

Business group says provincial NDP overreacting with worker proposals

BY PETER O'NEIL, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 23, 2013



Temporary foreign worker Jesus Bernardino monitors flowers at a DeVry greenhouse in Chilliwack. The worker program is in the spotlight again after a B.C. NDP pledge to keep a closer eye on its rapid expansion.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

OTTAWA — A national business group has criticized the B.C. New Democratic Party over its plans to give new muscle to the agency that ensures workers, especially those under the federal government's Temporary Foreign Workers program, aren't exploited.

Laura Jones, executive vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, said the NDP's proposals if it forms government could jeopardize B.C.'s reputation as a province with minimal bureaucratic red tape.

She said the CFIB is open to some proposals to improve protection for workers, but said the NDP is overreacting to sensational revelations involving a small number of incidents.

"Let's be sensible about this," Jones told The Vancouver Sun Wednesday. "Let's not overreact."

She was responding to NDP labour critic Shane Simpson's proposals, outlined in an interview Tuesday, to toughen up the Employment Standards Branch, which faced huge budget and staffing cuts a decade ago.

Those cuts coincided with sweeping legislative changes by then-premier Gordon Campbell's new provincial government to reduce bureaucratic red tape for B.C. businesses.

Jones seized on Simpson's comment that the vast majority of B.C. businesses don't exploit workers. She questioned why the NDP would consider emulating Manitoba's NDP government, which requires employers of TFWs to register with the provincial government.

She pointed to a recent CFIB report card that gave B.C. top marks in the country for having the least red tape, while Manitoba had one of Canada's worst records.

"If the vast majority of businesses are acting appropriately, why do we need a dramatic ramp-up of enforcement?" she said.

B.C.'s business community would support tougher penalties for "bad actors" who exploit workers, she said.

And the CFIB supports Simpson's advocacy of a multilingual "help line" so foreign workers can seek help when dealing with exploitive bosses.

But Jones suggested that the NDP is overreacting to specific controversies.

"Let's not take one example of someone behaving inappropriately and punish everyone for that."

She said business owners will be nervous in response to NDP suggestions the Employment Standards Act might be amended. She said the Campbell government's changes made improvements for both employers and employees.

"Concern about employment standards as a source of red tape has come down dramatically over the past 10 years. I would hate to see that reversed."

Labour and worker advocacy groups have for years expressed concern about the dramatic rise in the use of Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada — especially in B.C., where just under a quarter of the TFWs find work. The number of TFWs in Canada reached a record 190,842 in 2011.

The issue burst into public attention after disclosure last autumn that a consortium of mostly Chinese companies planned to use exclusively Chinese TFWs in four proposed underground coal mines in B.C.

In December, The Vancouver Sun reported that an owner of two doughnut franchises in B.C. was requesting payments from TFWs of close to \$20,000 for minimum-wage counter jobs.

The ESB is looking into the allegations, and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney launched a probe by the Criminal Investigations Branch of the Canada Border Services Agency.

B.C. Jobs Minister Pat Bell was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

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