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Statements

Remembering Women Farm Workers

On a very rainy International Women's Day in B.C, I drove out to Abbotsford to the heart of the rich agricultural land in the Fraser River Valley. Members of the local community gathered there to honour three women who died in a tragic van accident on the way to their work in the production of our food.

On the morning of March 7, 2007, Sarbjit Kaur Sidhu, 31, Amarjit Kaur Bal, 52, and Sukhvinder Kaur Punia, 46, were killed while travelling to work in a 15-passenger van. The van was overloaded, carrying 17 people. It had only two seatbelts and wooden benches had replaced the stock seats. It was being driven dangerously by the van's owner, a labour contractor, who did not have the proper driver's license.

The subsequent RCMP investigation led to 33 recommended criminal charges. However, all the charges were dropped except 2 minor driving infractions. In the end the driver paid a $2,000 fine and had a one year driving suspension. The employer was fined $69,000 by the Workers' Compensation Board but the fine was never paid.

Given the tragic loss of their loved ones, the families were outraged by this lack of justice and worked with the B.C. Federation of Labour to call for a Coroner's Inquest into the incident. In 2009 a Coroner's Inquest was held and the jury investigating the crash made 18 recommendations aimed at cleaning up unsafe working conditions for farmworkers. The government has ignored or side-stepped many of the recommendations. However, they have initiated more roadside inspections which lead to

some improvements in the safety of farmworker transportation.

Every year, on the anniversary of this tragedy, the families and community gathers for a candlelight vigil. They remember the women and mourn for their loss, but they also pledge to continue the struggle for safe working conditions for farm workers.

They are working on a project that will be a lasting memorial, a beautiful 22 foot Golden Tree designed by local artists. The Golden Tree is will stand as a fitting legacy to Sarbjit Kaur Sidhu, Amarjit Kaur Bal, and Sukhvinder Kaur Punia, and as a monument to all farmworkers who have been killed or seriously injured while working to put food on our table, honoring their sacrifice.
The Golden Tree is a twisting apple tree that merges into three subtle female forms forming a “female trinity”. The female trinity represents the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

The Tree is an important symbol in every culture. It reminds us of nourishment, endurance, unity, community and diversity, making it an appropriate symbol to represent farmworkers.

The Tree will be built with the generous support of donations from government, labour organizations, business, community groups and individuals. On International Women’s Day, it seemed fitting to honour these women whose work was embedded in nourishing others both in their daily work in a Fraser Valley nursery but also in their work as mothers, sisters, daughters and community women.

Irene Lanzinger
Secretary-Treasurer
B.C. Federation of Labour