Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

TANYA BASOK, Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press. 2002

Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada by Tanya Basok offers the empirical basis to assess the Canadian agricultural guest worker program. Her central argument is that migrant workers constitute a "structural necessity" for Canadian farmers in Ontario because they constitute an "unfree labour" force that is readily available to work long hours, up to seven days a week, and even when the workers are sick or injured.

Basok starts with a literature review of work on economic restructuring in industry, which is quite puzzling given that her central theme is focused on agricultural production. Most of her references in this review are from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, so their main concern is with the growing unemployment that resulted from the crisis of Fordism. But she misses the expansion of the 1990s and its concomitant decline in unemployment. After choosing the wrong literature for review, Basok critiques it because it "cannot explain the conditions that make the employment of foreign labour structurally necessary" (p. 14). She then goes on to discuss her main concepts of structural necessity, migrant workers, unfree labour, etc. based on other literature. But because the previous literature had different research goals to hers, Basok's critique is unfounded and unfair.

The empirical data and analysis offered by Basok is the strongest or her book's contributions. She does a fine job of contextualizing her Leamington case study within its overall Ontario and Canadian contexts. This community alone receives 10 percent of all migrant workers from the Caribbean and Mexican guest workers Program, and Ontario gets 80 percent of the Canadian total.

By the late 1950s, Canadian family farmers had been facing several problems of increasing input costs and declining prices for their products. This "cost-price" squeeze led to the typical process of concentration and centralization of capital in farming, with the concomitant increase in hired labour. The latter resulted because not all farming processes may be mechanized, given also the high financial costs of doing so. The post-war Canadian economic expansion had led to decreased unemployment, and

increased rural to urban migration for industrial work. All of this made it harder for farmers to find workers.

But once a farmer, Eugene Whelan, made it into the position of Minister of Agriculture, he was instrumental into pushing the Department of Labour to consent to the importation of Caribbean farm workers in 1966. By 1974 the Commonwealth Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program was established, forcing private workers out of business and regulating the living and working conditions of migrant workers (p. 33).

In Chapter 3, Basok describes the multiple problems faced by Leamington growers to hire local workers. They are too unreliable, do not accept the working conditions, or are not willing to put in all the hours required by growers for an adequate harvest when fruits or vegetables have ripened. Because of this, growers have come to depend on offshore workers. In order to have access to these, though, growers must demonstrate their inability to hire locals.

The following chapter describes Canadian growers. Some have described them as a "vulnerable industry" in that their operations suffer from high turnover rates due to low wages, dull and hard work, exclusion from labour legislation and inability to form unions (except in British Columbia). Only harvesters can be covered by labour legislation, but on condition that they have worked at least 13 weeks, when most jobs last only 10 to 12 in harvesting. In fact, farm work constitutes the most dangerous and precarious after mining and construction. For farm workers, paternalistic relations with employers inhibit the formation of unions. The fact that there is low unemployment in industry makes hiring farm workers even harder. Furthermore, farmers claim that "there's not much gravy to go around," so they cannot improve wages or working conditions by too much.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that Leamington greenhouse farmers are highly profitable, rather than constituting a "vulnerable industry." In fact, 70 percent of their tomato production was exported to the United States in 1998, so no food "self-sufficiency" argument can be made to protect these farmers – they're just greedy capitalists. The top 18 greenhouse operations in Canada constitute a mere 0.5 percent of all Canadian greenhouse producers but account for 31 percent of total Canadian acreage. Leamington producers control an average area seven times larger than the Canadian average greenhouse. By all measures, these are enlightened farmers who have pooled their resources into a research centre to improve their crops, going with organic trends. Income has increased more than operating costs, so profits too have increased during the 1990s. Yet, the fact remains that these operations require unfree labour available on demand at any time. Therefore, it is not the sector's vulnerability but this structural necessity "that makes most Leamington greenhouse growers depend on offshore labour" (p. 85).

There is an obvious paternalistic attitude on the part of the Mexican government in selecting workers bound for Canada, as a social-assistance

criterion seems to play a big role. Yet, this very criterion, translated into workers with the greatest economic need, married with children, and most of them with agricultural backgrounds, works in favour of meeting the structural needs of greenhouse growers: they become an unfree labour force that is willing to do anything to stay in good terms with the employer: "most are landless and poorly educated" (p. 105).

Chapter 7 on "Captive Labour" describes the operation of this labour force as reliable and docile. Against stipulations, Mexican workers get wages below the prevailing farm work wage. The Mexican consulate representatives either do nothing to help workers or take the side of farmers, as if they were part of a company union. Some farmers paid bribes so that consulate officials would not report their violations to Canadian authorities. Mexican workers are much more productive than Canadian workers: "At least double" said one grower, or "it takes 1.5 Canadian workers to do the work of one Mexican, said another. Or, "If you have 5 percent bad offshore, you probably have 5 percent good Canadians" (p. 116). Unlike Canadians who can quite their jobs at anytime, Mexicans will stay through the end of the season, working long hours, in any weather, even when sick or injured (p. 117). As one grower put it: "When you get a domestic worker, the first thing they ask is how much you're paying. When you get an offshore worker, the first thing he asks is how many hours you gonna ask him to work. That's the difference. You take it from there" (quoted on p. 118).

From interviews with farm workers in Canada and at their home communities in Mexico, Basok found that most of their earnings serve them to complement their subsistence needs. As time goes on, their needs and expectations increase, so that they become hooked on their work in Canada. By choosing the poorest, the Mexican government insures a steady flow of migrants.

Basok's conclusion and postcript are devoted to defending the guest workers program. After repeating her critique of the segmented market perspective, she argues that offshore workers help save many jobs in Canada, although on some level "the program does push local wages down. But there are also other reasons why wages are kept at existing levels" (p. 148). The last phrase leaves the problem as an indeterminate one. The postscript narrates the story of a labour walk out, in which workers made complaints very similar to those that the author had started out with in her preface. Basok then takes the stand of the growers, advising them to improve their workers' conditions so as to keep having access to this pool of unfree labour: ". . . Mexican workers are likely to feel even more loyal to their patrones than they do already, and from that point of view these improvements would be an investment well spent" (p. 151). Absent from this book is a frontal critique of Canadian policy around guest workers. Why, for instance, are they not allowed to change employers once admitted to the program, so that they do not have to function as virtual serves? Or why does the North American Free Trade Agreement does not include the free flow of workers throughout the three nations, like in the European

Union? In the end, the critiques presented by Basok are geared more toward greenhouse growers, so that they improve the migrant workers' conditions in order to keep their operations viable.

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