of Quebecois and Mexican farmworkers in context, it is helpful to have some knowledge of the history of migrant agricultural labour in the Okanagan. Accordingly, Chapter Two will discuss migrant farmworkers in the past with a view to understanding the situation of those working in the valley in the present.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The History of Agricultural Labour in the Okanagan Valley**

The managed (im)migration of agricultural workers has a long history in Canada, where, although farmers have been able to control the cost of labour, they have had little influence over its supply (Wall 1992; Laliberte and Satzewich 1997). Securing dependable sources of farm labour is a problem that has plagued Canadian farmers for decades, and through initiatives ranging from the contracting of Polish WWII veterans to a program which forced Native people to work in the Alberta sugar-beet fields, the federal and provincial governments have diligently but unsuccessfully attempted to provide farmers with a reliable labour source (Wall 1992; Laliberte and Satzewich 1997).

In the Okanagan Valley, farmers have always relied on migrant and/or immigrant workers as the primary source of low-cost labour (Lanthier and Wong 2002). Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Okanagan's agricultural labour force has gone through several phases, with various ethnicities being the dominant work group at different times (2002). When the history of farm labour in the Okanagan is considered, a pattern in the treatment and perception of migrant workers by locals and farmers emerges.

Consequently, the experiences of farmworkers in the valley have been quite similar from decade to decade, typically involving substandard living and working conditions, exploitation, racism, discrimination, and social exclusion, segregation, and isolation from Okanagan communities.

Like much of British Columbia, the Okanagan Valley was mainly settled by British immigrants during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Koroscil 2003). The settlers initially engaged in cattle ranching, but a transition from ranching to orcharding took

place in the 1890s (Andrew 1954, 1955). This shift was prompted by the commercialization of tree fruit production which occurred when Lord Aberdeen, the Governor General of the period, purchased a large parcel of land at the north end of the valley and began exporting his crops using the recently built railway (Lanthier and Wong 2002; Dendy 1974:68). Lord Aberdeen's interest in the valley led to widespread promotion in England of the Okanagan as an ideal place to live and fruit farming as a desirable way of life, which, coupled with the Laurier government's desire to populate Western Canada with settlers drawn from Western European countries, prompted a marked increase in British immigration to the area during the early twentieth century (Lanthier and Wong 2002).

Land values rose dramatically as fruit trees were planted, with the result that most buyers of farmland were upper class Britons (Ormsby 1931:82-100; Koroscil 2003:5,106). Orchardring thus came to be seen as the genteel occupation of gentleman farmers, and the Okanagan became a destination for immigrants, in Barman's (1984:34) words, "of the better class." Being of the better class, orchardists preferred to oversee the production of their crops rather than do the labour themselves (Koroscil 2003). For this they relied on migrant and immigrant workers, who, in the early years, were either Native or Chinese (Knight 1978; Hill-Tout 1977; Thomson 1978; Koroscil 2003).

As time went on, farm ownership in the Okanagan ceased to be a purely British affair, with Portuguese and Indian immigrants buying up a significant amount of farmland from 1950 onward (Anderson and Higgs 1976:119; Koroscil 1987:44-46). Farmers' dependence on migrant and immigrant farmworkers remained unchanged, however, and over the years Chinese railway workers, Doukhobours, Japanese internees,

and immigrants from Portugal and India also provided agricultural labour in the valley (Lanthier and Wong 2002).

Though they may have differed ethnically, non-local farmworkers were treated in much the same way from decade to decade. Living conditions were usually substandard; most workers either tented in temporary labour camps or made do with whatever building shed or shack that was made available to them (Lanthier and Wong 2002). Buildings and camps tended to be overcrowded, minimally furnished, and lacking privacy and basic amenities. Doukhobour workers, for instance, were given old chicken coops and a horse barn to live in, Chinese labourers stayed in dilapidated bunkhouses on farms or in small rooming houses, and Portuguese immigrants were provided with one-room shacks that did not have running water or adequate heating (Mann 1982: 21-28; Lanthier and Wong 2002:8-15).

Working conditions were also difficult, involving extremely long days and hard physical labour (8-15). In addition, the work environment usually contained a high degree of exploitation, which was closely linked to the workers' status as ethnic minorities. The general opinion within the Okanagan farming community was that farmworkers who were not white would accept low wages, and farmers repeatedly lobbied governments to increase immigration from countries such as China so that they would have continual access to sources of cheap labour (Mann 1982:20; Basran 1995:25). As a result, (im)migrant farmworkers in the valley were often paid far less than locals for the same work (Lanthier and Wong 2002). At the same time, they were expected to work in conditions that were unsafe and for periods of time that were frequently excessive. Some workers were further exploited by labour contractors, who acted as intermediaries

between farmers and workers and charged the latter a variety of exorbitant fees which ensured that they would remain in the contractor's debt and under his control (Mann 1982:21-28).

The exploitation of migrant and immigrant farmworkers in the Okanagan was encouraged in large part by discriminatory legislation that the provincial government, often at the urging of farmers, implemented from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on. Farmworkers were excluded from the protective legislation enjoyed by other B.C. workers, such as the Payment of Wages Act (that sets minimum wage standards), the Workers Compensation Act, the Unemployment Insurance Act and the Maternity Protection Act (Basran 1995:29; Bolaria & Li 1985:87; Sandborn 1982:4). In addition, some legislation was designed to prevent farmworkers from becoming farm owners; Chinese and Japanese workers, for instance, were barred from owning land and marketing their own produce while at the same time being restricted as to the sorts of jobs they could do (Sandborn 1982:4; Ujimoto 1975:115). Limiting their employment options in this way made it difficult for farmworkers to advocate for any improvements in working and living conditions, as did the active opposition to farmworker unionization taken by farmers and the provincial government (Shields 1988).

As is evident in their treatment by both farmers and the B.C. government, the exploitation of farmworkers was underpinned by racism. Although their labour was needed, the various farm labourers who came to the valley were viewed with fear and suspicion due to their different ethnicities and cultures (Lanthier and Wong 2002). Indeed, as Aguiar *et al.* (2005:131) point out, "the history of the Okanagan is of making space white" and of "corralling" ethnic minorities in segregated areas. There was



certainly a general sense among farmers, residents, and politicians that although certain groups might be temporarily needed as farm labourers, they were “outsiders” who were not desirable as permanent residents of the valley (Lanthier and Wong 2002).

Accordingly, various strategies were employed to exclude migrant farmworkers from local communities. For instance, when they were permitted to live within town limits at all, Chinese workers were confined to sharply demarcated ‘Chinatowns’, while Japanese labourers were only allowed to do their shopping on certain days and at specific times (Mann 1982:21-28; Lanthier and Wong 2002:12). Added to the barriers of language and cultural differences these strategies of exclusion resulted in the isolation and segregation of workers, both physically and socially, from Okanagan communities (Lanthier and Wong 2002).

The racism directed at migrant farmworkers in the valley also took the form of racialization, an ideological process that Satzewich (1988:233) defines as a key structural element in the political economy of migrant labour. In Mann’s (2001:62) words, racialization involves “attributing particular characteristics to particular people based upon socially determined criteria.” As a process, racialization is both exclusionary and allocative, precluding certain groups of people from working in certain sectors of the economy and assigning them to specific positions in production relations (Satzewich 1988:233). The racialization of (im)migrant farm labour has been common in Canada, where the state and farmers have identified specific populations as best suited to agricultural work and have then targeted them for recruitment (Satzewich 1988; 1991). Usually, farmers have then lobbied governments to enact legislation that prevented farmworkers from seeking employment in other sectors (Satzewich 1988; 1991).



In the Okanagan, each successive group of (im)migrant farm labourers has been racialized to some extent, as is apparent in the legislation that restricted them to certain sectors of the B.C. economy. Farmers and governments also identified each group as well-suited to agricultural work; Native workers, for instance, were said by growers to be “especially proficient in picking because they have great finger manipulation” (Lanthier and Wong 2002:4). Similarly, the B.C. Fruit Growers Association (BCFGA) described Doukhobors as “used to agricultural labour” and “known for hard work” while the Japanese were said to be “well used to manual labor, and quick to learn the essentials” (10-12). Accordingly, they were targeted by farmers in conjunction with the federal and provincial governments and recruited through various means, such as offering higher wages than were available elsewhere or promising to provide housing (10-12). At the same time, the racialization of these workers as suited to agricultural work was used as a justification for the poor living and working conditions that they were offered (10-12).

While there were other factors involved, the substandard living and working conditions, exploitation, discrimination, segregation, isolation, and racism that each group of (im)migrant agricultural workers experienced in the Okanagan helped to push them out of farmwork, and often out of the valley entirely (Lanthier and Wong 2002). Consequently, farmers, local residents, and the Provincial government are at least partly to blame for the Okanagan’s recurrent agricultural labour shortages. Indeed, each of the aforementioned factors has been commented upon time and time again by labour activists as largely responsible for the valley’s persistent lack of farmworkers (2002). During the 1966 labour shortage that developed when Portuguese workers became less available, the B.C. Federation of Labour (BCFL) indicated that the agricultural industry could not

“continue to exist on the exploitation of its labour force” and that the shortage could only be solved on a long-term basis through legislation to improve living and working conditions (2002:15-16). In support of the BCFL’s statement, the representative of unionized packinghouse workers in the Okanagan stated, “farmworkers are the most abused form of labour in our society, and it is high time something was done about it” (15).

Nonetheless, the treatment of farmworkers has changed little, and labour shortages have become more and more acute. The last shortage that occurred, during the 1970s, was described as the worst the valley had ever seen, and highschool students had to be pressed into service as fruit pickers (17). Within a few years however, a new group of migrant labourers began to arrive in the valley and the agriculture industry was once again saved from collapse (17). These workers were primarily young people from Quebec, and they arrived in such numbers, over 18,000 between 1976 and 1983, that they soon made up the majority of the Okanagan’s agricultural labour force (17). For the most part, the experiences of Quebecois farmworkers have followed the pattern established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As has happened in the past, the poor conditions encountered by the Quebecois have resulted in a gradual decline in the number of young people coming to the Okanagan from Quebec. Consequently, the valley is presently in the midst of yet another labour shortage.

Some farmers have attempted to encourage Quebecois workers to continue coming to the Okanagan through strategies that have been effective in the past, such as higher pay and better accommodation. This time, these strategies were not successful, and farmers were forced to look elsewhere for a source of labour. They once again turned

their gaze to other countries, but rather than pressing the government to bring in immigrant workers, Okanagan growers have opted to push for the expansion of the federal Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (MSAWP). In 2004, the Provincial government agreed to join the program, initiating a transition from domestic migrant workers to foreign contract labourers in the Okanagan that is quickly gaining momentum.

### **The Okanagan Valley's Agricultural Structure**

To understand the transition to temporary guestworkers that is taking place in the Okanagan, it is necessary to situate the valley's agriculture industry within the context of developments that have affected the agricultural sector countrywide. While almost everything about the agricultural industry in Canada has changed significantly over the past century, the presence of migrant workers within it has remained constant. The small populations in rural areas coupled with the distances to be traveled and the nature of agricultural work has meant that many wage labourers employed in the industry were and are temporary seasonal migrants recruited and organized through either public or private programs (Basok 2002:26-28). The current demand for foreign temporary agricultural labourers, contracted under guestworker programs, is directly tied to the structure and restructuring of Canadian agriculture which, although it has occurred on a micro level, reflects the macro-processes surrounding globalization and the flexibilization of production that have transformed the way food is produced, distributed, and consumed in North America (Shields 1988:94).

The nature of farming began to change in Canada during the 1920s, when the process of growing grain shifted toward mechanization and industrialization (Basran and

Hay 1988:8). Nonetheless, Canadian farming was not significantly reshaped until 1945, when farmers were caught in what Mitchell (1975:18) terms a “cost-price squeeze.”

Cost-price squeezes, where the price of producing a commodity rises more quickly than the return the farmer receives when it is sold, are a recurrent phenomenon in industrial agriculture and had been experienced by Canadian farmers prior to 1945 (18). What differed about this latest squeeze, however, was the solution developed to cope with it.

Previously, raising the market price of farm commodities had relieved pressure on farm income, but the new technology available in the post-war era enabled farmers to cultivate more land with greater efficiency and productivity (Mitchell 1975:19). Initially, increasing farm size and yield per acre effectively addressed the problem, but the market price of farm commodities remained low while the costs of land and farm inputs, as well as farmer debt, continued to climb (21). As a result, many farmers were pushed out of the business and conditions became difficult for those who remained (21). The widespread industrialization of farming, coupled with the increased capital investment required to farm, initiated a trend toward the concentration of land and capital among larger producers, with the traditional farming unit that relied on unpaid family labour being replaced by what Shields (1992:248) describes as “commercial or corporate family farming.”

The advent of commercial family farms, which depend upon employed labour, the logic of the market, and intensive capital investment, have created a strange paradox in that, although the number of farmers has declined with the industrialization of farming, the number of wage labourers working in agriculture has continued to rise (Mitchell 1975:18). Consequently, despite increased mechanization, there are now more migrant

farm wage-labourers than there are farmers (26). The rising demand for farm labour is primarily due to the growth of certain agricultural sectors that Canadian farmers view as not amenable to mechanical production processes, such as the greenhouse vegetable industry (Shields 1988:94). It is, Shields (93) argues, this reliance on paid workers, which has made the farmer "less an independent producer than a boss over labour," that most distinguishes today's farms from those of previous generations.

In the early 1990s, it was predicted that the movement toward corporate family farming would culminate in the takeover of farming operations by multinational agribusiness corporations like those that have come to dominate production in the United States, but despite the steady rise in farm size and fall in farm numbers, this has not occurred (Shields 1992:254). In large part, this is because farming in Canada is viewed by agribusinesses as too risky and not profitable enough to engage in directly (254). Still, Canadian farmers have not escaped the multinationals' net. An arrangement has developed whereby agribusinesses enter production contract arrangements with independent farmers, who agree to sell their produce to an agribusiness that then processes and markets it (255). Several of the multinational firms which operate the agribusinesses also control the supply of farm inputs such as machinery, chemicals, feed, and seeds, so that, whether they are selling or buying, farmers are firmly integrated into the structure of corporate agriculture (Shields 1992:255).

The globalized nature of food production, Canada's entry into free trade agreements such as the NAFTA, and the related reliance of farmers on multinational firms as suppliers and purchasers has placed farmers under considerable pressure to keep the prices of their produce low (Smart 1997:141). Canadian farmers must now compete

for a market with fruit and vegetable producers in Mexico, California, and other low-wage countries, and they are well aware that agribusinesses will, with little compunction, depart in search of more profitable pastures if the domestic costs of commodity production are too high (Shields 1988:97). The federal government has also played a part in pressing farmers to keep their costs at a minimum, beyond its role in encouraging multinational companies to establish themselves in Canada and enthusiastically entering free trade agreements. The Canadian state has long pursued what Shields (97) refers to as a "cheap food policy" aimed at supplying consumers with food at the lowest possible price. Accordingly, agricultural tariffs are kept low, creating an attractive market for fresh fruit and vegetables from other countries that compete with Canadian produce (Atkinson 1988:35).

In addition, Canadian farmers continue to be pinched by the cost-price squeeze, which, particularly in the fruit and vegetable sector, was never adequately addressed by attempts to boost productivity and efficiency through mechanization (Shields 1992:255). Given the current nature of the industry, it is hardly surprising that farmers today are as concerned with rising input costs as with the prices their produce will fetch, and that the decision to harvest a crop depends in equal measure on the cost of harvesting it and its market price (255). At present, wages represent the second largest component of farm operating expenses and are the input cost, especially in labour intensive crops such as fruit and vegetables, that farmers have been most able to control (93). As a result, farmers have constantly sought ways to keep labour costs at a minimum, which has had significant effects on migrant agricultural workers.

The processes of globalization currently impacting farmers have been manifested among both foreign and domestic farmworkers in the form of labour flexibilization, which involves the replacement or displacement of workers in the U.S. and Canada, many of whom were formerly well-paid and unionized, by, writes Smart (1997:141-142), "a growing body of 'contingent' workers, both at home and in other countries." Labour flexibilization is evident in the rising number of temporarily, seasonally, and contractually employed foreign nationals in Canada, who are part of a trend toward a segmentation and polarization of the workforce whereby Canadian workers are pressed to accept reductions in social programmes and wages so that their industries can remain 'globally competitive' (141-142). While Canadian farmworkers are neither well-paid nor, with the exception of B.C.'s Canadian Farmworkers' Union (CFU), unionized, they have confronted such demands in the form of cuts to Labour Relations legislation governing hours of work, minimum wage, and workers' compensation (Shields 1992:252).

An added dimension of labour flexibilization in Canada is the sustained attack launched by governments and industry on organized labour that has eroded the strength of many unions including the CFU, which has witnessed a drastic decline in its B.C. membership (252). Government and farmer opposition is, of course, not the only factor impeding the unionization of migrant agricultural workers. They have always been a difficult group to organize due to the seasonal, temporary, and isolated nature of the work itself, as well as the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic divisions among workers (250). The importation of temporary foreign agricultural workers that has accompanied labour flexibilization in Canada has further hampered unionization attempts; foreign workers are



not legally entitled to organize, and, as their numbers seem inexhaustible, can easily be used to replace striking domestic workers (250).

For foreign workers, labour flexibilization is embedded in the patterns of transnational migration that have developed alongside globalization, and are, according to Kearney (2004:97), linked to “spatial differentials” in employment opportunities that represent greater and lesser levels of economic development in Northern and Southern countries. It is poverty and a lack of employment opportunities in underdeveloped countries, therefore, that prompts workers to migrate and promotes labour flexibilization (97). In Canada, both farmer demand for cheap labour and the state’s desire to sustain its cheap food policy have led federal and provincial governments to take advantage of these spatial differentials in development by encouraging the temporary migration of foreign workers from developing countries into the Canadian agricultural industry (Smart 1997:143).

Until recently, the Okanagan has lagged behind other Canadian farming regions in terms of agricultural restructuring. This can be largely attributed to the size of both the industry and the farms within it. The amount of arable land in the valley is limited by its rugged geography and a lack of water, which has kept the agriculture industry relatively small (Krueger and Maguire 1985:19-20). While farm size has gradually been increasing, as recently as ten years ago most farms were small, family-owned operations of between fifteen and twenty acres where workers usually interacted with the farmer personally. In addition, the amount and nature of farmland available precluded the monocultural planting of vast acreages that have made areas such as California and Southern Ontario appealing to multinationals companies. In the Okanagan, the parcels of land that are



suitable for orcharding are interrupted by stretches where it is better to grow tomatoes or melons, and this has necessitated that the valley remain a mixed farming region.

Consequently, it has been unable to produce the volume of crops that would enable a large corporation to turn a profit and has not attracted corporate investment.

With the planting of vineyards in the Okanagan, all of this has changed. As they require little water, can be grown on steep slopes, and are ideally suited to the dry, sandy soil that covers most of the valley, grape vines can be planted in far larger acreages than tree fruits or vegetables (19). The last ten years have seen extensive changes in the area's agricultural structure as more and more farmers replace their vegetable fields and orchards with vineyards producing wine grapes (Bondar 1998:30). At present, there are 6,632 acres of grapes under production in B.C., 85.9% of which are in the Okanagan (Schreiner 2006).

The root cause of the transition to wine grapes is, not surprisingly, money. Like farmers across Canada, those in the Okanagan have struggled with cost-price squeezes that have steadily intensified over the last two decades, as the increase in fruit and vegetable prices has not been commensurate with the cost of labour, fuel, fertilizer, chemicals, and equipment (Krueger and Maguire 1985:20). In recent years, with the exception of some cherry growers who have expanded their orchards and begun selling their fruit overseas, farmers have found it increasingly difficult to make a profit in the face of competition from Washington State, California, and Mexico (20). The hardest hit have been apple growers, many of whom could not afford to pick their crop this year, and it is apple orchards which have been the first to be pulled out and replanted in grapes. As

one Oliver farmer put it, "We farm to make money, not to lose it. Right now the money's in grapes, so that's what we'll grow."

Indeed, according to the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture (2002, 2004), while fruit and vegetable producers in the province have been experiencing economic difficulties over the past several years, seeing a decrease in profits, both the crop values of grapes have increased rapidly. In 2003, the farm gate value of the B.C. grape harvest was \$23.5 million, with growers receiving between \$0.66 and \$0.77 cents per pound (B.C. Ministry of Agriculture 2004). In comparison, B.C. apple growers earned between \$0.18 and \$0.58 cents per pound in 2002, depending on the variety grown (B.C. Ministry of Agriculture 2002).

