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From: Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Western Canada

Date: February 2, 2018

LiUNA RELEASES GROUND BREAKING STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF CANADA'S MIGRANT WORKER PROGRAMS ON THE CONSTRUCTION LABOUR FORCE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver, B.C.) A first-of-its-kind research study by Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Western Canada reveals employers are hiring migrant workers on temporary permits in the B.C. construction industry using a little-known federal government program.

"To my knowledge, this is the first study to assess the effects of the International Mobility Program (IMP) on the construction industry in Canada," said Mark Olsen, Manager, LiUNA Western Canada. "The B.C. government claims the IMP isn't used by employers to hire migrant workers in building trades occupations. This study shows employers use the IMP and the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) to import a critical mass of migrant construction workers, which distorts the B.C. labour market."

LiUNA released a new Policy Brief today entitled "Canada's Migrant Worker Programs and the Construction Labour Force in British Columbia (2015-2016)," which found construction firms in B.C. hired 1240 and 1285 migrant workers using the IMP in 2015 and 2016, respectively. Construction employers hired 2.6 % of the migrant workers in B.C. under the IMP in 2015.

This finding is important. Federal and provincial government officials claim the IMP rules prevent employers from hiring construction workers and there are no IMP streams for construction occupations. However, the main feature of the federal migrant worker regime is that the IMP is the primary program for employers to hire foreign nationals on a temporary basis to work in Canada. A much smaller share of the migrant workforce enters the country under the TFWP.

Construction firms in B.C. hired 1260 and 1430 migrant workers in 2015 and 2016 under the TFWP. The industry accounted for 8.5 % and 9.3 % of migrant workers using the TFWP in 2015 and 2016.

"Some people argue the number of migrant construction workers in B.C. is small compared to the construction labour force," said Olsen. "But, you do not need thousands of migrant workers to have a significant impact on specific building trades involved in major public and private sector construction projects, as it suppresses wages and displaces qualified Canadians."

The IMP was a stream within the TFWP before the restructuring of the TFWP by the former Conservative government in 2014. After the restructuring, the IMP became a stand-alone program.

Migrant workers entering Canada on open-work permits using the IMP can be hired by employers in all industries, anywhere in the country. The IMP as a share of all migrant workers under both programs in B.C. was about 76 % in 2015.

However, there is a lack of data about the types of jobs open permit holders take, because Employment and Social Development Canada is not always able to collect data about occupations and where workers are employed. The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer reported that 45 % of the migrant workers entering Canada using the IMP did not report their occupation in 2015.

Employers who want to hire a foreign national using the TFWP are required to fill out an application for approval from ESDC, which involves a form called a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). This application process is supposed to verify there is a real need for migrant workers, and that no qualified Canadians are available to do the job.

Under the TFWP, foreign nationals are imported to Canada using an employer-specific work permit issued by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Employers using the IMP to hire migrant workers are exempt from the LMIA application process.

LiUNA recommends the federal government should undertake a full inquiry into the impact of Canada's migrant worker programs on the construction labour force, due to the simultaneous restructuring of the TFWP and rapid expansion of the IMP.

There are serious concerns Canada's migrant worker programs are creating pathways to transit foreign nationals to the underground economy as undocumented workers. The number of undocumented migrants in Canada was estimated to be between 200,000 and 500,000 in 2017.

Policy reforms are required to ensure foreign nationals who come to Canada to work using the TFWP and the IMP become full citizens upon arrival or have a pathway to citizenship.

The new NDP government's Workforce Development Advisory Group needs to develop a TFW Protocol, which requires employers to hire local BC residents first including First Nations, followed by other BC residents and workers from the rest of Canada.

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LiUNA White Paper available online

The Impact of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program on the Construction Labour Force in Western Canada (2003-2015) is available upon request from Jennifer Farish at jfarish@liuna-wc.ca.

About LiUNA

The Labourer's International Union of North America (LiUNA) is a diversified private sector Union, which has approximately 100,000 active and retired members across Canada. In Western Canada, LiUNA represents the labourers craft in industrial, commercial and institutional (ICI) construction, as well as underground construction (tunneling), pipeline work and road building in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, North West Territories and Nunavut.

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