

# PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND FEDERATION OF LABOUR

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Brief presented to Provincial Immigration Committee  
by the P.E.I. Federation of Labour

The issues surrounding foreign credentials and immigration are ones which need to be examined in light of ongoing issues regarding skills shortages, changing demographics, the future workforce, funding and access to training programs, access to language and apprenticeship programs and changes needed in Canada's Immigration program.

We are here representing the Prince Edward Island Federation of Labour which represents over 10,000 workers on Prince Edward Island. We draw upon our work within the labour movement as a whole including ongoing research relating to economic development in this Province as well as our experiences on Prince Edward Island with refugee and immigration concerns. We participated in the hearings regarding developing the Province's population strategy and have attended a number of consultations and meetings relating to this field.

I know in Canada about 20% of people's work is found in regulated occupations including 50 professions and 100 apprenticeable trades. I know that some emigrants from "Category One" countries can more easily transfer directly into a trade or profession than immigrants from Asia or Africa. There are barriers for workers who come from outside the country while employers claim there are skilled shortages of workers now or in the near future.

We also want to highlight that this issue is one which is critical for Prince Edward Island and the rest of the country. An analysis of P.E.I.'s demographic trends shows that by 2010, immigration will account for net labour force growth and by 2031 for total population growth. We have a birthrate of only 1.47 when 2.1 is needed just to replace the population.

There are barriers that currently exist within the workforce including no or few national standards in education with portability of certain skills or training not being recognized for workers from different provinces let alone from outside Canada. Employers in Canada do not reinvest in their workers to the degree that employers outside Canada do and some of them are more willing to bring in others with skills than train their existing workforce. Skilled workers are encouraged to immigrate but their skills or credentials are not recognized once they arrive. PLAR (prior learning and recognition) is not even being implemented on an ongoing and systematic way across the Provinces or educational institutions.

We know there are a shortage of health care workers including the example of nurses where the average age of existing nurses is growing but many nursing graduates are going abroad because of poor wages and working conditions here. There are trained nurses here from outside Canada whose training or credentials are not recognized. The same is true for other health care experts such as registered lab technicians and medical doctors.

We need to provide support for workers to achieve recognition for their training and credentials. There was one case where an esteemed lawyer and jurist from India moved to Prince Edward Island a number of years ago but was restricted from practicing law until he completed additional training off Island. This person was a renowned person in his field but had to jump through additional hoops in order to carry out duties he was entirely capable of doing. He had the additional resources to do that while other immigrants may not have that ability.

We need to address the needs of our workforce in the future and provide the means for workers to integrate into our workforce and our society and communities. An emphasis on additional supports and resources are necessary - we have only a few centralized programs which assist new immigrants and refugees with their language and other life skills. Rural areas of the province do not have these programs at all. Additional official language training supports, job entry programs, work placements and encouraging community-based initiatives to welcome and integrate newcomers is needed.

These programs may be underfunded. The local branch of the Federal Department of Immigration has been downsized with no public access hours. The local organization of the P.E.I. Association of Newcomers provides excellent help and assistance on limited funds.

Greater resources and community supports are necessary for groups like PEIANC to assist immigrants with issues like recognition of their foreign credentials. A foreign credential centre should be established in Atlantic Canada. Other assessments such as apprenticeship and evaluative testing should also be considered for immigrants or refugees. Governments must also work with others to recognize the need for this recognition with employers and union groups.

Canadian Immigration policy should reflect the need that we need to recognize, attract and integrate skilled professionals and tradespeople into the Canadian workforce. The costs of not recognizing and integrating international credentials should also be recognized in underemployment, unemployment, downsizing, privatization and skills shortages.

We also want the Panel to understand that exploitative practices and the vulnerability of workers in the following programs also have to be addressed: Foreign agricultural workers, Live in Caregiver Program and the low-skilled Foreign Worker Program.

