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Many Canadians uneasy about temporary foreign workers: poll

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Although most Canadians back the federal government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, there is significantly less appetite for allowing temporary foreign workers to take jobs for which Canadians are eligible, a new poll has found.

The Globe and Mail/Nanos survey found that almost three in four Canadians oppose or somewhat oppose allowing temporary foreign workers into the country while Canadians qualified for those same jobs are looking for work. The scenario is somewhat supported by 17 per cent and supported by only 7 per cent.

"As long as Canada's economy is fragile, Canadians are just going to be skeptical and concerned about any program that brings in temporary foreign workers," pollster Nik Nanos said.

The poll comes as the federal government is set to release a report on options for reforming the controversial temporary foreign worker program. The Globe recently revealed that the report is expected to acknowledge the need for foreign workers in specific sectors of the Canadian economy and emphasize the importance of providing the workers with a path to permanent residency.

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Canadian employers have expressed concern that changes brought in by the previous Conservative government – after a series of high-profile allegations of abuses in the program – went too far. The tighter

Conservative rules, combined with a weaker job market in some parts of the country, have led to a decline in foreign-worker approvals.

The poll found the lowest support for temporary foreign workers in British Columbia. About 16 per cent of those surveyed said they support or somewhat support the program, compared with nearly 28 per cent in the Prairies and 26 per cent in Atlantic Canada.

"B.C. is where this [issue] flared up. It's kind of ground zero for where this started under the Conservative government," Mr. Nanos said.

He is referring to the controversy in 2013 about the Royal Bank of Canada using the program to replace Canadian employees with foreign workers from India. The following year, the Conservative government introduced sweeping reforms aimed at eliminating abuses of the program.

Catherine Connolly, associate professor at the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University in Hamilton, said opposition to the program also stems from the treatment of vulnerable workers.

"There is a very strong desire [from temporary foreign workers] to become Canadian, but there is no path for them, and so as a result of that, they are very vulnerable to bad treatment," said Prof. Connolly, who received a federal grant in 2014 to study the program.

The Globe and Mail revealed on Aug. 22 that the number of federal inspections under the temporary foreign worker program skyrocketed this year and two businesses were added to a public blacklist. At Obeid Farms in Vanessa, Ont., federal officials found that 20 temporary foreign workers were consistently working seven days a week. AYR Motor Express, a New Brunswick-based trucking company, was accused of breaking the rules pertaining to travel costs of foreign workers.

The poll found that most Canadians back the arrival of a different group of newcomers: Syrian refugees. According to the survey, two in three Canadians support or somewhat support the government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

However, there is less support for the Liberal government's plan to boost overall immigration numbers. For the first time in decades, Canada is on track to welcome between 280,000 and 305,000 new immigrants this year. Thirty-nine per cent of Canadians polled said the government should accept fewer immigrants in 2017 than it did this year, 37 per cent said it should accept the same number and 16 per cent said the country should welcome more.

A government official, speaking on background, said Immigration Minister John McCallum has heard support for higher levels of immigration during cross-country consultations. Those consultations are ongoing and will eventually help guide Ottawa's decision on how many immigrants it will welcome in the coming years.

Almost 75 per cent of Canadians also support or somewhat support strengthening the screening process for immigrants from regions such as the Middle East. Mr. Nanos said those sentiments may be influenced by anti-immigration rhetoric from U.S. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

The Nanos poll, which surveyed 1,000 Canadians between Aug. 22 and 25, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

With a report from Bill Curry

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