Corporate investors have also noticed that there is money in grapes. Not only can vineyards be planted in huge, monocultural acreages, wine is also a luxury product that can demand a high price. Indeed, the expansion of vineyard acreages is part of a larger process of gentrification occurring in the Okanagan, which is now being constructed by municipal governments as a northern Napa Valley (Aguilar *et al.* 2005). Vineyards in the Okanagan thus have the potential to turn a considerable profit, and Vincor International, the, first multinational corporation to enter the agricultural industry in the valley's history has planted thousands of acres in grapes. In 2003, Vincor reported that its holdings in the Okanagan had contributed to the corporation's record profits of \$120.7 million (Vincor International 2003).

At the same time, the large size of vineyards has encouraged the development of corporate family farming to an extent not previously seen in the Okanagan. While making strategic use of the image of the family farm to sell their product, many grape growers in

the Okanagan are now overseeing such large corporate operations that they have become the bosses over labour described by Shields (1988:93). As of 2006, corporate wineries owned or controlled through leases 70% of the vineyard acreage in the valley, with only 30% remaining in the hands of small independent growers (Schreiner 2006).

The widespread shift to vineyards, coupled with the portrayal of life in the wine-producing Okanagan as luxurious, has caused a rapid rise in land prices similar to that which occurred during the initial orcharding boom, when Okanagan life and orchard ownership was promoted as highly desirable among Britain's upper classes. As a result, only those who already own land, wealthy individuals, or corporations can afford to operate vineyards in the valley. As was once true of orchards, vineyards are now largely owned by a class of elites, with the new addition of a few multinational corporations.

Like other growers in the valley, vineyard owners also require a supply of farm labour, and they prefer to keep their labour costs low. Initially, migrant Quebecois and local workers were able to meet the vineyards' labour needs, but the demand for workers soon outstripped the available supply. It is the combination of increasing vineyard acreages and decreasing numbers of Quebecois workers coming to the Okanagan that has caused the current labour shortage, which is affecting all farmers in the valley as vineyards absorb most of the farmworkers present. It is also vineyard owners who have been at the forefront of the search for a new supply of cheap labour, and they were largely responsible for the implementation of the MSAWP in the Okanagan. Before discussing the MSAWP, however, the reasons underlying the decline in Quebecois farmworkers' numbers should be given some consideration. Accordingly, Chapter Three

will look at the experiences that the Quebecois have as migrant agricultural labourers in the Okanagan.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Experiences of Migrant Quebecois Farmworkers**

Quebecois workers, or 'pickers', as they refer to themselves, are similar in many ways to other migrant North American farmworkers in that they often experience poor living and working conditions, exploitation, racism, and isolation and segregation from the communities in which they work. Despite these commonalities, Quebecois pickers are also a unique group within the larger body of migrant farm labour, mainly because their reasons for choosing to do farmwork differ from those that motivate others to do so. Most migrant farm labourers take up the work for three reasons: first, they need the money, usually because they have families to support, second, they either see themselves as having no other employment options or view farmwork as the best of the bad options that are available to them, and third, they are minorities, immigrants, or non-citizens whose employment opportunities are limited by a combination of political, social, and economic factors (Foner and Napoli 1978; Friedland and Nelkin 1971; Harper *et al.* 1974; Griffith *et al.* 1995; Massey 1987; Hansen 1988; Miller 1986; Reichert 1981).

Pickers in the Okanagan, however, are usually quite young, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty, and do not yet have families (B.C. Ministry of Skills, Training, and Labour 1995). Most have completed or are completing some post-secondary education and come from families that can be categorized as middle class or above in terms of socioeconomic status (1995). Consequently, most see themselves as having many job options available to them and look at farm labour as something that they will only do for a season or two before moving into a career (O'Donoghue and Jacobs 2001). In addition, while the Quebecois may be a minority within Canada, this does not limit the jobs open

to them to the same extent as it does, for instance, those available to the black-American workers discussed by Foner and Napoli (1978), Friedland and Nelkin (1971), and Harper *et al.* (1974). When they were asked, pickers in the Oliver area said that young people in Quebec choose to do farmwork primarily because they want to have an experience and an adventure, with money being only a secondary factor in their decision to come West.

The combination of a desire for adventure and the lack of familial obligations seems to make Quebecois workers' mobility higher than that of other migrant farm labourers, particularly those hired under guestworker programs (Basok 1999; Satzewich 1990). Although some remain on one farm for the duration of the season, most change farms frequently and for numerous reasons. Some of the most common given by those who participated in this study included dissatisfaction with living and/or working conditions, a negative relationship with the employer, the desire to earn a higher wage, boredom with the work, and wanting to travel.

Further, unlike other migrant workers, who often do farmwork for a number of years and depend on it as their main source of income (Massey 1987:1375; Foner and Napoli 1978:495; Wells 1996) most Quebecois pickers are University or CEGEP students on their summer break who have come to the Okanagan for the first and last time (BCMSTL 1995). Since many plan to work in the valley for only one season, they want to see as much of the region as possible and work on a number of different farms (O'Donoghue and Jacobs 2001). There are also a number of Quebecois who temporarily adopt picking and traveling as a lifestyle and follow a circuit that includes Mexico, Australia and Thailand. Members of both groups tend to regard their time in the

Okanagan as a working holiday, rather than feeling that they need to earn money with which to support themselves during the off-season (2001).

Indeed, Quebecois workers said that the freedom to travel and work wherever and whenever they wish is at the core of what they called the “picker identity.” The picker identity is part of a distinctive culture that has developed within the migrant Quebecois farmworker community over the past forty years and the pickers are, consequently, easily identifiable and highly visible on the streets of Oliver and when they arrive en masse in the summer (O’Donoghue and Jacobs 2001). Most dress in colourful, hippie-style clothing, wear hemp jewelry, and twist their hair into dreadlocks or other creative, brightly dyed arrangements. They tend to drive beat-up old cars, consume alcohol, marijuana and other recreational drugs, and play guitars and tam-tam drums at all hours of the day and night.

The attitude toward work and leisure which is a central element of this culture is perhaps what most distinguishes Quebecois pickers from other farm labourers, who usually feel that it is necessary to spend more time on work than on leisure (Ebanks 1991:401; Wells 1996; Massey 1987;). The Quebecois, on the other hand, take the view that leisure is more important than work. Accordingly, most either work hard for two weeks during the cherry season and take the rest of the season off or work periodically over the course of the summer so that they can purchase necessities. As one young woman put it, “Quebecers go with the wind. We want to be free to go where the day takes us. Maybe we work, maybe we don’t, it doesn’t really matter. For us, in the end, it’s all about the experience.”

The way that Quebecois pickers find jobs also diverges from the norm among migrant farmworkers, who are typically recruited by labour contractors and crew bosses or through government-run programs (Harper *et al.* 1974:28; Ortiz 2002:402). Although some of the Quebecois plan to work on a specific farm and arrange to do so with the grower ahead of time, most make their way to the valley without a particular destination in mind and move from job to job as opportunities present themselves. Word of mouth within their community remains the main way that Quebecois workers hear about available jobs, but they also check with the local labour employment office and travel from farm to farm asking if there are any jobs to be had. The system that often seems to develop around migrant labourers, where a labour contractor acts as a middleman in recruiting and transporting workers to farms, does not seem to exist among the Quebecois in Oliver to any great extent. This is probably to their benefit, since it has frequently been found that labour contractors add another layer of exploitation to the lives of migrant workers (Ortiz 2002:402). When workers are recruited directly, it is usually by farmers.

Once they have set up camp and found a job, most pickers find that the living and working conditions they encounter as migrant farmworkers leave a great deal to be desired. Indeed, lack of adequate accommodation has been an issue for Quebecois workers since they first started coming to the valley (Frontier College 2001; Gaskarth and Barroca 2003). In this they are similar to other groups of migrant agricultural labourers, who often live in conditions that are crowded, dirty, noisy and lacking privacy (Foner and Napoli 1978:497; Basok 1999:192). Most Quebecois workers live in tents for the duration of the season, either setting up temporary camps on farm property or establishing a base at the official pickers' camp, Loose Bay, and then traveling to farms



each day for work. A few farms have cabins or trailers where a small number of workers can stay, but most are expected to live in their tents. This is fine when the weather is good, but the sunny Okanagan often receives a large amount of rain, particularly during the spring, and tenting in these circumstances becomes extremely unpleasant. This season, there was almost a month of cold, wet weather with few jobs available, and the workers had little to do but construct innovative tarp arrangements and then sit in their tents watching the rain fall.

The majority of farmers, with the exception of vineyard operators, provide camping facilities of some description for their workers. The quality of those facilities ranges widely, however. Some cherry growers who depend on having a Quebecois crew each year have invested in building camps that have a cookshack with stoves and refrigerators, a source of clean drinking water, hot showers, flush toilets, and a covered area where workers can congregate out of the rain. Elsewhere, pickers are provided with outhouses and a hose as the water source, while in the worst cases they are given no source of water at all and are told to dig a hole in the orchard for a bathroom facility. "I couldn't believe it," remarked one picker asked to describe the facilities in the orchard where he was previously employed. "When I asked the guy I was working for where the toilet was, he pointed to the trees and said 'Wherever you want.' When I asked him where to get water, he just laughed. I ended up having to ask the neighbour to let me drink out of his hose. I quit that orchard after one day. Some [farmers] treat us Quebecers like animals. Except we get treated worse – most people at least give their animals water."

Conditions at Loose Bay fall toward the middle of the range in terms of quality.

The camp was established by the town of Oliver in conjunction with the local Rotary Club and is the only facility of its kind in the Okanagan (Frontier College 2001). As a result, it is prone to overcrowding; at the start of the season, before cherry picking begins, there can be more than five hundred people camping on the grounds (Gaskarth and Barroca 2003). The Rotary Club has gradually improved the facilities at Loose Bay and for a fee of four dollars per day, pickers are now provided with two cookshacks, running (non-potable) water, flush toilets, and free firewood. There are also coin-operated hot showers.

Still, most Quebecois workers do not think highly of Loose Bay and try to find somewhere else to stay as quickly as possible (Gaskarth and Barroca 2003). Pickers staying there this season gave several reasons for their dislike of the camp. First and foremost, Loose Bay's location is inconvenient; it is situated at the top of a steep, 1.5 km long hill which presents a grueling obstacle at the end of a long hot work day, especially for those whose only mode of transportation is by foot or bicycle and who are carrying their groceries and drinking water. It is also a long distance from most farms, and is 10 km away from the town centre, making it difficult to travel to and from work each day, buy food and water, and use the laundromat. In addition, there is little shade in the camp and there are no swimming places nearby, making it extremely uncomfortable during the dry summer months when temperatures are often between thirty-five and forty degrees.

Also, Loose Bay has become a gathering place for those who are more interested in partying than in working and there is a large amount of alcohol and drug consumption. Partly because of this fights in the camp, mainly between young Quebecois and local

men, are frequent. It is, therefore, not a particularly safe location, and is often noisy late into the night, making it difficult for campers who do want to work to get enough rest. There is also a high rate of theft in the camp, and workers staying there have come home to find their tents and all of their belongings missing. Others have had bicycles, vehicles, money and clothing stolen. According to the pickers who camped there this year, no one leaves without having something taken.

Access to clean water, for both drinking and washing, is another area of concern for Quebecois farmworkers (Wolfe and Needoba 2006:1). Over the course of the 2006 season, workers found that there was often no source of potable water on farms and that they were expected to bring their own drinking water, although they were usually not told this before beginning work. As a result, some drank water from hoses, irrigation lines, or ditches, after which they became sick. This type of water can be contaminated with everything from pesticide runoff to animal waste, and, not surprisingly, those who drink it usually do become ill (Frontier College 2001). It was also frequently the case that there was nowhere for workers to wash, and the pickers said that beyond being unhygienic, going into town with dirty clothes and unwashed hair was embarrassing. "I hate being in the grocery store with hands that are black and clothes covered in dirt and that stink because you couldn't wash them for a week or two," commented one worker. "All the locals give you these looks, like you're disgusting. They don't understand that we don't like being dirty. Sometimes, when there's no water on the farm, we just have no choice."

Getting to town in the first place can also be difficult, since most Quebecois workers do not have a reliable form of transportation (Gaskarth and Barroca 2003; Frontier College 2001). There is no public transit system in the area, so workers usually

walk, hitchhike, or bicycle to get their destination (Gaskarth and Barroca 2003). Since the distances between Oliver, farms, and Loose Bay are considerable and the heat this past summer was often intense, workers found it challenging to get to their jobs on time and to visit town as often as they would like. In the past few years, the combination of an information campaign by the local labour employment office, online discussion, and the greater affluence of Quebecois youth has resulted in an increased number coming to the valley with vehicles. Still, workers said that having a vehicle did not solve their transportation problems because of the high gas prices. By the time they had driven across the country, they had little money left to buy gas and found driving to work expensive. As a result, many ended up parking their cars for the season and relying on their feet and thumbs to get them where they need to go.

Related to the lack of transportation is the poor diet of many Quebecois workers (Frontier College 2001). Refrigeration was not available in most pickers' camps this year, including Loose Bay, which meant that perishable food could not be kept beyond a day or two. The prospect of traversing the distance between work and town every other day to buy groceries was unappealing to most workers, so they subsisted mainly on canned foods, rarely eating bread, meat, eggs or fresh fruit and vegetables. It was also the case that many workers did not get enough to eat when there was no work and their money ran out. When this happened, there was the food bank to fall back on, and one Oliver church group provided a free breakfast once a week in town and a free dinner on Tuesdays at Loose Bay. Still, workers had to get to town to access the first two services, which they found difficult on empty stomachs. Also, many felt that it was demeaning to accept this sort of charity. As one worker who had been between jobs for two weeks put it, "I'm

twenty-one years old and today I had to go to the foodbank because I'm unemployed and I live in a tent. I feel like I've hit bottom."

When they are working, the conditions that Quebecois pickers encounter on farms are frequently difficult and dangerous (Menard 1999; Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003; Frontier College 2001). Problems with earning and saving money, poor relationships with employers, safety issues around the use of ladders, pesticide exposure, and heat sickness, being asked to work too fast for too many hours, difficulty getting paid, and sexual harassment were the main work-related problems that pickers working in the Oliver area this season identified. In addition, regardless of the quality of the work environment, farm labour is in and of itself hard work. It is physically demanding, repetitive, monotonous, and can involve working in extreme heat for extended periods of time. Most pickers found that the work was much more challenging than they originally expected and were disappointed by the amount that were able to earn each day. Consequently, many left the work without completing it when conditions were difficult, worked more slowly when they were being paid by the hour, and/or worked only enough to meet their immediate subsistence needs. Most also found it difficult to save much money since they had to pay for food, water, laundry, camping and showering if they were staying at Loose Bay, and gas for vehicles if they could afford it.

Beyond living expenses, the picker culture, involving as it does frequent parties accompanied by the consumption of drugs and alcohol, does not appear to encourage saving. In this Quebecois pickers are like the migrant farmworkers described by Foner and Napoli (1978) and Friedland and Nelkin (1971), who found that the "prevalent migrant culture" among black-American farmworkers, which entailed "gambling and

excessive drinking on weekends,” discouraged them from being particularly productive or saving much money. Instead, they, like the Quebecois, often left the field if the conditions were poor, decreased the pace of their work if they were being paid by the hour, or worked only enough to provide the day’s sustenance (Foner and Napoli 1978:492).

Pickers’ working conditions are closely linked to their relationships with farmers, but as farms increase in size and become more corporate in structure Quebecois workers are finding it difficult to establish personal relationships with their employers. This has been a trend across Canada and throughout North America as small farms have grown into agribusinesses; today it is rare for agricultural workers to have a relationship of any kind with growers (Basok 2002; Binford 2002). Indeed, the Okanagan is one of the few farming regions in Canada where farm size has remained relatively small and workers have had close relationships with growers. With more and more of these farms being replaced by extensive vineyard acreages, it seems that this will soon change.

Many Quebecois workers found this development problematic on several levels. At the end of the season, pickers said that they had far better experiences as workers when they knew the person they were working for. They preferred to be employed by someone who they felt was interested in their welfare and cared about them as a person rather than, in the words of one picker, treating them like “an anonymous labour unit.” Typically, farmers that took the time to get to know their workers also provided them with the best facilities and made an effort to show them that they were welcome, appreciated, and respected. These farmers also tended to be conscientious about following the regulations around work safety, hours, and pay.

In turn, pickers said that they did better work for and were more careful about how they treated the property and crops of growers with whom they had a positive relationship. They were also more likely to want to stay at farms where they knew the farmer for longer periods of time, and to return there to work in subsequent years. Indeed, in the Oliver area, those growers who have made an effort to establish a rapport with their workers and have built attractive camps reported that they do not find it difficult to hire pickers when the season begins. Rather, they tend to have young people contacting them from Quebec in February and March looking for work and wishing to reserve a place on their farm. Similar findings have been made in Ontario and California, where, for many of the same reasons, farmworkers reported that their work experiences improve when they can establish a relationship with their employer (Wells 1996; Basok 2002).

While there are a number of farmers who treat their pickers well, others do not, and a large number of Quebecois farmworkers experience not only general mistreatment but also a high degree of exploitation at work (Frontier College 2001; Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003). The exploitation of migrant farm workers in North America is widespread and well documented, and commonly involves problems with pay, being required to put in extremely long hours, and being asked to work in unsafe conditions (Shields 1992:262; Bolaria 1988, 1992; Harper *et al.* 1974; Friedland and Nelkin 1971; Binford 2002; Satzewich 1988; Basok 1999; Basran *et al.* 1995; Griffith *et al.* 1995). An additional form of exploitation that may be just as widespread but is not as well documented is the sexual abuse of female farmworkers (Menard 1999; Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003).



In the U.S., it has been found that labour contractors, crew bosses, and farmers all act as agents in the exploitation of farm labour (Harper *et al.* 1974; Foner and Napoli 1978; Friedland and Nelkin 1971; Griffith *et al.* 1995). In the Oliver area, however, farmers were the main agents of exploitation where most of the Quebecois were concerned, mainly because pickers tended to dislike working on the large corporate operations where crew bosses were responsible for overseeing the workers. They preferred to work on smaller farms and so were more likely to interact with and be supervised by the grower.

Wages seemed to be the most common means through which Quebecois workers were exploited and discriminated against. For the most part, agricultural workers in the Okanagan are paid on a piece-rate basis (Frontier College 2001). This method of payment for agricultural tasks is popular throughout North America; farmers find that they get more value for their money this way, as piece-rates inspire higher productivity than do hourly wages (Ortiz 2002:404). They also enable the farmer to keep the costs of tasks constant and to simplify the recruitment of workers by allowing for the hiring of any labourer, regardless of his or her efficiency (404). Many farm workers also prefer to be paid by piecework because it gives them more freedom to come and go from the job as they please and to control how much they earn (404). However, it is only workers who are experienced and can complete tasks quickly who really benefit from piece rates. In the Okanagan, most pickers are not experienced and are therefore not particularly fast workers, so piece rates mean that they work very hard to earn minimum wage or less (Frontier College 2001; Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003).



In addition, for all workers regardless of skill level, piecework, as Ortiz (2002:404) points out, comes with “the risk of fluctuating incomes.” Indeed, the amount that Quebecois workers earn depends on the state of the crop as well as the weather. Some years, crops are very heavy and the picking goes quickly, while other years the crops are thinner and the picking is slower, and there is always the risk that the season will be negatively affected by rain or hail. There have been some years when the cherry season was cancelled due to rain, leaving pickers with only enough money to buy their bus ticket home (O’Donoghue and Jacobs 2001). This year the crop was about average, and pickers found that when they were working for an employer who offered a fair piece rate, they made between nine and twelve dollars an hour, which was less than they had hoped to earn.

However, when the employer was not concerned with paying a fair wage, workers were usually paid less than they should have been. This is fairly common in the Okanagan, where piecework rates are not standardized across farms (Frontier College 2001; Gaskarth and Barroca 2003). B.C. Employment Standards has established minimum piece rates that are supposed to be paid for picking various crops but as there is no enforcement of this legislation, farmers who want to increase profits by decreasing labour costs often do not hesitate to offer a rate that falls below the minimum (Ministry of Labour and Citizens’ Services 2005; Wolfe and Needoba 2006).

Unlike several American states where laws have been enacted that establish a universal hourly minimum wage for farm labour, B.C. excludes farmworkers from legislation that guarantees other workers an hourly minimum wage (Lanthier and Wong 2002:13; Sandborn 1982:11). This means that pickers sometimes earn less than minimum

wage, especially if the base rate offered is low. Further, Shields (1992:249) argues that in B.C. the piece-rate system results in the exploitation of farmworkers, not only because it allows growers to pay less than minimum wage, but also because it necessitates that labourers work exceptionally long days if they wish to make any money. Some pickers did attempt to work hours that could be described as excessive during cherry season in an attempt to maximize their earnings, but because making money was not the object of most, this was not the norm. Still, many felt that they had to work too long and too hard to earn the amount of money that they did.

