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Picking a Living in the Global Labour Market: Modern Guestworker Programs in Comparative Perspective

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Increasing labour shortages for seasonal workers in the horticultural sectors of developed economies has led to renewed calls for temporary guestworker programs. Both the lack of native workers and growth in other sectors calling for lower-skilled workers have been cited as reasons for the shortages, as has the growth in consumer demand for horticultural products. Yet past experience have shown temporary workers to be anything but temporary and recent proposals have been met with scepticism by government, public and labour unions. In light of this experience and given the significant differences among countries tabling such legislation, this paper examines recent proposals and current programs for temporary guestworkers in agriculture in Australia, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom in an effort to assess the impact of guestworkers in the current economic, social and political environment. It compares the legitimacy of such programs in respect to migration traditions, the demographic necessity for lower-skilled workers, the economic effects of guestworkers on wages and industry, potential sources for guest workers as well as the alternatives available in each country. The paper concludes by questioning the efficacy of guestworker programs at meeting the goal of “temporary-ness” and the legitimacy of short-term migration programs more generally.