



Christmas Eve tragedy prompts questions about Canada's immigrant dream

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Dilshod Marupov's Canadian dream died in a pile of rubble and the broken bodies of four friends.

Like generations of immigrants before him, the young man left his impoverished, authoritarian country behind last year to build himself a new life in Canada.

But a year ago this Christmas Eve — a scant three days after he began a job repairing balconies — Mr. Marupov and his friends heard a dreadful snap in the faulty scaffolding supporting them while pouring concrete 13 stores above the earth. They skidded, tumbling and hurtling to the cold ground.

A few terrifying seconds later, four of his co-workers lay dead. Mr. Marupov, originally from Uzbekistan, miraculously survived. He is now destitute, depressed, in agonizing pain and can barely walk.

"Every day is pain in my leg," he says in an interview, his only sentence spoken in English.

He won't dare utter his hopes for the future.

For hundreds of years, the immigrant dream has always been: come to Canada, work hard and eventually establish a decent life for your family, and especially your children.

But over the past 30 years, newcomers have found it more and more difficult to make ends meet. Poverty among immigrants is rising sharply. Employment is precarious. More recently, the numbers of undocumented and underground workers seem to be growing.

The dream, for many, is now a nightmare.

Mr. Marupov, now 22, was first inspired when his buddies in Uzbekistan showed him a website with stunning photos of the sea-side town of Comox, B.C.

He bought himself a plane ticket to Canada, left his sisters and parents behind and set off to get an education, make some money and build himself a new life.

He ran out of money when he reached Toronto, so decided to stay and work awhile before making his way to the coast. Tapping into the Uzbek community, he eventually found a job pouring concrete to repair balconies.

In the dusky late-afternoon hours of last Christmas Eve, as Mr. Marupov packed up his gear for a long weekend, the scaffolding supporting him and four others fractured.

None of them was safely attached to the structure and they all fell precipitously. Three company officials are facing criminal charges.

Mr. Marupov landed feet-first, destroying his back, spine, legs and damaging his head.

He spent four months in hospital, and is still in intense rehabilitation. He has struggled with addiction to painkillers and has been told he will never regain more than 25 per cent of his former mobility.

Instead of exploring the coastal mountains of British Columbia, "I feel like I am sitting inside four walls, like in a cage. And I feel myself very dull, very blue," the former wrestler added through an interpreter.

Canada is not Europe, where marginalization of immigrants has led to race-based rioting and violence in some cities. But as people like Mr. Marupov find themselves with questionable immigration status, stuck in low-paid, unsafe jobs facing a dim future, keen observers of Canada's immigration system are asking out loud whether we're headed in that direction.

"I think we're at a cusp of creating a divide in social cohesion," says Don Drummond, former chief economist at Toronto-Dominion Bank, who has been tracking the welfare of newcomers with concern.

Mr. Marupov did not enter Canada's workforce the traditional way. He came on a visitor's visa and just started working, making a refugee claim along the way. He's still waiting in a grey zone of status.

It's people like him who are in the most precarious situation when it comes to making ends meet. They're driven to take any job without complaint.

But even those who take the traditional route – who formally apply and are officially accepted to come to Canada as immigrants – are finding life more and more difficult here.

Studies of immigrants' economic outcomes over the years show that newcomers have always had a tough time when they first arrive.

"Every one of us whose ancestors came to this country, our ancestors went through a period of economic struggle. But what's important is that the sky is the limit," commented Immigration Minister Jason Kenney in a recent interview.

But over the past 30 years, newcomers have been getting off to shakier starts, and it's taking them longer and longer to catch up to Canadian-born workers.

The earnings gap used to disappear within a generation. But now, on average, it's been postponed to the second generation, according to analysis of labour data by economics professor Mikal Skuterud at the University of Waterloo.

"For recent cohorts, the gap is never completely closing."

It's not because they don't have jobs. Rather, he says, it's the quality of the jobs that is keeping newcomers down. Often, newcomers start in low-quality jobs, and aren't able to dig out – even though immigration policies are designed to attract skilled workers who have the tools to do well in Canada.

But that's only half the picture.

Compounding the slow grind that has eroded economic mobility among landed immigrants has been the

growing number of temporary foreign workers who are often even lower on the income scale.

Ottawa accepts about 250,000 new permanent residents every year – the traditional type of immigrant. But more recently, the government also has taken to bringing in about 180,000 guest workers every year.

Some of the temporary workers are highly skilled, brought in for specific, well-paid jobs, and do very well. Complaints about not being able to turn their temporary status into permanent residency have been resolved with the creation of the Canada Experience Class, which sets out a formal pathway to citizenship for highly-skilled guest workers.

More problematic, says analyst Arthur Sweetman, are the large numbers of unskilled temporary workers. Sweetman, a top social scientist at Hamilton's McMaster University, is one of the only researchers in Canada to include temporary foreign workers in his examination of the economic outcomes of newcomers.

They're hard to track, he says, because they're always on the move. Plus, no one knows what they do when their permits expire.

The suspicion, among those who work closely with guest workers, is that they often stay, going underground. There is no exit control or way to count who is doing what.

