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Releases

Aquilini family ordered to pay temporary foreign workers $130k in wages after BCFED complaint with partner organizations

The BC Federation of Labour is welcoming a Ministry of Labour decision ordering the Aquilini family to pay over $130,000 in wages and vacation pay owed to temporary foreign workers employed at their berry farm in Pitt Meadows.

“The decision shows that the Aquilinis engaged in wage theft. One of BC’s wealthiest families has been ordered to pay wages for the vulnerable temporary foreign workers they employed. The decision shows that the farm withheld work and were not paying them the wages they were entitled to under their contract,” says BC Federation of Labour President Laird Cronk.

The 174 temporary foreign workers came to Canada to work on the Aquilini-owned Golden Eagle Blueberry Farm under Labour Market Impact Assessment contracts that stipulated a forty-hour work week for a period of six months. The workers were given about one month of full-time work, before their work assignment was reduced.

In October 2018, BCFED submitted a third-party complaint about the situation to multiple federal and provincial government agencies. The complaint was submitted in collaboration with Abbottsford Community Services, Sanctuary Health Vancouver, and Watari.

The complaint included reported abuse, unsanitary living conditions, threats, and lack of adherence to stipulated working hours and conditions. The Ministry decision and payment order deals only with the issue of working hours and compensation.

Yesterday, the Workers Compensation Board fined the Aquilinis' $53,000 for using an unsafe vehicle to transport farm workers on the same farm.

BCFED is calling for greater protections for temporary foreign workers through enhanced monitoring and stronger enforcement of employer compliance.

Temporary foreign workers are susceptible to being sent home or blacklisted by their employer if they report a health and safety hazard or if they apply for workers' compensation after being hurt.

"This is a small but important victory, and it serves as a message to employers that they can no longer get away with exploiting Temporary Foreign Workers in the province of British Columbia."

"The best way to protect temporary foreign workers is not to tie their status to a single employer," adds Cronk. "They should be on track for permanent residency upon arrival for those who chose it. With a change in status, we may have a chance to organize these vulnerable workers into unions and negotiate fairer working conditions."

Read the decision in full here.