



Historicizing precarity: A labour geography of ‘transient’ migrant workers in Ontario tobacco



E. Reid-Musson*

Department of Geography, University of Toronto, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 March 2014
Received in revised form 9 July 2014

Keywords:

Labour geography
Migrant farm workers
Precarity
Mobility
Tobacco
Agriculture

ABSTRACT

So-called ‘transient workers’ from Quebec and Atlantic Canada made up a significant proportion of Ontario’s tobacco harvest workforce in the postwar era, though there is no existing research on this migrant population. Based on analysis of an unexamined archive, the article explores the relationship between seasonal transient workers, Ontario tobacco growers, and the federal Canadian government during the 1960s and 1970s. Migrants harnessed strategic forms of mobility or marketplace agency in precarious, unorganized and seasonal tobacco work. Further, the deepening of migrant precarity in Ontario agriculture can in part be traced back to this period of conflict between transients, tobacco growers and different levels of the Canadian government. Migrant precarity did not go uncontested among this population. Managed migration programs, still operational today, reflect the attempt to undermine migrants’ informal mobility agency. Transients travelled to find tobacco jobs with few constraints or pressures other than the compulsion to gain wages, using their relative freedom of mobility strategically, especially in public spaces, to disrupt local micro-hegemonies in tobacco areas. Government programs to manage farm labour migration were unveiled during this period in part to displace transients and solve a widely reported “transient problem” in tobacco.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Over several decades, under the rationale of chronic labour shortages, a rising proportion of seasonal waged farm work in Ontario has been performed by guestworkers from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South-East Asia under the *Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program* (SAWP), Agricultural Stream and Low-Skill Occupation sub-streams of the *Temporary Foreign Worker Program* (TFWP) (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013). This reliance has become embedded in Ontario agriculture, stabilizing ‘niche’ crop production on small, medium and large farms (Basok, 2002; Binford, 2013; Preibisch, 2010; Satzewich, 1991; Sook Lee, 2004).¹ The popularity of guestworker programs among farm growers is explained not by their lower cost (as ‘cheaper’ workers) but rather as temporary, non-citizen, ‘unfree labour’ (Basok, 2002; Choudry and Smith, 2014; Perry, 2012; Satzewich, 1991; Sharma, 2006). Unfree work or unfree relations of production refer to “situations in which workers are not only subject to labour exploitation, but are not even free to choose the

buyer of their labour power” (McGrath, 2013, p. 1007; Miles, 1987; Satzewich, 1991). As Tom Brass has argued, the existence of unfree labour relations in contemporary settings has to be understood within “the process of class decomposition/recomposition (or restructuring) that accompanies *struggles* over the direction of agrarian change” (Brass, 1999, p. 2, emphasis added).² However, due to the focus in research on Ontario’s agricultural *guestworkers*, we know little of the experiences and governance of non-guestworkers among Ontario’s seasonal, low-wage farm worker population, be they undocumented workers, summer students, paid or unpaid family workers, or immigrants and refugees. In addition to the complex make-up of this migrant workforce, all Ontario farm workers are formally excluded from provincial collective bargaining rights.³ The focus on farm guestworkers arriving under the SAWP and newer streams of the TFWP implies that a structural dependence among Ontario growers on guestworkers in unfree relations of production

* Address: Sidney Smith Hall, Room 5027a, 100 St. George St. Toronto, ON M5S 3G2, Canada.

E-mail address: reidmusson@geog.utoronto.ca

¹ This list is by no means exhaustive or intentionally exclusive.

² New debates in geography and beyond have emerged regarding unfree labour in contemporary capitalism. This article does not engage in these debates at a conceptual level, but rather acknowledges the legal unfreedom which places migrant workers in Canada in secondary labour markets where they exercise limited physical, social and labour mobility.

³ For a review of the history of Ontario farm workers’ associational and collective bargaining rights see Fudge et al., 2012; Law Commission of Ontario, 2012, pp. 74–80.



Fig. 1. Transient tobacco workers in Aylmer, Ontario, 1974. Courtesy of Elgin County Archives (Image C8 Sh2 B2 F5 33b).

was uncontested if not inevitable, while the specific historical and place-contingent relationships between workers, growers and the state and the governance of migrant labour more generally, in different crop sectors and regions, have not been adequately documented (for exceptions see [Dunsworth, 2013](#); [Greyson, 1985](#); [Parr, 1985](#); [Satzewich, 1991, 2008](#)).

