

# Canada's migrant workers protest lack of COVID-19 protections

By Matthew Richter and Roger Jordan  
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Hundreds of migrant workers and their supporters joined a series of protests across Canada Saturday against the horrific working conditions they confront amid the coronavirus pandemic.

At protests in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver participants demanded that workers be granted full immigration rights, and denounced the federal Liberal government and its provincial counterparts for their failure to protect migrant workers, refugees and undocumented workers from COVID-19 and the pandemic's economic fallout.

Thousands of migrant and undocumented workers who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic have no access to emergency support, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which pays a modest \$2,000 per month to recipients for 24 weeks. Protesters criticized this state of affairs, carrying signs that read, "Status for all" and "We are all essential."

A demonstrator in Montreal attacked the federal Liberal government's pledge to offer permanent residency rights only to migrant workers with jobs in the health care sector. Describing the proposal as "unfair," Floriane Payo, an asylum seeker from Cameroon who worked in a call centre until it closed in April, said, "We are all essential workers."

The protests reflect mounting anger among migrant workers and the population more broadly over the horrendous conditions that migrants workers admitted to Canada under various "temporary worker" programs confront, especially in the agricultural and meatpacking sectors.

Over 800 migrant farmworkers from Mexico and the Caribbean have been infected with COVID-19 just in Ontario, and three of these, all from Mexico, have died.

The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit published a media statement on their website last Wednesday confirming 191 cases at a single farm in Leamington, Ontario.

Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 seasonal workers are employed across 176 farms in Windsor-Essex County. Figures cited by Santiago Escobar, a United Food and Commercial Workers representative, and the Mayor of Leamington, Hilda MacDonald, suggest that as many as 2,000 undocumented migrant workers are employed on farms across the county.

Migrant workers account for 31.2 percent of all agricultural

workers in Ontario. Many are brought to the country by agri-food businesses under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. The SAWP, which has long been promoted by Conservative and Liberal governments alike, allows for the super-exploitation of Latin American and Caribbean workers who are paid poverty wages and are accorded few legal protections.

It is part of a gamut of "temporary worker" programs that have been greatly expanded over the past two decades to meet the needs of employers. These programs serve to supplement Canada's highly restrictive immigration system, which prioritizes business labour market demands. Indeed, so pro-employer is Canada's immigration system, US President Donald Trump has touted it as a model, as have leaders of Germany's far-right party, the AfD.

Countries that are eligible to send workers to Canada under the SAWP include Mexico and the Caribbean countries of Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. Many of the workers hail from impoverished rural communities and rely on their wages to support extended families back home.

As is the case with other Canadian "temporary worker programs," the immigration status of those who come to Canada under the SAWP is tied to their employment, meaning that they can be deported if they are fired or lose their jobs. This oppressive situation has facilitated the flourishing of ruthless exploitation, as employers can threaten workers who protest against poor conditions and abuse with the loss of their right to remain in Canada, along with their jobs.

Concerns over employers' manifest failure to provide a safe working environment amid the pandemic compelled the Mexican government to announce last month that it was stopping Mexican nationals from travelling to Canada under the SAWP. The Mexican ambassador to Canada, Juan José Gómez Camacho, told the Canadian Press in an interview that at least 300 Mexican migrant workers had fallen ill with the virus, having contracted it via community transmission.

Only after a worthless assurance from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that Ottawa will consider changes to the program did the Mexican government agree to lift the travel ban. "We know

that there are many issues—from living conditions, to the fact that they’re tied individually to particular companies or employers, to various challenges around labour standards—that require looking at,” said Trudeau on June 17.

Trudeau of course did not explain why it took a halt in the supply of cheap-labour from Mexico for his government to even acknowledge issues with the SAWP. And if truth be told, his admission was motivated not by concerns about the workers’ plight, but with safeguarding the lucrative profits of Canada’s agribusiness sector.

Ontario’s hard-right, Doug Ford-led provincial government has also made clear that ensuring the smooth running of farms and other workplaces is its top priority, regardless of the impact this has on workers’ health. In late June, the Ontario government announced that “positive asymptomatic workers” can “continue working as long as they follow the public health measures in their workplace.” The new policy, cynically referred to as “work self-isolation,” was presented as necessary to maintain agricultural production and other “critical” business operations. In reality, it will ensure that many more worksites become COVID-19 hotspots.

The Ford government also released a three-point plan to curb the spread of the virus in the farms and greenhouses of Windsor-Essex County. It calls for on-site testing, granting protections afforded by the Employment Standards Act to migrant workers and limited access to workplace compensation benefits, including the CERB for migrant workers who have made at least \$5,000 in the past 12 months. Given that large numbers of migrant workers only recently arrived in Canada for the 2020 growing season, many will no doubt fail to meet the \$5,000 minimum earnings hurdle.

A press release from the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC), an umbrella organization consisting of local advocacy groups, exposed the absurdity of the claims by Ford and other members of his government that social distancing and other public health measures can be effectively enforced in the agricultural sector.

The MWAC cited many violations of workers’ rights. These include outright wage theft, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), inability to socially distance while at work and in the cramped accommodations provided by employers, and employers’ ability to coerce and threaten migrant workers because of their precarious legal status.

Workers are crammed—often six or eight to a room—into unsanitary bunkhouses and old motels, where cockroach and bedbug infestations are common. The close quarters and unsanitary living conditions are a perfect breeding ground for the highly contagious coronavirus.

Last weekend’s protests were only the latest in a growing number of demonstrations driven by these miserable working and living conditions. On June 28, two protests were held in Leamington, a major agricultural area in Windsor-Essex County. A caravan of vehicles organized by Justice for Migrant

workers drove by several farms, honking in support of migrant workers. The volunteer-run organization consists of labour organizers, educators and migrant workers. One of their main demands is the granting of full permanent resident status to all migrant workers.

Leamington is at the heart of the largest concentration of greenhouses in North America, comprising 1,969 acres. Crops grown in the area include cucumbers, peppers, flowers and tomatoes. Historically, Leamington was a major centre of tomato production, supplying the local Heinz factory, which closed in 2014.

The attempt of the UFCW and other unions to pose as defenders of migrant workers’ interests is deeply cynical. The trade unions have for years waged chauvinist Canadian nationalist campaigns against workers admitted to Canada under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program. They have regularly sought to whip up anti-immigrant sentiments among native-born workers by urging governments to slash the number of TFWs allowed into Canada. Rather than blaming the capitalists and successive right-wing governments for worsening working conditions, these campaigns place the blame on the migrants themselves.

The UFCW has also proven time and again that it has no intention of waging any genuine struggle to protect workers’ interests. At the huge Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta, which is largely staffed by immigrant and super-exploited temporary foreign workers, the UFCW ordered workers to return to their jobs even though close to 1,000 COVID-19 infections had been reported at the plant, and three deaths had been linked to the outbreak. The local UFCW president denounced job action to defend workers’ health and lives, on the grounds that this would be illegal under the state-designed, anti-worker collective bargaining system (see: “Canadian workers at Cargill meat packing plant forced back to work despite 935 infections”).

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