When they finished work, many Quebecois workers found it difficult to collect their pay. On some of the larger farms, pickers discovered mistakes in their pay envelopes every time that they received them, which, they noticed, always resulted in them being paid less than they should have been rather than more. Workers who were aware of the inaccuracy of the payroll kept track of their hours and quantities picked so that they could complain to the office and, eventually, receive the pay that they were owed. Other workers could not be bothered to do this, or did not notice the mistakes until after they had left the farm, and did not want to return to argue over the pay. On other farms, Quebecois workers were not paid at all, or were paid in part, and then told to come back to the farm to collect their money in a week or two. When they returned, the farmer was absent or told them to come back again later. In these cases, persistence and threats seemed to be the only strategy that effectively elicited the money owed. Most workers wished to avoid this sort of conflict, so they cut their losses and moved on to another job. Many pickers felt farmers were aware that Quebecois workers were more likely to leave

the area than to cause trouble over pay issues, and that some therefore engaged in the discriminatory practice of paying them less than they would a local worker.

Although piece rates provide their own incentive, some growers also push their Quebecois pickers to work longer hours and at a faster pace than they would like, which contributes to the creation of an unsafe work environment (Frontier College 2001). The combination of fatigue and rushing the job causes pickers to be less careful than they would be otherwise and results in accidents (2001). Most of these involve falls from ladders or trees (2001). Ladder safety was one of the main areas of concern among pickers in the Oliver area, who were usually not taught how to properly set up and climb the ladders. According to workers and social service providers, farmers tend not to want to take the time to teach pickers how to work safely, being more interested in getting the crop off as fast as possible. Heat stroke and heat sickness was an additional safety issue mentioned by pickers, and is related to the hours and pace of work as well as to employers' failure to provide a source of drinking water. Some workers who were overcome by the heat fell from ladders or collapsed in the orchard. If they were working alone, they were generally not found for several hours.

A further safety concern is the exposure of workers to pesticides. The workers participating in this study all worked in orchards or fields where pesticides had recently been applied; while they were picking in one cherry orchard, several workers were sprayed with pesticide by the farmer as he drove past on the tractor. Afterward, they developed extensive rashes and felt ill for the better part of a week. "The farmer knew we were in those trees," said one of the pickers involved. "He just didn't care enough to turn off the sprayer. He said there was nothing in the spray that would hurt us, but we all got

really sick. There was no water so we couldn't wash it off until we got to the river. We didn't go back to work there. We needed the money, but we decided our health is more important."

Social service providers said that incidents like this are not uncommon in the area, and point out that it is the long-term effects of such exposure that are more worrisome than the immediate reactions of rashes and nausea. Indeed, several studies have linked pesticide exposure in farmworkers to poisonings, heart attacks, damage to the reproductive health of women, cancer, and diseases of the central nervous system (Basran *et al.* 1995:2-4; Wells 1996; Bolaria 1992; Basok 2002; Shields 2002). In a report to the Worker's Compensation Board, the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) pointed out that although agricultural labourers are employed in the only workplace in B.C. that is "regularly and systematically poisoned for the sole purpose of killing life" and are "inevitably exposed to the killing agents, government authorities, including the WCB, have never addressed this exposure through the development of protective legislation (Basran *et al.* 1995:2). Instead, agro-industrialists, farmers, and governments have blocked the efforts of farmworkers whenever they have attempted to improve occupational health and safety, arguing that such legislation would negatively affect the profitability of the agricultural sector (2).

A final issue related to the exploitation of Quebecois farmworkers is the sexual harassment and assault that female pickers are vulnerable to, both on and off the job (Menard 1999; Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003; Frontier College 2001; Weninger 2006). The women say that a farmer or crew boss is usually the perpetrator, and that the incidents most often happen when they are working or camping alone on a farm (Brocke

and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003:21). Inadequate transportation, which forces women to rely on hitchhiking or on farmers and crew bosses for rides, also places them at risk (11). Women farmworkers in the Okanagan rarely report incidents of sexual harassment or assault, and few studies have been done on the subject, though 37% of women surveyed in a study conducted by the Penticton and Area Women's Center reported that they had been sexually harassed or assaulted while working (Weninger 2006:1). All of the female pickers that I spoke with this summer either experienced sexual harassment at work or had a friend who did. Several were offered money for sex by their employers and were threatened with dismissal when they refused. "My boss got really angry when I said no for the fifth or sixth time," recalled a woman who had been propositioned while picking. "He started swearing and calling me a slut and things like that. He said I could take his offer or get fired. Some of the men here, they think that because we're from Quebec, they can get away with anything. But I'm not a prostitute. So I told him what he could do with his job and quit."

As it is not known how many female agricultural labourers in the valley experience sexual abuse, it is not clear how representative the experiences of the women that I interviewed are of the female Quebecois farmworker population as a whole. However, two recent studies conducted by the Penticton and Area Women's Center describe the levels of sexual violence experienced by female farmworkers in the valley as "significant" (Brocke and Pizzuti-Ashby 2003; Menard 1999).

Unfortunately, the sexual violence experienced by female farmworkers does not seem to be viewed as a problem within the farming community or by local residents; in fact, at one meeting of farmers, residents, and a farmworkers' advocacy group where the

subject was raised, some of the farmers and residents denied that it happened at all, or that if it did, it was extremely rare. According to social service providers, the lack of awareness surrounding the issue is not surprising, since women who are assaulted or harassed tend to leave the area rather than reporting the incident to the police. None of the women I spoke with who had been sexually harassed reported their employers' behaviour. This was primarily because they felt that, as one woman observed, "The police won't do anything about it anyway. They're on the side of farmers, not pickers. The easiest way to deal with it is just to leave and get a job somewhere else." In addition, although many stories circulate within the Quebecois picker community about women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted, they receive little attention from the local media. Some social service providers in Oliver have begun warning female workers about sexual assault and advising them never to work, travel, or camp alone, but there is no formal program in the valley that addresses the safety of female farmworkers (Pizzuti-Ashby 2003:11).

The problems that Quebecois pickers encounter on Okanagan farms stem from a combination of factors. In other provinces, similar problems have been attributed in part to the racialization of farm labourers by farmers, governments, and communities that has historically occurred in Canada (Satzewich 1988, 1990). As Satzewich (1988) points out, the racialization of certain ethnic groups as best suited to farm labour has frequently been used to justify the substandard conditions in which they work and live. Quebecois workers do appear to have been racialized in the Okanagan, but in a slightly different way than is usually. Rather than being racialized as ideally suited to farm labour, the Quebecois are described as being particularly poor farmworkers who are really only good

for picking cherries. There are several possible explanations for this. With the exception of Native peoples, migrant agricultural workers in Canada have traditionally been immigrants or guestworkers who are recruited by the Canadian state, often at the urging of farmers, specifically to do farm work (Satzewich 1988, 1990; Satzewich and Laliberte 1998). As a result, they are racialized before arriving in Canada and the idea that, for instance, Jamaican guestworkers or Polish immigrants are 'made' to do agricultural labour and should be discouraged from doing anything else quickly becomes embedded in the social and political fabric of the country (Satzewich 1990). The Quebecois, on the other hand, have not been targeted as a labour force by farmers or recruited by the government but have come to the Oliver area of their own free will. Consequently, it would seem that they have not been racialized as ideal farmworkers; on the contrary, many farmers feel that the Quebecois are unproductive and unreliable. As one cherry grower said, "I only hire them because there isn't anyone else."

Some farmers and crew bosses also have racist attitudes toward Quebecois workers, who, while they are not immigrants or guestworkers, are still a highly visible minority in the Okanagan. It is the combination of racialization and racism that seems to underlie the exploitative and discriminatory treatment of Quebecois pickers. Indeed, there is a general sense within the picking community that because they are migrant 'Quebecers', farmers see them as disposable and discriminate against them by sending them to work in conditions and for pay that locals would not accept. There is some evidence to support this view; on a number of farms where both local and Quebecois workers were employed, the locals were given the better jobs and were usually paid an above-minimum hourly wage rather than a piece-rate.



Language barriers also play a part in the difficulties that workers experience (Frontier College 2001; Pizzuti-Ashby 2003). There are no English language instruction programs available to migrant workers in the valley, although such programs would be of little use to pickers who find themselves working on farms where their employers are not fluent in English or French. While most Quebecois workers have some facility in English, they find it difficult to understand the heavily accented, limited English spoken by some crew bosses and farmers. In turn, these farmers can have a hard time understanding the pickers' French accents. The lack of a common language can lead to miscommunications, or, at times, deliberate misunderstandings on the part of farm management, around pay, hours of work, safety issues, and in the case of women, sexual availability.

In addition, Quebecois farmworkers' limited knowledge of English makes it more difficult for them to become familiar with the policies and laws that are meant to protect them, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation (Pizzuti-Ashby 2003:16). It also restricts their ability to report violations of those laws when they are aware of them, and to access services in the community that are designed to assist workers in situations of exploitation, abuse, or danger (14). At the same time, much of the legislation that is in existence, such as the exclusion of workers from regulations governing minimum wage, overtime, and statutory holiday pay, is discriminatory in and of itself, and leaves farmworkers open to exploitation (Lanthier and Wong 2002). Added to this, legislation intended to protect farm labourers is rarely enforced, due to underreporting of violations by workers and a lack of funding and personnel within the relevant government departments (Pizzuti-Ashby 2003:16).



Finally, the poor working conditions that pickers experience are probably related to their non-unionization, since it is usually only through the creation of unions that farm labourers are able to improve their work environments (Stultz 1987). In the California strawberry industry, for instance, the United Farm Workers Union has provided labourers with the political leverage needed to make some gains in the areas of improving pay and working conditions despite sustained resistance from farm owners (Wells 1981, 1996). Although the Canadian Farmworkers Union attempted to organize farm labourers in B.C. during the 1980s, what Shields (1992:257) calls “the generalized legislative attack” on organized labour that began in the province in 1983, along with grower opposition, caused a decline in union membership that has never been reversed. Currently, there is no union that represents farmworkers in the Okanagan.

Racist and discriminatory attitudes toward Quebecois workers extend beyond farms and into the local community where they shape the social relations that pickers have with area residents (Frontier College 2001). Like all migrant worker groups that have come to the valley before them, the Quebecois have been needed but not wanted, and have thus been segregated and isolated from the larger community. The Okanagan is not unique in this respect. The social exclusion, isolation, and segregation of farmworkers from the communities nearest the farms where they work is a common occurrence throughout North America, and usually stems from a combination of language barriers, long working hours, the efforts of farm management to keep their workers socially isolated and thus more easily controllable, and the racist and/or discriminatory attitudes of local residents (Basok 2002; Ebanks 1991; Smart 1997; Garcia 1980; Preibisch 2004).

In Oliver, the racist and discriminatory attitudes of local residents toward pickers appear to be the main factor in their exclusion from the community. Indeed, Oliver's previous mayor (MacQueen 1998:A2) described the annual arrival of the Quebecois as a "hazard [to the town] – they're a fire hazard, a garbage hazard, a health hazard" and it is from this perspective that the community has approached its relationship with the workers. Certainly, as a town that is attempting to cultivate the image of a cultured, wine-producing gem tucked away in the South Okanagan, it is not surprising that having the streets and parks overflow with groups of young people who look, as one farmer put it, like "leftover flower children" during tourist season is seen as undesirable by a large number of residents.

In the 1990s, the citizens of Oliver, headed by the Small Business Association, began a campaign to get the Quebecois out of town and out of sight. They were, it was said, scaring off tourists, ruining the look of the town, and making it unsafe to walk down the street. In addition, a number of farmers wanted the pickers confined to one location in the hopes that so doing would make it easier to hire and retain workers. The result was the establishment of Loose Bay, which was not, as the mayor at the time stated, created out of altruistic motives (MacQueen 1998:A2). As is evident in its location, the camp was put in place to benefit the town and farmers rather than the workers. To further ensure that the Quebecois would not congregate downtown, the town paved over the grassy little park that was one of their favourite gathering places.

Like similar measures directed at migrant farmworkers in the valley's past, these actions added a sense of physical segregation and isolation to that already experienced by the workers due to cultural and linguistic differences. In recent years, however, the

municipality, residents, and farmers who supported Loose Bay's development have attempted to put a positive gloss on the original rhetoric surrounding the camp. Now, they maintain that the upkeep of Loose Bay is a social service provided by certain conscientious citizens who are concerned about the welfare of Quebecois pickers. This is not how the workers perceive the situation, however. Many Quebecois workers said that for them, Loose Bay symbolizes how the residents of the valley, including farmers, feel about and treat migrant pickers. "The people here just want their food and wine to get on the shelf without having to think about where it came from," said one worker, "they don't care who did the work so they could have it. They don't want to see us, they don't want to hear from us, so they send us away to live at Loose Bay where we're out of sight and they don't care that the place is practically a slum."

Social service providers agreed with this assessment of the situation, noting that Quebecois pickers are characterized by locals as lazy, dirty partiers who invade the valley during the summer months, a stereotype that has developed largely because so many workers lack access to water for washing. These negative perceptions of Quebecois workers have made it difficult for them to get service in local businesses and some have been refused treatment in doctor's offices. They have also resulted in violence, with groups of youths periodically engaging in what is known in the area as "Frenchie bashing." There have been instances of pickers being attacked in their tents with baseball bats while they were sleeping and of fights being provoked that have ended in stabbings and beatings. A worker camping at Loose Bay commented, "The local rednecks come up here [Loose Bay] looking for fun, you know, it's a small town and there's nothing to do at night so why not beat up the Quebecers. I was here when those guys came up with

baseball bats and just started hitting people in their tents. That was pretty scary. I think I won't camp here much longer." Workers have also been attacked in parks and on the roadsides while hitchhiking. Like sexual assault, this sort of violence is underreported and under-studied, so its extent is not known.

Social service providers have noticed that in the past few years, due to the building of Loose Bay, the paving over of the park, and the lower numbers of Quebecois coming to the valley, conflicts between local residents and pickers have decreased. Some observed that this can also be attributed to a demographic shift in the area, with the population becoming slightly younger, better traveled, and more willing to accept people of different ethnicities. Still, many Quebecois workers felt that the attitude toward them in Oliver was far from friendly this season, and they did not feel particularly welcome. When I was hitchhiking on the highway or walking through town with Quebecois pickers, shouts of "Go back to Quebec!" and various other insults, as well as garbage, were frequently thrown at the workers from passing cars. On one occasion we had to jump into the ditch to avoid a driver whose intention appeared to be to run the pickers down. Beatings of workers have not stopped either, with violence between locals and Quebecois workers occurring several times over the past summer.

Given all this, it seems stating the obvious to say that social relations between Quebecois workers and locals are typically minimal (Frontier College 2001). For their part, according to social service providers, most locals have no wish to interact with the pickers, but even if the attitudes of residents toward them were more positive, Quebecois workers would probably not extend their social relations far beyond the Francophone picker community for the simple reason that they are most comfortable being with people

who share the same cultural background and speak the same language. In addition, the isolation of Quebecois workers on farms and at Loose Bay, coupled with the frequency with which they pack up their tents and move on, makes it difficult for them to establish relationships with local residents and other non-migratory farm workers. When they go to the beaches or parks for recreation, they usually remain in their own groups and do not mix with the other people present. Further, most pickers remarked that they had no real interest in befriending the locals, whom they generally referred to as “the English squareheads.” It was the opinion among most Quebecois workers that the English are boring, lacking style, musical taste, and a sense of romance, and that if you invite them to a party, they will just bring it down.

On this point, it should be said that the racism present in the Oliver area is not one-sided. There was a great deal of anti-English sentiment among the Quebecois in the valley this season, many of whom were strong separatists. This was especially evident around the time of Canada Day, which passed largely unobserved by the pickers. In contrast, come St. Jean Baptiste Day, hundreds of Quebecois workers gathered in the mountains for a huge celebration of Quebec nationalism that spanned several days. There was not a maple leaf to be seen, but *fleur-de-lis* and cries of “*Vive le Quebec libre!*” were everywhere. Apparently, locals are well aware of the separatist tenor of the St. Jean Baptiste revels, and they are resentful of it (O’Donoghue and Jacobs 2001). This in turn fuels the racism on their side and results in the sense within the community that if the Quebecois do not want to be citizens of Canada, they should stay in Quebec rather than coming out West to enjoy the summers in British Columbia (2001).

Nonetheless, the Quebecois youth do continue to come to the valley, even though

the life of a migrant picker in the Okanagan, while providing workers with some good experiences, also has many negative aspects. As young, educated people who could take any number of summer jobs that would be easier and better paying, it seems strange that the Quebecois have crossed Canada to reach the Okanagan in such large numbers for so many years. Pickers gave several reasons as to why they were drawn to the valley, the most powerful of which is probably the image of the Okanagan that began to develop in Quebec sometime during the 1960s. Since then, the beauty of British Columbia has taken on an almost mythic quality in Quebec, and the Okanagan, with its mountains, lakes, and long hot summers, has the reputation of being B.C.'s Shangri La (O'Donoghue and Jacobs 2001).

Quebecois working in the valley said that many young people in their province feel the urge to travel across the country with the ultimate aim of reaching the Okanagan, where they hope to have an experience and an adventure and make a little money along the way. For the most part, they are interested in picking one crop, the cherries. Cherry picking is one of the central elements in the image of the Okanagan that has been created in Quebec, where the story goes that a person can make five hundred dollars a day as a cherry picker. It is said to be the best summer job for a young person because, besides the money, the work is not difficult and you can spend the days outside in the sunshine with your friends. In reality, though, there are only a handful of pickers who can earn five hundred dollars a day; most average about fifty or sixty dollars.

Indeed, according to Quebecois workers, going to the Okanagan to pick cherries has come to be seen as a rite of passage for young people in Quebec. Everyone talks about it, and children grow up hearing their parents, siblings, and relatives tell stories

about their summer in the valley, stories in which the words “out West” are imbued with an aura of excitement. Certainly, many of those who made the trip this year described being a migrant farmworker in the Okanagan as a life-changing experience. For a large number, it was the first time that they had been away from home for an extended period and forced to deal with the difficulties that they encountered without the assistance of family or friends. Most said that their ability to overcome the challenges that confronted them while they were in the Okanagan meant that they would return to Quebec feeling far more like adults than they did before they left.

The fact that the Quebecois partly base their decision to come to the Okanagan on the tales that they have been told by relatives suggests that social networks are of importance in encouraging their migration to B.C. The centrality of social networks in processes of migration has been underscored in the research literature, which indicates that once the benefits of migration begin to be widely discussed within communities, social networks become progressively larger and influence increasing numbers of people to migrate (Massey 1987:1374).

Interestingly, the social network that exists among Quebecois pickers now extends into online communities. In recent years, young people in Quebec have been motivated to pick in the valley by a large online network dedicated to the discussion and planning of picking trips among Quebecois who have lived or want to live the life of a migrant Okanagan farmworker during the summer. Through blogs, websites, chat groups, notice boards, and MSN, Quebecois talk about anything and everything related to the experience, passing on advice and cautionary tales.



These online forums also serve as a place where those planning to make the trip meet and arrange to travel together. While they are aware of the difficulties that other workers have encountered in the Okanagan, the Quebecois have remained willing to take their chances in exchange for the opportunity to have what some describe as “the ultimate summer road trip.” “Young Quebecers have this ‘it won’t happen to me attitude’ about going out West,” explained a picker when asked why the Quebecois keep coming to the Okanagan, despite their poor treatment. “We hear all the bad stuff, but you forget all that in the excitement of planning and traveling. And then when you see the valley for the first time, the mountains and the lakes, you think ‘it was all worth it, just to see this. No matter what happens, this was worth it.’ ”

Yet, although the Okanagan picking experience has been and continues to be a part of the Quebecois youth culture, the numbers of young people who travel to the valley from Quebec have recently begun to decline. To compensate for the resulting labour shortage, farmers have begun to import temporary foreign workers contracted under the Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (MSAWP). While the use of temporary foreign agricultural labour has a long history in Canada, it has only recently been adopted as a labour procurement strategy by B.C.’s agriculture industry. It is swiftly gaining in popularity, however, with more than 120 MSAWP workers being contracted in the Okanagan during 2006. It is the experiences of these men that will be the focus of the next chapter.



## **Chapter Four**

### **The Experiences of Migrant Mexican Farmworkers**

The experiences of Mexican guestworkers in the Okanagan have much in common with those of migrant Quebecois farmworkers. At the same time, there are a number of issues that are specific to their situation as temporary foreign workers, most of which are directly related to the structure of the Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. For this reason, it is necessary to describe the MSAWP in some detail before proceeding with further discussion.