This paper contends that the production of migrant precarity experienced by the diverse groups that make up Ontario's farm worker population is historically inextricable from individual and collective attempts to contest the conditions of seasonal, poorly remunerated, difficult and often dangerous farm work. By using a labour geography perspective, the ways in which migrant precarity in Ontario agriculture were historically produced and contested become clearer. Labour geographers have become interested in understanding how workers at the interstices of precarious employment and precarious citizenship strategize to circumvent enormous barriers to gain better wages and/or working or living concessions from employers or governments, especially in settings where organizing is challenging and/or workers are geographically and temporally dispersed ([Coe, 2012](#); [Rogaly, 2009](#)). Rather than solely undercutting solidarity among workers, precarious employment has intermittently spurred innovative examples for organizing, documented by geographers in hospitality and cleaning sectors in London and Toronto ([Aguar and Ryan, 2009](#); [Tufts and Savage, 2009](#); [Tufts, 2009](#); [Wills, 2005](#)). Taking a cue from contemporary and historical labour geography research, this paper provides a historical analysis of organizing and agency among Ontario migrant farm workers in the context of unabated precarious employment since the postwar era.

Specifically, this research traces the discursive and material contours of a purported problem with "transient" labour, based on analysis of tobacco-growing industry archives dating between 1965 and 1980 ([Bulbulian, 1977](#); [Macartney-Filgate, 1959](#); [Ramsey et al., 2003](#); [Smit et al., 1985](#)). Representations of transient tobacco harvesters reflected as well as shaped migrant mobility, governance and agency. So few accounts exist of transients in their own words in the archive I analyzed that I cannot adequately do their own voices justice here, despite the fact that this migrant workforce was the most important source of tobacco harvest labour after locally-recruited workers. Transients were primarily unemployed Canadians and students who arrived of their own accord to seek tobacco jobs during the 1960s and 1970s from Quebec, Northern Ontario and Atlantic Canada ([Fig. 1](#)). As will become clear, the term 'transient' also harboured anxieties about migrant mobility and agency. Transients were portrayed as threats and outsiders – spatially, culturally and socially – in ways unsurpassed by other groups of worker during this period (SAWP guestworkers; Mexican-Mennonite family labour; local recruits; European

exchange students; US tobacco curers; etc.). In part the threatening character which transients embodied is indicative of their relative freedom of mobility, as they circulated in the seasonal tobacco labour market with fewer constraints or pressures other than the need and compulsion to seek wages. They used their relative freedom of mobility strategically, especially in public spaces, to disrupt local micro-hegemonies in tobacco areas. These micro-hegemonies were characterized by (1) the disproportionate power of growers in relation to seasonal workers;⁴ (2) the tenet that migrants would consent to this scenario, and would be grateful for any work or welfare they were dealt without making waves; and finally; (3) the belief that these power relations constitutive of the tobacco growing economy were ultimately necessary and desirable in sustaining 'the good life' that tobacco growing livelihoods represented.

Representations of transients as intractable, out-of-place, and even as prone to criminality were integral to the political construction of a labour shortage crisis in tobacco growing specifically. These representations appear in debates between various levels of the government and growers over the social provisioning, governance and mobility of transient tobacco harvesters. Like other Ontario growers, tobacco growers' widely publicized claims that they faced absolute labour shortages ([Basok, 2002](#); [Satzewich, 1991, 2008](#); [Sharma, 2006](#)) which were deeply entangled and legitimized through the "transient [labour] problem" (*Globe and Mail*, 9 August 1977; [Smit et al., 1985](#)). Moreover, this crisis helped justify in part what government-enforced limits and constraints could be imposed to control (both non-citizen and citizen) workers' seasonal mobility, particularly under the new *Canada Farm Labour Pool* (CFLP) (1974) and bilateral *Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program* (SAWP) agreements with Jamaica (1966), Barbados (1969), Mexico (1974) and Trinidad and Tobago (1978). Unveiled in the name of multiple interests, the federal government's CFLP and SAWP were intended to solve their own legitimacy crisis as well as improve working conditions for migrant farm workers themselves, not solely to meet employers' need for 'cheaper' labour ([Satzewich, 2008](#)). These managed labour migration programs remained somewhat unpopular with tobacco growers. Despite this the SAWP was used increasingly to recruit seasonal workers throughout the 1970s, just as the CFLP seems to have been eliminated. Yet the rolling-out of CFLP and SAWP programs together significantly broadened the remit of state-managed farm labour migration. Labour shortages signalled by tobacco growers thus appears to have been a labour management strategy which obscured much more

⁴ These power relations can be characterized in an abstract form as: growers paid workers as little as the market allowed them and resisted worker organizing while workers "work[ed] hard and diligently to maximize the profits of capitalists" ([Wright, 2000, p. 970](#)).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5074049>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5074049>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)