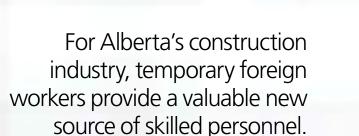






## CONSTRUCTION MELTING POT



BY JOEL THOMPSON AND MORITZ SCHMIDT



ntil very recently, "temporary foreign worker" was a label new to the construction industry in Canada. For decades, the focus on labour markets in this country was always on creating jobs and battling unemployment.

Baby boom demographics, coupled with strong economic growth, have brought big changes to labour markets and chronic worker shortages became the new norm for many industries. This is especially true in construction, with Western Canada facing the most severe tradespeople shortages.

While immigrant workers have historically been a core group for the construction industry, they were workers who had moved to Canada from source countries like Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Hungary and were landed immigrants residing in Canada permanently. The industry had no experience in recruiting migrant workers who would come to Canada for six months

to two years and then return to their home countries.

Although this was something new to the industry, construction employers have reacted quickly to this opportunity to ease their skilled labour shortages. Temporary foreign workers became more commonplace, despite the daunting task of navigating the bureaucracy that controls their entry and the logistics of recruiting, transporting, housing and integrating offshore tradespeople.

When talk of importing workers first began, most expected a scenario where a few large industrial projects would employ hundreds of Chinese or Filipino workers. While that has occurred to some extent, the more interesting story continues to be the remarkable response from industry. Businesses of all sizes clamoured to utilize this new talent pool. Workers from a very long list of countries and virtually every trade were recruited to work in Canada.

The workers themselves and the companies they work for vary tremendously, as illustrated by the following profiles.

Valery Octave first came to Canada for temporary work in 1995. A native of the eastern Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, Octave realized at an early age that opportunities to make a good living for his family were scarce on the impoverished island nation. Some of his earliest jobs in Canada were in southern Ontario, where he toiled in farmers' fields. However, 2008 marked only the second time Octave had worked in Alberta.

"I want the best for my family," explains Octave. The migrant worker can make a good wage in Canada, and the employment opportunities are typically stable. Compare that to the Saint Lucian economy, where pay is low and work opportunities rarely last longer than six months per year. While working in Canada is a good economic decision, it is not without some sacrifice. Two weeks after his daughter was born in Saint Lucia, he left the island for another season of work and didn't see her again for nine months.

His many years of experience working as a carpenter, bricklayer and concrete finisher in Saint Lucia made him a good fit for Proform Concrete Services Inc. of Red Deer. For the past several years, the concrete company struggled to adequately staff its curb, gutter and sidewalk operations. Proform engaged the services of a labour broker, who successfully helped recruit 12 Saint Lucians to work during the 2008 concrete pouring season. Octave says that the process with the labour broker worked well. "The paperwork is too complicated to do on your own," he says, noting that the nearest Canadian consulate was in Trinidad and required a plane trip to visit in person. While there are many stories circulating about questionable tactics used by disreputable

Valery Octave, Saint Lucia

labour brokers, Octave says he did not pay anything additional to the broker. Proform owns apartments that are used to house foreign workers while they live in Canada.

**DWIGHT ARTHUR** 

PHOTOGRAPH BY

Comparing construction methods in Canada to those in Saint Lucia, Octave says there are huge differences. "Back at home, they mix concrete by hand and hoist bricks with a rope and pulley," he says. He points out the contrast to the Albertan jobsite where the crew is finishing a sidewalk, formed by a modern extruder with concrete being supplied by a shiny new mixer truck.

Octave's work permit is good for a year, but he plans to return home in mid-November when the outdoor concrete pouring season in Alberta comes to an end. Octave hopes to return to Canada again, and his long-term goal is to become a landed immigrant and bring his family to this country. His daughter, who is now entering high school, has dreams of becoming a doctor. "Canada is a better place to raise a family," he says.

Higher wages also lured Sebastian Santillan Chavez into a life of migrant work. As a Mexican labourer from the state of Hidalgo (near Mexico City), Chavez has made three trips to Canada as a temporary foreign worker.

