

Migrant workers face harsh conditions on Australian farms

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) “Four Corners” program reported last month on the brutal conditions faced by migrant workers in the country’s agricultural sector. They described working 10- to 12-hour days for poverty wages, overcrowded and dilapidated accommodation and near-total control by labour-hire contractors over every aspect of their lives.

With tight restrictions on their visas, often tying them to a specific employer, the hundreds of thousands of overseas workers in the Australian food picking and processing industry are especially vulnerable. Their sub-poverty wages and harsh conditions are a sharp expression of the exploitation of the working class as a whole.

Gershom Isaac, a worker from Papua New Guinea, told the ABC he spends up to 12 hours a day climbing ladders to pick fruit or bent over pulling onions and pumpkins, sometimes earning less than \$7 an hour.

“Even [when it is] 40 degrees, you’re still hanging there, picking oranges, trying to do as much as you can, and it’s not easy.” If he is sick or injured, he is not paid. “Every choice is with the contractor. They’re the ones who make all the decisions, and the fruit pickers have to say yes to everything.” He said some days he feels suicidal.

Jin Lee, a backpacker on a 417-visa working on a farm near Coffs Harbour on the New South Wales north coast, told the ABC he sometimes worked 7:30am to 5pm shifts for as little as \$2 an hour, with no bathroom breaks. “Some of us got diapers because they didn’t provide bathroom breaks,” he said.

Workers were expected to buy their own equipment, and deductions were made from wages—including \$150 a week for Lee’s accommodation and \$10 a day for transport.

Eighteen people were crammed into a house with broken doors and windows, no working air conditioning

and cockroaches everywhere, Lee told the ABC. He said he was “treated more like an animal” than a human being.

The company that recruited Lee, ECW Farming, could not be traced to a real business address. When workers tipped off the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), the Australian government’s workplace regulator, in 2024, it opened an investigation, but shelved it in May 2025, unable to identify who was actually running the company, according to the ABC.

FWO investigations found that 61 percent of growers and labour hire companies in Coffs Harbour, in northern NSW, were breaching workplace laws, including wage theft. In the Riverina, in the state’s southwest, the figure was 72 percent. In Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula and Yarra Valley, it was 83 percent.

The Migrant Workers Centre’s 2024–25 annual report found 62 percent of migrant workers had experienced at least one form of workplace abuse, and 40 percent reported underpayment.

Conditions such as those described by Isaac and Lee are maintained by a set of visa and employment schemes specifically designed to facilitate intense worker exploitation for profit.

The 417 Working Holiday visa, on which Lee entered the country, allows people aged 18–30 to work in Australia for up to 12 months. To qualify for a second year, they must complete 88 days of “specified work” in regional areas—overwhelmingly in agriculture. This provision funnels tens of thousands of backpackers into horticulture each year, where their need for the employer’s sign-off on their visa extension leaves them at the boss’s mercy.

Several of those interviewed by the ABC had been on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, but left due to “disputes over pay, working conditions or alleged mistreatment,” forcing them into “illegal” status, subsisting on cash-in-hand work and facing the threat of

deportation.

The PALM scheme recruits workers from impoverished Pacific nations and East Timor, binding them to a single “approved” employer for up to nine months on short-term placements or up to four years on long-term ones. If a worker leaves that employer—regardless of the pay, the conditions or the abuse—they can lose the right to work in Australia at all.

Over 31,000 workers are currently in the scheme. In December last year, the ABC reported around 7,200 had quit over abuse and exploitation.

In 2022 a Tongan PALM worker died after being trapped in a “cake press” machine at an abattoir owned by Western Australian Meat Marketing Co-operative. A magistrate found he was undertaking “inherently risky” work, for which he was inadequately trained.

PALM was launched by the current federal Labor government in 2022, consolidating two earlier programs: the Seasonal Worker Program, begun under the Rudd Labor government in 2008 and formalised by the Gillard Labor government in 2012, and the Pacific Labour Scheme, introduced by the Morrison Liberal-National government in 2018. Labor and the Coalition have jointly built and expanded this architecture over nearly two decades.

The 407 Training visa, nominally for “professional development,” does not require the sponsor to pay award wages—the “trainee” can legally be required to work for nothing. The 21-year-old Filipino worker Jerwin Royupa, who died after falling from his employer’s moving vehicle in 2019, was brought into the country on this visa. A coronial inquest found he had been made to perform manual labour for up to 60 hours a week without payment and his passport was confiscated.

These schemes could not have been imposed or enforced without the complicity of Australia’s trade union apparatus. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has supported the PALM scheme throughout. In its October 2022 document, “Building a stronger Pacific family,” the ACTU declared: “Australian Unions support the PALM program as an important development initiative that builds connections between Australian and Pacific Island and Timor-Leste workers, and enables workers to make a living and support their families.”

In other words, the Australian union apparatus is actively and proudly complicit in what is a scheme designed to deliver a constant stream of desperate and vulnerable workers to serve as cheap labour to drive up the profits of food production corporations and the

supermarket chains.

The ACTU’s support for PALM is an extension of its broader role enforcing the destruction of secure jobs, wages and conditions in the working class. The unions have for decades collaborated with governments and corporations to drive the growth of casualisation, labour hire and other precarious forms of work, including “gig-economy” arrangements, in agriculture and throughout the economy.

The number of employees who found their main job through a labour hire firm or employment agency surged from 591,800 in August 2022 to 747,500 in August 2024, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Some 1.1 million workers, 7.6 percent of the entire workforce, are so-called “independent contractors.” The vast majority of these workers have no guaranteed hours, paid leave, or other basic workplace entitlements.

The exploitation of migrant workers in Australia is not an aberration. It is one harsh expression of the capitalist system, in which workers’ lives are subordinated to the accumulation of profit. This means the fight for decent wages and conditions of Pacific Islander and other overseas workers is inseparable from the struggles of the working class as a whole, against deepening real-wage cuts and austerity spearheaded by the federal Labor government and aided by the trade unions.

To defend the rights and lives of migrant workers, as part of the fight for decent working conditions, wages and democratic rights of the working class as a whole, workers need to take matters into their own hands. This means building rank-and-file committees in workplaces across the country, independent of and in opposition to the nationalist, pro-business program of the unions and Labor, and capitalism itself.



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