

Thousands of migrant workers labouring on Canada's farms in unsafe conditions amid deadly COVID-19 third wave

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With the spring planting season well underway, tens of thousands of migrant workers have arrived on Canadian farms amid the coronavirus pandemic's raging third wave. Last year, some 2,000 farmworkers caught COVID-19 and at least three died. The situation was so alarming that Mexico had to temporarily suspend travel for migrant workers to Canada.

One year later, nothing has fundamentally changed in terms of protection for migrant workers. The meagre investment of \$59 million announced last July by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government served primarily to modestly increase inspections. In most cases, these result in no action against unscrupulous employers, and in a slap on the wrist for a handful of particularly egregious bad apples. Meanwhile, thousands of workers will still be crammed into overcrowded bunkhouses, and with the additional risk of catching new, more contagious and deadlier variants of the virus, which are striking down workers in the prime of their life.

As Migrant Workers Alliance for Change executive director Syed Hussan noted, the Liberals' investment "is not something that protects migrants ... It simply ensures that people will show up to work."

Over 760 migrant workers have already been infected with COVID-19 in Ontario this year.

On Tuesday, a report prepared by Ontario's deputy chief coroner into last year's COVID-19 deaths of Mexican migrant farmworkers Bonifacio Romero, Rogelio Santos, and Juan Chapparo was released. It stated the obvious—migrant farmworkers are at a higher risk of catching COVID-19 and other infectious diseases than the general population—and made a few timid recommendations aimed at perpetuating Canada's highly exploitative migrant farmworker

system. The recommendations include setting up an information hotline, randomized asymptomatic testing, and the establishment of isolation rooms on farms.

The Ontario government, which callously ordered migrant farmworkers to continue working last year even when infected, is hardly likely to adopt even these token and inadequate proposals.

Showing that the federal and provincial governments have no real intention of improving safety for workers, Ottawa announced last month a new system that authorizes workers arriving from abroad to make the federally mandated three-day quarantine at their employer's farm instead of in designated hotels. This measure is entirely in the interests of farm owners, who won't have to pay the hotel costs. In addition, it will facilitate the spread of the virus as potentially asymptomatic workers will quarantine in crowded dormitories.

The pandemic has laid bare the barbaric conditions under which migrants have been systematically forced to work and live for the benefit of agri-business. Roughly 60,000 migrant workers, mostly from Mexico and the Caribbean, are annually employed by Canadian agriculture, including 25,000 for the spring planting season in the first quarter of the year. A third of these workers are employed in Ontario farms.

Agricultural migrant workers spend an average of 17 to 20 weeks in Canada each year, between January 1 and December 15. They perform manual work on some 1,800 farms in nine provinces, nearly 1,600 of them in Ontario. Collectively, these farms produce a significant share of the fruits and vegetables, flowers, tobacco, honey, nursery tree products, shrubs and sod produced in Canada. Some migrants also work in canneries,

processing and packing plants.

As seasonal work makes up 53 percent of Canada's paid agricultural workforce, the recruitment of international cheap labor, sometimes referred to as "Canada's dirty little secret," is essential and highly lucrative for the country's agricultural sector. According to the Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance, Canada is the fifth largest exporter of agricultural products and agri-foods in the world, with total exports amounting to an estimated \$56 billion annually.

As hundreds of farmworkers were being infected with COVID-19 during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, some media outlets carried reports that exposed how the squalid and cramped dormitories in which many farmworkers live contributed to the spread of the virus. Reports also detailed how some workers had to work for 12 to 14 hours a day, sometimes in the pouring rain, to compensate for labour shortages.

Even before the pandemic, farmworkers struggled with many structural barriers such as language (French and English), limited to no access to proper health care and social services, precarious migration status, ineligibility for social benefits, and exposure to abusive work practices and conditions. Even though they perform back-breaking labour, they do not receive adequate pay for themselves and their families back home.

Seasonal farm work positions are increasingly difficult to fill due to precarious and unsafe working conditions. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) was created in 1966 and revised in 1974 to help Canadian seasonal producers address chronic labor shortages. Workers' rights, however, were constantly sidelined. Under SAWP, migrant workers are not eligible for public health care (even during the pandemic) and are not allowed to apply for permanent residency.

Canada's violation of migrant workers' rights, one of the most exploited sections of the working class, explodes the myth of the country as a champion of human rights. With the full support of federal and provincial governments of every political stripe, big agriculture corporations violate the rights of migrants, taking advantage of workers from difficult and poor backgrounds, lacking in education and skills.

The brutal working conditions facing migrant workers, whose precarious immigration status is tied to

their pleasing their employer, are in line with Canadian imperialism's participation in US-led wars of aggression around the globe and the treatment of workers in lesser-developed countries by Canadian multinational corporations. When their seasonal contracts are done, temporary migrant workers return to their home countries where they encounter the inhumane consequences of capitalism: poverty, unemployment, drug cartels, violence, and other socio-economic ills produced by the US, Canada and other imperialist countries.

The union apparatuses such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) are complicit in the exploitation of these workers. They essentially act as a staffing agency for the farm owners and stooges of the agriculture profiteers. Like for the rest of the working class, the unions enforce the demands of the governments and the companies and suppress any opposition among workers. In a telling example, in 2016 some workers complained that the UFCW negotiated a \$0.15 an hour raise but charged them \$4 a week in union dues.



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