During the summer of 2008, he worked as part of a paving crew, employed by Carmacks Enterprises Ltd. on Calgary's northeast ring road project. Like Octave, his previous stints in Canada were as an agricultural worker in southern Ontario.

Chavez took his first step towards working in Alberta by responding to an ad in a Mexican newspaper. The ad called for construction personnel who wanted to work in Canada and was placed by a labour broker commissioned by Carmacks. Within weeks, Carmacks staff traveled to Mexico to interview Chavez and a number of other applicants from the region to verify their skillset. By June 2008, Chavez was living in a company-supplied apartment, which he describes as "first class."

Chavez is very candid about his motivation to work in Canada. "I want to make more money," he states. "The wages here are about twice what we make in Mexico." He suggests there are many more Mexican workers who want to come to Canada to work because of the wage disparity. "I am ashamed. Mexico is rich with lots of resources. It should not be a poor country. It is politics, I think."

While his main motivation to leave his home in Mexico and work in Canada is financial, he is enthusiastic in explaining that is not the only reason. "I like to travel, to see different people, to see different cultures and also to give people a bit of our culture," he says.

He has found living expenses in Canada "a little higher" than in Mexico and expresses frustration about using Calgary's public transit. "This is awful!" he says, laughing at

his attempts to master Calgary's bus service. Despite the transportation difficulties, he says that he and his four Mexican compatriots enjoy shopping and sightseeing on their days off.

Chavez had experience working on road construction in Mexico and says there are not many differences between Canadian and Mexican paving or construction worksites. While the equipment was familiar, he reports that "things move faster here; production is higher."

In late October, the Carmacks crews are operating on borrowed time against the normal weather window for asphalt paving in Alberta. Chavez is looking forward to returning home and makes it clear that he comes only to work and has no desire to live in Canada permanently. He has a wife at home in Mexico and longs to return to his homeland and culture.

Money was not the driving force

behind David McAleer's decision to come to Canada for work. He and his wife had considered emigrating from their home in Scotland for many years to be closer to relatives living in Ontario.

Making a connection with a Calgary employer looking for electricians happened purely by chance. While researching Canadian real estate on the Internet, an agent put him in touch with Keith Brooke, owner of Calgary-based Unitech Electrical Contracting Inc. Brooke had been actively recruiting tradespeople from the U.K. for several years. From first contact with his future employer until he actually arrived in Calgary in May 2007, it took only six months.

The task of navigating the regulations for the Temporary Foreign Worker Program was not easy, but not overwhelming either. "It was just a matter of completing the paperwork," he says.

Talking at a jobsite at the former Children's Hospital in Calgary, McAleer says he didn't have any difficulty in adapting to his current role. "The code is essentially the same with maybe a few differences in things like cable size," he says. While there are a few differences in tools and work practices, he adds: "Things are essentially the same. You just have to get used to the products."

One big difference, though, is the amount of conduit used in Canadian installations. Conduit is no longer used extensively on commercial projects in the U.K., and it was "a bit of a step backward in time." He has worked on sites across the U.K. and in Holland and says that there are differences in productivity and safety procedures that vary between various commercial and industrial projects. From what he has seen of Canadian sites, he would put them "somewhere in the middle."



Sebastian Santillan Chavez

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Asked about his training, he describes a system quite similar to the Canadian apprenticeship, with approximately four years of on-the-job and classroom training before achieving journeyman status. The classroom training included "block release," standard in Alberta's electrical trade, but also includes a period where apprentices remain working and attend technical training for one day per week.

Temporary foreign workers are required to pass Red Seal examinations for their trade within six months of coming to Canada, something McAleer found challenging but not insurmountable. He invested a great deal of time and effort into familiarizing himself with the Canadian Electrical Code, a process that was aided by his employer and by the fact that there were a number of other immigrant workers at Unitech going through the same process. They were able to support each other while preparing for the exam.

"What I most feared about coming to Calgary," he says, "was having to start at the bottom again, after years of effort to get to a high level in Scotland." Those concerns were soon put to rest as he was given substantial jobsite responsibilities after only a short time with Unitech. He was recently engaged in completing schematic as-built drawings for his renovation project and subsequently promoted to project manager.