They are the oil sands workers, the hotel room cleaners, the burger-flippers and the construction workers like Mr. Marupov that frequently do the work no Canadian wants to do. And they're probably competing for jobs against the immigrants of five years ago, pulling down wages for newcomers generally, Prof. Sweetman said.

Because guest workers are dependent on their employers for their status in Canada, they are, by definition, vulnerable to abuse and poor treatment, says Professor Naomi Alboim of the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University.

While provincial labour laws apply to guest workers as they would to Canadian workers, the visitors say repeatedly they would never complain for fear of losing their jobs, and their status, in Canada.

Employers and government are keen on the temporary foreign worker program, since it provides a steady supply of labour targeted directly to where it's needed most. But Alboim and others concerned about the welfare of newcomers say it's out of control.

"It's a short-sighted, short-term fix which will lead to long-term problems – which we should know to beware of because we know what happened to Europe," says Ratna Omidvar, president of Maytree, a Toronto-based charitable foundation that promotes immigrant hiring and poverty reduction.

"We know what happens to people you bring in on a short term, without guaranteeing them some way of accessing regularization to the regular landed immigrant stream."

The scaffolding accident last Christmas Eve is only an extreme example of the problems of uncertain, unsafe and poorly paid work that a growing pool of undocumented workers faces every day, she said.

"We will have, quite unwittingly without a public debate, created a loophole to allow for entry of people who may not go back and who will not have the regulated access to landing, and services, and protection that others have."

None of this is lost on Minister Kenney. He and his predecessors have made several significant changes to the immigration system over the past few years, precisely because they were concerned about the ability of newcomers to give Canada their best shot.

When it comes to traditional immigrants, Ottawa realized a decade ago that accepting landed immigrants

based on occupation wasn't working because the process was too slow to keep up with changing demand in the workforce. So since then, it has selected skilled immigrants based on education, language capacity, and ability to adapt to a new country.

But recently, Mr. Kenney has had to add back in a screen for occupation, since the backlog of applications has exploded.

Ottawa has also increased its requirements for language, since poor English or French is a major barrier for immigrants searching for decent jobs. And it has an agreement with the provinces to improve the recognition of foreign credentials in several key occupations.

For the other half of the newcomer flow, however, Mr. Kenney rejects the idea that temporary foreign workers are vulnerable.

"The lot of temporary foreign workers is that they work in a better, safer workplace in Canada than they ever would have in their country of origin," he said.

"This is not the Keynesian abuse of workers in the industrial revolution that some of the unions make it out to be. So we ought not to generalize from a few marginal bad cases."

There's no doubt the story of Mr. Marupov and the other four who fell off the scaffolding is a tragedy, Mr. Kenney added. But he points out that most of them were undocumented workers who are invisible to regulators.

"It points out the danger of illegal immigration," he said, and that's something he has targeted consistently in initiative after initiative.

"The vast majority of newcomers do pretty well over time, and of course their children do extremely well," Mr. Kenney said. "So yes, that dream is still very much alive. But people should be disabused of the notion that the streets are paved with gold."

Others argue, however, that Canada is far too passive about its immigration system. With about half a million newcomers a year entering Canada's workforce, Ottawa and the provinces need to take a broad look at how they are selected and what policy aims the selection of immigrants is trying to fulfill.

As for Mr. Marupov, he says he doesn't harbour ill feelings against Canada, despite the constant pain in his legs. But even if immigration authorities give him a chance to stay here, he's conflicted about whether he should he persist.

"Life will show me the options. Step by step," he said.

Discrimination could play role in immigrants' struggle

As analysts dissect the data to figure out why it is that newcomers to Canada these days are having a much harder time than previous generations of immigrants, they're bumping up against an uncomfortable answer.

Discrimination, they say reluctantly, can't be completely ruled out.

For 30 years, the landing for newcomers to Canada has become steadily rougher.

In the 1980s, the source countries for many of Canada's immigrants were in flux, shifting away from traditional English-speaking or European countries, and more towards Asia, says social scientist Arthur Sweetman at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Language and cultural barriers were, and continue to be, a set-back for immigrants hoping to close the earnings gap with Canadian-born workers, he says.

In the 1990s, immigrants were hit extra hard by the recession.

The widening gap of the early 2000s can be explained mainly by the dot-com bust. Canada had imported large quantities of technology workers during the boom, who were left high and dry when the market suddenly turned, according to Statistics Canada's Garnett Picot.

But the erosion has continued since then, and there is no single obvious explanation, Mr. Sweetman says.

Part of the answer is that Canadian employers are often suspicious of foreign credentials and experience. So immigrants who, on paper, look equivalent to Canadians in education and background, aren't valued as highly, says Mikal Skuterud at the University of Waterloo.

And part of the answer is that immigrants don't have the networks and links to good jobs that Canadian-born workers have established, Mr. Skuterud said.

So there's a growing and disproportionate number of immigrants concentrated in low-quality jobs, he has found.

But Skuterud has also found that the wage disparity with Canadian-born workers persists much longer for visible minority immigrants, lasting into the second and even third generations.

While he's skeptical about studies that quickly blame racist employers, he says the question can't be dismissed easily.

"There is some discrimination," he said.

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