The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program dates back to 1967, when Ontario growers and the Caribbean Commonwealth convinced the federal government to address the issue of agricultural labour shortages through the implementation of a temporary employment visa system that would permit Caribbean citizens to work on Canadian farms (Basok 2002:16). A combination of farmer demand and pressure from the Mexican government resulted in the expansion of the program to Mexico in 1974 (16). Known as the Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (C/MSAWP), it has provided Canadian farmers with a steady stream of migrant guestworkers who, over the last four decades, have come to represent a growing proportion of the agricultural labour supply (Preibisch 2004:204). Originally, these workers were concentrated in the tobacco fields and orchards of southern Ontario, but they are now distributed across Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI, and B.C. (HRDSC 2005).

Officially, the MSAWP is intended to facilitate the organized movement of foreign workers to meet the temporary seasonal needs of Canadian agricultural

production during the peak periods of planting and harvest, when there is usually a shortage of domestic labour (HRSDC 2003). The institutional framework of the program is managed and implemented on three levels. The first is federal, where it is nested within the framework of the Immigration Refugee and Protection Act and the "Canadians First" labour market policy which states that Canadian citizens and permanent residents are to be considered for employment prior to hiring foreign workers (Preibisch 2004:205). Provincially, the program is governed by statutes relating to employment and labour standards as well as to worker health and safety (205). Internationally, it is implemented through bilateral agreements established by Canada and Mexico and employment contracts that are distributed to the employers, workers, and government agents of the supplying countries (205). The federal agency directly responsible for overseeing the SAWP is Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), but much of the program's administrative burden, such as the recruitment of workers, is shouldered by the governments of the supplying countries, which maintain offices and consular staff in Canada (205).

The application process must be initiated by the farmer eight weeks before the work term is to start and will only proceed once he or she demonstrates that an effort has been made to hire unemployed Canadians (HRSDC 2005). Farmers who have already participated in the program can request by name workers they have hired previously, but HRSDC assesses all applications based on the availability of Canadian labour, the farmer's previous experience in attracting and retaining workers, and the adequacy of their job offer (Basok 2002:38). In addition, farmers must pay, per worker, a \$150.00 "cost recovery fee" before Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) will process the

workers' applications (HRSDC 2005). Once the farmer has completed the appropriate paperwork, HRDSC forwards approved applications to the Government of Mexico, which recruits workers, sends their applications to CIC, and makes their travel arrangements (2005). To be considered for admittance to the program, Mexicans must travel to Mexico City to apply at the Ministry of Labour, and have a medical exam (2005).

The workers and farmers then sign a contract outlining the responsibilities of both parties. Farmers are required to cover the cost of workers' visas, health insurance and Workers' Compensation as well as their transportation to, from, and around the farm in Canada (2005). In addition, they must provide housing that has been approved by the province and municipality, pay MSAWP workers the same wages as Canadian agricultural labourers, and obey all regulations regarding hours of work and job safety (2005). There is a particular stipulation that farmers must provide workers handling chemicals and/or pesticides with free protective clothing and the appropriate training/supervision (2005). Finally, farmers agree, as the contract puts it, that their "workers shall not be moved to another area or transferred or loaned to another employer" without the consent of the workers and the approval of HRSDC (2005).

For their part, MSAWP participants must agree to perform all agricultural work requested of them by the farmer, live where they are told to, not work for any other farmer without the approval of HRSDC and their employer, report any injuries to the farmer immediately, return promptly to Mexico once the work term has expired, not consume alcohol or drugs while they are in Canada, not spend the night away from farm property, not have women in their bunkhouses, and fully repay the cost recovery fee to

the farmer within the first two months of work (2005). Once the contract is signed, the worker will be issued a work permit that is valid for no more than eight months, but farmers have the right to repatriate employees at any time before the termination of the contract (2005). Workers are also given temporary Social Insurance Number cards and are expected to pay both Income Tax and Employment Insurance (2005). Upon completion of the work term, employers fill out a worker evaluation which is placed in a sealed envelope that workers must return unopened to the Mexican Ministry of Labour if they wish to remain in the program (Preibisch 2004:207).

Since the Mexican Ministry of Labour and Social Planning has established guidelines for the selection of MSAWP workers, men who qualify for the program share certain characteristics. First and foremost, they must have had experience working in agriculture and must be at least twenty-five (Basok 2002:98). Preference is then given to applicants who are most in need, which is defined as having low levels of education, not owning land or a business, and being married with children (98). Either men or women can participate, but few women do, mainly because Canadian farmers do not wish to provide separate living quarters for them and therefore do not request them (99). Although applicants can join the program regardless of where in Mexico they live, the expense entailed by the requirement that they travel to Mexico City to apply and have a medical exam means that eighty-five percent of participants come from a few states around Mexico City (Binford 2002:2).

Applicants cannot request to be placed on a specific farm until after a three-year trial period, during which they are obligated to return to employers who have requested them by name, regardless of how they were treated (8). After completing three contract

years, an MSAWP worker can request a change of farm, but this will only take place if the farm owner also requests the worker (8). Successful applicants are usually told whether they have been hired and where they are going sometime in February or March, depending on the start date of their contract.

As in other parts of Canada, the experiences of MSAWP workers in the Okanagan are, for the most part, shaped by the structure of the program. The MSAWP is similar to provincial farm labour legislation in that some of its regulations leave workers open to exploitation and abuse, while those that could protect them are often not enforced. It is also important to keep in mind that much of the wording of the contract is ambiguous, so that many of its regulations are left open to the employer's interpretation. Not surprisingly, farmers in the Oliver area typically made interpretations that were to their own benefit rather than that of the workers. Similar behaviour on the part of farmers in other provinces has been observed, leading Basok (2002:99) to conclude that "there is a considerable disjuncture between the program as it exists on paper and as it is enacted in reality." In the Okanagan, this disjuncture resulted in many of the Mexican workers who came to the valley having negative experiences in a number of areas.

To begin with, living conditions were generally very poor, although at first glance they appeared significantly better than those of Quebecois migrant workers due to the MSAWP regulations that require farmers to provide their Mexican workers with a bunkhouse of some sort. The workers' accommodations are supposed to be approved by the Ministry of Health but it is up to the employer to arrange an inspection, which will not otherwise occur unless someone lodges a formal complaint (Smart 1998:115). On the lower mainland and in other provinces, employers frequently have not had their

bunkhouses inspected and there have been numerous instances of MSAWP workers being housed in substandard conditions (Sook Lee 2003).

Even when an inspection does take place, the inspector only visits the farm once at the beginning of the season (Smart 1998:115). Once a building has been certified, there is no further monitoring of the conditions within it, and if they slip beneath the standards of the Ministry of Health over the course of the season it goes largely unnoticed (115). For the most part, according to one Leamington, Ontario newspaper, the living conditions of Mexican migrant workers contracted under the MSAWP can be described as “cramped, poorly maintained, and largely unmonitored bachelor ghettos” (115).

The same description can be applied to MSAWP housing in the Okanagan, which took the form of mobile homes, Atco trailers, or small houses. In the valley, most farmers who hired MSAWP workers had their bunkhouses inspected but following that inspection the quality of the buildings seemed to deteriorate, with most lacking upkeep and becoming dilapidated in appearance. Inside, appliances and plumbing that stopped working after the inspection occurred tended not to be repaired for long periods of time. On one farm, the kitchen had a plugged sink and no hot water for the duration of the workers’ stay. There were also recurrent problems with the bathroom plumbing on the same farm, causing the showers and toilets to stop working for stretches of a week or more. Similar problems were experienced by Mexican workers on other farms, some of whom also had refrigerators and televisions that refused to function.

Beyond the poor quality of the structures themselves, many Mexican workers found their living spaces cramped, lacking privacy, noisy, and dirty. The extent to which these elements characterized the men’s living situations did not seem to vary regardless

of how many Mexicans were being employed by a particular farm. If only a few had been hired, they were simply housed in a smaller space where all of the same problems existed. There were usually between three and four men sharing a small room, sleeping on bunk beds pushed up against the wall with a narrow walkway in between. There was no privacy to be had, and the workers found this difficult. They had to live in extremely close quarters for several months with a group of men who, for the most part, were complete strangers. Relations often became strained between the men, especially those who were roommates. "Most of us were friends in the beginning," said a worker on one farm, "but now there's only fights, fights, fights. By the time we go back to Mexico, none of us will be friends." On a few occasions, these conflicts boiled over into physical violence, but this was rare and usually the result of an overindulgence in alcohol.

Noise was constant wherever Mexican workers were living, but was more of a problem where larger numbers were housed together. On the bigger farms, several people played their stereos at top volume during the evenings in an attempt to drown out the music of their neighbours, which travelled easily through the thin walls. It was common for at least one stereo to be left on all night. Besides the music, TVs were almost always left on and added to that, on most nights the younger men stayed up into the early hours of the morning drinking, playing the guitar, dancing, and singing. The unending noise proved to be a source of considerable irritation for some of the men, who had trouble sleeping because of it.

Workers were responsible for keeping their own living areas clean, but frequently did not have the energy or the desire to sweep, mop, wash dishes, and do laundry by hand after putting in a twelve or fourteen hour day. As a result, their living spaces were usually



filthy. In two Atco trailers that served as a bunkhouse, for instance, the flies were frequently so thick that the surface of the picnic tables that the workers ate at could hardly be seen. The sink was full of rotting food and scummy water, dishes crusted with the remains of several days' meals were piled on the counters and tables, the floor was covered with a mixture of dirt, cooking grease, food bits, and spilled beer, and the trashcans were overflowing. The bathroom was little better; the sinks and toilets were rarely cleaned and the floor and countertops were coated with a layer of dead insects and dirt. It bothered many of the men to live in the bunkhouses when they were dirty. "Our houses in Mexico aren't like this," observed one man, "but then, in Mexico I have a wife. She would never allow me to make such a mess. You see what happens when men are taken away from their wives?"

On most farms the workers tried to establish cleaning schedules, but these never seemed to be followed. Instead, the same two or three people would end up cleaning the bunkhouses periodically when they had the time, which tended to be around nine or ten at night. Their work was undone by the end of the next day, though, after the other workers had tracked in large quantities of dirt and cooked their evening meal. This proved to be an additional source of friction between the men, with those who did the bulk of the cleaning feeling resentful toward the workers who did not take a turn.

When the Mexican workers left their bunkhouses and went out to the fields, their working conditions presented them with another set of difficulties. Many of these arose from their relationships with farmers and crew bosses, which, like those experienced by the Quebecois and other groups of migrant farmworkers, frequently involved racism, racialization, verbal abuse, and exploitation. They were also characterized by



paternalism, which did not seem to be present to any great extent in the relationships that Quebecois workers had with farm management.

The racism which Mexican workers were subject to differed slightly from that directed at Quebecois pickers. With MSAWP labourers there seems to have been a return to the racialization of migrant farm labour that has historically occurred in the valley and across Canada (Lanthier and Wong 2002; Satzewich 1988, 1990). Today, farmers discuss MSAWP workers using the same sort of racialized language that has been applied to other groups of migrant agricultural labourers in the Okanagan and elsewhere; the Mexican men were commonly said to be “hard-working”, “fast learners”, “made for agricultural work”, and “ideal for harvesting ground crops.” One tomato grower observed that, “This kind of work is perfect for them - it’s what they’re used to. I think they’re so good at it because they’re so short – they don’t have to bend down as far as we do,” a comment which is representative of the sorts of remarks made by farmers in the Oliver area and reflects their general attitude toward Mexican workers.

Although such comments may initially seem relatively innocuous, the racialization of Mexican workers in this way has serious consequences in that, true to the historical pattern in B.C. and other provinces, it is used by farmers to justify the men’s substandard living and working conditions and to deflect any suggestion that they should be improved (Basok 2002; Ebanks 1991; Colby 1997; Lanthier and Wong 2002). Most growers were of the opinion that the bunkhouses that Mexican workers lived in while they were in Canada were far superior to their homes in Mexico, and seemed to assume that because they were poor and came from a developing country, they would be more than happy to live in residences that most Canadians would not tolerate. “They probably

feel like coming to Canada is a vacation,” said one grower. “Here they have running water and electricity and showers. That’s got to be a lot better than the way they live in Mexico.”

There was the general sense among farmers that because the standard of living in Mexico was so low, making any improvements to the bunkhouses would be an unnecessary expenditure. As another grower put it, “Their expectations are lower than what we have in Canada. They don’t come here expecting a big screen TV and a hot tub. For them, the bunkhouses are more than good enough.” When asked whether he would live in similar housing, the grower glanced up at his sprawling residence, complete with a swimming pool, hot tub, satellite dish, and a garage that was larger than the workers’ bunkhouse. “Well no,” he replied, “but I think you’re missing the point. I’m Canadian, so I’m accustomed to a certain way of life. They’re Mexican, so they’re not. They can be perfectly happy with a lot less than we can.”

Similarly, farmers took that position that because they were Mexican, MSAWP labourers could be expected to work longer, harder, and faster than Canadians. A vineyard owner summarized the prevailing opinion among farmers when he said, “We [Canadians] can’t work all day in this heat. Our bodies just physically can’t take it. But the Mexicans are built to work hard in this kind of temperature. They love it!” Indeed, most farmers took the view that the Mexican men enjoyed working in thirty-degree temperatures for hours at a time and used this as justification for not giving them time off and asking them to put in fourteen-hour days. As with housing, they further justified such demands through the belief that most Mexicans live in poverty and are accustomed to doing hard labour in the fields and factories of Mexico just to survive. “Mexicans,” said

an orchardist, "are used to doing work that's just as hard or harder than what they do here. At least here they get paid better."

While farmers racialized Mexican workers, crew bosses' attitudes toward them tended to involve racism rather than racialization. Most of the crew bosses in the Oliver area were landed immigrants or Canadian citizens who had come to Canada from various South American countries; none were Mexican. They had a language in common with MSAWP workers, but this did not seem to inspire feelings of camaraderie. Instead, various crew bosses described the Mexican men as lazy, dirty, stupid, liars, cheats, and drunks, and thought that the decision to hire them as farmworkers was ill-considered. Accordingly, they were highly critical of the speed and quality of the Mexicans' work. "You can't expect them to a good job," said one crew boss with a frown, as he surveyed a number of men picking tomatoes. "They're just lazy Mexican dogs. All they're good for is lying around and drinking beer. They'll regret bringing them here. You'll see. In a few years, they won't hire any more."

The crew bosses' racism affected Mexican workers in a number of ways. Since none of the farmers who hired MSAWP workers were fluent in Spanish, they relied on crew bosses to supervise the men's work each day and to determine which workers should be brought back the next year. This gave the crew bosses a significant amount of power over the workers and it appeared that, due to their low opinion of the Mexicans, most of them abused this power without compunction. Favouritism was one of the most common ways in which this manifested itself.

Favouritism appears to be a fairly common behaviour among crew bosses, who often choose favourites from among the most productive workers and then give them the

better jobs or leave them to oversee the other workers (Harper *et al* 1974:290; Foner and Napoli 1978; Friedland and Nelkin 1971). The same occurred on Oliver farms, where crew bosses selected a few Mexican workers as favourites at the beginning of the season. Usually, these were men who had been at the farm the previous year and were viewed as more dependable and trustworthy than the other workers. The favourites were always given the jobs that were easier and, in some instances, paid more. In addition, they were made deputy crew bosses and left to oversee the work of a small group of Mexicans while the crew boss went off to supervise another area of the farm.

Although it may seem fairly harmless on the surface, the singling out of a few men as favourites in this way created additional tensions between the Mexican workers. On Okanagan farms, those who were being supervised by the deputy crew bosses resented being told how to do their jobs by someone who was not, they felt, any better than they were. It was bad enough, from the men's point of view, to have to tolerate the disrespect of the official crew bosses and follow their orders, but it was completely unfair to expect them to take direction from one of their own, even though the Mexican deputies said that they treated their crews with respect and took an equal share in the work. As one man remarked, "I'll listen to the crew boss because he's Canadian and the farmer put him in charge, so he's at least a little bit superior to me. But we Mexicans are all the same. None of them have the right to tell me how to do my job."

More than one friendship was terminated as a result of the crew bosses' favouritism, and the men involved did not speak to each other unless absolutely necessary for the remainder of their time on the farm. Within the group as a whole, although the favourites did not behave as though they were in any way superior, they became marked

as different and were subtly set apart from the rest of the men. The favourites tended not to be invited when outings to town or other activities were planned, and spent more time in their rooms than socializing with the other men in the evenings, since they were usually not fully included in the conversations taking place.

Crew bosses further emphasized their position of power over the men by subjecting them to a constant stream of verbal abuse. They frequently insulted the men, calling them "Mexican donkeys" and worse. Threats were common as well; the bosses often told the men that if they did not work faster, harder, and better they would receive a "bad evaluation" and be expelled from the program. Similar retribution was promised if the men complained in any way about their treatment. The crew bosses' position of power also enabled them to exploit the workers. In the U.S., crew bosses' exploitation of farm labour is mainly financial and takes several common forms, including deducting money from workers' pay on a variety of pretexts and then pocketing it, overcharging workers for items that are purchased in town and resold in the camps, and ensuring that workers become indebted to them by charging exorbitant amounts for transportation and meals (Harper *et al.* 1974; Foner and Napoli 1978; Friedland and Nelkin 1971). Like their American counterparts, crew bosses in the Oliver area can be said to have exploited workers for their own economic gain. However, this exploitation took a somewhat different shape in the Okanagan.

In the U.S., crew bosses are usually independent agents who both contract the labourers and run the camps that they live in (Harper *et al.* 1974:286). In the Okanagan, on the other hand, crew bosses do not act as labour contractors or camp supervisors; instead, they are hired by farmers for the duration of the season and are paid a salary.

Their exploitation of the Mexican workers was thus oriented more toward long than short-term economic gains, since their wages, bonuses, and guarantees of future employment depend upon their ability to run a productive and well-behaved crew. Accordingly, crew bosses used their position of power to exert a high degree of control over their workers' lives and thereby ensure that they were indeed productive and well-behaved.

Farmers also exploited the Mexican workers in ways that were similar to those used by crew bosses in the U.S., though at a greater remove due to their more limited interaction with the men. In the Okanagan, it was the farmers who assumed responsibility for overseeing the camps and providing necessities such as drinking water, though the workers purchased the bulk of their own food in town. Some farmers overcharged the men for water, beverages, specialty foods, and rent, each of which was deducted from their paycheques. Most of the workers were unaware that they were being overcharged, as such deductions were usually not itemized on their paysheets but lumped together into one category titled 'miscellaneous deductions'. There was little they could do about being overcharged in any case, since their distance from town and lack of transportation made it almost impossible for them to purchase heavy items like jugs of drinking water. Also, specialty foods provided by some farmers, such as corn tortillas shipped in from the U.S., were not available locally.

In addition, the periods of time that labourers spend waiting for crew bosses to take them to work can be seen as form of exploitation that benefits farmers (Harper *et al.* 1974:292; Foner and Napoli 1978). The workers are not paid for this time, but they also cannot use it as they wish because they must be ready to depart for work at a moment's

notice (Harper *et al.* 1974:292). Most of the time, the MSAWP workers were not told when the workday would start or finish, or what their work would be. Consequently, they often woke up early, prepared to go out to work, and then sat in the bunkhouse waiting for crew bosses to pick them up. They might wait fifteen minutes, an hour, or several hours. There were days when there was no work to be done but the men were not told that they would have the day off and stayed in the bunkhouse all day in case the crew boss came to collect them. "We can't leave the bunkhouse when the boss says he's got work for us that day," a worker explained. "If he comes to get us and we're not there, he'll be angry and we might not get work the next day. We want the money, so even if we have to wait all day to work five or six hours, that's what we'll do."

Often, farm management's exploitation of workers is facilitated by the paternalistic treatment of employees. Paternalism has been identified as a common element in relationships between crew bosses, farmers, and migrant farmworkers in both Canada and the United States (Laliberte and Satzewich 1998; Basok 1991, 2002; Stewart 1974; Harper *et al.* 1974; Griffith *et al.* 1995). While paternalism did not appear to be present to any great extent in relationships between Quebecois workers and employers or crew bosses, it was very evident in interactions that Mexican workers had with both the former and the latter.

Although it was not officially their job to do so, there was a tacit understanding on farms that the crew bosses were responsible for keeping an eye on the Mexicans' behaviour and making sure that they showed up for work each morning. As noted above, having a Mexican crew that worked fast, hard, and consistently was in the crew bosses' best interests. Consequently, it seems that they attempted to control the men's behaviour



and productivity by taking on the role of father figures and treating them like children. For instance, like those in Harper *et al.*'s (1974:287) study, when the crew bosses were displeased with the workers they punished them in ways similar to those of a parent punishing an errant son. Punishments for workers who were not productive enough or complained about the work included not being allowed to have lunch, being removed from the field and sent to clean the bathrooms, being refused a ride into town for shopping, and being sent to their rooms for a day. Crew bosses also gave workers parental-type lectures on the unacceptability of behaviours that might interfere with their ability to work, such as staying out too late, consuming too much alcohol, and having relationships with Canadian women.