McAleer says that Alberta wages are definitely higher than in Scotland. Taking into account the differences in living costs, government services and taxes, he says, "Tradesmen get a higher standard of living here," and, considering the factors that go into income and lifestyle, "it tips in favour of Calgary."

McAleer was granted landed immigrant status through the Provincial Nominee Program in December 2008. He and his

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wife have bought a house in Calgary and his family enjoys living there. According to McAleer, the Calgary housing market wasn't unaffordable when compared to Glasgow; he found that "you actually get more house for your money here." Initially apprehensive about Canadian winters, he soon realized that, while the temperatures might be lower, Calgary's dry climate was much different to the bone-chilling Scottish damp he was used to back home.

## Markus Stemmler had also long considered

leaving his native Berlin but was never quite ready to make the move. "When I was about 18 or 20 years old, I thought about leaving Germany, but I don't think I was tough enough," he says.

Over the years, the thought of emigrating remained and when an opportunity arose for his wife to take a job in North America, they decided to make the move. Stemmler went to a job fair in Berlin where he met a representative from Calgary's Con-Forte Contracting Group Inc. He was immediately offered a job as a carpenter.

Stemmler describes his experience with the Temporary Foreign Worker Program as "very quick and easy." While he completed most of the paperwork himself, his employer provided significant support and guidance



at every step of the journey. Because he was able to do almost everything correctly the first time, he acquired a work permit within six weeks of making the initial application.

Since arriving in Calgary in June 2007, Stemmler has been on the fast track for advancement with Con-Forte. His technical skills, aptitude and language abilities made him a very good long-term fit with the company and he was subsequently reclassified under the Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program in order to apply for landed immigrant status. This also meant a move to the project manager position he currently holds.

Stemmler manages several significant projects currently in progress around Calgary. "There's a condo, an office building, a retail space, a shopping centre..." His voice trails off as he glances at the dozen or

so project binders in his office. He clearly has a lot on his plate, and while he admits that it is stressful sometimes, he wouldn't trade it for anything.

While he likes the fact that in his new position he is responsible for a wide variety of projects, he also looks back fondly at his time in the field. "I really miss the guys," he says. "It was always enjoyable working in the field, and the guys really helped me learn the techniques I needed to know in Canada."

Much of his success stemmed from the fact that his English language skills are excellent. "Some of the other foreign workers didn't have as much luck as I did, mainly because they could not speak English very well." His point emphasizes the importance of language skills for any employee considering a move to Canada.

Stemmler has noticed some key differences between working in Germany and Canada. "In Europe, we use forming systems much more than here. In Canada, you like to use plywood and 2x4s, which is fun but a little different." He also points out that safety attitudes and regulations are vastly different in Germany, where he frequently worked with nothing more than "shorts and work boots," foregoing the hard hat, safety glasses and other personal protective equipment standard on Canadian construction sites. The prominent role of safety coordinators is also one that he says does not really exist on German sites and took some getting used to. Overall, he has been able to adapt very well and is looking forward to a promising career in the Alberta construction industry. O



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Germany

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## Roam the World in Alberta

Temporary foreign workers are a very small percentage of the province's total construction workforce but construction is not the only industry that has welcomed offshore labour as a solution to labour shortages. Temporary foreign workers can now be found in many different sectors of the economy, particularly in service industry jobs where employers have been chronically short-staffed.

The table below shows how total numbers of temporary foreign workers grew nearly fourfold in the last five years and their presence in every area of the province.

The economic downturn being experienced in 2009 will result in many offshore workers not having their contracts renewed but the demographics of the Canadian labour force dictate that, over the long term, temporary foreign workers will continue to play a role in our labour market.

City	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Medicine Hat	118	182	151	145	209
Lethbridge	77	101	215	310	382
Calgary	3,928	4,603	6,114	8,808	11,576
Red Deer	156	310	210	458	437
Edmonton	2,138	2,147	3,026	6,145	8,301
Wood Buffalo	168	337	518	590	1,008
Other Alberta	3,987	5,028	8,331	12,983	17,264
Alberta	10,572	12,708	18,565	29,439	39,177