

Agriculture profits up 63% in 2008 but what about the workers? Bumper year for owners but not for exploited workers

TORONTO, May 26, 2009 – Profits in the Canadian agriculture sector have jumped a second year in row while the workers in the field continue to be one of the most exploited labour forces in Canada — including the more than 22,000 agriculture workers who come to Canada each season under the federal government's Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (CSAWP).

This week Statistics Canada reported that farm sector total net revenues increased for the second consecutive year to \$3.3 billion — up \$1.3 billion from 2007. Meanwhile wages for most agriculture workers remain the lowest in Canada “because the system is set up to keep these workers powerless,” says Wayne Hanley, the national president of UFCW Canada.

UFCW Canada, in association with the Agriculture Workers Alliance, operates nine agriculture worker support centres across Canada. In 2008 the centres handled more than 40,000 inquiries from both domestic and CSAWP workers.

“CSAWP workers have no say about their pay or working conditions. That is strictly left up to the government and the farm lobby,” explained Hanley. “It is the same story for all farm workers in Ontario and Alberta because their Charter rights continue to be violated by provincial bans on farm unions.”

Field workers in Alberta are also excluded from protections of the province's workplace health and safety regulations. Only token protections exist in Ontario where farms receive a provincial safety inspection about once a decade.

“The blatant discrimination against agriculture workers has to end,” said Hanley. “It means billion in profits for the agriculture industry at the cost of the workers' health, safety and workplace rights.”