

## Ottawa aims to give status to illegal foreign workers

By MARINA JIMENEZ  
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Immigration Minister Denis Coderre is developing an unprecedented program to deal with a hidden problem: the thousands of illegal immigrants in Canada's vast underground economy. The initiative, which would grant undocumented workers legal status, would begin in Ontario's construction sector, but could be extended to the textile and service sectors in Ontario and across the country, Mr. Coderre announced yesterday in Toronto. He was careful to note that the program would not be a general amnesty for all illegal immigrants, although he would not give details.

A union official who met the minister said the workers would first receive two-year temporary visas, and then be allowed to apply to become landed immigrants.

"We won't grant a general amnesty. . . . That would be irresponsible and encourage people to go underground," Mr. Coderre told a news conference yesterday. "But we need a validation process on a case-by-case basis."

"We will add a humanitarian component to the solution. Competency is also important. We must protect against cheap labour and keep Canadian standards high."

He noted that incoming Liberal leader Paul Martin's government-in-waiting supports the initiative: "The future prime minister has been eloquent on the topic of immigration. Using immigration as an economic issue is very important to the future government."

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The Citizenship and Immigration Department will assess the language and job skills of undocumented workers, as well as their ability to integrate into a Canadian way of life. Labour market demands will also be taken into consideration.

Last spring, Mr. Coderre appointed Toronto Liberal member of Parliament Maria Minna to study the issue of the underground economy. Both politicians met yesterday with four unions to discuss several pilot programs that would give undocumented construction workers the right to work.

Andy Manahan, spokesman for the Universal Workers Union, Local 183, applauded Mr. Coderre's announcement. "There will likely be a number of pilot projects that will allow the existing illegal, undocumented workers to come forward," he said. "They would be granted temporary work visas, and then be allowed to apply for landed immigrant status after two years."

Mr. Coderre said his department will work out the details of the programs with the unions, who count many illegal workers among their members.

Ontario Immigration Minister Maria Bountrogianni, Toronto mayor-elect David Miller and Human Resources Development Canada would also be involved.

Mr. Coderre could not say how many undocumented workers are in the construction industry, but called the Ontario Construction Secretariat's estimate of 76,000 "quite high". He said the first challenge is to define "illegals" -- and then to find them.

The Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association and Local 183, the largest construction union in the Greater Toronto Area, have estimated that there are 10,000 to 20,000 undocumented drywallers, carpenters, house framers, painters and carpenters building homes, condominiums and subdivisions in the Toronto area. They earn less than their Canadian counterparts, and many live in fear of being deported or denied access to health care, housing and schooling for their children.

Union officials have also spoken to Mr. Martin, who will soon succeed Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, and he is "very receptive" to such a program, Mr. Manahan said.

Mr. Coderre also agreed to extend the Construction Recruitment External Worker Services program, known as CREWS. It is an initiative the federal government launched two years ago to recruit up to 500 foreign workers to work in Canada on a temporary basis.

"Immigration is about settlement and the ability to integrate, and not just [about] a temporary work visa, but about whether a person will contribute to the country," he said.

At the same time, "there will be zero tolerance for criminals or people who have an impact on security. We must send a message that illegals won't be tolerated."

Many undocumented workers have overstayed their visitor visas, or are failed refugee claimants who slipped underground. Every year, the Citizenship and Immigration Department removes about 8,400 people, but thousands more are ordered deported.



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