

Report on Canadian Food in the 21st Century

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This report discusses the chronic labour shortage in Canadian agri-food production focusing on the use of temporary foreign workers to make up for this shortfall. My interest in this topic is based on my own experience of agricultural labour, concerns about the rights and working conditions of migrant workers in Canadian agri-food production, and the moral implications of our reliance on cheap food. Consideration of potential policies that could be implemented to improve the situation of temporary foreign workers are also presented.

Canadian farms produce a vast array of commodities for domestic consumption and export including grains, livestock, poultry, fruits and vegetables¹. Beyond the farm, food and beverage manufacturing is the largest industry in Canada in terms of the total value of production². Long before the pandemic, Canadian agri-food production was experiencing labour shortages. In 2017, Canadian farmers had 16,500 more job openings than there were workers to fill them and it is predicted that this labour market gap will double by 2029³. In the food and beverage industry, a similar picture emerges with current job vacancies of 28,000⁴ and a projected labour gap of 25% by 2025⁵. The reasons for this labour gap include poor working conditions, pay, and benefits in the food and beverage industry⁶ and for agricultural production its challenges include its physically demanding nature, skill requirements, remote locations, long hours, seasonality, and low wages⁷. To address this labour shortage, up to 75% of workers in

¹ Agriculture in the Classroom Canada, "All About Food." p. 18.

² Agriculture in the Classroom Canada, "All About Food." p. 27.

³ Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, "How Labour Challenges Will Shape the Future." p. 1.

⁴ Sylvain Charlebois, "Comment: Agri-food sector still sees labour shortage."

⁵ Rosa Saba, "Leaders in food and beverage manufacturing say the industry is facing a major worker shortage."

⁶ Rosa Saba, "Leaders in food and beverage manufacturing say the industry is facing a major worker shortage."

⁷ Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, "How Labour Challenges Will Shape the Future." p. 2.

some agricultural industries rely on temporary foreign workers during peak periods of production⁸.

I grew up on a farm and I have experienced agricultural work first-hand including gathering eggs, debeaking chicks, catching chickens, hoeing, detasseling corn, picking peppers and tending the family vegetable garden. I did not enjoy most of this work – the hours were long; it was often hot, uncomfortable, physically demanding and monotonous; it was sometimes cruel and upsetting; and none of it paid very well, if at all. As soon as I was old enough to obtain a more desirable summer job, I jumped at the opportunity to avoid farm labour. Given the statistics cited above, it appears that most Canadians feel the same way.

The majority of temporary foreign workers in Canada are racialized individuals predominantly arriving here from Mexico and Jamaica as well as other Latin American and Caribbean countries⁹. They travel here for months of hard work year after year in order to provide for their families back home. Should they try to immigrate here in order to live a better life, they stand little chance of succeeding under Canada's current immigration system¹⁰ as they are designated as low-skill, low-wage workers¹¹. Migrant workers in Canada face many hardships and are vulnerable to abuse including the inability to complain about working conditions without fear of deportation, lack of access to permanent residency, limited access to services including health care, dependency on employers for housing, and economic exploitation¹².

⁸ Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, "How Labour Challenges Will Shape the Future." p. 4.

⁹ Olivia Chow, "Canada's growing temporary workforce: a worrying trend."

¹⁰ Olivia Chow, "Canada's growing temporary workforce: a worrying trend."

¹¹ Canadian Council for Refugees, "Migrant Workers – the issues."

¹² Canadian Council for Refugees, "Migrant Workers – the issues."

Indeed, warnings about systemic problems with the temporary foreign worker program have been ignored for years¹³.

The Covid-19 pandemic threw a spotlight on the agri-food labour gap and the vulnerability of temporary foreign workers in Canada. The labour shortage was a major news story last spring as Canadian farmers worried about how Covid-related delays would exacerbate the situation by limiting their access to migrant workers to help plant and harvest crops¹⁴ prompting the Federal Agriculture Minister to consider wage subsidies to allow farmers to hire out-of-work Canadians who would expect higher wages, as well as grants to assist farmers with extra costs associated with bringing in workers during the pandemic¹⁵. Some of the largest outbreaks of Covid-19 were experienced in the agri-food sector where temporary foreign workers had limited access to basic healthcare, were unable to socially distance, were subject to pay violations and wage theft, had insufficient access to food, were forced to live in unclean living quarters with limited access to cleaning supplies, had restricted mobility, were subjected to surveillance, experienced threats and racism in the community, and faced an additional workload including longer daily hours, limited time off, and a faster pace all without any overtime pay¹⁶.

The fact that three migrant farm workers died of Covid-19 in Ontario this summer¹⁷ should be unacceptable. Canadians must consider whether our food system is sustainable when

¹³ The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, “Unheeded Warnings.”

¹⁴ D.C. Fraser, “Farmers to know soon whether new wage supports work for them.”

¹⁵ D.C. Fraser, “Farmers to know soon whether new wage supports work for them.”

¹⁶ Canadian Council for Refugees, “Migrant Workers – the issues.”

¹⁷ Shelley Ayres, “Pandemic in the fields.”

it is subsidized by the labour of temporary foreign workers¹⁸. If our food production is feasible because it is exempt from providing a minimum wage; maximum hours of work; time off between shifts; rest periods; food breaks; and overtime pay¹⁹, we should all be troubled by this reality. The labour gap in Canadian agri-food production is a long-standing problem. If we are to continue to manage this shortage using temporary foreign workers, I believe some changes must be made to ensure their rights and dignity are upheld. The Canadian immigration system should place a higher value on these necessary workers allowing them the opportunity to obtain permanent residency so they can stay here and bring their families²⁰. Other suggestions include ensuring access to dignified living conditions and improved working conditions including higher wages, minimum working hours, overtime pay, and access to the benefits of programs they help fund like workers' compensation and employment insurance²¹. I close with these words from a temporary foreign worker, "This is our JOB this is how we survive this is how we take care of our family back home. Without this God help so we are grateful for the job we are happy for it but we need to be treated as equal as everyone²²."

¹⁸ Lois Ross, "The plight of farm workers in Canada."

¹⁹ Legal Line, "Farmers, harvesters, fishers, growers, breeders, and hunters."

²⁰ Shelley Ayres, "Pandemic in the fields."

²¹ The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, "Unheeded Warnings."

²² Harvesting Freedom, "Message from an anonymous migrant worker at Greenhill Produce."

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