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Manitoba to provide health benefits to seasonal migrant workers

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Edwin Juarez (from left), Jose Chinchilla, and Omar Gomez demonstrate work done by actual migrant workers at the Manitoba legislature today. Migrant workers were afraid of being deported if they spoke out about their work, so community members protested on their behalf. The workers were calling on the Manitoba government to provide health care to them, which the province announced it would do.

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The province shocked advocates rallying outside the legislature for Manitoba's migrant farm workers today when Immigration Minister Christine Melnick announced health coverage will now be provided for the estimated 400 seasonal workers who plant and harvest Manitoba produce every year.

"This will give workers great peace of mind," said Jennifer deGroot with the Migrant Worker Solidarity Network. "I'm shocked. I'm thrilled."

The workers in the federal Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program come from Mexico and Caribbean countries. They have been paying for private health insurance, and they contribute to Employment Insurance although they are ineligible for those benefits and the Canada Pension Plan.

"Our government recognizes the hard and physically demanding work done by seasonal agricultural workers and we have heard the challenges they have faced with accessing health care," said Melnick.

"Manitoba's economy relies on seasonal agricultural workers and we compete with other provinces to attract them here, which is why we're changing our health coverage, to be in line with that already offered in Saskatchewan."

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