

# Damning Auditor General report exposes failure of Canada's government to protect migrant farm workers from COVID-19

Talia Brown  
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The death of an unidentified farm worker from Jamaica last month, who perished while in mandatory isolation of COVID-19 in Southwestern Ontario without receiving any treatment, reveals once again that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government has done nothing to improve the dangerous conditions that temporary migrant workers confront. On the contrary, the terrible living and working conditions faced by this particularly oppressed section of the working class have continued to deteriorate since the onset of the pandemic.

A damning report prepared by the Auditor General (AG) of Canada published in early December 2021 details how inspectors working for Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), a federal agency, have been largely negligent in their inquiries over new pandemic regulations designed to protect workers from COVID-19 on Canadian farms.

The report highlights several alarming aspects, such as the evident lack of supervision of investigators, including both federal employees and contractors, and the lack of professional expertise from the investigators, with many having no serious training provided and barely six months of professional experience. The report also questions the quality, relevance and veracity of information gathered amid budget cuts at the ESDC.

From March 2020 to June 2021, more than 79,000 workers arrived to work in Canada's agricultural sector under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), which oversees the hiring of cheap labor from poorer countries by farm owners. The majority of workers on the SAWP are from Mexico and other Caribbean and South American countries. The terms of the SAWP are akin to modern-day indentured servitude, with a worker's right to remain in Canada dependent upon them retaining their job with a specified employer. SAWP participants

have virtually no hope of ever obtaining permanent residency to live in Canada, even after many years of hard labour.

Many long-standing problems for migrant workers were exacerbated by the pandemic. These include a lack of proper housing, delays in wage payments, no substantial legal rights, no medical protection amid a pandemic, and the threat of being deported to their country if they speak up about unsafe working conditions. Communal living arrangements, poor sanitary conditions, and a general disregard for the well-being of the workers combined to create a significantly higher risk of COVID-19 transmission among migrant workers.

In response to a public outcry over the high number of outbreaks on Canadian farms and the death of three migrant workers documented in a series of news reports, the Trudeau government promised a thorough investigation on farm work conditions. In July 2020, it made available over \$16 million to ESDC, supposedly to strengthen its inspection regime. The AG's report makes clear that no improvements in fact took place.

Since March 2020, all inspections have been conducted virtually and relied solely on the employers submitting pictures and videos of their facilities, as well as interviews with workers. The report notes that the problems were so troubling that the AG's office decided to prolong its oversight into 2021. While the AG found that 73 percent of the quarantine inspections it examined in 2020 were deficient, this figure rose to 88 percent in 2021.

The list of failures by the ESDC is long. The report notes, among other things, that inspections "lacked the diligence and urgency that were needed in light of both the pandemic circumstances and the department's own policies."

Some of the report's most damning findings include:

- Even though “poor-quality evidence or no evidence was collected” in most inspections, “the department assessed almost all employers as compliant with the COVID-19 requirements.” ESDC bureaucrats even gave employers a passing grade in the 16 percent of reports that discovered evidence of a violation of pandemic regulations.

- When COVID-19 outbreaks were identified on farms, the AG found inspections were initiated quickly, “but were inactive for long periods.” The report cites an example where during an interview with the inspector, the employer said they were not offering separate accommodation for workers who tested positive, and that both infected and non-infected workers were sharing a bathroom and a kitchen. After learning this, the ESDC investigator “did not follow up on corrective measures for more than one month.”

- The AG found no evidence that inspectors had acted to address concerns raised by workers, including when some workers complained to the department that they had no access to food while in isolation.

Working under the direct order of the ESDC, the inspectors’ botched work is the direct result of the indifference of the Trudeau government towards the highly exploited migrant workers who are utilized as a disposable workforce to enrich big agricultural companies. The fact that the situation worsened during the reporting period shows how employers can continue to flout health rules with impunity, keep workers in poor living conditions and impose abusive working arrangements on them.

Significantly, the AG report may be incomplete because an important portion of contract employees belonging to the audit service went on strike last year to demand better salary conditions and a pay grid system.

Syed Hussan, executive director of the advocacy group Migrant Workers for Change, sharply criticized the ESDC following the AG’s report. He said the report is “deeply, deeply concerning,” but not all that surprising. “The auditor general is saying what we already know — inspections cannot and will not protect migrant farm workers,” Hussan declared in an interview with CBC News, adding, “ESDC was not created to protect migrant farm workers. It was created to ensure a steady supply of cheap labour.”

The horrendous conditions faced by migrant workers is just one example of the criminal disregard shown by the ruling elite towards workers’ lives since the beginning of the pandemic. Employers, with the full approval of

governments and the support of the trade unions, have enforced a continuation of business as usual with totally inadequate public health measures in order to safeguard corporate profits. At the request of the financial oligarchy, governments have reopened schools, universities and workplaces prematurely, leading to wave after wave of infections and death.

The Trudeau government reacted to the AG report with empty promises that it will listen to the office’s recommendations. Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough, who is responsible for ESDC, pledged to “rebuild” the temporary foreign worker inspection program and do more to support the inspectors tasked with carrying out this work in the future. “Rest assured, we’ll do better,” she claimed.

In truth, the past two years have provided ample proof that the Trudeau government represents the interests of the financial and corporate elite and has no intention of improving the safety and living conditions of migrant workers. Over recent weeks, the Trudeau government has endorsed the scrapping of almost all COVID-19 public health measures by provincial governments from coast to coast, helping implement the program of the far-right Freedom Convoy. This is paving the way for a resurgence of infections just as thousands of migrant workers arrive in the coming weeks for the new growing season.

The Trudeau government’s “pro-refugee” and “pro-migrant” pretensions have been thoroughly exposed. In the latest example of its indifference to the plight of refugees fleeing poverty and oppression, Trudeau’s Liberals concluded a deal with the Biden administration to close a loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States in order to prevent refugees from crossing the Canada-US border outside of official checkpoints.

Meanwhile, the unions are doing nothing to defend migrant workers. In response to the Auditor General’s report, the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) issued a pro forma communique filled with platitudes and a clear indication that it would do nothing to improve working conditions, other than pleading uselessly to the Trudeau government to do more.



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