

The state in the field: Mitigation policy to counterbalance temporary workers' vulnerability in Canada

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Abstract

Canada prides itself on its legal temporary labour migration programs and often stands as an example internationally. In contrast to this political stance, there is a consensus among researchers and other stakeholders that these programs produce various forms and degrees of precarity and provide a flexible, disposable and exploitable labour force, particularly in the current context of labour shortages in many sectors of the Canadian economy. In 2019, in recognition of the potential of its temporary foreign workers' program for creating vulnerability, the Canadian government launched the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers policy, which allows foreign workers on an employer-tied work permit to apply for an open work permit. Previous research has documented how the policy burdens community organizations who offer support to temporary migrants. This presentation seeks to unpack the effects of this new policy on migrants themselves. It shows how a new program aimed at mitigating the inadvertent effects of closed work permits creates new vulnerabilities and offers very little in terms of improving safe temporary migration in Canada. The presentation will argue that the program fails because it ignores the structure of power relations between vulnerable migrant workers, employers and intermediaries. The analysis will draw on an on-going study that follows agricultural migrant workers in Ontario, British Columbia and Québec who obtained an open work permit, and others who failed. Conceptually, it is informed by research on the role of the state in counterbalancing adverse effects of its own policies, with application to migration policies.

Biography

Danièle Bélanger is Professor, Université Laval, and holder of the Canada Research Chair on Global Migration Processes. Between 1997 and 2013, she was a professor of sociology at Western University (London, Ontario). Her recent research examines the role of essential workers with temporary migration status in Canada. She is leading a project on Members of Parliament district offices as critical actors in the delivery of immigration services in Canada. Her research studies the trajectories and strategies of migrants with precarious status,

including temporary migrant workers, trafficked individuals, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, care migrant workers and marriage migrants.