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**TORONTO STAR**

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## Tories begin deporting illegal workers

### Portuguese families caught in immigration crackdown

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STAFF REPORTER



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

The Ferreiras, a Portuguese family of four who are being deported Saturday after their refugee claim was rejected, pack up their belongings at their Toronto home. They have been in Canada since 1999.

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Illegal workers in Toronto's underground economy are being deported as the new Conservative government abandons a Liberal amnesty plan, immigration lawyers and consultants say.

Some families who have been in Canada five years or more are being given less than two weeks to pack up and leave.

Toronto's Portuguese community — with up to 15,000 undocumented members, working mainly in the booming construction industry — is especially concerned.

Early last year, then-Immigration Minister Joe Volpe said he would try to find a way to get legal status for undocumented workers.

"They are here already and have proven themselves to be integrated," Volpe said at the time.

Last May, he said he had signed off on a final draft and the plan was set to go to cabinet. But nothing was done during the following six months before the Liberals were defeated.

Immigration officials now say they will continue to enforce the existing policy, with increased resources.

In February, Immigration Canada notified the Portuguese embassy in Ottawa that it would continue with the current law and be strict in applying it, Maria Amélia Paiva, the consul-general in Toronto, told the *Star's* Isabel Teotonio.

Portugal's ambassador to Canada, João Silveira Carvalho, has publicly told people to avoid trouble and to "stop feeding the myth" in Portugal that you can come to Canada without documents, several community members said.

And yesterday, Immigration Minister Monte Solberg called the issue a "low priority," indicating that Volpe's approach is dead.

A spokesperson for the Canadian Border Services Agency said she couldn't give figures on the number being deported.

Immigration consultant Tony Dutra said he knows of 20 families that have been given less than two weeks to leave. "People are being hustled out ... Three or four years ago, there seemed to be more flexibility. It was humane. Now, it's rush, rush, rush."

The agency has booked seats on a Sunday Skyservice charter. According to a voice mail message from one of its officers, the agency had filled another 50 seats on a March 30 Air Transat flight.

"I've seen a larger number of (removal) letters going out to people," Peter Ferreira, president of the Portuguese National Council and a former senior immigration officer, said in an interview. "I've been getting more calls from people who are concerned. They see the writing is on the wall."

Apart from personal hardship for people now firmly entrenched in Canada, the flurry of deportations could devastate the construction industry, Ferreira said. "This group — it's been proven and any union president or employer will say — don't get rid of these people because we need them.

"Imagine expelling thousands of construction workers when the construction industry is desperate for skilled labour ... Consider the contribution made by these people.

"It doesn't make sense. These people are contributing to Canada's well-being and economy."

To ease the shortage, Canada offers one-year temporary work permits for people with construction skills. The annual quota of 500 is never met, Ferreira said. "So we need these (undocumented) people even more."

Among those impacted is the Ferreira family (no relation) — parents Joe and Elizabeth, both 39, their son Licinio, 21, and daughter Alicia, 18 — who were ordered on March 17 to be on this Sunday's Skyservice flight.

The Ferreriras — who came to Toronto in March 1999, to visit relatives and decided to stay illegally — are typical.

The children went to school, Joe worked as a bricklayer and Elizabeth got a job in a window factory.

"Life was good, but we were scared to get caught," Licinio, who now works in construction, said in a weekend

interview. The family had to be careful because if anyone got injured or sick, medicare wouldn't cover their hospital costs.

About three years ago, at a time when rumours of an amnesty first began, they went to an immigration consultant who advised them to apply for legal status, first on humanitarian grounds and then, when that failed, as refugees. The consultant charged \$4,500, the Ferreiras said.

Like all refugee claims filed by Portuguese immigrants, theirs was rejected.

Portugal has a democratic government with no record of torture or other activities that could justify refugee claims. However, some unscrupulous consultants recommended that course of action. Other undocumented workers applied on different grounds, possibly expecting a repeat of an amnesty in the mid-1980s.

The policy applies to undocumented immigrants from any country, but the hopeless refugee claims mean it has a big impact on the Portuguese community.

"I blame 99 per cent of the problem on consultants," Dutra said.

Border agency spokesperson Anna Pape says the GTA enforcement centre has averaged a steady 4,500 "removals" in each of the past five years.

"I expect those numbers will be up," she said.

The increase is in part because many of the failed applications have reached the end of the road around the same time, Ferreira said.

As well, Ottawa has given the agency more resources "to focus on removals," in line with increased staffing at the board that rules on refugee appeals, Pape said.

"We said, if they (the board) got more resources, it would make sense for us to get more to process the increased number of negative decisions.

"It's like if you have more police on the street, you'll get more arrests."

The Ferreiras acknowledge they were here illegally and must go. But they think the policy doesn't make sense, and they don't like how they've been treated.

"We're working and go to school," Licinio said. "We pay income tax, do everything by the book, but we're treated like garbage."

"It's not fair, sending people home in two weeks," said cousin Paula Goncalves. "If you own a home or car, what are you supposed to do? People who work their asses off here, who aren't any trouble whatsoever, are sent home. They're hard-working people."

Since receiving their "direction to report" — the final notification to be on a particular flight — the Ferreiras have scrambled to prepare to leave.

"A week isn't enough to get rid of the car and do everything I need to do," Licinio says. "It's a huge commotion. A lot of other people are in the same situation. They're being completely unfair to us."

The family arranged for seats on a different flight, saving a total of more than \$3,500 compared to what they'd have paid the border agency for tickets.

"I love it in Canada," Licinio said. "I have great friends and family. It's a great life. I want to come back."

Pape said families usually get three or four weeks to depart. But, she said, once their final appeal has failed, and before they get the "direction to report," they should start getting ready.

"They should have a sense they're going to be asked to leave. It's the end of the road."



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