

One Woman's Grain of Sand

The Struggle for the Dignified Treatment of Canada's Foreign Agricultural Workers

AS TOLD BY TERESA ALEMÁN TO KERRY PREIBISCH

Voici l'expérience de Teresa Aleman qui a fait la manchette l'été dernier dans les journaux locaux alors qu'elle a dénoncé le sort de 44 travailleurs mexicains employés par une firme canadienne d'appâts grâce à un nouveau programme de mobilité au travail pour la main d'œuvre non qualifiée.

The following narrative recounts the experience of Teresa Alemán who was featured in the local and national press last summer when she publicized the treatment of 40 Mexican workers by their Canadian employer, a bait company, under a new labour mobility program for low-skilled foreign workers. The Low Skilled Worker Program is a relatively unknown program that emerged in 2002. It differs in significant ways from the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, including the fact that it is subject to far less government oversight.

When Teresa and two other women spoke to the press, they were fired and the company attempted to deport them to Mexico. Instead of leaving, the women decided to stay in Canada for the length of their eight-month visas, even though they were legally prevented from working with anyone other than their designated employer. Although this created great hardship for Teresa, a single mother who had incurred significant expenses to come to Canada and who hoped to send regular remittances to her

children, she remained in Canada in order to launch a national speaking tour with the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) to expose her experiences under the Low Skilled Workers Program. Teresa returned to Mexico in October 2004. The following excerpt is a paraphrased, translated version of her testimony recorded in August 2004 for which she has requested that her real name be featured.

It all began when my aunt phoned me and told me that there was an opportunity for me to go to Canada to work. The following day I went to the offices of the State Institute for Labour (IEE) in Saltillo, Coahuila, and they told me that I had to provide some information. There were some talks, meetings with interviewers, and they asked me if I was completely sure that I wanted to go, and I said "yes, this is why I have come to the capital city." So more or less I spent a month without employment in the state capital, arranging for a passport and my other papers, like my birth certificate to put in my file, and filling out an application form, as well a visa application. In the last two weeks we went to several meetings where they told us what the work was going to be like, that we would be working at night, that we were working with worms, how much we were going to be paid. Then on

the 13th of May they told us that our trip had been scheduled for the following day, and that we would leave the state capital to go to Mexico City, and from there we would take the flight to Toronto.

We arrived on a Saturday night and were greeted by the daughter of the company owner who took us to our apartments where we were allocated four to a room. She welcomed us and told us that we should rest and that the following afternoon we would meet our translator. Early on the Monday, we met our boss who gave us our equipment and a synthesis of what our work would be like. He also loaned us some money to buy some groceries, took us to buy them, left us back at the apartment and told us to be ready to work for 7:00 p.m.

Our first day of work was very unusual because we women were horrified the first moment we had to pick up the worms. Personally it took me about an hour to catch my first worm because I was so revolted, but then we started to get used to it. But the first night was horrible, fatal, because you knew what you had come for, but to actually live it was very distinct. We arrived in the early hours of the morning and slept. We slept the whole day and woke up, ate, and began to feel all the muscular aches and pains. We hurt all over and the depression set in: your *compañeras* were crying about everything and

you began to feel the loneliness and nostalgia for your family.

On Wednesday we heard from the translator who told us that the boss was happy with our work and that we were doing well. But by Saturday, she told us that the boss is angry because he wants more production, and the rules change. From the first moment, our first meeting with the boss, he never showed us the contract. We had signed a contract in Mexico but he never asked for it, not even in the first meeting. The 40 of us were carrying a contract in hand but it didn't matter to him and he did not sign it. We didn't do anything about it because we thought, "well we're here now, and working." In the following meeting, when he started to demand higher yields, he told us that we were in the wrong, which of us were doing the worst in terms of yields, and started to tell us that if we didn't work out he was going to send us back to Mexico, that we were incompetent, and that we made a lot of noise. And that's when the problems started. After the first paycheck he started to send back the first Mexican workers. He sent a warning letter, and to the others that he fired like a shot he said, "I don't want you because you are useless to me." In the contract however, it supposedly stipulated that we would have three or four weeks of training. So this radical change was like breaking the contract, because it had not even been a week and he was demanding higher yields.

At payday he told us: "I want ten bags [of worms] a day, and if not, you will no longer be useful to me. I will stop paying you by the hour but by piece rate. If you produce, you will earn money, and if not, you won't get anything." That is where the conflict began. Not everyone had the same physical condition and could pick very much. In the first two or three pay periods I was the only woman that did well. I was always the best out of the 20 women, but still I did not like the treatment they gave to us, because even the driver insulted my

countrywomen. Clearly, just the fact that they are insulting your people hurts, because they are insulting your country.

