

Out in fields and the cold

By ANGELA FERRANTE
of The Gazette

CHATHAM, Ont. — The shabby, peeling farm house on the edge of a large tomato field is the temporary home of twelve Quebec migrant workers.

Inside where it is scantily-furnished but warm, four members of the Drouin family and numerous cousins, all from Lac St. Jean, slip on rubber gloves for another 12-hour day to pick the last of the tomato harvest before the frost — the earliest in 43 years — completes its destruction.

"It's crowded here, especially when we had to live with another family and there were always fights. But it's better than most other places," says Mrs. Germaine Drouin, who on her own shepherds the group's youngsters, aged 15 to 21, through three months of stoop labor in southwestern Ontario.

"When we first came three years ago, a farmer put us in a garage, a filthy, terrible place I wouldn't even put a dog in. We just cried and cried all night. We stayed a month and then left," she says in a husky, tired voice.

Another family from her area, the Gilberts, arrived here last July to pick cucumbers only to find that promised housing, inspected by the local health unit, was only a one-room 'shack'.

"I told the farmer he either cleaned it up or I left," said Benoit, the father, who works on construction at home during the winter. "He didn't care. But I got some paint from him, worked two nights and made it better."

The shack had the only toilet for 22 people on the farm. "People just kept coming in and out. There was never any peace," he recalls.

The Gilberts and their four children, aged ten to 17, were lucky to find another farm and better housing. "A lot of others come down with no money and they are afraid to move around or go back. So they just stay in bad places," he said.

About 10,000 Quebec migrant workers such as these flock to the "banana belt" between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie every year, some of them living in substandard, uninspected lodgings which lack even basic facilities such as running water and electricity.

In Kent County alone, of which Chatham is the main centre, about 3,000 Quebecers, mostly from high-unemployment areas such as Lac St. Jean, Val D'Or and the Gaspé, come to pick everything from strawberries to pota-

(See NEW GROUP, Page 5)

New group aiming to protect 'banana belt' workers' rights

(Continued from Page 1)

700 farms. But only 71 lodgings were inspected by health unit this year.

migrant workers, many of whom are on welfare or unemployment insurance and rarely speak English, are attracted here by the chance of making extra money — up to \$100 a week for a family of four for a three-month season. With a little finagling the extra income won't show up on their income tax returns.

The bad housing conditions were brought to light this year by a newly-created pressure group, the Migrant Workers' Association.

Started by a small group of Quebec migrants and two dozen of Young Canadians workers, the association has about 100 members and plans to continue organizing in the winter in order to press for more rights for workers.

The work of the association has caused controversy and friction among the farmers and communities of southwest Ontario who feel charges of exploitation are unjustified and that forward their own complaints about the migrants.

Spokesman for the local farm labor pool, one of thirty in the country which place migrant workers on farms, says migrants could assure themselves of minimum pay and housing if they went through the pool.

SERVICE UNUSED

Walter Williams, manager of the federally-funded pool, says that half the workers from Quebec don't use the service, although their transportation to and from the province is paid if they did. Most do so, he believes, to get out of paying taxes on their earnings.

Some said workers often give false names and false social security numbers. They also bring along extra "cousins" and children under 16 thus crowding the housing set aside for them.

Most migrants prefer to get a job on their own, making their own arrangements with the farmer. These arrangements usually provide for minimum wages, child labor control or control of hours since migrant workers are excluded from labor relations legislation in all provinces except New Brunswick.

Ontario, one province trying to remedy this situation, has failed to bring migrant workers under existing labor relations legislation for the beginning of picking season next year.

William Clarkson, director of the Ontario Agriculture and Horticulture Department Manpower Services, said the government will probably introduce an amendment in the Employment Stand-

improve the image of farm labor and give the migrant workers equal footing with other workers."

Clarkson said the government is studying ways of guaranteeing minimum wages when workers are paid "by piece"; that is, by the amount of fruit or vegetables they pick.

"We are also looking at vacation pay, statutory holiday pay and overtime. No decision has been made on these yet but we are including farm organizations in our talks so we will have their support."

He said the workers are automatically covered by Workmen's Compensation through the farmers if they get sick on the job.

Michael Lemire, a young C.Y.C. worker organizing the migrants, said his group never tried to enlist the help of the large American migrant group led by Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union because the problems faced by migrant workers in the States are different.

BIGGER FARMS

"The workers are on much bigger farms and they do not have the help of government departments like our Manpower or the labor pools," he said.

However, he added, the labor pools have not been totally effective in upgrading minimum standards in housing and working conditions.

"I would go out to a farm and see that the house for migrants was a shambles — just a chicken coop — with no water or toilet. Everybody just had to go out to the fields."

"Most farmers just give the migrants what they think they are used to back home. There is this attitude that the migrants are used to shacks in Quebec so why should we give them anything better."

He said the French Canadian worker often cannot explain his discontent to a farmer who only speaks English. "They really need an interpreter so the workers can understand what is going on."

A CONTRAST

Lemire said one of the biggest injustices is the contrast between the treatment of French Canadian workers and about 6,000 imported Caribbean workers in Ontario.

Caribbean workers, through agreements between the Canadian government and their home countries, are guaranteed a minimum of \$80 a week, rain or shine. They are also guaranteed adequate, clean housing.

Quebec workers are paid by the amount they pick and don't get paid if the weather is bad.

"There is no reason why outside workers have to be treated worse than our own workers. Our own workers, especially the Quebec families,