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# Part 3: Manitoba welcome host for guest workers in Canada

## Migrant workers get fair shot at future thanks to meat plant, province's unique policy

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BRANDON, MAN.—By any measure, William Cruz is a success story. He has realized a dream as old as Canada.

In 2002 he came from El Salvador with almost nothing. He braved the winters in this prairie town and the hard slog of its meat plant.

Back home, he had been a cellist with a symphony orchestra. Here, he was cutting out the big bone from a pig's shoulder, a new one arriving on the "disassembly" line every 16 seconds. Virginia, also from El Salvador, did the same nearby with a smaller bone. How could they not fall in love?

They married in 2007 and bought a two-storey house. Cruz, 30, notes with pride that it takes an hour to mow his corner lot.

"Only rich people have a house like this in El Salvador," he says.

When not working, they participate in the city's winter festival – he plays instruments, Virginia does folk dances – and volunteer helping newcomers settle.

Last year, Cruz became a Canadian citizen. Virginia hopes to become one soon.



Some 1,500 migrant workers are employed by Maple Leaf Consumer Foods in Brandon, Man. They toil on the "disassembly" line, dismembering animals, but as one worker says, it "pays well and has good benefits."

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"I felt great – I felt free," Cruz says. "We say we are very lucky to be here."

And Canada is lucky to have them. But does the federal government think so?

For years, Ottawa has barred low-skilled workers like the Cruzes from entering Canada as landed immigrants through the regular points system. Only high-skilled workers get a shot at that privilege.

The Harper government argues the low-skilled are less likely to integrate and succeed. Others insist that's turning our backs on the kind of people who built the country.

Want them or not, Canada appears to need them.

The immigration system, groaning under a massive backlog, is widely seen as incapable of meeting labour demands. So last year, 192,519 foreigners were brought in with work permits of up to three years – almost double the number that arrived in 2003.

The majority were for low-skilled jobs that require less than a high school education. They serve coffee, clean hotels, drive trucks and, like the Cruzes, slaughter and dismember animals.

Canada's Auditor General, Sheila Fraser, is to issue a report Tuesday that, in part, examines how the government manages the immigration system and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. The latter has been widely criticized for being poorly monitored and leaving low-skilled migrants vulnerable to abuse.

With the exception of live-in caregivers, low-skilled "guest workers" are largely barred from becoming landed immigrants.

Provinces can nominate migrant workers for landed status, but most reserve that privilege largely for high-skilled ones. Manitoba is the exception, having opened the process to all migrant workers recommended by employers.

Last year, Manitoba welcomed 11,221 landed immigrants, about 4.5 per cent of Canada's total. Fully 71 per cent of them came through its Provincial Nominee Program (PNP). (Of those who became landed immigrants in Canada last year, 13 per cent – 14,075 of them – did so through provincial programs.)

Manitoba's PNP allowed the Cruzes to realize their dream. But where once they might have felt indebted to a government or political party, the Cruzes have Maple Leaf Consumer Foods to thank.

The company has 1,500 migrant workers – 75 per cent of its Brandon workforce – slaughtering and dismembering pigs at its plant here. They come on permits that allow them to work only at the Brandon plant.

Plant manager Leo Collins dismisses talk of foreigners taking Canadian jobs. Before migrants arrived in waves, beginning in 2002, the plant's turnover rate was huge.

Killing, gutting and slicing pigs is heavy, dirty work. Yet the retention rate for foreign workers is 85 per cent. The enticement is a shot at landed status.

Maple Leaf can sponsor an employee for the PNP after six months. The province forwards the nomination to Ottawa for approval.

"It's never been a Temporary Foreign Worker Program for us," Collins says. "Our goal is to

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have them stay here and bring their families."

By 2011, officials estimate, Brandon's population of 41,000 – stagnant just a few years ago – will jump a stunning 14 per cent.

Allowing employers to determine who gets on the path to citizenship, critics say, is no way to build a nation. Tell that to Cruz and others like him, Collins replies.

One thing is certain: This once conservative prairie town without Sunday bus service is being transformed — fast.

## **THE WELCOME**

The workers come from Latin America, Africa, China and Ukraine. Their biggest hurdle is English. The biggest shock for most is winter. Then there's the fact that Brandon's sidewalks seem forever rolled up.

"The first impression is this is not Europe," says Sergii Smagytel, 35, who arrived from Ukraine in April 2008. "We were scared. Nobody walks on the sidewalk. It was very, very strange for us."

Collins says each migrant worker costs Maple Leaf about \$6,000. That includes recruitment, medical exams, permit application fees, one month's rent, a month-long bus pass, free cafeteria food for a week, and a bed with linen and pillows.

It's a lot, but not everything.

Local St. Vincent de Paul Society volunteer Lawrence Dubois once met some newly arrived Salvadorans living in the same apartment, sharing one plate and waiting their turn to eat. He filled a garage with donated furniture, and newcomers had their pick. "If it wasn't for those people," says Kerselin Fumier, 36, who arrived in 2008, "I would have returned to Mauritius."

No one reports serious incidents of racism.

