



News

Temporary Foreign Worker Review Is Skewed, Says Alberta Labour Leader

Gil McGowan says majority of voices testifying in Ottawa want controversial program expanded.

By Jeremy J. Nuttall, 4 Jul 2016, TheTyee.ca



AFL leader Gil McGowan says review of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is 'about giving this self-interested group of employers exactly what they want.'

Photo: Facebook.

The head of the Alberta Federation of Labour says a committee in Ottawa examining the controversial Temporary Foreign Worker Program has been skewed to favour those who support making it easier for business to access it.

AFL president Gil McGowan said his group was also never invited to testify in front of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and was "ignored" when it approached committee organizers asking for the chance.

"It's clear these committee hearings were not about scaling back or refocusing the program like the Liberals promised during the election campaign," he said. "Instead the hearings were about giving this self-interested group of employers exactly what they

want, which is easier access to exploitable Temporary Foreign Workers."

But the chair of the committee, Liberal MP Bryan May, disputes McGowan's complaints and told The Tyee that though it was not asked to testify, the AFL could have submitted a written briefing and did not.

May also said the committee made efforts to have a balanced witness list.

'PREDETERMINED CONCLUSION'?

The AFL has been a vocal opponent of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, alleging that employers use it to skirt Canadian wages and labour practices. In the past the organization has expressed concern about the working conditions for employees brought to Canada through the program and insisted an immigration-based system giving such workers the same rights as Canadians was better.

McGowan, who ran for the NDP in Edmonton last federal election, accuses the Liberals of pulling a "bait and switch" with the program and said the committee seems set up to reach the "predetermined conclusion" of a recommendation to expand it.

He pointed to an op-ed that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wrote in 2014 when he was the leader of the third-place Liberal Party.

https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2014/05/05/how_to_fi

In the article, Trudeau said the TFW Program needs to be "scaled back over time."

But Ottawa lifted restrictions on the program for seasonal industries earlier this year and scrapped a plan to cap the number of Temporary Foreign Workers an employer could hire at 10 per cent instead of the current 20 per cent.

McGowan said the majority of those who have testified at the Ottawa committee review have supported the expansion of the program.

He said there has been little heard from groups concerned about what the program does to the labour market especially in Alberta, which is going through unemployment challenges following the drop of oil prices.

The witness list for the committee shows a number of associations that want to expand the program, such as the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Hotel Association of Canada.

WHO TESTIFIED?

Of the 50 individuals, associations, government departments and academics that testified, 15 were industry groups asking for restrictions to be eased while three labour groups were

represented.

The Vancouver Economic Commission, an agency of the City of Vancouver, also testified at the committee in favour of expanding the program.

The Canadian Labour Congress and other labour groups testified, but mainly addressed worker rights and a lack of skills training for Canadians leading to the program being needed.

McGowan alleges the committee was too one-sided and his group should have been allowed to speak.

"It wasn't for lack of trying on our part," McGowan said. "We almost begged to be added to the list of witnesses, but our requests fell on deaf ears."

But May said the committee clerk responded to the AFL's requests and the organization was not ignored.

He said all parties with representation on the committee choose what witnesses they would like to hear from during hearings.

"All requests were carefully considered to ensure we struck the right balance between all points of view," May, who was travelling, said in an email. "I find it very disheartening that they feel they were ignored."

He pointed out three labour groups testified as well as industry groups and those concerned about working conditions for foreign workers.



Jeremy J. Nuttall is The Tyee's Parliament Hill reporter in Ottawa. Find his previous stories [here](#).

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