As with the racialization of Mexican workers, farmers' paternalism toward them took a somewhat different form than the crew bosses'. The paternalism of farmers could be described as more positive in nature, since it mainly involved employers doing what they described as "favours" for the workers. However, because the farmers did not have close relationships with the men, such favours came at third hand and typically included having crew bosses or other employees take the men shopping in Penticton, bring them pizza and beer on the nights when they were working late in the packing house, or give them rides to town on days besides those appointed for grocery shopping.

For their part, the Mexican workers disliked the paternalistic attitudes that crew bosses and farmers took toward them, regardless of whether they were positive or negative. Most of the men were in their late twenties to mid-thirties, had been married for several years, and had been working hard to support their wives and children. They were used to having responsibility, making their own decisions, and being consulted on



subjects of importance by the members of their families and communities. They found it insulting and degrading to be treated like children while they were in Canada by people whose only claim to superiority over them was their Canadian citizenship. "In Mexico, I am someone," observed one man. "When I come to Canada, I am nothing. I have to do what they [farmers and crew bosses] say because they're Canadian. What am I? Only a Mexican. Mexicans aren't important in Canada. Only Canadians are important here."

It appears that the combination of racialization, racism, and paternalism present among farmers and crew bosses was largely responsible for the conditions under and the manner in which the men were expected to work. As mentioned in Chapter Three, farm labour is, inherently, hard work. For MSAWP labourers, the work was harder than for most of the Quebecois, involving greater physical exertion for longer periods of time. In April and May, when the season had just begun, workdays ranged from six to ten hours and the men were given one or two days off per week. During the main harvest months of June, July, August, and September, however, longer daylight hours along with lights in packing and greenhouses enabled the men to begin work before dawn. As a result, for many the day was extended to between ten and eighteen hours, with only a few hours off every week for grocery shopping.

Like the Quebecois, Mexican workers were under considerable pressure to work fast because they were paid by piecework for most tasks and wished to maximize their earnings. The men were also pushed to work more quickly by farmers and crew bosses. However, the structure of the MSAWP gave farm management far more leverage than they had with the Quebecois, who were free to change employers and could not be removed from the country. The Mexican men were well aware that they did not have

these options, and farmers and crew bosses emphasized that the most productive workers had the highest likelihood of remaining within the program for this season and the seasons to come. Indeed, farmers were unapologetic about their emphasis on productivity as a criteria for determining which workers they would invite to return to their farm the following year. One vineyard owner summarized the general opinion among farmers participating in the MSAWP when he said, "I'm running a business here. I need to make a profit. So I'm going to bring back the guys who are the fastest and work the best."

Although they may increase a farm's profitability, the hours worked by MSAWP labourers, coupled with the pace that they are expected to keep up, are a problematic issue. Because the language of the contract states only that the "hours of work are not to be excessive," with the interpretation of "excessive" being left up to the farmer, there are effectively no limits on the number of hours that Mexican workers can put in. Further, since farm labour in B.C. is exempt from overtime pay legislation, farmers have no incentive to restrict the length of the workday. In addition, although the contract stipulates that workdays are not to exceed eight hours and workers are entitled to one full day of rest after every six days of work, it contains the proviso that, when there is a "pressing need" to do so, employers can "request" MSAWP participants to work longer hours and postpone time off (Basok 2002:39-40). Again, it is the farmers' prerogative to determine what is meant by a "pressing need." In other provinces, this loophole has resulted in workers frequently putting in twelve to sixteen hours per day and not receiving a day off for months at a time (Smart 1998:150; Preibisch 1998:5; Basok 2002:39-40). In the Okanagan, many of the men were asked to work hours that they felt were excessive. There was a great deal of discontentment among the workers over not

being given one day off each week and being asked to work from dawn to dark for several months. "In Mexico," they said, "Sunday is always a day off, to rest, go to church, see your friends and family. In Canada, there are no days off."

The pace and amount of work seemed to begin taking a toll on the men's health toward the end of September. Apparently, illness and injury is common among MSAWP workers, which, notes Binford (2002:7), "is not surprising given that agriculture remains a dangerous occupation and migrant workers often spend long hours carrying out repetitive motions and are in close contact with unfamiliar machinery and toxic chemicals." Workers on the farms that I visited had not been getting more than five or six hours of sleep per night all season and began to experience fatigue, with many falling asleep sitting on couches or at kitchen tables almost immediately after coming in from the fields. One occurrence from this period is particularly illustrative of the level of the men's exhaustion: a worker came into the bunkhouse late one night, collected pen and paper from his room, and sat down to write a letter to his wife, who had just had a baby. Five minutes later he was asleep, pen in hand, paper barely touched. He repeated this process each day, but never did have the energy to finish his letter. Probably due to a combination of exhaustion and the colder weather, almost all of the workers on these farms eventually came down with colds or flus. Several developed serious illnesses but continued working until they were physically unable to do so any longer, at which point they were flown back to Mexico.

In addition, as with the Quebecois, the combination of fatigue and speed caused a number of injuries on the job, mostly as a result of the men being untrained in ladder safety. Those picking apples were particularly prone to injury, and several were badly cut

and bruised after falling off their ladders and landing on the apples below with the weight of their picking buckets on top of them. Rather than resting or reporting the injury, they resumed work, albeit at a slower pace. Out of the desire to keep sending money home in the short-term and ensure their continued participation in the MSAWP in the long-term, workers did not tell anyone except their close friends about their illness or injury despite the program's stipulation that all injuries be reported immediately. Instead, ill or injured workers were cared for by their friends, who shared medication, brought meals, and kept them company until they either felt better or worsened dramatically. It was not until the latter occurred that a crew boss or farmer would be asked for help.

Like the Quebecois and other migrant farm workers, the Mexican men were also exposed to pesticides and the associated health risks. In Ontario and other parts of Canada where MSAWP labour is used, injury of workers involving pesticide usually occurs when they apply the chemicals improperly due to a lack of training and product labeling in Spanish (Basok 2002). In the Oliver area, farmers and crew bosses rather than Mexican workers did most of the pesticide application, so their exposure occurred when they were sent too soon to work in areas that had been sprayed, or were caught in the drift from pesticides that were being applied in an adjacent field.

Also of concern is MSAWP workers' mental health. Some social service providers pointed out that the men are at significant risk of developing depression while they are in Canada. They noted that Mexican society is highly family-oriented and that people spend a great deal of time socializing with their family members and friends. Having to leave their communities, families, and friends for six months at a time and come to a country where they are isolated on farm property and given nothing to do but

work and talk with a small group of other Mexicans is extremely difficult. Add to this the conflicts that develop within that group, the abuse and exploitation that they receive at the hands of employers and crew bosses, the pace and amount of work, fear of being expelled from the program, and the stress of wanting to earn as much money as possible to send home and it is surprising, according to one member of a farmworker advocacy group, that "the men don't suffer a complete mental collapse. It's only the resilient nature of the Mexican character and their positive outlook on life that prevents it. Any Canadian in their situation would have a breakdown."

The men may have appeared resilient and positive, and they did try to remain cheerful, but many were not happy. This can largely be attributed to their difficult living and working conditions, but it was also due to the quality of their social relations. Like other migrant farmworkers in the valley, Mexican contract labourers were segregated and isolated. However, their segregation and isolation was more complete than that experienced by Quebecois workers. Mexican workers were similarly isolated at a distance from town on the farm properties where they lived, but they were more confined to the farm because they had even less access to transportation than did Quebecois pickers. None of the Mexican workers had vehicles and while some farms provided an old bicycle or two, for the most part the men relied on the crew bosses or farmers for rides into town.

On farms where both Mexicans and Quebecois were hired, the Mexican men were segregated from their Canadian co-workers. Each group lived in separate camps, with the Mexicans staying in bunkhouses and the Quebecois either sleeping in tents some distance away or camping off the farm. The two groups did not work together during the day.

According to the farmers, Mexican and Quebecois workers were separated in this manner to facilitate the evaluation of Mexican workers' productivity. Farmers wanted to compare the two groups of workers to determine how much money they were saving by hiring MSAWP labour, and to determine which workers within the Mexican group were most productive.

Farmers did not have to exert a great deal of effort to keep the Mexican and Quebecois workers separate; language effectively isolated and segregated the Mexican men, not only from other workers, but also from the local community. It was an even larger factor in their case than in that of the Quebecois; whereas many Quebecois had a working knowledge of English, most Mexican workers did not speak the language at all. They were eager to learn English, but no instruction was offered on the farms where they lived. Some attempted to instruct themselves, but usually did not have the time or the energy to study in a manner that would have allowed them to get a grasp on the language. As a result, they found it difficult to communicate with local residents or Canadian farmworkers, which restricted their social interactions to other Mexican workers.

Along with language, several other factors resulted in Mexican workers' social relations being a great deal more restricted than those of the Quebecois. On the most basic level, Mexican and Quebecois workers have quite different motivations for coming to the Okanagan. Most of the Quebecois come mainly for social reasons, while the Mexicans come for monetary ones. Accordingly, they are more concerned with working than with finding a good party or having a tam-tam jam session. Along the same lines, the hours that they work do not encourage the Mexican men to seek out social relations; most

nights they are too tired to cook supper, never mind going out and dancing around a bonfire into the wee hours as the Quebecois often do.

The fact that Mexican workers are contracted to stay at one farm for the duration of their time in Canada also limits the degree to which they can socialize. Quebecois workers are highly mobile, constantly changing farms, meeting new people, and expanding their circle of friends. They visit each other in their camps and go on large group outings to beaches and parks, where they invariably meet up with more pickers. MSAWP workers, without transportation and the freedom to leave farms when they please, are not able to meet with Mexicans staying on other farms. They may talk briefly with them in the grocery store or the bank when they are in town, but they do not have social outings in the same way that the Quebecois do. Instead, their social relations were, for the most part, limited to the other Mexican workers on the farm.

Added to all of this, there was a sense of resentment toward Mexican contract labourers among the Quebecois, many of whom felt that the Mexicans were taking their jobs and received better treatment, since their plane ticket was paid for and they were provided with accommodation and transportation while in Canada. At the same time, the Mexican men found the picker culture, with its unique style of dress, drug use, and free-love attitude strange, and were not entirely comfortable in the company of the Quebecois, particularly if same-sex couples were present. Finally, the tendency of Quebecois pickers not to remain on one farm for any length of time decreased the likelihood that they would establish relationships with the Mexican workers.

As well, it appears that the social exclusion of MSAWP workers from both the local community and the Quebecois migrant worker community was desired by farmers.



In other provinces, it has been found that farmers have frequently attempted to minimize interactions between their SAWP workers, both Caribbean and Mexican, and local residents, particularly women (Basok 1999, 2002; Preibisch 2004; Smart 1997; Ebanks 1991). Farmers typically give reasons related to work performance for discouraging social relations between guestworkers and Canadians (Ebanks 1991:399), and in the Okanagan, these were the reasons that they gave for encouraging workers to remain on farm property. It is likely that farmers had an additional motive, in that they did not want Mexican workers to be informed of their rights under provincial farm labour law by Quebecois workers or locals.

MSAWP workers had little interaction with Oliver residents, again mainly due to language barriers, lack of transportation, isolation on farms, the hours of work, and farm management's desire to socially exclude them from the community. The men said that locals were polite to them for the most part and that they did not experience any racism when they were in town. It could be suggested, however, that the racialization of the Mexican men has been extended into the wider community; the local media discussed them in much the same way as did farmers (Johnson 2005:1; Knelsen 2006:1; Lalonde 2006:1) and social service providers noticed that similar opinions were expressed by many local residents and farmers who were not participating in the MSAWP. In any case, the attitude toward Mexican workers in town and within the farming community was far more positive than that toward the Quebecois.

Still, positive attitudes did little to provide the men with social interaction. The lack of social activities was one of the main complaints voiced by Mexican workers, who disliked working for weeks and months at a stretch with few diversions and little time to



rest. They became bored, they said, with "seeing only the same Mexicans every day. Talking with only the same Mexicans every day." They also grew increasingly lonely as the time that they had been away from home lengthened and important events in the lives of their families took place without them. A number of the men had babies born while they were away; in some cases, the infants would be several months old before their fathers saw them. Others had relatives become seriously ill or die, and many had children whose childhoods they were not there to participate in for at least half the year.

Their loneliness was intensified by the difficulty of communicating with their families in Mexico. Most farms did not offer their workers the use of a phone, even if the workers paid for the call themselves, so the men had to use the payphones in Oliver during their weekly grocery trip. Doing so proved difficult, since only three of the payphones were working and all the Mexicans in the area usually came to town on the same day. This meant that when they did get access to a phone, their conversations were limited to between five and ten minutes before the next person in line stepped up to take his turn. On the one farm where workers were permitted to use the office phone provided they paid for the call, they were only allowed to access it during lunch, between twelve and one, or just before the office closed, between four and five. These times were not convenient for the men, who, if they were given a lunch hour, needed to cook and eat during it, and who very rarely finished work before five. Not surprisingly, access to a phone line of their own was something that all of the workers felt would markedly improve their stay in Canada.

Despite the difficult living and working conditions that many MSAWP workers in the Oliver area experienced, the majority wanted to remain within the program. In fact,

on the farm where conditions were worst, almost all of the men who had been requested by the farmer at the end of the 2005 season chose to return in 2006. A similar situation exists across the country, where despite numerous instances of abuse and exploitation, Mexican workers continue to join the program and to remain within it for considerable periods of time (Basok 2002). Indeed, some of the Mexican men who worked in the Oliver area had been coming to Canada as MSAWP labourers for more than fifteen years and said that conditions had been the same or worse in other provinces where they were employed, so they knew what to expect when they came to the Okanagan.

Even those coming to Canada for the first time are well aware of the sort of experience they are likely to have, since a communication network similar to that of the Quebecois exists among Mexican workers. When they meet in town on shopping days, the men exchange stories about work, housing, crew bosses, and farmers, stories that quickly spread from one group of workers to another and are carried back to Mexico. There, men who are considering joining the program, or who are deciding whether to continue within it, hear them. According to MSAWP workers in the Oliver area, most of the stories they were told about the program while they were in Mexico did not portray the working and living conditions in Canada as positive.

Given all this, it must be asked why most Mexican men remain in Canada for the duration of their contract when they are being mistreated, and why many participate in the MSAWP year after year. After all, they can choose to leave the program at any time. Basok (2002:196) suggests that the MSAWP contains three key mechanisms of control, paternalism, the end of season evaluation, and language, which are used by farmers to

“manufacture” Mexicans’ ongoing consent to work in exploitative, unsafe conditions despite their freedom to leave the program.

Wall (1992:268) notes that in the case of MSAWP workers, paternalism is a particularly effective mechanism because the workers have few social interactions with the Canadian community off-farm and are usually isolated in a location some distance from town, so the farmer or crew boss is often their primary source of interaction with the Canadian community. The MSAWP regulation requiring employers to house their workers on farm property, says Wall (268) is “symbolic of several other dependencies Mexican farmworkers may experience in their interactions with growers.” For instance, the workers often need to have their employers’ permission before they can leave farm property (268). As well, farmworkers usually rely on farmers and/or their families for help with translation, filling out government forms, transportation, and assorted personal difficulties (268).

Growers usually call their behaviour during such interactions “doing favours” but, Wall (268) notes, the implications are deeper than that phrase suggests (268). Such dependencies help to cement MSAWP workers into personal relations of unequal exchange and can foster a high degree of paternalistic behaviour, so that workers come to see farmers as friends and wish to meet their expectations for reasons that have to do with feelings of friendship and not solely a desire to be rehired (268). The paternalistic relationships that develop between MSAWP labourers and farmers are also linked to the social exclusion of Mexican migrants from the rural communities where they work. Many farmers have encouraged this exclusion and employed it as an additional method of control by attempting to minimize workers’ contacts with local residents and regulate

their social lives off-farm, having learned through experience with other migrant workers that those who do not have outside social engagements are more likely not to leave the farm during crucial harvesting periods (Preibisch 2000; Basok 2002; Smart 1997; Colby 1997).

For the most part, the paternalistic behaviour of farmers and crew bosses in the Oliver was almost identical to that observed elsewhere in Canada, even in the language used to describe their interactions with workers as “doing favours.” Undoubtedly, Mexican workers were dependent on farmers and crew bosses, particularly for transportation and assistance in completing forms. It was also clear that farm management preferred Mexican workers to remain socially excluded from the local community and attempted to use paternalism as one strategy to ensure that this remained the case. This was particularly evident in the “talks” that crew bosses had with workers about the inadvisability of their being off farm property after dark, visiting local pubs, and pursuing relationships with Canadian women. Indeed, farmers saw Quebecois pickers’ extremely active social lives off-farm as one of the key reasons that they were frequently undependable workers, so it seems logical that they would wish to avoid the creation of a similar situation among their Mexican workers.

However, it seems that the responses of Mexican workers’ in the Okanagan to the paternalism that they experienced diverged from the pattern that has been common elsewhere in Canada. Workers in the Oliver area did not come to see the farm management as their friends, and had no desire to do a better job out of a sense of friendship. This is likely due to the large size of the farms where most MSAWP participants were working, coupled with their limited knowledge of English. As a result,

most had no relationship with the farm owner, who, on the biggest operations, did not even know the workers' names. At the same time, the relationships that MSAWP workers had with crew bosses tended to be quite negative.

Consequently, the men were under no illusions that farmers and crew bosses behaved in a paternalistic manner because they thought that doing so was in the workers' best interests. They thought that any attention they received from the farm management, good or bad, was ultimately intended to benefit the farm through ensuring that they would work longer, harder, and faster. Further, many Mexican workers felt that they were being taken advantage of. Their relationships with employers and crew bosses, coupled with the poor conditions in which they lived, left the men with the sense that they were seen as picking machines rather than human beings. A large number of the workers said that they were treated, and felt, like slaves.

This feeling was augmented by the social exclusion of the workers that farmers and crew bosses actively encouraged. They felt that the crew bosses' talks, which effectively discouraged them from leaving farm property and attempting to have social relations of any kind with local residents, were again designed to benefit the farm and the bosses through making sure that they would be ready to work whenever necessary. Some of the men said that farm management's apparent desire to regulate every aspect of their lives, including those aspects that should have remained private and personal, left them with the impression that they were viewed as property rather than as friends or equals.

Perhaps more powerful than paternalism as a strategy to control workers and secure their commitment to agricultural work is the end of season evaluation completed by farmers, coupled with their lack of citizenship, which gives farmers the right to

repatriate their employees at any time (Basok 2002:xix). Fear of receiving a negative evaluation or of being sent home before their contracts expire, which would jeopardize their chances of being reaccepted into the program, leads MSAWP labourers to comply with all demands made of them and to accept the substandard conditions in which they are asked to live and work (xix). In practice, this means that they are often exposed to pesticides and herbicides in the fields, work when they are ill or injured, put in longer hours and receive fewer days off than they are supposed to, are paid less than minimum wage, and go along with the unofficial practice that has arisen in some areas of 'loaning' workers to other farmers without obtaining official approval (Colby 1997:6; Smart 1998:150; Preibisch 1998:5; Wong 1984:88).

In the Oliver area, there was evidence to suggest that this mechanism of control was being used extensively and more effectively than paternalism to ensure workers' continued participation in the program. Most farmers informed their workers at the beginning of the season that they would be evaluated at the end of the contract and that infractions of the program rules would result in repatriation to Mexico. In reality, farmers needed labourers so badly that they could not afford to send workers home before the season's end and therefore did not enforce the program rules very strictly. Still, the Mexican men were not aware of this, and they either followed the rules to the letter, or were extremely circumspect when they broke them. Even though it was not always the case, the men felt that their behaviour both during and after work was constantly being observed and this placed many under a significant amount of stress.

It was also the case that most MSAWP workers did whatever employers asked of them, even though some of those requests violated the terms of the contract. For some,

this meant being exposed to chemicals in the fields, paid less than minimum wage, and loaned out. The most common violations, however, were overworking the men and letting injuries go unreported. As mentioned previously, due to the MSAWP's proviso allowing employers to request that workers extend their hours and not take days off, many of the men worked well over eight hours per day and rarely received a full day off. It was also common for MSAWP labourers to work when they were ill or injured and not report their condition. Some farmers and crew bosses were aware of this situation and attributed it to the men being embarrassed or uncomfortable, but they did nothing to make the workers feel more at ease and to encourage reporting by ensuring them that illness would not result in their repatriation. Instead, they preferred to let the men work as long as they felt they could. As one farmer put it, "If they want the hours, I'm not going to stop them. It's up to them to decide if they're too sick to work." It was difficult for the workers to report their injuries in any event, since their negative relationships with crew bosses discouraged them from sharing their problems, as did the lack of a relationship and a common language with farmers.

