

**Ontario unveils new rights for temp workers; Legislation addresses group's low pay as part of anti-poverty strategy**

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Byline: Tanya Talaga

Temporary workers in Ontario say they no longer feel like second-class citizens now that the government has introduced legislation to stop unscrupulous employers from taking advantage of a growing segment of the workforce.

There are nearly 700,000 temporary jobs throughout the province and for years temp workers - many new Canadians or women - have fought to get basic employment rights. Improving the Employment Standards Act is part of the Ontario government's ambitious anti-poverty strategy, unveiled last week. Ontario is vowing to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent in five years.

If passed, new legislation introduced today by Labour Minister Peter Fonseca should help to even the playing field by bolstering temp workers' rights in everything from holiday and termination pay to more contract information and stopping the practice of temp agencies charging prohibitive fees to workers.

"Now, if you go to work for a temp agency, they have to give you their corporate name, address, as well as where they send you. They have to tell you hours of work, benefits and the description of work you are doing," said Fonseca. "It is unbelievable that they weren't getting this information in the past."

These changes will go a long way to helping vulnerable workers and low-income families, Fonseca said. "Our legislation and regulations in terms of employment standards was not keeping up with the market place."

The government is finally recognizing the reality of these workers' low pay and lack of protection, said Sonia Singh of the Workers' Action Centre. "This is the first step to expand basic laws to reflect the realities of work," she said and added the changes will make a "huge difference" in people's lives.

Holiday pay recognition would mean an extra nine days of pay a year that people were denied before, she said. This is now effective as of Jan. 2. While everyone wants workers to be treated with respect and there are many positives to the changes, People Bank president Steve Jones fears employers may have a hard time coping.

"It is really likely that independently owned staffing companies that specialize in short-term contracts will have difficulty keeping their doors open because of their increased costs," said Jones, whose firm is a staffing company. Jones is also president of the Association of Canadian Search Employment and Staffing Services, which represents more than 550 individual firms.

Jones feels there are challenges, particularly to small staffing companies that specialize in short-term labour. Holiday pay requirements, about a 5 per cent increase in labour costs, could affect a company's competitive edge.

For too long there has been a two-tier workforce in Ontario and most of those on the bottom tier are women and minorities, said New Democratic Party MPP Andrea Horwath (Hamilton-Centre).

"There are two tiers of workers and that is unacceptable," she said. "It is time every worker, whether they are a casual worker, a temp worker or part-time worker, is treated with all the dignity and respect they deserve."

This is a big victory for all the people who work hard and contribute to this province, said Beix Liu, a former temporary worker who now has a part-time job as an accounting clerk. "I was taken advantage of; I didn't get holiday pay. "

Liu, an immigrant from mainland China, felt like a second-class citizen when he was a temp worker. "We pay tax, we pay everything as other workers, but we get little protection ... and we are paid low salaries and no benefits," said Liu.

Mexican immigrant Andrea Galindo, 21, has worked for five temp agencies over the last two years. She makes about \$10 hourly waitressing in banquet halls. If all the proposed changes become law, Galindo said she will feel happier about work.

"I feel like my rights are being protected," she said.

Galindo is tired of losing about \$10 each paycheque for "fees" she feels are unnecessary.

"If I only work four or five hours one weekend and they take \$10, then I only make \$40," Galindo said.