

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



1. Who are migrant workers?

Migrant workers come from Jamaica, Philippines, Mexico and other countries working in farms, fields, factories or taking care of children, sick or the elderly. Migrant workers are largely racialized, and often working class people from the Global South.

Officially, migrant workers are divided into 'Seasonal Agricultural Workers', 'Caregivers' and 'Temporary Foreign Workers'. These three groups lived under slightly different rules but what's common in all of them is that they are all on 'tied' or 'closed' permits. That means that they can only work for the employer listed on their work permits and have a very difficult time changing jobs. Bad employers know this and make migrant workers work harder, in more dangerous jobs and for longer hours with less pay because they know migrant workers can't leave them.

2. Don't migrant workers have the same rights as everyone else?

No. Most immigrants - like refugees, spouses, and richer immigrants - come to Canada permanently, and their families can visit them. But migrant workers - even though they go through the same strenuous testing that other immigrants do - come here without their families. Other than Caregivers, most of them cannot even apply to stay here permanently through a federal program. Some workers in agriculture come to Canada for eight months of the year for 35 to 40 years but they still can't live here permanently.

Many migrant workers in agriculture are excluded from minimum wage laws and domestic migrant workers are excluded from occupational health and safety laws.

Many of our parents or grandparents came to Canada and worked in low-paying jobs. Today, they would have come as migrant workers. We need a single tier system and laws should not deny people their families, basic services and dignity simply because they make less money.

3. There is so much unemployment in Canada, why are there migrant workers? Does this mean that migrant workers are stealing Canadian jobs?

Temporary foreign workers find employment in Canada legally. When we use the word "stealing" to describe how a migrant acquires a job we are falsely criminalizing them.

Migrant workers make up less than 0.005% of the labour force. There are at least 1.3 million unemployed Canadian citizens and approximately 100,000 migrant workers in Canada. Most migrant workers are in regions with relatively low unemployment, and working in industries where there are few Canadian citizens. Even if there were no migrant workers, there would still be 1.2 million unemployed Canadian citizens.

A lot of us are suffering from unemployment and precarious jobs and we need to deal with that. This has to be done through improving Employment Insurance, raising the minimum wage, providing training, more accessible education and giving people the skills that the job market needs. Migrant workers are not the problem.

4. Many people in Canada already don't have healthcare/housing/food/pensions, etc - can we afford to give those to migrant workers?

If anything, migrant workers actually subsidize the welfare system, not the other way around. Migrant workers pay into pensions and employment insurance but most don't receive it. Similarly they pay all federal and provincial tax (HST) but in most provinces don't get full health care, worker's compensation, social assistance, subsidized housing or post-secondary education. According to one report, just in 2008, migrant workers and their employers poured in \$300million into Employment Insurance that they did not access!

We need to deal with people draining our social programs and to do that we should start with the wealthy elites in Canada who are now hoarding a record \$170 billion in offshore tax havens.

5. Migrant workers chose to be treated this way. If they are being treated this badly, why don't they just go home?

Migrant workers have to pay an equivalent of two-year salaries to come work in Canada to recruiters. Charging recruitment fees are illegal in many places in the country but most provinces simply don't enforce these laws. These recruiters make many promises to migrant workers, but migrant workers arrive to conditions different from what they were promised. Even if wages are sometimes higher, migrant workers are away from their families and support system and facing a lot more pressure.

For many people, migration is not a choice. Migrant workers are forced to come to Canada is because there are few jobs in their countries. Multinational corporations go into countries in the Global South creating sweatshops and dangerous extraction and infrastructure projects that reduce access to good jobs and decent quality of life. To ensure that people aren't forced to leave their homes to come toil here, we need to challenge trade agreements like the TPP, force corporations to not create sweatshops which created tragedies like the Rana Plaza where approximately 1,200 Bangladeshi workers died making clothes of North American and European consumers, and pass laws that hold Canadian corporations accountable for crimes committed in developing countries.

At the same time, because of global poverty, the Temporary Foreign Workers Program is the only way for some people to send their kids to school, put food on the table, and secure shelter and housing for their families. Some migrant workers are choosing to come to Canada, they are not choosing to be exploited and abused.

6. Many migrant workers are happy, not all employers are bad!

Migrant workers like everyone else want to be with their families, they want to change jobs that are dangerous or making them sick, they want to be able to go to a doctor when they are sick, they want to take time off for vacations, they want to be able to negotiate their contracts. These are very basic rights and Canadian laws deny them.

There are good employers who do bad things and bad employers who do good things. At the end of the day, the responsibility is with federal and provincial governments to pass better laws and enforce existing laws. We all need to work together to ensure that migrant workers have permanent immigration status, open work permits and a decent life.