March 7, 2016 |

Releases

BC Federation of Labour Statement: Remembering Women Farmworkers

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

“March 7 is a day we must remember.

On this day 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 farmworkers 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 license.

March 7 is a day to pay tribute.

It’s a day to honour the thousands of farmworkers 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.

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

Dangerous work, minimal pay, long hours, inadequate housing and living conditions, poor sanitation, substandard transportation, and restricted access to health care services are just a few of the unacceptable conditions facing those who work in agriculture.

The fact that many farmworkers are recent immigrants or migrant workers with language barriers only serves to compound the disadvantages.

In BC alone, there is an average of three farmworker deaths and 122 serious injuries per year.

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

This is the legacy that we owe to the families of the three women who lost their lives as well as to the farmworker community in BC.

Last year the Golden Tree Farmworkers Monument was unveiled in the International Friendship Garden in Abbotsford as a lasting reminder of the tragic loss of life on March 7, 2007, and to honour the life-sustaining contributions farmworkers make to our communities."

***

Background on the safe transportation of farmworkers in BC

The van crash on March 7, 2007, that took the lives of three women illustrated the need for increased inspection, enforcement, protections and awareness for the safe transportation of farmworkers.

An inter-agency inspection blitz following the incident resulted in more than 35 per cent 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 farmworkers.

A Coroner's Inquest into the deaths of the three women was held in 2009 and the Jury made 18 recommendations to improve the safe transportation of farmworkers. Although some recommendations were implemented, resulting in moderate improvements, a number of key recommendations were not implemented:

• Ensuring that vehicle inspection sites are separate from maintenance and repair facilities—the jury 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—again, the jury recognized the conflict of interest with private inspectors.
• Farmworkers should receive education about their rights and responsibilities under the WCB Act & Regulation.
• Ensure business owners are responsible to check the safety compliance of labour contractors.

In addition, the recommendation to sustain the commitment to increase inter-agency random roadside and onsite inspection of commercial vehicles has seemingly been forgotten, with inspections decreasing by 80% since 2007.

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

Media Event:

There will be a candlelight vigil held in honour of the three women who lost their lives on March 7, 2007.

When: Sunday, March 13, 2016
Time: 1:30 pm

Where: Golden Tree Farmworkers Monument

32320 George Ferguson Way

Abbotsford