We know that there have been efforts through an LMDA study in agriculture that migrant farm labour be introduced to Prince Edward Island. The study itself does deal with the cost-price squeeze issues within agriculture but really fundamental issues regarding concerns of workers on Prince Edward Island was all but ignored. In order to attract and retain qualified workers whether they be immigrants or not these issues need to be resolved otherwise you are just using this labour to drive down the wages of workers here. Prince Edward Island has the lowest average annual and hourly rates for workers in any province. A Stats Canada study of 15 different occupational profiles had P.E.I. place last in 10 of the categories and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> last in every remaining category save one. That same study indicates the cost of living on P.E.I. were also higher than other provinces, particularly as far as food and accommodations went. We have a larger out migration of young people seeking higher wages in areas like the trades. This does not touch on ongoing concerns regarding health and safety, no public transportation (except new in Charlottetown area) and limited childcare spaces. That is not to mention the issue of patronage and others of openness and fairness in hiring. We also have the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest unemployment rate in Canada, 11.5% accompanied by a high degree of out-migration, particularly our youth.

We have had limited experience with migrant agricultural workers. We had the experience of one employer accessing migrant workers from Mexico. They received little health and safety training while they dealt with a dangerous fumigant. Ultimately it became public that since they were not trained or outfitted properly there was a problem, all the workers had gotten sick due to exposure to this dangerous chemical. The Canadian workers were taken for medical treatment and the Mexican workers who spoke little or no English did not receive any medical assistance. This was a case that happened in Alberton and only received some publicity after the fact.

The Prince Edward Island Department of Development have a program to attract immigrants to P.E.I. and have them use their skills, business acumen and capital to invest in our economy; however, I am not sure of the training and background these officers have in their own entrepreneurial field as well as cross cultural training. If we already want only participants in the Prince Edward Island Nominee Program to have post secondary education and either french or english skills, are we missing out on a larger pool of people? The nominees are skilled workers where we have a labour shortage, and either immigrant entrepreneurs or partners who have at least \$200,000 to invest on P.E.I. The retention rate for economic class immigrants on P.E.I. is only 10%.

Are there others we need to attract and are there other aspects of having them relocate here which we need to address including many cultural and integrative factors which will assist them and their family being successful into becoming part of our Island community. Perhaps rural places like P.E.I. need to attract immigrants who would like to work in the area where we have jobs (agriculture, fishery, tourism) or who come from rural backgrounds. Family and community reunification programs would assist in bringing people together and build communities. We have established a strong and vibrant Lebanese community in the past 100 years. Currently, there is a number of refugees who have come to P.E.I. who want to remain here and are struggling to bring their family members here but finding it financially difficult to meet immigration requirements.

We need to do more on P.E.I. and elsewhere in establishing people economically, socially and culturally. We may need to concentrate on having established host communities develop multicultural awareness and policies and welcome newcomers. Prince Edward Island was just on the National News when local entrepreneurs of the Noodle House are selling their business and moving off Island due to ongoing problems with local students. We have to be more proactive to address such issues within the school and community so that we can develop and maintain a welcoming environment.

It appears it may be a case of “too little - too late” on the part of institutions needed to carry out this role although the majority of residents have been rallying to support this couple.

We had a long haul trucker relocate here from Syria and then found it difficult to continue in his field due to more restrictive rules re his entry into the United States despite being a landed immigrant in Canada.

In talking with those who work with refugee people here, one of the hardest barriers is for such refugees to establish stable and meaningful employment. Their loss of documentation verifying their occupational and educational status and problems with foreign credential recognition are common dilemmas. Studies have shown that to compensate for this, refugees turn to social capital and social groups. If these do not exist, integration is much more difficult and they may also relocate to gain social supports if they are lacking where they are initially. The Canadian Race Relations Foundation supports the position that subtle forms of discrimination are at work for visible minority immigrants and systematic discrimination has existed in gaining employment and housing on P.E.I.

We ask that the provincial government strengthen programs and policies which address prejudice, racism and discrimination in our workplaces, schools and other settings. These are core elements for building stronger communities.

We also ask the Province to address the issue of out-migration of workers on P.E.I. including the youth of this province. Many leave although trained in the trades because wages and benefits are greater elsewhere. The same is true of many other occupations. The adoption of a fair wage policy for trades workers in this province may assist in keeping trades workers here.

The province can also make improvements in labour standards and in protecting the health and safety of its workforce. These measures which protect the interests of workers will provide a means to attract new workers to this province. We cannot denigrate the existing workforce with some of the lowest standards in the country (workers in Atlantic Canada have some of the lowest rates vacation pay, statutory holidays and other leaves.) If we also attract workers in our seasonal industries, we must also fight for improvement to the EI/UI fund. Many newcomers would not even meet the first time qualifying rules for EI/UI.

We wish you good luck with your deliberations on this important matter for all Islanders and our collective future.

