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Dream of a better life landed worker in jail

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Miguel Martinez came to Canada with an age-old dream: work hard, send money back home, and one day bring the family here. Sixteen months later he was practically penniless and back in Mexico.

In May 2008, he left the city of Aguascalientes, in central Mexico, where he had lost a job selling truck parts. He arrived at the Rol-Land mushroom farm near Guelph with a two-year temporary work permit.



Miguel Martinez left Canada after being jailed for working illegally. (Sept. 16, 2009)

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

The first few months were promising: He made \$9.75 an hour picking mushrooms and was soon promoted to fixing trucks for an extra \$2 an hour. He says he paid \$600 a month for rent and utilities, which the company deducted from his paycheque.

In December, Martinez was one of 120 foreign workers laid off.

In the new year, he travelled to Toronto with several unemployed workers to look for jobs. But his "closed" work permit meant he could legally work only for Rol-Land.

"I was trapped in a vicious circle," says Martinez, 51, who has four children in Mexico, two of them adults.

He moved to Leamington to live with a friend and collected employment insurance for a few weeks. When it ran out, he got desperate. One day, he was approached on the street by a recruiter who offered him a job working illegally in a farm warehouse for \$7.50 an hour.

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Martinez was at the job 2 1/2 days when, on June 24, officers from the Canadian Border Services Agency raided the farm.

The employer wasn't charged for using illegal workers, said Stan Raper, an official with the United Food and Commercial Workers union. He says the employer apparently hired a contractor and paid him an hourly rate for legal workers. The contractor hired illegal ones and paid them less.

Martinez spent eight days in a Windsor jail. "They put me in with criminals," he says. "I wasn't a killer or a drug lord; I was just here to work and to feed my family."

A bond for his release was posted at \$2,000. His family and friends raised \$800, and Raper personally posted the rest.

Raper said Martinez could have stayed in Canada until his work visa expired next May. But he had had enough. The union held a fundraiser to buy him a ticket back to Mexico. The Star interviewed him via a translator in September, two days before he was to board a flight. He said Canadian officials have barred him from returning for one year.

"I'll wait a year and try to come back with my family, somehow," he says. "I want a better life."

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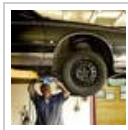
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