The employer blamed the Institute of Labour of deceiving him, that they sent him people that were not *campesinos*. I had heard in the IEE that the employer was calling Mexico everyday saying that he needed people urgently. The only thing the IEE

to take our own, but it was never sufficient. The work makes you thirsty, and without water you dehydrate.

The rebellion was armed when they sent back our leader who was one of the people that got us to resist in the first place, to expose what was happening. It was a real blow when he abandoned us. But because I was the other person who started all of this, I

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could do was send the people they had [some who were *campesinos* and some who weren't] which was their mistake. Both parties were to blame: one for demanding workers from one day to the next and the other for acquiescing.

I, together with a *compañero* who was our first coordinator and who got us into all of this, started to meet people, like Axel. Axel [a member of United Food and Commercial Workers] was the first person to help us, because even though the company gave us money, it didn't cover our expenses. He took us to Kitchener and bought us a bunch of food. Later Stan [the National Coordinator of the Migrant Agricultural Workers Support Centre] came to listen to our problems: the mistreatment at work, that they didn't give us a toilet in the worksite, and that they didn't give us water. It was because of these working conditions that I got sick. Later when we met with the Consulate, I was asked if it was true that the reason I went to the hospital was work-related. I said "Don't you think that a bladder infection and dehydration have anything to do with work, with going to the bathroom where cows graze? Think about it!" It's also about lack of liquids, and they never gave us water. The Consulate told us

went ahead with it, despite the fact I am a woman. He returned to Mexico and told us not to speak to the press but we followed what our hearts had dictated for us, our conscience, to say that we had no reason to give up, to be quiet, to shut our mouths! We started to talk to the newspapers, the press.

At the beginning of June, when the company heard we had spoken out, the bad treatment got worse. They started to send people home and others went on their own free will because they didn't want any more problems. On June 18th, a couple days after receiving our last paycheck, the translator called us and told me that the employer no longer required my services, that I was fired and that I had a flight home the next day. When I asked her the reason, she told me there was no point in keeping a conflictive woman like me even though I was one of the best workers. She said, "Let me give you a piece of advice, but take it seriously: it's better to say that what happened here is over." And I told her, "you know what this means in Mexico. This is a threat. Even so, I am not afraid of you or your boss."

So there were threats, mistreatment, poor conditions, and broken contracts. Then the [Mexican] Con-

sulate wanted to speak with me as well, and asked me what I proposed. I said that the only thing I wanted was for our rights to be respected, as people, as humans, as migrants. Just because we are migrants from another country does not give them the right to step all over us. The first time we had contact with the [Mexican] Consulate they were very short with us, calling us troublemakers, prob-

in respect to migrants, a more dignified treatment, if we contribute one grain of sand [to the struggle], I think that more people will come and continue contributing and helping. We women can be an inspiration for others, who can struggle for our rights as Latinos, as Hispanics. I want to return with that sensation that I did something, however, small, however negligible. I know very well that be-

us the chance to demonstrate to him the workers we are, being women. Being women and leaving our children behind, our children that we are responsible for, who depend on us. I, as a single mother, I can tell you that my children basically depend on me. And here and in Mexico I feel, and I am sure, that I am a hard working woman and you cannot say that I am not a farm woman, because I have

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lematic, and the like. We always told them no, we are defending our rights, what we believed was within the law, and that they should put themselves in our shoes so they would know and feel what we were feeling. In the second meeting the Consulate acted like they were more on our side and spoke up against the employer.

The company fired four of us that day. Two of the women opted to go back to Mexico because they feared reprisals. Yet the other woman and I, even having children and family, stayed. We had to courage to continue fighting for ourselves and for the other immigrants who might arrive at this company or another one in the [Low Skilled Workers] Program, because when we were here we realized that this was a pilot program, that it wasn't well regulated or supported at all.

There are times when I question if what I am doing is right or wrong, or how it is going to turn out. It gives you a lot of pride, in spite of being a woman. For me, personally, I feel a lot of pride going back to Mexico, having begun this. It takes a lot to say that you are not going to give in. Something inside you rebels and you say: "you have to go on." And I want to go on. If we achieve this, if we achieve some change in the Program

ginning this [speaking] tour has begun to open doors. The Consulate is uncomfortable because they don't know where we are [staying]; the company is afraid that we are going to speak out about what they did to us and that we will hurt the company.

