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## Temporary foreign workers: The rising risk of a guest-worker class

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Canada now takes in nearly as many temporary workers as it does immigrants. The number has tripled in the past decade. These foreign workers aren't just picking tomatoes. They are serving coffee at Tim Horton's, and working at abattoirs and fish plants. In other words, they are doing permanent work.

By law, employers can pay them five to 15 per cent less than Canadians. That is because, in theory, there are no locals available to fill these jobs. In practice, however, Ottawa needs to do a better job auditing employers to make sure they have made an effort to recruit and train locals. Otherwise, this program is problematic on many levels and ends up being a subsidy for businesses.

The presence of temporary workers also has the effect of depressing wages and decreasing investment in training, says Ratna Omidvar, the president of Maytree, a private foundation and research body. This feeds into negative stereotypes about immigrants. With some exceptions, such as those who come in as live-in caregivers, it is difficult for temporary workers to gain permanent residency. After four years, they must go home. Their families cannot join them. They must wait four years to apply again to work here.

This is a dramatic change in direction for Canada, which is known for having one of the world's best immigration programs – largely because it recruits highly skilled professionals and offers them a predictable path to citizenship.

It is too soon to say whether the dramatic expansion of temporary workers will lead to the kind of social unrest associated with guest-worker programs in Germany and elsewhere. But Canada will soon find out. In April, 2015, the four-year maximum imposed last year on permit extensions will expire. Many experts, including Queen's University professor Naomi Alboim, predict some foreign workers will melt into the underground population. "People come to a country, work hard, feel connected and inevitably some portion remain," adds Audrey Macklin, a law professor specializing in immigration.

In its review of the program, Ottawa should focus on better auditing of employers, increasing pay for foreign workers, and making it easier for more of them to acquire citizenship.

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