



DISPATCH 002 – Migrant Workers in Agriculture

The work that we do is not a temporary job.

They are permanent jobs.

Putting food on Canadian tables are not temporary jobs.

Cleaning Canadian workplaces and homes are not temporary jobs.

Taking care of Canadian children & elderly are not temporary jobs.

- Edelyn, migrant worker¹

In this edition of DISPATCHES we examine the integral role that migrant workers play in our current food systems and the many layers of abuse and failing conditions they face on an ongoing and historical basis. Migrant workers are essential to global food production and economy, yet their treatment is subhuman. The difficult fight for unionization, the disproportionate power dynamic between worker and employer, the severe labour conditions and the precariousness of gaining residency status have all been constant struggles for migrant workers in Canada and internationally. The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed further strain on an already distraught system for workers - they have been stripped of basic human necessities and are left in high risk conditions where COVID-19 has spread like wildfire. These realities reveal deep and systemic racist policies targeting racialized/BIPOC farm workers who have been deemed “essential” workers and critical to the food production cycle during the pandemic yet continue to be sacrificed to uphold racial capitalism. Included in this dispatch are a set of resources to read, watch and listen to, as well as ways we can support migrant workers in Canada.

READ —

Essential but expendable: How Canada failed migrant farm workers

Kathryn Blaze Baum & Tavia Grant

“The investigation revealed that problems in an already broken system have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. The experiences of workers varied, with some describing decent housing and respectful bosses who have worked hard to keep them healthy. Others spoke of racism and recounted threats of termination or deportation if they didn’t meet stringent productivity quotas.”

¹Migrant Rights Network. *Full Immigration Status for All - Call Trudeau.*
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=254295782544091>

[// Read more //](#)

Every spring, he left Mexico to pick crops in Canada. One year he didn't come home. We expose the terrible cost of migrant work

Sara Mojtehedzadeh

“As temporary foreign worker schemes expand throughout North America, the Star spent nine months reporting across Mexico and Canada to follow this cycle of migration and its impact on families. For the first time, the Star has also obtained records of thousands of complaints made by seasonal agricultural workers to the Mexican government about their Canadian employers, ranging from reports of snake-infested bunkhouses to wage theft to physical assault.”

[// Read more //](#)

Transient servitude: migrant labour in Canada and the apartheid of citizenship

Harsha Walia

“Shifts in Canada’s immigration policy, most recently linked to the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) with the US and Mexico, have created an increased reliance on temporary migrant workers, who constitute a disposable workforce, driven from their own countries by the same forces of neoliberal capitalism which foster their super-exploitation in the Canadian labour market.”

[// Read more //](#)

Essential before the Pandemic

Migrant Labour and the Politics of Language

Navug Gill

“As thousands of migrant labourers struggle to return to their homes, government officials have sought to keep them in place with promises of safety and support, and through brute force. Beyond containing the spread of the virus, preventing migrants from returning is based on the need to maintain the availability of labour for the economy once it reopens. Using the example of the upcoming harvest and planting season in Punjab, both the demand and disregard for the category “labourer” through the politics of identity, capitalism and colonial rule is traced. What this pandemic reveals, therefore, is not only the importance of the hitherto unimportant, but the ideology embedded within the language of everyday life.”

[// Read more //](#)

Essential or Expendable? Farmworkers Condemn Lack of Protection and Economic Help During Pandemic

Democracy Now

“We are talking about doing this essential job, and we are going to be unable very soon if attention is not placed where it matters, which is, protecting the workforce that you are deeming as essential. Because we are, you know? We are an essential workforce.”

[// Read more //](#)

LISTEN —

Covert calls for help – a hotline for migrant workers

CBC Front Burner

“COVID-19 outbreaks have ripped through farms in Canada, particularly in southern Ontario, taking a grim toll on migrant workers. Three have already died. Desperate for help, workers have been calling a hotline staffed by the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change – usually in secret. Today, the two people who staff that hotline give us an inside look at this crisis, as it unfolded.”

[// Listen now //](#)

WATCH —

Uthan da Vela (A Time to Rise)Anand Patwardhan

co-produced with Jim Monro

1981 · 40 mins

On April 6, 1980, the Canadian Farmworkers Union came into existence. This film documents the conditions among Chinese and East Indian immigrant workers in British Columbia that provoked the formation of the union, and the response of growers and labor contractors to the threat of unionization. Made over a period of two years, the film is eloquent testimony to the progress of the workers' movement from the first stirrings of militancy to the energetic canvassing of union members.

[// Watch now //](#)

Migrant Dreams

Min Sook Lee

2016 · 1h 28m

Director Min Sook Lee's award-winning documentary follows the story of migrant workers who come to labour in Ontario greenhouses as part of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker

Program. Many are women recruited by brokers who illegally charge fees upwards of \$7,000, with greenhouse owners complicit in the scam. The film examines the lives of a group of strong, vibrant migrant women who resist systemic oppression and exploitation.

[// Watch now //](#)

SUPPORT —

Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW)

Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW) is a volunteer-run political collective comprising people from diverse walks of life, including migrant workers, labour organizers, educators, researchers, students and racialized youth based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. We are engaged in this work alongside our personal commitments and numerous social justice struggles.

[// Support now //](#)

Migrant Rights Network

The Migrant Rights Network is a cross-Canada alliance to combat racism and fight for migrant justice. We are a network of self-organized groups of refugees and migrants and allies.

[// Support now //](#)

Migrant Workers Alliance for Chance

We are organizing provincially and federally to ensure that migrant workers can live with dignity and respect....We coordinate policy development and advocacy with migrant workers.... We provide training, know your rights materials, referrals and advice to service providers, legal experts and migrant workers to support migrant self-organizing.

[// Support now //](#)

Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens is a playful, experimental food sovereignty initiative. Dedicated to encouraging the cultivation of feral gardens and building an international artists network of out-of-the-box food systems, Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens is a long-term project that opens up new economies for growing, sharing and eating food. Playing with the discursive tensions between the wild (feral) and the domestic (garden), the Network invites artists, curators and cultural workers with thoughtful seeds, unusual tools, and ancestral intelligence to conjure up atypical spaces for cultivating fruits, vegetables, herbs and medicinal plants.