The Politics of Seasonally Migrating: The Transnational Political Identity of Guatemalan Migrant Workers

Giselle Valarezo
Queen's University PhD Candidate '11

Research Funded by IDRC and Queen's University

The Guatemalan Temporary Agricultural Worker To Canada (TAWC) Project

Recent Reforms

- Separation between FERME and IOM Guatemala
- 4 year limit on the stay of Temporary Foreign Workers

Out in the Field

- Field sites included St. Rémi, Quebec and Santiago, Sacatapequez, Guatemala
- Interviewed 30 Guatemalan Migrants (18 male workers and 12 female workers) along with various government officials, administrators of the program, and activists
- Drawing out the Transnational Political Realities of the TAWC Project

Conflicts faced by Guatemalan migrant workers	
SAWP counterparts have dissimilar right	• 3 month waiting period to gain access to health service • Charges and over charges for accommodations • Inability to transfer employers (tied to one employer) • Discriminatory treatment by workplace authorities based on nationality • Competitive workplace environment
Minimal knowledge of access to certain rights	• Lack of knowledge regarding paternity benefits • Inadequate housing conditions • No access to worker's compensation • Denial of wages • Dehumanized by employer • Fired or dismissed unfairly or without knowing the reasons
Lack of support and assistance	• Finding employer and/or consulate to provide little or no support and assistance • Trouble accessing documentation in Canada • Inability to contest mistreatment • Jobs endangered when communicating with the UFCW • Language barriers with contracts and certain forms they are made to sign • Inability of being re-enlisted into the program
Dependence on TAWC Project	• Economic restraints placed on migrant workers back home • Family Issues (children missing parents and family being blackmailed) • Going into debt trying to get into the program • Feeling stuck in the program

Transnational Process of (Re)shaping the Political Identity of Guatemalan Migrant Workers

Transnational Experiences in Multiple Transnational Spaces

- Cyclical Experience
- Same Political Experiences of Discrimination, Oppression, Submission
- Different Political Experiences of Empowerment, New Political Practices and Ideas

Political Practices And Political Consciousness Of Migrant Workers

1) acknowledgement of new political ideas but an unwillingness to engage in political practices
2) acknowledgement of new political ideas and a willingness to engage in political practices
3) pushed to the edge and no other alternative

Transnational Political Identity of Migrant Workers

- Conform, accommodate, and oppose hegemonic constructions of political identity
- Shaped by Authoritative Figures and Human Agency (imposed and self-constructed)
- Political Identity can vary in multiple spaces

Transnational Flow of Political Practices and Political Ideas

Guatemala (Home Country)

- Oppressed Indigenous People from Rural area
- Political space of corruption, violence and mistrust
- Migrant shaped by administrative and government officials (Governmentality)

↓

Canada (Receiving Country)

· Safer Political space for migrants
· Introduced to new (empowerment, freedom of speech, etc.) & old (discrimination, oppression, etc) political ideas and practices
· Acquire political tools from transnational networks

→

Guatemala (Home Country)

· Bring some of these newly acquired political ideas and practices back to Guatemala
· Pushed to the edge these workers will engage in political practices

Transnational Political Support for Guatemalans

- Garnered Support from the Global Workers Justice Alliance
- UFCW Guatemala migrant worker Political Campaign
- Mobilization of Guatemalan Migrant Workers
- Formation of AGUND in July 2010

Asociacion Civil Guatemaltecos Unidos por Nuestro Derechos (AGUND)

- Sept 1st, 2010 march in Guatemala
- The mission of AGUND is twofold: 1) to defend the rights of workers blacklisted from the program while pressing for changes in the program and 2) seek out new agreements and contracts to send Guatemalans outside of the country as temporary migrants
- Capacitation Project and AGUND-CITA Project

Photo Credit UFCW Canada

A Push for Positive Change

- Introduction of NOC C and D Agricultural Stream
- After action by UFCW Quebec Labour Standards Board found $45 a week housing charge to be in violation with the $20 cap
- NOC C and D Agricultural Stream workers now charged max $30 a week for housing
- No longer obligated to pay refundable deposit of 5000Q or $400USD to enter the program
- Massive Overhaul of IOM administration