

# Abuse and exploitation endemic in Australia's Pacific "guest worker" scheme

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According to a report by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on December 5, an estimated 7,200 Pacific Islanders involved in Australia's "guest worker" scheme have quit their employment over abuse and exploitation. By seeking new work, they are often in breach of their visas and access to basic rights, including health care.

Under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, workers are recruited from impoverished Pacific countries to fill jobs in agriculture, meat processing and aged care, which provides money to be sent home. Workers must hold a temporary work visa tying them to an approved PALM employer. Short-term contracts are for a maximum of nine months, with long-term contracts up to four years.

Over 30,000 workers are currently employed under the scheme from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. In 2021, Canberra launched an aggressive campaign to prevent workers from fleeing their jobs after more than 1,000 absconded. The campaign warned they would "bring shame to their families" and risked having their visas cancelled.

The ABC report highlights numerous recent cases of exploitation. Two years after becoming a fruit picker, Solomon Islander Susan Pinu was unemployed and found carrying her infant daughter in the rural town of Leeton, having left her employer over her poor pay. Many like her remain vulnerable over their immigration status, and some—including those who become pregnant—lack Medicare coverage and health insurance. "After everything, I felt like committing suicide," Susan told the ABC.

Wayne Leve also quit his employer, a labour hire company, over low pay. He made \$A300-\$400 a week after deductions. "I had no option [but to leave]. I have

a family back [in Solomon Islands] to feed ... I had to do something, I had to find another way," he said, subsequently moving to fruit picking on a bridging visa.

Griffith University researcher Kaya Barry told the ABC: "Without rights to 'exit' employment when encountering mistreatment, people on the PALM scheme are likewise impaired from exercising their 'voice' due to fear, as termination infers deportation." Losing their visa status, many end up working ad-hoc casual labour jobs for cash and relying on voluntary community support.

The PALM scheme has long been rife with exploitation. A report in February by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's Business and Human Rights Centre exposed severe conditions in the meat industry, with a harsh working environment, restricted freedoms and systemic inequities experienced by Pacific Island workers.

In August, an abattoir owned by Western Australian Meat Marketing Co-operative was fined \$785,000 over a PALM worker's death at its Katanning facility in 2022. The Tongan national died after being trapped in a "cake press" machine while undertaking what the magistrate described as "inherently risky" work. The task, for which he was inadequately trained, involved carrying heavy bags up steps slippery with grease, then pouring the contents into machinery with paddles.

PALM workers are often paid the bare minimum within industry awards, with "deductibles" made for travel and accommodation. Many report being forced to work unpaid overtime or take on extra responsibilities without additional compensation. Those in isolated rural areas are often forced to live in overcrowded, high-rent accommodation. They describe long hours, excessive production targets and a lack of leisure time.

At a New South Wales parliamentary inquiry into “slavery risks” faced by migrant workers, Dr Trudi Beck, an obstetrician based in Wagga Wagga, said in June there was an “unseen population” of migrant women seeking abortions they would not normally want, to avoid breaching their visa conditions. “We’re providing services to 500 to 600 pregnant women per year,” Beck said, describing the unwanted abortion situation as a form of “modern slavery” for the women.

Paul Maytom, a former mayor of Leeton Shire Council, told the inquiry of the substandard workers’ accommodation he had witnessed. “I have seen situations with people camped in backyards, or with a few bricks and a bit of iron at the top and a fire going to boil water,” he said. He had also seen a two-month-old baby “lying on the floor with blankets over it, nothing else in a little room as big as a laundry, with a mother and father.”

Despite the complaints, exposures and official inquiries over many years, little has changed. An Australian Senate inquiry in 2022, an investigation by the New South Wales Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2024) and a review by the Vanuatu government (2022) all highlighted atrocious conditions experienced by temporary workers, to no avail.

The exploitation and abuse endemic to the Pacific worker schemes has a long and brutal history. The local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, have for over a century used Pacific peoples as cheap labour and, when it suited, as cannon fodder in times of war.

The practice remains an essential aspect of both governments’ continuing neo-colonial policy toward the island nations.

The precursor of Australia’s PALM scheme, the Seasonal Worker Program, began in 2012 after a four-year pilot scheme, under the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, supported by the trade unions. They revived comparisons with the country’s infamous “blackbirding” history. Up to a million workers from Pacific countries, many kidnapped and sold to landowners, were used as indentured or slave labour from the 1860s to the 1940s.

New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, introduced by the Helen Clark Labour government in 2007, initially allowed for 16,000 workers annually from Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji to work in the \$NZ10 billion

horticulture and viticulture industries. The scheme has since expanded into the meat and seafood processing sectors and is now capped at 20,750 workers on visas for seven to nine months. The low pay and miserable conditions are used as a precedent for broader austerity attacks on the entire working class.

New Zealand also has a history of brutal treatment of Pacific workers. From 1974–76 successive governments carried out a racist campaign to scapegoat migrants for a deepening economic and social crisis, with police and immigration officials carrying out early morning raids targeting alleged “overstayers.” Hundreds of workers who immigrated from the Pacific to fill labour shortages, along with their families, were prosecuted for alleged visa violations and expelled.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s official apology to the Pacific community in August 2021, in which she called the dawn raids “a defining moment in New Zealand’s history,” was meaningless. An official review by Immigration New Zealand in 2023 excoriated her Labour-led government, which included the Greens, for effectively continuing the practice.

For their part, the Pacific Island governments do nothing to materially improve the conditions of the workers. They are closely involved in vetting applicants for the migrant labour schemes and even helping supervise their behaviour. The schemes have been lauded by all the participating authorities for the purported economic “benefits” to fragile island economies, which depend heavily on remittances paid by overseas workers.



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