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Releases

Remembering women farm workers killed in 2007 tragedy

Vancouver – The following is a statement from Irene Lanzinger, President of the BC Federation of Labour, marking the anniversary of the tragic van crash that killed three women farmworkers on March 7, 2007:

“March 7 is a day we must remember to renew our commitment to fight for healthier, safer workplaces and to end the discrimination faced by all farm workers who are exempted by law from BC’s minimum wage requirements.

Eleven years ago in 2007, three women— Armajit Kaur Bal, 52, Sukhvinder Kaur Punia, 46, and Sarbjit Kaur Sidhu, 31—tragically lost their lives when a 15-passenger van carrying 17 women farm workers to work skidded out of control on the Trans-Canada Highway near Abbotsford, BC.

Multiple investigations revealed that the employer was at fault for this tragedy. The van was illegally overloaded, had only two seat belts, was riding on mismatched and bald tires, had a wooden bench in the back, a fraudulent safety permit and was driven by someone who did not have the proper licence.

March 7 is a day to pay tribute.

It’s a day to honour the thousands of farm workers who toil every day in British Columbia - planting, nurturing, harvesting and processing the food that sustains our families, our communities and our

economy. No work is more important.

March 7 is also a call to action for justice for farm workers.

Agriculture continues to be one of the most dangerous industries to work in, with farm workers among the most exploited and vulnerable workers in Canada.

Dangerous work, minimal pay, long hours, inadequate housing and living conditions, poor sanitation, substandard transportation, restricted access to health care services are just a few of the unacceptable conditions facing those who work in agriculture. The fact that many farm workers are recent immigrants or migrant workers with language barriers only serves to compound the disadvantages.

Since 2007, 23 farm workers have died.

In 2017, 550 claims were accepted for farm workers suffering from a workplace injury or illness.

We must remain vigilant in our fight to improve the working conditions for farm workers in BC and across the country, and to hold negligent employers accountable when they put farm workers in harm's way.

Working to make workplaces safer, and fighting to end the unfair economic discrimination--this is the legacy that we owe to the families of three women that lost their lives as well as to the farm worker community in BC."

A backgrounder on farm worker safety is attached.

Background on the safe transportation of farm workers in BC

The van crash on March 7, 2007 that killed three women highlights the need for increased inspection, enforcement, protections and awareness of the safe transportation of farm workers.

An inter-agency inspection blitz following the deaths resulted in more than 35% of all vans being immediately impounded because they were unsafe to drive. Moreover, widespread corruption was

uncovered involving fraudulent safety permits being granted to owners of vehicles used to transport farm workers.

A 2009 Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of the three women made 18 recommendations to improve the safe transportation of farm workers. Some were implemented and brought immediate improvements. Other more crucial recommendations were ignored, including:

• Ensuring that vehicle inspections sites are separate from maintenance and repair facilities—the Inquest recognized this as a significant conflict of interest that led to false vehicle safety certifications.
• Classifying 15-passenger vans as "high risk vehicles."
• Mandatory annual inspections by a government-employed inspector for all 15-passenger vans.
• Farmworkers should receive education about their rights and responsibilities under the WCB Act & Regulation.
• Making business owners responsible for the safety compliance of labour contractors.

In addition, the recommendation to sustain random roadside and onsite inspection of commercial vehicles has been forgotten. Inspections have decreased by 80% since 2007.

Full implementation of the outstanding recommendations is essential to ensuring significant and sustained improvements in the safe transportation of farm workers. A robust and sustained inspection and enforcement strategy, including education of all stakeholders, is key to farm worker safety.