

How can we turn our back on a valued worker?; Treatment of an offshore worker who is battling cancer is shameful

By Kate Andres-Toal
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For many people in the world, work is an essential part of life. For those living in privilege, however, work has become something to avoid. The goal is to work as little as possible, living a life of weekend leisure until we can retire. Work is something we pay others to do. We buy "labour-saving" machines and services, because, as a recent dishwasher/nail polish advertisement states, "There's more to life than just doing dishes." Agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry observes, "You may hold up your head in polite society with a public lie in your mouth or other people's money in your pocket or innocent blood on your hands, but not with dishwasher on your hands or mud on your shoes."

This mentality has distanced us from real work, and it's these same disdainful eyes looking at labour that look at its labourers. Just ask any farm worker.

Those living in urban areas have become disconnected from food production, but big business says that's a good thing. There's more to life than just growing food, right? We're taught to treat food cultivation as a nuisance and as a result, we treat those involved accordingly. We try to keep them tucked away in the corners of our sprawling cities where they won't get in the way. We treat the workers the same way we treat the work: like dirt to be rid of. We'll leave that up to someone else, though, because we don't want to dirty our hands.

Allow me to introduce you to someone very dear to my family. You've probably heard or read about his story over the past year. His name is Philip, but everyone calls him Roger, and he was employed in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) for over 25 years. At some time, you've probably eaten the local peaches he helped to cultivate.

It was May of last year when I first saw Roger. It was at the first official worker welcome and appreciation event in the more than 40-year history of the SAWP. Roger was being recognized for nearly three decades of hard work at the same Niagara farm. His tall stature and shining smile dwarfed everyone else on stage.

A couple of months after taking the stage, he took sick. Diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer called multiple myeloma, he was confined to a hospital bed and unable to continue working.

Most of his wages had gone to support his two children, Troy and Asheda, back in Jamaica. After his diagnosis, not only was he unable to sustain his children

through school, his health-care benefits were also to be revoked. His work contract was to expire several months later in December, at which time his OHIP coverage would do the same.

The Canadian and Jamaican governments were both ready to repatriate him at that time with no questions asked. Such crucial questions include how will he afford treatment? How will he even access this treatment, available only in the larger cities like Montego Bay and Kingston, far from his small rural town?

More importantly, how can we turn our back on this man who has worked in our country for so long, probably longer than he has been in his own? I'll tell you how: We live in a throwaway society, where we learn that everything and everyone is at our disposal. Broken chair? Throw it away! Sick worker? Throw him away!

Roger was granted a temporary visa that extended his OHIP coverage just in time, thanks to a loyal group of friends and supporters. Sadly, many other workers in similar situations don't have the same support from the community that has benefited from their labour.

The federal government thinks that because it can't use them anymore, it can dispose of and replace these workers and no one will mind. Let's speak out against this amoral practice and hold them accountable. Roger's visa expires again this summer. What will your response be? Will you allow him to be sent back, where he will not receive the dialysis and chemotherapy treatments he needs to live?

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Repatriation, which happens even to healthy individuals, is a threat that looms over every migrant worker. Despite all the hardships, they still find the courage to keep going at full strength and singing at full volume.

Because of last year's success, on May 4 we celebrated workers at our second annual welcome night. One of my favourite choruses that we sang is called We Are Together Again. And when we are together and our voices sing: "Something good is going to happen, something good is in store."

I can only pray it's true.

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