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City considers asking Ottawa to let illegals who are working stay

BY JEFF GRAY

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2005
UPDATED AT 9:51 AM EDT

Mayor David Miller has thrown his support behind a bid to press the federal government to allow certain illegal immigrants -- including thousands believed to be working in Toronto's construction and hospitality industries -- to stay in Canada.

Tomorrow, the city's policy and finance committee will debate a motion, spearheaded by Councillor Cesar Palacio, asking city council to urge Ottawa to deal with the problem of "undocumented workers" and supporting calls to allow some of them to come out of hiding and obtain work permits.

The motion was moved by committee member and councillor Adam Giambrone -- whose west-end ward is home to many Portuguese immigrants. It was seconded by Mr. Miller.

It calls on council to express its "support for the many thousands of undocumented workers currently living and working in the city of Toronto."

There are no reliable estimates on how many people work in Toronto illegally, but activists believe there could be 10,000 people without immigration status, working largely on construction sites and in hotels and restaurants.

Some have seen their applications drag on or lose their way in Canada's immigration system; others simply stayed after a work permit expired. Many have been in the country for years.

Activists with a group called the Undocumented Workers Committee, as well as the construction industry, have been urging Ottawa to offer long-time undocumented workers with jobs -- and without a criminal record -- special work permits to allow them to stay legally.

Employers often exploit these workers because they are less likely to complain when maltreated for fear of being deported, the activists say.

Patchen Barss, a spokesman for the mayor, said yesterday that the city needs Ottawa to recognize these workers, many of whom have children born here and who are now in Toronto's school system.

"We need an arrangement, an official recognition, that there are thousands of working Torontonians, people who are working without documentation," he said.

The construction business says it has long relied on such workers and warns that an attempt to crack down and deport them all would actually harm the sector, which is experiencing a labour shortage.

"They've really built this city. And without them, quite frankly, we wouldn't be able to meet the strong demand that has been in place over the last number of years," said Jim Murphy, director of government relations for the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association, which represents the industry and has asked the federal government to allow these workers special permits.

The Ecuadorean-born Mr. Palacio, who says he has met with scores of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking workers in Toronto without immigration documents, says the only humane response is to give them a second chance.

"We have to have some sort of mechanism to allow these people to come out of their holes, to come out of hiding," Mr. Palacio said.

But Etobicoke Councillor Doug Holyday said the city has enough on its plate and should let Ottawa handle immigration policy.

"Are we saying then that you can just come here and work and after a period of time, we'll make you legal? . . . It's not fair to the people who have played by the rules," he said.

Stephen Heckbert, a spokesman for federal Immigration Minister Joe Volpe, said the minister has made the issue a top priority, and is working on a one-time plan to "regularize" undocumented workers. But he could not say when the plan would be announced.

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