## **THE STRAINS**

The sprawling Maple Leaf plant is a 15-minute drive outside of town on a road with an unpaved shoulder and an 80-km/h speed limit. When a large group of Chinese workers arrived, they wanted bikes, and the company obliged.

Next thing you know, pickup trucks are swerving, honking and weaving past cyclists on their way to work during pre-dawn hours.

"We're a truck town," says registered nurse Nancy McPherson, an analyst with the Brandon Regional Health Authority. "This became a huge issue."

More serious is the housing crunch.

Brandon's vacancy rate is 0.1 per cent. Prices have skyrocketed. Developers are building large, expensive family homes instead of rental units. With accommodation eating up more household income, the Samaritan House food bank has served 30 to 60 new families every month this year.

Governments and service providers have been slow to respond, McPherson says. It's starting to happen.

A language cooperative has been set up with 12 certified translators, available for \$25 an hour. The school board has extended English as an additional language to all schools, where enrolment is going up after years of decline.

The crime rate is down, police say. Officers are kept busy, however, explaining laws, laying impaired-driving charges, and stopping motorists without a provincial driver's licence.

"We get a lot of drivers who produce a Maple Leaf card," says Const. Tanis Basaraba, with the Community Policing Unit. Newcomers are also victims. Scott recalls one from El Salvador cashing his first paycheque and lining up the bills on a shopping mall bench to count. A thief scooped them up and was gone.

The Chinese have learned the hard way to lock their bikes. And there have been incidents of extortion: some have had their families back home threatened for money.

## **THE WORK**

The plant opened in 1999 and kills 85,000 hogs a week.

At work, Kerselin Fumier looks like a modern version of a medieval knight: hard hat, white lab coat and protective steel-wire mesh apron. He works saws and machines that cut carcasses in half, break the shoulders and slice them off.

Half a pig can weigh 200 pounds. Fumier spends hours pulling and tugging them into the right position. Repetitive strain injuries, the union says, are the most common.

His friend Sony Bottebell, also from Mauritius, works the "front end kill" section of the line. He flips hogs and fits their hind legs to hooks that raise and dip them in scalding water.

Bottebell makes \$13.55 an hour and Fumier, \$15.50.

"All Canadians will tell you that Maple Leaf will kill you," says Fumier. "It's a hard job ... But it's the only place that guarantees a job, pays well and has good benefits."

The plant's union fully backs Maple Leaf's migrant program. But union rep Ray Berthelette says low wages make attracting Canadians difficult. That dates back to the mid-1980s, when the North American hog industry broke unions and rolled back wages.

In a recent study, Simon Fraser University economist Dominique Gross concluded the migrant program contributes to keeping higher unemployment rates in some parts of the country.

Turning to migrants spares employers the higher wages and other incentives that would make it worthwhile for the unemployed to move for a job, Gross says.

About 10 per cent of Maple Leaf migrants decide the job is not for them and head home, Berthelette says. Many of those who stay muse about getting other work once they're landed.

## **THE ARTIST**

Juan Zavaleta arrived from Mexico with the first group of Maple Leaf migrant workers in

January 2002. It fulfilled a dream that had little to do with a new life in Canada.

Years earlier, he had created works of art from horse carcasses. Maple Leaf was a chance at hands-on research. He lied about being a butcher. "It was a messy job – a lot of blood," he says. "For me it was just wonderful."

A fascination with death helps: fake skulls and skeletons decorate Zavaleta's living room. He married in 2003 at a goth wedding in his backyard. The bride and groom wore black.

Zavaleta, 38, says his "honeymoon" soured when he suffered a rib injury on the job. One day, back pain reduced him to lying down on the shop floor. The "disassembly" line was stopped for two hours.

The migrant program, he insists, counts on submissive workers, fearful they'll be sent back to desperate lives. He quit in 2005 and stayed in Brandon to focus on his art.

One project involved thousands of disposable paper towels with patterns of blood collected while he worked. Another was made of bloodied Maple Leaf uniforms Zavaleta bought at a garage sale and wore on the job.

"I investigated 21st-century slavery in First World countries," Zavaleta says. "It's a very strange way to enslave people; very brand new and totally legal."

## O CANADA

Talking with Maple Leaf's foreign workers could serve as therapy for anyone cynical about Canada.

"People have told me for years they feel it's like winning the lottery," says union official Zara Pople.

Since June, Jose Armijo has been vacuuming excrement from pigs for \$13 an hour.

He sends \$200 a week to his two children and wife in Honduras, where he had lost his job in a print shop. He shares a house with six workers, dreams of bringing his family to Canada, and can't seem to stop smiling.

"When my wife comes, I want to have a typical Canadian dish waiting for her," he says.

In his prime, Eduardo Navidad, 43, was a boxer in El Salvador, living in a leaky shack. Then he sold slush from scraped ice in a pushcart. He says he thought of killing himself.

"I can't say I have a lot of money," says Navidad, who came four years ago and has landed immigrant status. "But I feel I have everything."

Sergii Smagytel was a beekeeper in Ukraine. "We always knew at school about Canada, that it is a great country," he says in English. He's planning on buying a house and bringing over his wife and their two kids, 4 and 1.

"I came not because I wanted to," he says. "I came for my children. I know that if they get an education in Canada, the whole world will be opened to them. I believe so."

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