

Ending the Exploitation of Undocumented Workers in Construction: A Call for Action in the Upcoming Election

Canada's construction industry is facing a crisis that can no longer be ignored—the rampant exploitation of undocumented workers. These individuals are the backbone of many construction projects, yet they are subjected to substandard wages, dangerous working conditions, and the constant fear of deportation. This not only violates basic human rights but also undercuts law-abiding contractors and depresses wages for all workers. With the upcoming federal election, it is imperative that all political parties put forward concrete policies to end this exploitation once and for all.

The Reality of Exploitation

Undocumented construction workers, particularly in Alberta and British Columbia, are often paid cash at a fraction of standard wages, with no access to benefits or workers' compensation. Many are lured by unscrupulous subcontractors who promise work but deny them fair pay and proper safety protections. Reports indicate that some undocumented workers earn barely half the prevailing wage, with no ability to report abuses due to fear of deportation. Employers take advantage of this vulnerability, forcing workers into hazardous jobs with little to no training or protective equipment.

The underground economy in construction is not a new phenomenon. In Ontario alone, it is estimated that over \$1.5 billion in wages, taxes, and insurance premiums are lost annually due to off-the-books labour. In British Columbia, a past enforcement effort uncovered \$80 million in unpaid wages and taxes in just one year, underscoring the vast scale of the issue. With major labor shortages across Canada, some employers have opted to exploit undocumented workers rather than invest in hiring and training legal workers.

A National Failure in Leadership

Despite the undeniable evidence of abuse, past and present governments have failed to act decisively. While the federal government recently announced a pathway to permanent residency for up to 6,000 undocumented construction workers, this effort is far too limited to address the broader crisis. Estimates suggest that tens of thousands of undocumented workers are currently propping up Canada's construction industry, making the proposed solution woefully inadequate.

Furthermore, enforcement efforts remain weak. While fines and workplace inspections have increased, many exploitative employers continue to operate with little fear of consequences. The reality is that current penalties are not enough to deter businesses from using undocumented labour as a cost-cutting measure.

What Must Be Done

With a federal election approaching, it is critical that voters demand stronger action from political parties. The next government must implement a comprehensive, enforceable plan to end the exploitation of undocumented workers, including:

A Broad and Inclusive Regularization Program – Expanding beyond the current 6,000-worker limit and creating a permanent pathway to status for all undocumented workers contributing to the economy.

Stronger Labour Law Enforcement – Increasing workplace inspections and imposing severe financial and criminal penalties on companies that exploit undocumented labour.

Public Investment in Skilled Trades Training – Strengthening apprenticeship programs and providing pathways for undocumented workers to gain recognized certifications and work legally.

Reinstating the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act – Implementing stricter requirements for subcontractors to prove all workers have legal status and fair wages, ensuring public projects do not support exploitative labour practices.

The Stakes in This Election

The exploitation of undocumented construction workers is not just an economic issue—it is a matter of human rights and national integrity. Every worker, regardless of immigration status, deserves fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal protections. It is unacceptable for Canada to allow an underground labour market to flourish while failing to protect the very people building our homes, infrastructure, and communities.

This election, politicians must be forced to take a stand. Will they commit to ending this exploitation, or will they allow businesses to continue profiting from the suffering of vulnerable workers? The answer will define Canada's labour policies for years to come. Voters must hold candidates accountable and demand policies that ensure no worker is left unprotected.

The time for half-measures is over. The next government must take decisive action to put an end to the exploitation of undocumented workers and ensure that Canada's construction industry operates with fairness, dignity, and respect for all workers.

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