



ESSENTIAL, BUT DISPOSABLE?

The Contributions and Rights of Migrant Workers in Canada

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ABOUT CPJ

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) is a national, progressive organization of members who are inspired by faith to act for social and environmental justice in Canadian public policy. Our work focuses on three key policy areas: poverty in Canada, climate justice, and refugee and migrant rights. For 60 years, justice-oriented people of faith, along with churches and religious orders, have joined their voices as Citizens for Public Justice.




Policy Brief

Each year, tens of thousands of migrant workers come to Canada to provide vital labour to the agri-food industry. In 2021, 61,735 temporary foreign workers came to work in the agricultural sector in Canada through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP); a number that is continually increasing. Tragically, Canada has a history and legacy of exclusionary immigration policies that counter the values and image we claim to hold, and the SAWP is no exception.

The SAWP keeps workers in a cycle of precarity and vulnerability, with poor health outcomes, high poverty levels, and separated families. Many are stuck in exploitative, low-wage jobs with precarious status while providing essential services. They lack equal rights at work and have limited access to healthcare and other basic services.

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Canada has long used temporary foreign work programs to address labour shortages. However, it is increasingly evident that these labour gaps are only increasing, and are anything but a temporary problem. While this is a long-term issue, the migrant workers who are meeting these shortages are stuck with permanently temporary status. Many of the workers spend years and even decades coming to work in Canada, yet are still unable to access permanent resident status or family reunification in Canada. A significant proportion of workers in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program are parents and the effects of not being able to bring their families as they work in Canada are profoundly detrimental. These workers also pay into benefits such as Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan, which they are unable to access due to their temporary status. Additionally, many do not have equal access to health care or other social services. While there are many great employers, the policies of the program allow for abuse, exploitation, and even trafficking. This is a result of employer-specific work permits, where the employer is also a worker's landlord and gatekeeper of their immigration status in Canada. This immense power that an employer holds over a worker's life creates fear and conditions ripe for exploitation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding that this precarity stems from their precarious immigration status, migrants and activists across Canada have been calling for a broad regularization program through the #StatusForAll campaign.

Considering the values Canadian society desires to reflect and the essential contributions that migrant workers give to our communities, we believe that the government should grant migrant workers the option to access permanent residence status. Canada proudly purports values of diversity, equality, and respect for human rights. To act according to these values and commitments, temporary foreign workers should be granted an accessible pathway to permanent residency, which entitles them to a minimum standard of rights such as family reunification, choice of residence, the ability to switch employers, and equal access to health care.

We implore the government of Canada to use this opportunity to rectify the injustices of the past and present and to move toward a more just society that honours the dignity of each and every person residing within the country.



REFERENCES

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