Language also belongs to the suite of control mechanisms used by farmers in their relationships with MSAWP workers, most of whom speak only Spanish. This lack of English knowledge is usually seen as an advantage by farmers, since it decreases workers' ability to socialize outside the farm and form relationships that might distract them from their jobs, limits their ability to demand improvements in pay or working conditions, and means that farmers are often Mexicans' only communication conduit with the outside world (Basok 2002:35). In contrast, Caribbean SAWP workers and domestic migrants who speak English are, farmers feel, more likely to "talk back," become



“troublemakers,” and have social relationships that interfere with the quality of their work (35).

The lack of interest exhibited by Oliver area farmers in providing their workers with English instruction, which meant that communication with the world outside the farm could only occur when crew bosses acted as interpreters, suggests that they did view language as a means of controlling workers and limiting their off-farm social relations. The likelihood that workers might voice complaints was also greatly reduced by the fact that they would have to tell the crew boss about their problem and ask them to pass their comments on to the farmer. This precluded their ability to make complaints about crew bosses and discouraged them from making complaints of any sort because they did not want the crew bosses to see them as troublemakers. Indeed, farmers seemed to perceive Mexican workers' lack of facility in English as positive because it meant that they were less likely to complain and cause trouble than the Quebecois. This point of view was perhaps best expressed by a farmer who observed that the “Quebecers are always whining about something. It's too hot, the work is too hard, the days are too long, the money is no good, on and on and on. The Mexicans don't say anything. They just smile at you and get on with their job, so they're a much easier workforce to handle.”

While paternalism may be a less significant factor in the Okanagan than in other parts of Canada, the research conducted by others, as well as my own, appears to support Basok's (2002) contention that the various mechanisms of control used by farmers partially explain Mexicans' continued participation in the MSAWP and their willingness to endure substandard working and living conditions. Still, this solution seems incomplete. Other researchers have attempted to explain the appeal of guestworker

programs in terms of economic need, pointing out that the conditions of economic inequality which exist between developed and developing countries force many citizens of the latter to seek employment abroad and to accept the exploitative working conditions they typically experience in other countries (Bonacich 1972; Piore 1973, 1979; Cohen 1987).

Undoubtedly, economics play a large part in Mexican workers' decision to join the MSAWP. Studies conducted in other provinces have found that because they are men with families to support, workers identify the wages, which are very high compared to what could be earned doing similar work in Mexico, as the main attraction of the program (Basok 2000:85; Smart 1997 150-151). Workers in the Okanagan shared this perspective, repeatedly stating that, "We come for the money." Still, economics do not fully explain why so many men join the program and remain within it regardless of the poor working and living conditions that they frequently encounter. Workers in other parts of Canada have given a number of reasons, above and beyond economics, as to why they value their MSAWP jobs and wish to keep them for as long as possible.

First, they prefer working legally in Canada to doing so illegally in the U.S., even though jobs in the States are often better paying than those offered by the MSAWP, because the Canadian program with its signed contract offers greater job security (Colby 1997). As one worker observed, "it's good to work in Canada because you know that you'll have a job to go to every morning and a home to come back to at night" (Basok 2002:61). Other workers add that it is easier to save and remit money in Canada, since, unlike the urban American locations where they often work as illegal immigrants, there is

little to spend money on in rural farming communities and not much to do besides work (Colby 1997:27).

In addition, their stays in Canada can be kept shorter than those in the U.S., and it is somewhat easier to communicate with their families because they have a fixed address (27). Finally, many remarked that their wives preferred that they work in Canada because they were less likely to take up with another woman, get in trouble with the police, be endangered by an illegal crossing, forget to send money home, or never return home at all (27). Therefore, while many felt that their working and living conditions could be improved, they saw their time here as temporary and directed toward earning money for their families, and so were willing to put up with the situation in the short term (Smart 1997:150).

As well, like the Quebecois and other migrant workers, the development of social networks seems to play a large part in the decision to come to Canada as temporary agricultural labourers. The role of migrant networks in encouraging and enabling Mexican migration to the U.S. is well known (Benjamin and Winters 2001; Barron 1999; Calavita 1990; Chavez 1994). Much of this literature emphasizes that the development of social networks results from the creation of both social ties between sending and receiving communities and a web of reciprocal obligations between people from the same community (Massey 1987:1374).

Basok (2002:100) suggests that the geographic distribution of program participants indicates that social networks are also important elements of Mexican migration to Canada. Most participants come from a small number of municipalities and many are related by blood or marriage; in the state of Guanajato, for instance, almost all

participants come from seven municipalities even though the male population of these municipalities comprises only twenty-seven percent of the state's male population (100-101). Many hear about the program from friends or family when they return to their communities from Canada and decide to join based on what they are told and at the urging of their relatives and friends (109).

In the Oliver area, social networks did seem to have influenced Mexican workers' decision to come to Canada. Most MSAWP workers said that they joined the program because they were told about it by family or friends and encouraged to apply. Many also came from the same towns and were related. A few were assisted in coming to Canada this season by men who had been in the program and knew that they would be returning to the same farm. They asked the farmer to request their relatives or friends, and in most cases the farmers obliged. This suggests that although the situation for migrant farmworkers in Canada is somewhat different than for those in the U.S., since they cannot remain in the country for extended periods of time, they may still establish similar social ties and webs of reciprocal obligation between Mexico and Canada that will allow them to assist their relatives in migrating and at the same time expand the social networks that have begun to develop in the valley.

Beyond social networks, MSAWP workers in the Oliver area, like those in other provinces, mentioned job security, the ability to save money, shorter stays, easier communication, and the preferences of their wives when they were asked why they continued to participate in the program. In particular, they emphasized that the temporary nature of the work was all that made it endurable. Most had calculated the number of years they would have to remain in the program before they could save enough to support

their families without having to leave Mexico and were adamant that the moment their goal had been reached, they would quit the program.

Most of the men saw themselves as having three main options in terms of supporting their families: they could either work in Mexico, the United States, or Canada. None of these choices were viewed as favourable, but the MSAWP appeared to be the best option available to them. They said that working in Canada was better than working in the U.S., and that working in B.C. was no better or worse than working in other provinces. One man who had been in the program for a number of years put it this way: “employers are the same everywhere in Canada. And we are Mexicans everywhere in Canada. So the way they treat us doesn’t change much. We’ll come until we don’t have to any more and then we will be happy to stay in Mexico.”

While Mexican men may choose to become guestworkers in Canada for numerous reasons, their ability to do so depends on the participation of farmers in the program. In the Okanagan, the MSAWP has experienced rapid growth, with the number of temporary Mexican workers in the valley increasing from 40 in 2005 to 160 in 2006 (Edwards 2005:33; Knelsen 2006:1). The factors underlying the popularity of the MSAWP among Okanagan farmers will be explored next, as will the implications of the program’s adoption for Quebecois pickers, Mexican workers, and the farming community.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Why Okanagan Farmers are Joining the MSAWP and Implications of the MSAWP's Implementation for Farmworkers and Farmers in the Valley**

The reasoning underlying workers' continued participation in the MSAWP seems fairly clear. What remains to be explained is why a growing number of Okanagan farmers are looking to the MSAWP to solve the valley's current labour shortage, and what the implications of the program's implementation will be for farmworkers and farmers in the valley. The reasons given by farmers and governments as to why the MSAWP offers the best solution to Canada's agricultural labour problems have changed little across time and space, and are now used in the Okanagan. Over the past four decades and in each province where it has been implemented, the vulnerability and instability of the agricultural industry, rising farm input costs, a shortage of domestic labour, and the opportunity to assist impoverished citizens of other countries have been used to justify and promote the program.

The overarching ideology within which these justifications are situated revolves around the image, carefully constructed and mobilized by farmers and governments, of the family farmer and the family farm. It is an image that has deep resonance in Canadian society, which, into the 1940s, was primarily agricultural and rural (Shields 1992:247). Today's farmers, Thomas (1985:35-36) observes, are still perceived as "guardians of rural values" engaged in "society's most useful and necessary enterprise," one that, vulnerable as it is to the weather, labour shortages, and uncertain markets, entitles them to special treatment regarding economic policy and labour supply. This perception has been perpetuated and amplified by the mass media, strengthening the belief that farmers

have, writes Fisher (in Thomas 1985:36), "a right...to an adequate supply of labour." Accordingly, when the MSAWP is discussed, farmers and governments frequently prophesy the demise of farming as a 'way of life' if access to low wage, dependable labour cannot be maintained (Shields 1992:262; Wall 1992).

However, as the earlier discussion of agricultural restructuring indicated, the family farm and the family farmer are swiftly being consigned to the ranks of history. As Shields (1992:263) comments, "the forces of the marketplace have already served to thoroughly transform the old- style farm into a commercial venture." Moreover, most farmers do not see themselves as embattled defenders of rural values but increasingly as farmer-businessmen who are operating in the farm industry (254). At present, writes Shields (1988:93), the "key words in Canadian agriculture are productivity and efficiency," an orientation that represents a significant change in traditional agricultural values (93).

Nonetheless, farmers continue to make strategic use of the family farm construction to win public and state support for measures aimed at keeping the supply of agricultural labour steady and inexpensive. Indeed, in the Okanagan, several of the largest operations continue to promote themselves as 'family farms' even though they have grown to the point where their structure is more like that of a corporation. Regardless of farm size, growers in the Oliver area emphasized that they would have "gone under" without Mexican workers during the summer and that their ability to support their families through farming depended on their continued access to MSAWP labour. A similar tone was taken by the local media, which portrayed Mexican workers as



dependable low-wage labour that had circumvented the imminent doom of Okanagan agriculture (Johnson 2005; Lalonde 2006).

Beneath the image of the family farm lies another ideology, that of racialization, which, though it is not expressed as explicitly as the former, may have influenced the acceptance of the MSAWP to a greater extent. The presence of racialization in the program might be expected, given that processes of racialization and exclusion have characterized government attempts to secure farm labour throughout Canadian history (Satzewich 1988). As discussed previously, certain groups of people, whether they be German prisoners of war put to work on the prairies, Indian immigrants who were funneled onto the B.C. berry fields, or Japanese internees forced to pick peaches in the Okanagan, have been targeted by selective policies that define them as suited to agricultural work, but not suitable for the full rights of Canadian citizenship (Parr 1985; Smit, Johnston and Morse 1984). Indeed, the federal government initially refused to implement the MSAWP, citing its aversion to allowing “undesirable migrants” across Canadian borders who might become permanent immigrants (Satzewich 1991:29).

Despite its initial reluctance to implement the program, the federal government and its provincial counterparts have come to see MSAWP migrants as highly desirable, largely because the program is constructed in such a way that the migrants remain migrants and do not seek Canadian citizenship (29). For Preibisch (2004:211) the structure of the program, with its many restrictions, suggests a deliberate strategy to exclude Mexican workers from Canadian society, rendering them “powerless in their service to the country’s agriculture industry.” It is certainly the case that, since 1970, the state has preferred to meet agricultural labour demands with temporary visas instead of

permanent immigration, configuring migrant workers as an agricultural resource and a labour supply but making no attempt to extend social membership to them (Bolaria and Li 1988:228; Wong 1984:92). Arat-Koc (1992:230) argues that the movement toward contracting foreign workers under temporary work permits, rather than allowing them to remain in the country as landed immigrants, actually represents a step backward from the liberalizing tendencies that reshaped Canadian immigration policy in the 1960s. So, although race as an explicit criterion was eliminated from immigration policy with the introduction of the points system, it still plays an important part in the recruitment of migrant workers (229).

Arat-Koc's thoughts are borne out by the MSAWP, which seems to target Mexicans primarily because they have been racialized as particularly suited to agricultural labour and therefore both able and willing to endure conditions that domestic workers are not. Doug Leclair, executive director of the PEI Federation of Agriculture, neatly encapsulated this perspective when he remarked, "with some of the changes to Employment Insurance, it might be that domestic workers are better off not doing this labour. It's not as if the Mexicans are taking people's jobs. If there's better jobs available [Canadians] will take them. It's only natural" (Ryder 2002:A3). The sentiment that it is "only natural" for Mexican workers to accept and appreciate jobs that Canadians do not want was frequently expressed by both farmers and members of the local community in Preibisch's (2004:208) study, with Mexicans consistently being described as "suited to agricultural work." There was also a common feeling that they were poor people from a poor country for whom Canadian money was, in the words of one farmer, "like gold" (208). Basok (2002:55) had similar findings in Ontario, where farmers were of the

opinion that domestic labourers could not work as hard or as fast as Mexicans, and would not be nearly as happy to receive minimum wage.

It seems that Okanagan farmers share the viewpoint of those in other parts of Canada. In the Oliver area, farmers felt that with the booming Alberta economy next door and a high availability of jobs across the country, it was unlikely that Canadians would choose to do farm labour. As one farmer commented, "Why would you come and do a job that's one of the toughest and lowest paid out there and has no benefits when you can work at Starbucks for more money plus benefits? If I had half a brain, that's what I'd do, rather than breaking my back picking tomatoes for minimum wage." Mexicans, on the other hand, were seen as ideal agricultural workers. Farmers who joined the program described MSAWP workers as better farm labourers than anyone from Canada that they had hired; as one grower put it, "I divided our Mexicans into three groups according to how good they were, and even the bottom third was faster and more productive than any other group of workers I've ever had."

Over the course of the season stories about Mexican workers being incredibly efficient and productive spread throughout the farming community so that by late August, a sort of myth of the Mexican worker as being worth ten Canadian workers and the answer to a farmer's prayers had developed. This image of Mexican workers contributed to the decision among many farmers who did not participate in the MSAWP this year to join it next year. Regardless of whether they had MSAWP workers or not, farmers were of the opinion that because the pay was low and the value of the Canadian dollar high in Mexico, Mexicans were highly motivated to work hard for minimum wage in Canada. Like farmers elsewhere, those in the Oliver area thought that Mexicans' poverty made

them grateful for the opportunity to do work in conditions and for wages that most Canadians would not accept. "The problem is," remarked one grape grower, "Canadians are spoiled. We've gotten soft and we don't want to do hard physical work anymore, especially if it only pays eight bucks an hour. But Mexicans are raised doing hard work and they're not afraid of it. Plus, for them eight bucks an hour is a lot of money." It would appear, then, that the racialization experienced by agricultural workers throughout Canadian history has been carried forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the MSAWP and, with the program's implementation in the Okanagan, extended from coast to coast.

Just as the ideologies that underpin the MSAWP cannot be accepted uncritically, the reasoning and justifications given in support of it must be examined more closely. It is true, to the extent that it produces perishable commodities and is subject to the vagaries of weather and markets, that agriculture is a vulnerable and unstable enterprise (Hansen and Muszynski 1990). It is also true that farmers are still being pinched by the cost-price squeeze and that some are seeing their profits shrink while input costs rise (Basran 1992:4). The challenges farmers face as a result of globalization are also frequently mentioned in connection with agriculture's vulnerability, with the assertion being made that in order to remain competitive and therefore viable, farms must have inexpensive, reliable labour (5). Provincial Agriculture Minister John van Dongen's (Keating 2003:A10) comments following B.C.'s adoption of the program exemplify the language typically used when discussing the MSAWP in terms of vulnerability and globalization: "the MSAWP will improve job opportunities and make agriculture in B.C. more competitive with other provinces and Washington State, giving the industry greater flexibility."

However, the farmers who have been most strident in their calls for a contract labour program on the basis of such arguments operate in sectors of the industry that are neither vulnerable nor unprofitable, but have instead been enjoying steady growth (Basok 2002:19). For these farmers, the majority of whom run greenhouse vegetable operations in Ontario, input costs have not exceeded profits and would not do so even if farmworkers' wages doubled (19). In the Okanagan, it is vineyards that have been at the forefront of the transition to MSAWP labour, and this sector of the industry is far from unprofitable. As Larose (1998) points out, while the B.C. agriculture industry is a multi-billion dollar business, its growth and wealth is not reflected in the treatment of farmworkers, who are one of the province's most poorly compensated workforces.

What has cut into the profits of the Canadian agricultural industry, and seems to concern farmers most, is the lack of labour. There is, undoubtedly, a shortage of domestic agricultural labour, and the hardship this causes farmers is emphasized in media stories and public statements made about the need for foreign workers (Satzewich 1991:58; Woodward 2005; Ulliyot 2005:32; Lalonde 2006) For instance, Doug Leclair (Ryder 2002:A3) remarked that "Mexican [SAWP] workers are a new phenomenon on PEI, but the shortage of seasonal farm labour could fuel the growing demand for new sources of labour... a lot of times farmers can't get local help." Similarly, in 2004 an article in *The Province* exclaimed, "Growers Forced Let Apples Rot: Picker Shortage Has Farmers Scrambling for Needed Manpower" (Wylie 2004:A7). The article discussed a shortage of apple pickers in Kelowna, which was costing growers thousands of dollars and leading them to, as Wylie (A7) put it, "question the future of the industry as they desperately scoured the streets to recruit pickers." This year, the *Oliver Chronicle* repeatedly reported

on the scarcity of farmworkers in the valley, running headlines such as “Labour Shortage in the South Okanagan: Cries of ‘Help Wanted’ Heard in Retail, Service, and Agricultural Industry” and “Mexican Workers Pick Up Slack in Oliver” (Hampson 2006:1; Lalonde 2006:1).

Regardless of which province is experiencing agricultural labour shortages, farmers and governments tend to blame them entirely on Canadians’ unwillingness to do farmwork. Most farmers share a low opinion of domestic migrant workers, who, they say, continually quit without notice, take time off without considering their employers’ needs, and ultimately damage farmers’ profits by leaving them with perishable commodities that cannot be harvested in time (Binford 2002:47). The majority of farmers feel that the lackluster performance of domestic labourers in the fields can be attributed to the fact that, as one Alberta farmer put it, “they just don’t like farmwork” (47).

In the Okanagan, Glen Lucas (Edwards 2005:33), general manager of the BCFGA, explained the shortage of workers from Quebec in this way: “It’s a changing society and people are less motivated to do farmwork. It’s very demanding labour and requires manual dexterity, stamina, and strength. People aren’t applying for those jobs.” In addition, most farmers in the valley were of the opinion that the majority of Quebecois workers who did apply for farm jobs were unmotivated and undependable. They found that there was an extremely high turnover in their Quebecois workforce, which not only damaged their profits in terms of leaving them with an unharvested crop, but also cost them when it came to the continual screening of new workers and the processing of paperwork. Some farmers further observed that Quebecois pickers were disrespectful workers, often damaging equipment or plants and smoking in the fields. As one article in

the *Oliver Chronicle* noted, "A lot of the Canadian workers are lazy; many only want to work for a day then go out partying, then you won't see them the next day" (Lalonde 2006:1).

However, what those lamenting Canadians' distaste for farmwork usually fail to mention is that it is largely the poor working conditions, substandard accommodation, and low pay perpetuated by the agricultural industry, coupled with the impersonality of employer-employee relations on corporate family farms, that has caused domestic workers to seek employment in other economic sectors. Indeed, Thompson (Woodward 2005), commenting on B.C. farmers' complaints about the domestic labour supply, made the seemingly obvious point that "you either pay your workers more, or they won't work." Similarly, social service providers and some farmers in the Okanagan observed that if farmworkers were offered better accommodation, higher pay, and safer work environments, farmers would have less difficulty attracting Quebecois workers.

Beyond the issues of wages and working and living conditions, Morse and Smith (Wall 1992:264), in their study of seasonal agricultural workers in Ontario, found that on smaller farms where workers had a more personal relationship with the employer, turnover was significantly lower. This was also true in the Oliver area, where farmers who took a personal interest in their workers, provided them with good accommodation, and paid a reasonable amount found it easier to both attract and retain pickers. At the same time, pickers were more interested in working for farmers who seemed genuinely concerned with their well-being. Word travels quickly through the on and off-line networks that have developed around picking, with the result that farms which have a



good reputation are frequently contacted in February and March by Quebecois who want to reserve a work space for the coming season.

Leaving the wages, working and living conditions and the employer-employee relationship aside, there is little to attract Canadians to work that typically involves extreme heat, long hours, health risks, and few or no days of rest (Cecil and Ebanks 1991; CBC 2006b). A federal report on the agricultural workforce in 1991 noted that agricultural employment had a "poor image" among Canadians (cited in Lanthier and Wong 2002). The authors blamed this on the sector's "demanding and unconventional working hours, low rates of remuneration and poor benefits" (2002). When it is suggested that pay and working conditions be improved to attract more Canadian labourers, farmers maintain that they cannot afford to do so, and that even if they could, there are not enough people in Canada willing to do the work for any price (Satzewich 1991). While the claim that farmers' profit margins are so tight that they cannot raise wages or improve working conditions is questionable, their assessment of the lack of Canadians who will do agricultural work is accurate (Bolaria 1992). Less accurate, however, are the assertions made by farmers and governments that their decision to address the domestic labour shortage through a guestworker program was underpinned by a charitable desire to assist citizens of developing countries.