For my children mainly, for myself, and for my parents, I would like to achieve something, if only that people remember what we did here. Of the noise we made for our people, for the Mexicans, so that we do not allow ourselves to be stepped on. We are equal, we are human, and we can also succeed. The Saxons, the gringos—however you want to call them—need the labour of Mexicans, Blacks, other races, in order to get ahead, because there are many Canadians and gringos who aren't as strong or hard working as Latin Americans, as Mexicans. They are not hard working or they simply don't want to work in agriculture. It is rare that people from this country work in the fields. I know full well that they depend basically on us, immigrants, Hispanics. I also think that they should think about the way they treat us, how they step on us, because they depend on our labour. Men as well as women, we know how to work. And this man, our employer, didn't give

worked in the fields. I demonstrated that to him, I was one of the best workers, but despite that he insulted us, he broke the contract, he changed the rules, and he threatened us. He sent people home to Mexico frightened there would be reprisals. There are so many things in this program that we want to shed light on. We want to expose everything.

Our employer was an overbearing person who always looked down on us. He always treated us as "worthless Mexicans." He asked us to pick a can of 420 worms and empty them in a bag. The more bags you produced, the greater the yield. The Korean [immigrants] yielded four to five times what we did. They are used to sitting close to the ground and could walk in a seated position. I used to say to the employer through the translator: "How do you explain the fact that me, one of the tallest women here and certainly not the thinnest [grins], is the best worker among the Mexican women?" I said that it has little to do with your physical condition. The first week we just didn't know how to work. It is all a process—you have to learn how to bend down and pick a couple of worms at a time. You have to learn the skills, like how to pick with two hands. He never gave us time to learn

our own skills to pick more. In a week and a half I demonstrated that I could harvest more with time. If he had given us the time stipulated in the contract for training, we would have picked the quota and then some. But I also think that it affects a person when you are being pressured, when you are told you are bad, lazy, and useless, or “we’re going to send you back to Mexico if you don’t try hard.” This affects you psychologically when they keep bothering you, repeating the same thing.

Someone from the State Institute for Labour in Coahuila called us and wanted to know how everything had started. They wanted us to stop making noise. I told him, as we say in Mexico, that I had to get rid of this thorn. You know how it hurts more to leave a thorn in than remove it? I had to get this thorn out instead of going back to Mexico with it still embedded. The only fear we had was that there would be reprisals against our families, because the Institute had a lot of information on our families: where they live, addresses, telephone numbers. So there was some fear. I am afraid mainly for my children; they are very young. I live with some fear, some anxiety, wondering if my children are okay. But you have to be strong, because if it wasn’t us women going through this, it would be other women, or other men. So if we can contribute something, then that’s good.

It is very difficult to be in another country where no one knows you, but here, far from your country, you begin to value your family, especially your children. A day does not go by in which I think about my children. In a week my oldest son will be nine years old, and I don’t have any money to send. But I keep thinking that there will be a reward to all of this; that we will be able to say we did something. You have to hold your head up high and say you did something. You can’t go bent over, like many of my *compañeros*, or like I imagine our leader—the one that started this uproar, that designated

us both as leaders—arrived home with his head bowed. No, I want to arrive in my country, in Mexico, and look people in the eyes. To hold my head up and say “I did something because I wanted to, and I achieved it. For me, for my people, for my children.” I think it is this that gives you strength to keep going.

Teresa lives with her three children and extended family in Northern Mexico. Upon return home, she could not find employment for eight months. She is currently working in a maquiladora that manufactures jeans for a U.S. company where she sews an average of 2,000 front pockets per day. She is paid

less than one Canadian cent per pair, earning approximately \$87 per week. Her New Year’s resolution is to have the opportunity to work in Canada as a seasonal agricultural worker in 2006 so she can better provide for her children.

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FLAVIA COSMA

Bullfight

“I will not kill this lunatic!” –
We were both thinking in wonder.
You, fidgety, like a lost kid,
I, drowsy from the eternal lurk,
From slippery hours of waiting.

Excited throngs roared in great delirium,
Scarlet kerchiefs unfurling in the windows;
Fires broke out in the withered dust,
And under the sun’s eyelashes, in dead trees,
Birds were budding on rusty branches.

Blindly I came to you, my hands outstretched,
And full of secret whispers, like weighted scales;
Fate seized us, noisily, in haste;
The rumbling arose from sleep into a wing;
With a clatter of hearts and with barbaric rhythms,
Rugged, the moon’s horn stabbed us wildly
And left us livid, lying in the sand,
Covered in blood and in slobber.

Translated from Romanian by Flavia Cosma and Charles Siedlecki.

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