

Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW)
c/o Workers Action Centre
720 Spadina Avenue, Suite 223
Toronto, ON M5S 2T9
Canada
Mayor John Paterson
111 Erie St. North
Leamington, Ontario
N8H 2Z9

Open Letter to the Mayor of Leamington John Paterson over recent comments
pertaining to migrant workers

Sep 3, 2013

Mayor Paterson,

Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW) is a non-profit political collective that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in Canada. J4MW has been actively engaging migrant workers in the Leamington area for over a decade. During this time, we have met thousands of migrant workers in this community.

Over the past decade we have followed with great interest the wider community's response to migrant workers. Unfortunately, your recent remarks come as no surprise to members of our collective. In the past several years, the open hostility that your council has shown towards migrant workers represents the most blatant displays of anti-migrant sentiments we have ever witnessed. Recent comments in the media, have disparaged the use of public library facilities by migrant workers; made allegations that there are too many migrant workers 'loitering' downtown; and criticized the presence of too many 'ethnic' businesses serving the migrant worker community. In each instance 'cultural differences' have been used to justify the wider community's adverse reaction to the presence of large groups of migrant workers in visible local spaces. To pass off this tension as a matter of difference based on one's place of origin is disingenuous at best. It alludes to there being an equal and level playing field between migrant workers and Canadians. This completely masks the fact that all migrant workers in your community are:

- (1) Racialized
- (2) Bound to their employers
- (3) Denied social and labour mobility
- (4) Denied the ability of permanent residency
- (5) Are separated from their families for significant portions of time
- (6) Cannot exercise social and democratic participation in the processes that you represent.

Your analysis does not acknowledge the power imbalance in your community. You and your council are free to condemn and stigmatize migrant workers without any real and significant response from workers themselves; a population who have lived and worked in Leamington for fifty years, but continue to be considered temporary.

Your recent remarks pertaining to “lewd behaviour” of migrant workers cannot be taken in good faith. Instead of dealing with sexual harassment on an individual basis, you skip right to racialized stereotypes; drawing from some of the worst parts of Canadian history. It does not escape us that the community of Leamington once supported ‘sundown laws’ which made it illegal for Black Canadians to walk freely in the community after sunset.

It is apparent that your council would rather have migrant workers ‘out of sight and out of mind’; segregated from the white citizens of your community as much as possible. This de facto separation of migrants only reinforces the negative reputation that your community is earning under your leadership.

Recently, human rights violations were substantiated by the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (HRTO) in the form of anti-black racism and widespread attention has been paid to another ongoing case involving an employer who allegedly sexual harassed racialized migrant women. As Leamington has one of the largest population of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) in Canada these important cases directly impact workers in your community - yet your office took no public stance to acknowledge them. You and your council have been absent in discussions on racial profiling of the Asian population of Leamington where officers under your direction as Chair of the Police Services Board have acted as de facto Border Officials towards Asian residents of your community.

Your office has been negligent in improving road infrastructure that would ensure safe transport and greater road safety for migrant workers. Neither your council nor the municipality has grappled with the dangerous modes of transportation that migrant workers must endure.

Performing such simple tasks as phoning home, buying groceries or sending money home become feats of life and death.

Migrant workers have continued to complain that they are victims of hate crimes and, that racism and sexism continues to be part of the daily experiences while working and living in Leamington. They are constantly excluded from all discussions related to their social welfare. The question returns to you: what steps are you taking in your elected capacity to advocate for the rights of migrant workers? What resources will you put forth towards anti-racism programming, training and education for the Canadian community about the experiences of migrant workers? How are resources from the City of Leamington being allocated towards programming concerning violence against women and is this programming culturally and racially sensitive? Are your services accessible and

inclusive of the migrant community of Leamington?

We express our bewilderment and dismay that after almost 50 years of working and living amongst the community, the general population of Leamington, the issues of migrant workers remain invisible. Simultaneously the only visible spaces of the downtown core where workers can come together are now threatened through the implementation of racially motivated loitering laws, that if passed will reinforce both their legal and social exclusion.

Yes, a dialogue is needed in Leamington about migrant workers, but the dialogue that you are proposing is skewed towards an outcome that will only perpetuate the racial divisions that exist. One cannot have a dialogue when the population most impacted is left out of the conversation. Furthermore migrant workers must be seen as members of the community something it seems that you refuse to accept. There is a consistent line of argument that migrant workers should be the sole responsibility of employers and that employers should be financially responsible for any form of municipal services rendered to migrants. This argument reflects a deep seated level of paternalism and racism through implying that non-citizens should have no access to municipal services and if they do private interests should be paying the costs. Despite social and legal exclusions, migrant workers are the economic engine of Leamington and Ontario through both their labour and through their contributions to the local economy. Contributions that have come through the sacrifices that migrant workers have made to put food on the table for their families as well as ours

We can assume that the public outcry towards your recent remarks has not changed your resolve to leave unaddressed the underlying divisions that lay at the heart of the day to day realities of migrant workers. Without significant investments towards anti-racism programming, inclusive municipal services and programs that foster a genuine sense of community for all, the ongoing tensions will continue.

For our part, we will continue to educate the broader public about the true conditions that racialized migrant workers face in Leamington. We will engage and develop educational programming to ensure that migrant workers can advocate for an end to the exclusive framework that governs their lived realities in Leamington. Finally, if steps are taken to further deny civic participation of migrant workers from public spaces we will invest whatever resources needed to counter any racially motivated legislation that you and your council invoke for your own political gain. In spite of how you perceive the migrant community, migrant workers will continue to demand to be treated as equals. They will march, they will organize, and they will continue to rupture the invisibility so their voices, dreams and aspirations are heard. They will disrupt and resist the stereotypes, assumptions and beliefs that you and your colleagues may assign towards them. Their silence will be broken and their voices will be heard.