There is a strongly altruistic flavour to rhetoric surrounding the MSAWP, with those involved in its implementation insisting that the program is actually benefiting the labour supplying countries more than it is Canada. Government publications detailing the program emphasize that during the selection process, priority is given to the most destitute applicants and those who have dependants to support (Basok 2002:99). The

language used implies that establishing the program has been an act of charity on Canada's part, and that assisting impoverished Mexicans, instead of meeting farmer demand for labour, is its primary objective.

In the Okanagan, farmers and media constantly referred to the MSAWP as a great opportunity and a life-changing experience for the workers, one that would improve the quality of life for themselves and their families beyond measure. In addition, farmers justified the number of hours the men worked by stating that the workers needed the money for their families, and therefore wanted to put in long hours. Not wishing to hinder the men in the desire to provide a better future for their families, growers were happy to allow them to work as many hours as they wished. In the words of the BCFG's general manager (Edwards 2005:33), "When they come, they try to earn as much as they can, so they do like putting in long hours...one of the good feelings about this program is they are supporting an extended family back in Mexico, so 100 percent of the dollars go to grassroots in Mexico, where it's needed. Most of these people are from pretty poor areas in Mexico. This really helps them get on their feet."

Across the country, a discourse has thus developed around the program that draws attention to the disparities in wages and standards of living in the developed and developing worlds, rather than to how Canada benefits from the pool of unemployed workers that such disparities create (Arat-Koc 1992:230). As a result, it is how much the workers want to be here, not how much Canada needs them, that is emphasized, causing the MSAWP to be viewed not as a labour recruitment mechanism but as a system of charity from the first world to the third (230).

Yet, the Canadian government initially balked at implementing the MSAWP, only giving its approval once the program had been structured in such a way that the migrant workers would remain migratory and not seek Canadian citizenship (Basok 2000). This was achieved mainly through the MSAWP's recruitment criteria, which, although they are promoted as benefiting Mexican families, actually target married or cohabiting men with children because they are perceived as less likely to seek permanent residency through marriage or illegal residence than younger men who lack familial obligations (Colby 1997). It is for this reason that the minimum age of applicants, initially set at eighteen, was raised to twenty-five, and that, although both women and men can apply, very few women are accepted (Basok 2002). Further, since the application process involves the time and expense of traveling to Mexico City and paying medical and application fees, the program only employs Mexicans from a few states around the capital, most of whom are not among the poorest of the poor (Binford 2002:5-6; Basok 2000:82-83). The politicians and farmers who support the program have seemed unconcerned by this, and appear uninterested in making the program accessible to all Mexicans.

As well, farmers and governments often point out that because much of the cost that being a foreign labourer in Canada entails is absorbed by the employer, the hiring of MSAWP workers actually, as Leclair (Ryder 2002:A3) remarked, "creates additional costs for farmers, who are expected to pay Mexican workers the going rate as well as visa and transportation costs." The expectation that farmers shoulder the majority of the financial burden, the argument goes, enables impoverished Mexicans to not only gain access to employment in Canada but also to save money while they are here (Basok

2000). Upon reading the MSAWP's fine print, however, one finds that the program provides for several payroll deductions which allow the farmer to recover a substantial portion of the workers' airfare to and from Canada, as well as the immigration visa fee, the cost of housing, the premiums for private health insurance coverage, and the cost recovery fee (HRSDC 2005). Deductions are also made from workers' pay for EI, Worker's Compensation, Income Tax, and the Canadian Pension Plan, so that farmers ultimately pay very little for their foreign employees (2005). This suggests that the state and farmers have their own interests at heart, rather than those of MSAWP participants, and indicates that it is highly disingenuous for them to now insist that the program was established with workers' welfare in mind.

So much for the MSAWP's surface veneer. When the rhetoric of the state and the agricultural industry is stripped away, it becomes apparent that MSAWP labour is attractive to farmers for two main reasons: It can be controlled and, consequently, it increases farm profits. This returns us to the subject of globalization. At a time when Canadian farmers face competition from agricultural industries around the world, their production processes must be as efficient as possible (Winson 1993:211). Regardless of farm size, efficiency, productivity, and profitability are the major forces driving contemporary Canadian agriculture (211). In an industry where the commodities produced are highly perishable, nothing threatens these three objectives more than the uncertainty of labour supply, to which the MSAWP has provided what seems to be the first lasting solution (Basok 2002). Thus, farmers find the MSAWP highly appealing because it supplies labour that is predictable, stable, and controllable (Bolaria 1992; Satzewich 1991; Wall 1992).

Basok (1999, 2002) contends that farmers' ability to control MSAWP labour stems from the fact that Mexican workers contracted by the program, unlike their domestic counterparts, are unfree, and it is this unfreedom, more than Mexicans' willingness to work for low wages or their ability to boost productivity, that farmers most appreciate. The term 'unfree labour' is generally used in juxtaposition to the category of free labour introduced by Marx (1977:874), for whom the freedom of workers under capitalism was related to their ability to "dispose of their labour power as their own commodity." Workers can be described as unfree, therefore, when they are bound to one employer and cannot circulate on the labour market (Basok 2002:195). Keeping in mind Smart's (1997) contention that freedom and unfreedom lie along a continuum, however, it should be noted that MSAWP labour is only unfree to a certain extent, since in liberal democratic countries like Canada, all contract workers have the option to break their contracts (Basok 2002:195). MSAWP workers, then, can be seen as both free and unfree, in that they join the program in Mexico voluntarily and can leave it at any time, but are forbidden to sell their labour to whomever they choose upon entering Canada (Howell 1982:136). Once a temporary worker steps onto Canadian soil, he or she becomes part of, in Griffith's (1986:881) terms, a "captive labour force," and must remain with the same employer for a predetermined period or abandon any hope of improving his or her economic circumstances through participation in the MSAWP.

The appeal of a program that provides a captive and unfree labour source to farmers is evident, given the stability and increased profitability that they thereby gain. Given this, it is not difficult to understand why those in the Okanagan lobbied vociferously in support of the MSAWP. Indeed, farmers in the Oliver area pointed to

reliability and control as the two qualities, over and above cost savings, that most attracted them to MSAWP labour. Farmers said that they could not depend on most Quebecois pickers, who tended to work for a few days and then leave before the job was completed. This posed large problems for growers, because, as one put it, “in the agricultural industry, timing is everything.” Certain jobs have to be done at certain times if the crop is to be successful, and farmers pointed out that once the season starts, they do not have the time to go out recruiting workers or deal with the paperwork that the high turnover within the Quebecois workforce entails.

Farmers wanted workers they could rely on to turn up every morning and they therefore saw the MSAWP contract, which ensured that workers would remain on farm property for the duration of the season, as highly valuable. Most also felt that it was very important that the program had been structured in such a way that it was difficult for the participants to attain Canadian citizenship. If they became Canadian citizens, it was thought that the MSAWP workers would view farmwork in the same negative way as other Canadians and would look for work that was easier and higher paying. Farmers appreciated the control that the lack of citizenship provided because the ability to repatriate MSAWP workers at any time gave them a certain amount of leverage that they could exert to retain their workforce, leverage that was unavailable to them where Canadian workers were concerned.

Certainly, the proprietary language used by Oliver farmers when they talked about their MSAWP employees indicated that they felt a significant sense of both control and ownership over the men. The growers who participated in the program typically referred to their workers as “my Mexicans” and took a certain amount of pride in making

assertions such as “my Mexicans always do what I tell them to do and they do it fast. I don’t get any flak like I did from some of the Quebecers, and there’s none of this sitting down in the middle of the field to smoke a joint stuff that they do.” As this statement indicates, most farmers did not talk about Quebecois workers in the same way; rather, they felt that pickers were “too free,” had “no loyalty” to their employers, and “are never there when you really need them.” In contrast, the movements of Mexican workers could be closely monitored. Since farmers provided transportation to town and largely determined when and for how long workers could be off the farm, they could always be sure that the workers would be available when they were required.

Given the attitudes of their employers, it would seem that MSAWP workers in the Oliver area this summer were no different than those in any other part of the country in terms of their unfreedom. They freely chose to join the program, to the extent that choosing the best from among a number of bad options can be said to be a free choice. They could also freely leave the program, if they were willing to put their families’ survival at risk. Still, there is some question as to the extent to which these are truly free choices. As Breman (in Ortiz 2002:61) comments, in most cases contract labourers, who exist in a state of “neobondage,” are not totally free; social obligations, expectations, and economic realities limit their ability to choose work offers and to end their employment. Consequently, it would seem that MSAWP workers in the Okanagan are, like other guestworkers, “free to be unfree” (Basok 2002:61).



### **Implications of the MSAWP's Implementation for Farmworkers**

The implementation of the MSAWP in the Okanagan will affect both Quebecois and Mexican farmworkers in several ways. As larger numbers of farmers join the program, it is probable that Quebecois pickers will find it more difficult to get agricultural work. This season, there were cases of workers being turned away from farms where they had worked before because Mexicans had been hired instead, and rumours were constantly circulating within the picker community about one farm or another that would be using only Mexican labour the following year.

Still, farmers asserted that the valley will never move entirely to MSAWP labour because of the program's expense and its regulations surrounding the length of the workers' stay in Canada. MSAWP labourers can work in Canada for no less than six weeks and no more than eight months (HRSDC 2005). However, some growers, such as those producing cherries, only require workers during the two-week harvest period, while vineyards need them year-round. This means that Canadian workers will still be needed to do certain jobs, like cherry picking and the thinning of grape vines.

Also, the cost of the MSAWP is prohibitive for smaller, non-corporate farmers, unless they make a joint application with other growers and agree to share the workers. This did take place in a few instances this year and there are indications that it will become a more frequent occurrence, but a number of small farmers said that they would join the program only if they absolutely could not find Canadian labour. Then too, MSAWP labour is concentrated at present in certain sectors of the valley's agricultural industry, such as ground crops and grapes. It is not yet being used much in the production of tree fruits, particularly cherries, because most cherry growers have not yet experienced

serious labour shortages due to the Quebecois penchant for cherry picking. So although certain jobs may become less available to Quebecois pickers as more Mexican workers enter the Okanagan, it is likely that others will remain open to them as long as they continue to come to the valley in sufficient numbers.

Regardless of its accuracy, however, the perception that Mexican workers are taking pickers' jobs will likely become more widespread within the Quebecois farmworker community as more farmers join the program. This will probably contribute to a continued feeling of resentment toward MSAWP workers among the Quebecois, which in turn will affect the development of social relations between the two groups. When increased resentment is added to the other barriers that separate them, it seems unlikely that relationships between Quebecois and Mexican workers will become any more developed than they are at present, and may be more antagonistic in the future. This will in turn hinder the establishment of the sense of worker solidarity that is needed before organized and effective action to improve the conditions of farmwork can be undertaken.

On a more positive note, it is possible that the implementation of the MSAWP will lead to greater public awareness of the issues surrounding living and working conditions that affect all farmworkers in the Oliver area. The local media's interest in the contracting of Mexican labour and how farmers' decision to do so will affect Quebecois workers led to a number of stories that focused on farm labour issues being given front page coverage in the *Oliver Chronicle* (Hampson 2006; Weninger 2006; Knelsen 2006). The *Chronicle* also published letters to the editor written by citizens concerned with the well-being of farmworkers in the valley, and the CBC filmed a program about the

MSAWP, Quebecois workers, and agricultural labour issues in the Okanagan. Social service providers working in the area felt that there was a definite increase in the awareness of and concern with both domestic and foreign farmworkers' issues among the general public and the farming community. They saw this as a very positive development, one that has the potential to provide a forum for wider public discussion and the solution of problems that have been ignored for decades.

It would be encouraging to believe that the interest exhibited in farmworkers' issues over the past summer will lead to improvements in their living and working conditions. However, in light of the valley's labour history, and the history of the MSAWP program in other parts of the country, this does not seem likely. Conditions for MSAWP workers in Ontario, for instance, have either remained the same or deteriorated over the sixty-odd years that the program has been in place in that province (Basok 2002). In the Okanagan, forty years after the BCFL recommended that the basic structure of the agricultural industry should be overhauled and the exploitation of workers stopped if future labour shortages were to be avoided, little has changed in terms of the treatment of farmworkers (Lanthier and Wong 2002). What appears to be happening instead is that some farmers are offering better accommodations and higher wages to attract Canadian workers in the short-term. This will probably not be a widespread or lasting trend, as most farmers in the Oliver area predicted that the declining availability of Quebecois workers would force them to join the MSAWP within the next five years. They therefore saw no point in building a pickers' camp that might or might not attract the required number of Canadian workers when they would soon be moving to a guaranteed source of labour.

At the government level, it is unlikely that any legislative changes that would improve conditions for farmworkers will be forthcoming. Not only do agricultural labourers lack a strong union to bargain on their behalf, such legislation continues to be opposed by the BCFGA and other farmers' organizations who, as in the past, argue that any changes to the status quo would have detrimental effects on their industry. While there may now be a higher level of awareness among farmers about the issues confronting Mexican and Quebecois farmworkers, the farmers' organizations that exert the most influence over government where labour policy is concerned continue to deny that there are any problems. For instance, at a seminar addressing Quebecois farmworkers' issues held in 2001 in Oliver, the BCFGA's representative argued that the incidence of sexual harassment among female farmworkers had been greatly exaggerated and was mainly attributable to "bad PR" (Frontier College 2001:5). In 2005, in response to concerns that were raised regarding the treatment of MSAWP workers, the BCFGA's general manager said that he sees the program as a "boon to both farmers and workers. I don't think there are any negatives" (Edwards 2005:33).

As long as the agricultural industry refuses to acknowledge that there are problems, Quebecois and Mexican workers will probably continue to encounter all of the difficulties described here. Due to the structure of the MSAWP, Mexican workers will also face the additional issues that are unique to their status as non-citizens and unfree labourers. This is a concern on a number of levels, since MSAWP workers, who possess neither Canadian citizenship nor the freedom to change employers at will, are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than Quebecois pickers.

Although Mexican contract labourers are supposed to report any problems that they experience on farms to consular representatives in Canada, in other provinces it has been found that MSAWP workers rarely lodge complaints against employers with the Mexican consulate due to fear of repercussions, the most common of which is blacklisting from the program (Basok 2002:111; Binford 2002; Sook Lee 2003). The workers interviewed by Basok, for instance, (112) said that their consular representatives were frequently corrupt and did nothing or sided with the employer when workers complained. Some also reported instances of officials having taken bribes from farmers (112).

Indeed, while MSAWP workers are said to have the right to representation by consular staff, in practice the staff's ability to provide that representation is compromised by its mandate to maintain Mexico's market share of workers in the program and its awareness that if employers are not pleased with the workers or their representatives, they can always switch to another source country (207). The desire to maintain high rates of participation in the program is hardly surprising, given that remittances sent home by MSAWP workers, totaling eighty million dollars in 2002, are an important contribution to the struggling Mexican economy (CIC 2005; Woodward 2005). On the Canadian side, inspections of farms to ensure that the MSAWP provisions and the B.C. Agricultural Labour Code are not being violated are infrequent, and the chances that an official might witness a violation are slim (Basok 2002:112).

In the Oliver area, Mexican workers also expressed a reluctance to make complaints. They were aware that the farmers and crew bosses held the balance of power in their relationship and they felt that attempting to cause change of any kind would result

in their immediate dismissal. They too had no confidence in their consulate or their government, both of which they saw as being concerned with keeping the Canadian government happy and the program in place rather than with their citizens' welfare while they were in Canada. If they were to complain, the men said that it would be their word against that of the farm management, and the management would always be believed. As evidence of this, they would recount the story of the one worker in the Oliver area that did make a complaint to the consulate this season and also discussed his concerns on camera for the CBC. He was sent home within a few weeks. While the farmer involved claimed that his repatriation "had nothing to with him making a complaint or talking to the reporters. It was an issue with the quality of his work," his dismissal became a cautionary tale among MSAWP workers that quickly spread from farm to farm. The workers said that there were so many people in Mexico who wanted to join the program that they were easily replaceable. "For every Mexican who quits the program," said one man, "there are ten standing behind him waiting to take his place." Farmers are aware of this as well, and the sheer numbers of Mexican workers available to them further decreases the likelihood that farmworkers' issues will be addressed to any significant extent.

The MSAWP's implementation in the Okanagan does have some positive implications for the men who participate in the program, however. It is important to bear in mind, as Smart (1997:153) points out, that "the commonly held view in the social sciences that labour flexibilization, economic restructuring, and importation of foreign labour is a multinational corporate conspiracy and a form of hyper-exploitation designed to completely subordinate the working class" is not entirely accurate and often fails to

take into account the workers' perspectives. Across Canada, MSAWP workers are generally thankful for the opportunity to participate in the program, since the money they earn in Canada enables them to provide their families with better food, more material goods, and higher levels of education than would be the case otherwise (Binford 2002:12; Basok 2002). Similarly, Mexican workers in the Oliver area emphasized that to them, the program seemed the best means through which to provide their families with better lives and that they felt fortunate to have been selected to work in Canada.

Still, the money that MSAWP workers earn comes at a price. Binford (2002:12) calls this "the hidden cost of migration" and observes that it takes several forms, including negative effects on children, increased risk of health or psychological crises within the Mexican household, and loneliness and anxiety felt by the spouses over the months that they are separated. To this should be added the detrimental effects that farmwork can have on program participants' health in the long-term. Illnesses associated with pesticide exposure or repetitive strain injuries caused by long hours performing the same task have the potential to negatively affect workers' ability to support their families in the future, since any injury will cause them to be withdrawn from the MSAWP and will also make it more difficult for them to find other work in Mexico or the U.S. (Basok 2002).

Along with the economic costs, there are also the long-term social costs of migration for families. It is not an easy choice the men make, to come to this country and leave their wives and children behind. Their families do not want them to leave; one man described having to sneak out of the house and go to the airport while his children were sleeping, because if he heard them ask him to stay in the morning, he would. When the



men return to Mexico after months away, everything has changed. Another worker broke down in tears when he talked about coming home the previous year and greeting his young son, only to find that the boy did not remember who he was. There was also a good deal of black humour among the men about the possible infidelity of their wives while they were gone. Many a mournful guitar ballad was sung on the subject; one fellow composed a song about all the money he earned in the MSAWP being used by his wife to pay a gigolo that was greeted with uproarious laughter. It is not wholly a joke, though; the men said that some wives (though not theirs, of course) do have affairs while their husbands are gone, and that this is only to be expected when the husband is away for so long.

Participation in the MSAWP can thus put considerable strain on marriages, while at the same time causing the workers to be absent for large portions of their children's lives. While most men only plan to remain within the program for a limited time, many end up working as MSAWP labourers for far longer than they had expected to. This is largely due to what Basok (2000:1) calls the "barriers to productive investment" that exist in Mexico, which prevent the men from investing their earnings in viable enterprises and remaining in their own country to run them. Instead, the small, mainly household-based businesses that MSAWP migrants establish usually complement rather than replace contract labour migration (Binford 2002:12). So, the MSAWP may benefit Mexican labourers, but only at a considerable social, psychological, and physical cost. Far more than workers, the program benefits farmers.

### **Implications of the MSAWP's Implementation for Okanagan Farmers**

Oliver area farmers who had participated or were considering participating in the MSAWP saw the program as having only positive implications. They felt that having access to a reliable workforce that they could control would increase the productivity and profitability of their farms while at the same time decreasing their stress levels. They also pointed out that securing a stable source of labour would facilitate the expansion of their operations. This would appear to be particularly true where vineyards are concerned, since they require intensive labour inputs but have, until recently, lacked reliable workers in the numbers necessary to enable vineyard expansion on the scale that will be possible with Mexican labour.

In addition, farmers said that hiring Mexican workers made them feel good, because they had the sense that they were helping the men to build better lives in Mexico. "They really appreciate having the work," remarked one tomato grower. "The French Canadians act like they're doing you a favour by working for you. With the Mexicans, it's the other way around." The perception among these farmers was that the MSAWP benefited everyone involved equally. However, though pro-MSAWP farmers were either unaware of or did not wish to discuss them, their support of the program does have implications beyond increasing their profitability, making their job easier, and allowing them to feel charitable.

The implementation of the MSAWP in the Okanagan has divided the farming community, with some farmers advocating for the program and others just as vociferously opposing it. Those who argue against the program say that a greater effort should be made to attract Canadian farm labour through improvements in conditions,

wages, and legislation rather than bringing in foreign workers. From their perspective, farmers who hire Mexican workers do so because they cannot be bothered to change their operations so that Canadians would want to work for them. Anti-MSAWP farmers feel that it is the grower's responsibility to look after his workers through the provision of adequate living and working conditions and to establish a relationship with them that indicates that the grower is interested in their personal welfare. It is, therefore, farmers' failure to do this that has resulted in their inability to get workers and that is contributing to the current shortage of Quebecois workers. Growers opposed to the MSAWP also feel that the program itself is partly to blame for the lower numbers of Quebecois workers in the valley. They assert that word of the MSAWP workers coming to the Okanagan has spread quickly in Quebec, with the result that young people are being discouraged from travelling to the valley because they think that there will be fewer jobs available.

