

Permanent status plan leaves questions

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FULL TEXT

Last March, the federal government committed to reduce Canada's rapidly escalating proportion of temporary residents, in part to "avoid the pitfalls of an economy built solely on temporary workers." There are three main ways to reach this goal. One is reducing the entry of new temporary residents, as the recent international student cap has done. Another is increasing the exit of current temporary residents, which is logistically difficult. A third is offering temporary residents the opportunity to remain permanently. The government is assessing the trade-offs of each. It is within this context that a plan to admit care workers as permanent residents, rather than temporary workers, was recently announced. No longer will they be required to care for Canadians in their homes on work permits before earning the right to apply for permanent residency. More than thirty years of research has clearly demonstrated how this conditional two-step migration process left care workers vulnerable to employer abuse and forced many to endure years of separation from their families. We are thus cautiously optimistic that the changes answer long-standing calls for permanent status upon arrival.

That said, we have questions.

The government intends to admit more than 15,000 care workers as permanent residents between 2024-2026 through pilot programs. Yet details remain unclear, such as whether this number will include temporary care workers already here under previous programs. We know the government's goal is to decrease Canada's current temporary resident population. But long-term, does it truly plan to create a fairer migrant care worker program offering straightforward, immediate access to permanent residency?

If the answer is yes, this raises questions about other temporary worker programs. While migrant care worker programs have unique characteristics, many well-documented problems apply to others - particularly the use of permanent residency as a carrot to incentivize migrants' tolerance of unjust conditions. This sits at the root of all two-step migration pathways. Will permanent residency be offered upon arrival to other deserving temporary workers? Two points are important. First, it is hard to distinguish between temporary work programs as they are actually lived. The international student program, for example, has become one facet of a migrant care worker program; there is evidence that some international students and post-graduation work permit holders are employed as care workers. In this sense, the precarity of temporary care workers lives on.

More generally, Canada's various temporary worker programs have long been uneven, each with their own flavour of injustice. Temporary migrants used to all be "permanently temporary," with limited opportunities to transition to permanent residency. Some, such as seasonal agricultural workers, remain so. But since the 1990s, two-step migration has become a major component of Canadian immigration. Some temporary workers are "temporarily temporary," meaning a pathway to permanent residency exists - even if achieving it demands extended periods of precarity. Others with less clear permanent residency prospects spend years in a probationary limbo.

Governments like two-step migration because they can "test" potential immigrants. Migrant workers receive conditional access to the labour market and are only "kept" after meeting certain criteria. In theory, this "weeding out" process helps select immigrants with better long-term earnings outcomes and lower levels of underemployment. Yet there are hidden costs along the way, the majority borne by migrants themselves. Recent protests across the country highlight the struggles of international students and temporary workers unable to find legal pathways to remain after contributing to the well-being and economic success of Canada for many years. Because the number of temporary residents wishing to stay far exceeds available spaces in the Immigration Levels Plan, we can expect to

see further tension and pain.

The government has difficult choices to make. As it weighs the options, we should deeply consider the underlying principles care worker advocates worked so hard, for so long, to promote.

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