According to Quebecois workers, this is indeed occurring. They also indicated that the MSAWP's adoption has generated a great deal of resentment toward farmers among the Quebecois, and caused a number to either not come to the valley this year or to leave early in protest; many would not work for farmers who were using MSAWP labour to do jobs that they felt Quebecois workers were entitled to. Growers in the Okanagan, the pickers said, had never really appreciated or valued their work and were replacing them without compunction. The commonly held view was that for farmers, bringing in Mexicans would be cheaper than making an effort to improve living and working conditions and raising wages to attract more Canadian farm labour. The workers found it unfair that after coming to the valley for decades, they were still expected to pay their own way across the country, find their own transportation when they arrived, and

live in tents while the Mexicans had their airfare paid, were given houses to live in, and were driven wherever they needed to go. Quebecois workers said repeatedly that if they were offered the same program as the Mexicans, farmers in the Okanagan would have no problem getting workers from Quebec. For the Quebecois, the decision to invest in the MSAWP rather than in improving conditions for Quebecois workers thus represented a lack of gratitude for their years of work in the valley. They also saw it as another example of the negative attitude toward and discrimination against Quebecers that they felt was present in the Okanagan.

Farmers, however, took quite a different view of the situation than did the Quebecois, and pointed out that there was a great deal of misinformation circulating within the picker community concerning the MSAWP and its ramifications. This was quite accurate. Most Quebecois were not familiar with the MSAWP in detail, and were not aware that although their airfare was paid, numerous deductions were made from the workers' pay for housing and other expenses. They were also not aware of the extensive set of regulations that the workers agreed to abide by when they signed the contract. Farmers were of the opinion that Quebecois workers would never agree to a contract like the MSAWP's, and that there would be no use in even attempting to establish such a program because the pickers could break their contract without fear of retribution. As one farmer put it, "how would you make sure your workers honoured the contract? They're Canadians – you can't threaten them with deportation, and if you throw them out of the program what do they care? They can just go work in Alberta. And then you're up the creek again" The farmers are likely right on both counts. It seems that the Quebecois are too fond of their freedom and the ability to work where and when they please to accept

the kind of restrictions that a contract would impose on them. It is probable that the majority would break their contracts sooner or later, and farmers would be left without workers.

Still, though it might be based on misinformation, Quebecois resentment toward farmers, coupled with the rumours that Mexican workers are taking all of the farm jobs in the valley, will probably make it more difficult for many to hire workers from Quebec in the future. Ultimately, this will likely mean is that farmers will see a continuation and deepening of the present labour shortage in the immediate future, which will result in larger numbers of farmers joining the MSAWP. At the same time, the flow of workers from Quebec will gradually dwindle into insignificance, and the history of migrant agricultural labour in the valley will continue to unfold with Mexican workers as the central players.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion: The Future of Farm Labour in the Okanagan**

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, agriculture in North America has changed significantly. Perhaps most notable has been the corporatization of the small family farm and the creation of an agricultural industry operated by multinational companies and growers who see themselves as farmer-businessmen (Shields 1992:254). Farming has become a corporate venture that demands high productivity and low-cost labour, largely due to North American consumers' continued demand for cheap food and governments' implementation of policies designed to satisfy that demand (Bates 2006; Mitchell 1975; Stewart 1974; Winson 1993, 1995).

The type of farm labour desired by the agricultural industry and the strategies used to procure it have also undergone changes. Where possible, human labour has been replaced by that of machines (Bates 2006). Where this is not possible, many growers are now choosing to import temporary foreign workers under contract programs such as the U.S. *bracero* and H-2A programs and the Canadian MSAWP, a development that is closely linked to the larger processes of globalization that have resulted in the mass migration of people from developing to developed countries in search of work (Barron 1999; Kearney 1985).

The reasons given by the agricultural industry and governments as to why guestworker programs provide an ideal source of agricultural labour have remained fairly consistent over the years. In keeping with Castles and Kosack's (1985) argument that temporary foreign workers are usually imported when there are shortages in the surplus population of workers available in a country, both growers and the state typically point to a shortage of domestic labour, created by an unwillingness on the part of citizens to do

farmwork, as the main factor in their decision to hire contract workers (Foner and Napoli 1978; Lanthier and Wong 2002; Hansen 1988). While it is true that such shortages have been a constant occurrence within North America agriculture, it is somewhat disingenuous to blame them entirely on the domestic workforce. Rather, it can be argued that shortages of farm labour have largely been created by the agricultural industry and governments, neither of which have improved the conditions of farmwork to the point where agricultural labour would appeal to domestic workers. As Piore (1979) and Cohen (1987) indicate in their discussion of segmented markets, the employment of foreign contract workers is often linked to the need to fill jobs that are characterized by poor working conditions, insecurity and low salaries and are therefore unattractive to domestic workers.

Following Sassen-Koob (1985) and Fernandez Kelly (1985), it can also be said that the perpetuation of poor working conditions and low salaries within the farm industry, and therefore labour shortages, are linked to the processes of global restructuring that have affected agriculture. The entry of transnational corporations into farming, with their emphasis on higher profits and lower labour costs, has ensured that the conditions of farmwork either remain static or worsen. As a result, employment in the agricultural sector has become increasingly unappealing to domestic workers who have other job options and has heightened the need for foreign labour (Basran *et al.* 1995; Lanthier and Wong 2002; Basok 2002; Foner and Napoli 1978; Friedland and Nelkin 1971).

It seems unlikely that the conditions of farmwork will change in the near future, and the reliance of North American farmers on foreign contract labour will likely



continue to grow. Farmers are not unique in this regard. Temporary guestworker programs appear to be the labour procurement strategy of choice throughout North America and around the world at present; a recent ILO report estimated that temporary workers constitute the majority of the 42 million migrant labourers worldwide (cited in Basok 1999:192). In countries such as Canada, the U.S., and Australia that have traditionally relied on immigrant labour, the ratio of temporary migrants to permanent immigrants has gone up in recent years (Bolaria 1992). Canada's flow of foreign temporary workers increased by 6% in 2005, while B.C. saw a 12% rise in the number of foreign workers entering the province between 2004 and 2005 (CIC 2006). Workers at skill level C, which includes seasonal agricultural labourers, were the largest temporary worker group to come to Canada in 2005 (2006). Mueller (2005:37) argues that Mexico is quickly becoming a key source of these temporary workers, especially those destined for the agricultural sector. The number of Mexican guestworkers in Canada grew by 112% between 1994 and 2001, and Mexico is second only to the U.S. in terms of the number of temporary workers sent to Canada (CIC 2006). It is mainly the implementation of NAFTA that is responsible for this growth, as the agreement streamlined hiring processes for Mexican workers (Mueller 2005:37).

Guestworkers will perhaps be more needed in Canada than in the U.S. in the near future, as Canadian employers do not have access to the large pool of illegal (im)migrant labour that is available across the border. Indeed, according to Mueller (51), the increased economic integration of North America that will occur as the NAFTA provisions take effect, the flow of information back to Mexico about Canada as an alternative destination to the U.S. that will be facilitated by the formation of migrant networks, demographic

changes in Canada, including the retirement of baby boomers, and ongoing labour shortages will combine to encourage further increases in the number of Mexican guestworkers. They will primarily be required as low-skilled labour, which will probably put pressure on the Canadian government to expand programs like the MSAWP and to extend it to other sectors besides agriculture (51).

Certainly, the MSAWP has been hailed as an unmitigated success by the Canadian and Mexican governments, as well as Canadian farmers (45). Carlos Obrador, Mexico's vice-consul in Canada, said that the program is "a real model for how migration can work in an ordered and legal way," while in 2003 Jean Chrétien, speaking in Mexico, commented, "This program where your farmers can come and work in Canada has worked extremely well and we are now exploring (ways) to extend that to other sectors. The bilateral MSAWP has been a model for balancing the flow of temporary workers with the needs of Canadian employers" (45). At the same time, governments and the agricultural industry have been quick to stress the benefits that accrue to program participants, such as the ability to send their children to university (Basok 2000a; Smart 1997; Sook Lee 2003; CBC 2006b). This is not surprising, as temporary labour migration is usually ensconced in rhetoric that portrays it as equally beneficial for both countries, or even weighted in favour of the sending partner (Wong 1984:154). This "migration ideology," to borrow Wong's (154) terminology, was developed in Western Europe by employers and governments seeking to maintain, justify, and facilitate the acceptance of their migratory labour system. However, it has been argued here that while the program does have positive aspects, it also negatively affects workers in a number of ways.

Beyond the immediate effects on the workers themselves, in much of the literature surrounding guestworkers it is maintained that the use of temporary labour by developed countries constitutes a drain on the sending communities, which tend to be poor and rural (154). The extraction of young, healthy workers during their most productive years can damage their home economies, and little is done in the way of reparation by developed countries, which return them without new skills or valuable work experience (Gmelch 1980). Wealthy countries and employers benefit from a ready-made workforce that has been raised, trained, and educated at the sending society's expense, and when these workers are no longer productive they are returned home, where their maintenance costs are again absorbed by their families, communities, and/or governments (Wong 1984:154).

According to Basok (1999) and Satzewich (1991), temporary contract workers like those hired through the MSAWP benefit their employers and the governments of receiving countries mainly because they are unfree. Since they can be effectively controlled through mechanisms contained in the structure of the contract, unfree workers provide employers with a labour source that is not only cheaper, but also more dependable and docile, than that of domestic workers (Basok 1999; Satzewich 1991). For governments, temporary contract labour is appealing because it has a far lower rate of illegal residency than do other (im)migrants (Basok 2000b). Contract labour can, in effect, be used up and sent back, enabling governments to avoid the settlement within their borders of undesirable populations that might later become a burden on the state's social welfare system, while allowing them continual access to a supply of healthy,

young workers raised at the expense of the supplying country (Miller and Martin 1982; Colby 1997).

Due primarily to the structure of their contracts and their non-citizen status, most unfree workers face substandard working and living conditions, are obliged to contribute to social security funds but do not receive any benefits, have their activities and civil rights restricted, experience social exclusion, and are separated from their spouses and children for considerable lengths of time (Basok 1999:192). This is certainly true of MSAWP workers, who are fast becoming indispensable within the Canadian agricultural industry because domestic and immigrant workers are increasingly unwilling to be employed under the conditions described above (Basok 2002:14).

Those Canadian citizens who do work on farms continue to encounter exploitation and abuse at the hands of farm management, poor living and working conditions, social isolation, segregation, racism, and discrimination that extends to the governmental level, at which they are denied coverage by the protective legislation that has been extended to other workers (Frontier College 2001; Lanthier and Wong 2002; Shields 1992). It is, therefore, not surprising that farmwork is unattractive to most of the domestic workforce, particularly at a time when widespread labour shortages allow workers to receive higher pay and better benefits in jobs that are far less demanding. As Wong (1984:190) states, guestworkers are now “permanently structurally necessary in the Canadian agriculture industry due to farmers’ difficulty attracting and retaining labour, and because regulations and contracts make guestworkers docile, dependable, and inadequately protected by labour relations legislation.”

The Okanagan Valley is a case in point. In the Okanagan, there have been no lasting changes in the attitude toward and treatment of farmworkers by farmers, communities, and governments despite recurrent shortages of agricultural labour. Rather, growers have exploited one group of labourers after another up to the present day, which finds the Okanagan Valley once again in the midst of a transition from one source of migrant agricultural workers to another. The unappealing nature of farmwork in terms of living and working conditions, wages, lack of protective legislation, issues surrounding sexual harassment, discrimination, exploitation and racism, coupled with the country-wide labour shortage and the implementation of the MSAWP, have resulted in what will probably be a permanent decline in the numbers of Quebecois coming to the valley.

Lower numbers of available Canadian workers will likely cause more farmers to join the MSAWP, even if they would prefer not to. Most growers, including those who were opposed to the program and relied on Quebecois workers, predicted that the declining availability of Quebecois pickers would force them to join the program within a few years. Although labour shortages have been solved in other parts of North America through the mechanization of agriculture, Okanagan farmers, regardless of their farms' size, do not see mechanization as a viable alternative to the hiring of seasonal wage labourers. Machines such as mechanical harvesters are still too expensive for most growers, and some crops, like tree fruits and certain vegetables, do not lend themselves to mechanical production. Even the largest corporate vineyards, though they do have picking machines, use these only as a last resort. They prefer hand harvesting as it is less damaging to the fruit and vines and ultimately leads to the production of a better vintage. The more widespread hiring of guestworkers is currently being encouraged by growers

who are already participating in the MSAWP, particularly those who have vineyards. They are pressing the provincial and federal governments to expand and modify the program and would like to see it made faster, easier, and cheaper to import workers while at the same time having regulations surrounding hours of work and the length of time they can stay in Canada made more flexible.

Further, the Okanagan's changing agricultural landscape will encourage the implementation of the MSAWP on wider scale within the valley, not only because expanding vineyard acreages require large labour inputs but also because labour is needed during periods of the year, specifically early spring and the fall months, when Quebecois workers are not present in large numbers. Added to this, working in large corporate vineyards does not suit the picker culture and lifestyle. Vineyards offer no camping facilities and usually have rules around drinking, smoking, drug use, and behaviour on the job that are more strictly enforced than on the smaller ground crop and orchard operations. The pay structure of vineyards also tends to be more rigid than on other farms. Workers are paid once every two weeks, have a fixed wage rate, and are not allowed to work under the table to avoid paying taxes. This limits both the amount of money Quebecois pickers can earn and their ability to leave the job whenever they want to, which makes vineyard work fairly unattractive to them. In any case, it is unlikely that vineyard owners will put much effort into attracting Quebecois workers, as MSAWP labour is far better suited to their needs. Mexican guestworkers can be contracted in early spring and kept until the end of October, are more easily controlled than Canadian workers, provide a stable, reliable, low-wage workforce, and represent an opportunity for

vineyards, as well as other types of farm, to increase their productivity and profitability overall.

For all of these reasons, it is likely that MSAWP workers will soon be a structural necessity within the Okanagan's agricultural industry, just as they are in other provinces. Regrettably, it seems that their treatment in the valley is also following the pattern set in other regions of Canada, and that growers' increased productivity and profitability is being gained at the expense of MSAWP guestworkers. Many of the men who came to the Okanagan in 2006 encountered poor living and working conditions, exploitation and abuse at the hands of farm management, racism, and social exclusion and isolation. This is extremely unfortunate, given the sacrifices that MSAWP workers make in coming to Canada, sacrifices that may not be compensated in the long term by the money that they are able to earn as farm labourers. As a farmworker advocate working in the Oliver area remarked, "The farmers, the government, and the consumers definitely get the best out of this deal. Farmers get more money, the government gets a disposable labour force, and we get cheaper fruit and wine. Not many people seem to know or care about what the Mexicans are giving up to participate in this program. They're not just workhorses. People are leaving their families and children, their food and culture, and all of those things are really important."

If farmers, government, and consumers are unconcerned with the situation of MSAWP workers, they are even less so with that of migrant Quebecois farmworkers. The implementation of the MSAWP has the potential to perpetuate this lack of concern, to the detriment of both domestic and foreign agricultural workers. Various advocacy groups in the Okanagan have repeatedly raised the issues confronting Quebecois migrant workers,



and there is no reason that they should continue to be ignored by government, farmers, and the general public. However, many critics of guestworker programs argue that as long as farmers have access to a continuous supply of unfree workers who are forced to take jobs abroad due to poverty and unemployment at home, the bargaining power of domestic labourers will be undermined (Atkinson 1988; Bolaria 1988; Calavita 1990; Martin 2001). In the Okanagan, the adoption of the MSAWP may thus mean that agricultural working conditions and wages will not improve for domestic or foreign workers, and might actually deteriorate.

If the substandard living and working conditions that existed in the valley during the 2006 season remain the status quo for both Quebecois and Mexican workers, it is unlikely that the Okanagan's agricultural labour shortages will find a lasting resolution in the MSAWP. If Mexican workers continue to be treated as they were over the course of the past summer, they will, like the agricultural workers who came before them, eventually leave the valley, though for the time being the combination of economic need and a lack of better alternatives will probably encourage them to return. Still, as in the Quebecois picker community, word travels quickly through the network of past, present, and potential MSAWP participants. Information about which farms are good employers and which are not spreads from town to town and state to state in Mexico, and this could result in some farms having difficulty hiring MSAWP workers. There were indications that this was already beginning in the Oliver area, where workers were advising each other, as well as their friends and relatives back home, not to work for certain farmers. The MSAWP could therefore prove to be merely a short-term solution, leaving growers with the same dilemma at some point in the future.

Still, it is always possible to initiate change. The Okanagan, having only recently joined the MSAWP, has the opportunity to reverse the mistreatment of Mexican workers before it becomes too deeply entrenched, while at the same time addressing the issues of Quebecois pickers. Farmers, Quebecois and Mexican farmworkers, and social service providers in the Oliver area had a number of recommendations that they felt the B.C. agricultural industry and the government should act on if they expect MSAWP guestworkers to solve their labour dilemmas in the long-term and Quebecois workers to continue providing labour in the short-term.

First, all workers would benefit from the establishment of a transportation network, which could lessen their isolation and sense of social exclusion as well as decreasing Quebecois pickers' need to hitchhike and reducing female workers' risk of being sexually assaulted. Second, the accommodations that workers are provided with should be improved. This would involve setting standards for domestic workers' housing that are similar to those of MSAWP workers and having more frequent inspections, perhaps on a bi-weekly rather than an annual basis. Third, clean water, both for drinking and washing, needs to be made available on every farm. Fourth, safety issues such as pesticide exposure and ladder use should be addressed through the education of workers and farmers. Fifth, the legislation that does exist to protect farmworkers, as well as the MSAWP regulations designed to serve the same purpose, needs to be better enforced. Sixth, workers and farmers should be educated as to workers' rights regarding pay and hours of work. Seventh, English language instruction should be made available on farms. Eighth, many workers said that they would like to know the farmers that they are working for on a more personal level, and would appreciate it if their employers took the time to

get to know them as people as well, rather than treating them like numbers or machines. Finally, events such as soccer games, potluck dinners, and movie nights should be organized that bring the various farmworker groups working in the area together in a social setting. Activities of this type could also decrease their sense of isolation and exclusion, and might inspire feelings of solidarity rather than antagonism between Quebecois and Mexican workers.

In terms of issues specific to each group, the sexual harassment and assault of female Quebecois pickers needs to be addressed, again through the education of workers and farmers. Mexican workers should be given one full day off per week and the farms where they are working ought to arrange periodic outings for them to break up the monotony of the work. It should also be made easier for them to communicate with their families. It would not only be advantageous for the workers if the above recommendations were acted on. Farmers would also benefit from the improvement of agricultural labourers' living and working conditions since, as both the Mexican and the Quebecois workers pointed out, employees that are happy are more productive, more respectful of the employer's property, and more likely to do a good job if they are treated well by the person that they are working for.

In closing, it should be said that the onus of resolving the problems that farm labourers face ought not to be placed entirely on farmers and the government. There is a need for the public to develop a greater awareness of both domestic and foreign farmworkers' issues and to become more involved in addressing them. After all, there is little that is more important than the food we eat. That food would not reach our tables without the labour of farmworkers, and as consumers who continually demand cheap

food, we are partly to blame for the poor treatment of those workers. Consumers must pay what their food is really worth before the treatment of workers will improve, which may necessitate, as the B.C. Federation of Labour (Lanthier and Wong 2002:15-16) commented more than forty years ago, the restructuring of the farming industry from the governmental level down. However, such a restructuring will only happen if the public demands it. Before this can happen, there will need to be a change in the way that governments and consumers think about agriculture in Canada, and in the value that is placed on both farming and on the labour of farmworkers.

Writing on the subject of Canadians' general lack of concern with the exploitation of migrant guestworkers, Arat-Koc (1992:238) asks, "Why is it that Canadians accept the denial of basic rights and freedoms to a group of workers at a time when immigration policies have been liberalized and Canadian charter has become a symbol of increased sensitivity to inequalities based on gender and race?" Similarly, it could be asked why Canadians accept the denial of basic rights to groups of workers, like Quebecois pickers, who are residents of this country. One Mexican man participating in current protests against a draconian new bill designed to combat illegal immigration to the United States, when asked how migrant workers could gain public sympathy and inspire social action, replied "We need to tell them the stories of our lives" (CBC 2006a). There is a need for the stories of migrant agricultural workers to reach a larger audience than they do at present. In the years to come, I hope that more of those stories will be told, and that, to borrow the slogan of the Okanagan's Safe Harvest Coalition, they will inspire more Canadians to "protect the hands that feed us."

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