

Trudeau government failed to enforce COVID-19 protections for migrant farm workers

By Janet Browning
20 July 2020

Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March, Canada's Liberal government has overseen the arrival of 60,000 poorly-paid and highly-exploited migrant workers under Ottawa's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP).

While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and other federal ministers publicly proclaimed that these workers would be safeguarded from COVID-19, the Liberal government suspended even the totally inadequate inspection and enforcement measures in place prior to the pandemic. As a result, close to 1,000 migrant workers have been infected in Ontario alone, and at least three workers, all from Mexico, have died.

For a six-week period after the government, under pressure from agri-business, exempted migrant farm workers from its travel ban, the Liberal government stopped all in-person housing inspections in the agri-food sector. Instead of requiring up-to-date evidence of compliance with newly modified temporary foreign worker program safety rules, the government issued permits to employers allowing them to use migrant farm labour based on three-year-old housing inspection reports. Moreover, the government has admitted that what audits were completed were done remotely.

Federal requirements for employers of temporary foreign workers, updated in April 2020, said that if an agri-food operation couldn't submit a valid housing inspection report owing to COVID-19, "they must try to provide a satisfactory" report from the previous three years. Even if an employer couldn't produce a report from the previous three years, the company could still be approved to receive temporary foreign workers "if photos of the accommodation are provided and the employer agrees to submit an updated [report] to ESDC [Employment and Social Development Canada] within the duration of the work permit."

The Trudeau government's indifference and negligence toward protecting migrant workers from the ravages of COVID-19 are yet another devastating exposure of its supposed "progressive" character, as well as of the trade bureaucracy which boasts of its close ties and partnership with

the Liberals. Upon coming to power in 2015, Trudeau cast himself as a friend of refugees and immigrants, committed to an open and "diverse" Canada. In reality, this was a smokescreen for the Liberals' enforcement of right-wing policies, including the rearmament of the Canadian military and close collaboration with the Trump administration in its vicious crackdown on immigrants and refugees.

Trudeau's Liberals, their union allies, and the ruling elite as a whole view migrant workers as an expendable source of profit-making for Canada's multi-billion dollar agribusiness sector. According to the Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance, Canada is the fifth largest exporter of agricultural products and agri-foods in the world, with total exports amounting to an estimated \$56 billion annually.

The lifeblood of this profitable industry is brutally exploited cheap labour. Migrant workers, who typically come from Mexico and other impoverished Latin American and Caribbean countries, are brought to Canada under the most abysmal conditions, paid a pittance, and confined to inhumane living quarters. In a perverse revival of the "company towns" common in the US and Canada in the late 19th century, migrant workers rely on the same employer who ruthlessly exploits them for their food, accommodation, and even their right to remain in the country. Under such miserable conditions, it is virtually impossible for migrant workers to refuse unsafe work, demand improvements to conditions, or access proper medical treatment if they become infected.

Since March, Employment and Social Development Canada has received 32 COVID-19-related complaints regarding the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Yet not one farm has been found in violation of the pandemic-specific rules that the government claims will protect agricultural workers, even as well over a thousand migrant workers have been infected with COVID-19.

Ottawa's rules include the requirement that employer-provided accommodations must allow workers to keep a distance of two metres, and employees must be paid for their two-week mandatory quarantine upon arrival in Canada.

The federal government has the authority to penalize

employers found to be non-compliant, including through fines of up to \$1 million and a ban on accessing labour through the SAWP. However, the actions of the Trudeau government make clear that it has no intention of using these powers, preferring instead to allow the notoriously exploitative agricultural employers to self-regulate. Of the 32 COVID-19-related complaints regarding SAWPs, only eleven have even resulted in government inspections. Of these, only three are complete, with the employers found compliant in all areas.

A *Globe and Mail* investigation into the COVID-19 outbreaks among migrant farm workers in Ontario published in June exposed that federal government regulations are a dead letter. Migrant workers face overcrowded accommodations, broken toilets and cockroach and bed-bug infested rooms. Sheets and cardboard are used as dividers between bunk beds. Workers also recounted not being fully paid for their initial quarantine.

Conditions got so bad that for two weeks in June, the Mexican government felt compelled to stop migrant farm workers from travelling to Canada. Only after the Trudeau government provided a worthless assurance that conditions would improve did Mexican authorities allow migrant workers enrolled in the SAWP to resume travelling to Canada.

York University Professor Leah Vosko, a Canada research chair whose work focuses on enforcement of employment standards and the precarious immigration status of migrant workers, pointed to a 2018 federally commissioned study on employer-provided accommodations that found a lack of uniformity in housing conditions and oversight. “[P]rior to the pandemic,” she explained, “there were no concrete federal directives around housing capacities, bed size, number of windows and doors, privacy measures, food preparation and storage, [and] sanitation facilities.”

Three workers employed by Scotlynn Group in southern Ontario were among those interviewed for the *Globe* investigation. The men described deplorable living conditions, ill workers living with healthy ones, and no PPE (personal protective equipment) to guard against the virus. Scott Biddle, president and chief executive of the Scotlynn Group—a North American transportation logistics and farming company with one of the largest vegetable operations in Ontario—told the *Globe* that the Ontario Ministry of Labour had said their inspectors would likely be on site for two days to investigate the June 22 death of 55 year-old Juan Lopez Chaparro. However, inspectors ended up staying for just two hours. Chaparro was one of 216 migrant workers at the Scotlynn farm, almost all of whom tested positive for the virus.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford has repeatedly cited Ministry of Labour inspections and compliance orders as evidence that his government is taking action to protect migrant farm workers. In fact, his government has been trying to keep migrant workers infected with COVID-19 on the job, to the detriment of their own health and that of other workers. In late June, it announced

that “positive asymptomatic workers” can “continue working as long as they follow the public health measures in their workplace.”

Ontario’s Labour Ministry says that it conducted 142 field visits in the agri-food sector related to COVID-19 between mid-March and early June. The inspections resulted in a mere 34 COVID-19-related orders to improve conditions.

One migrant farm worker told the *Globe* that when employers are given advance notice of an inspection, they have time to make conditions appear better than they are. “They’re prepared for the inspection, and usually what they do is show the good lunch room or the part of the facilities that are in good shape,” the worker said.

While the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) has issued rhetorical criticisms of the conditions facing migrant workers, the union has nothing to offer workers seeking to fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and health care protection. It has failed to mount any serious struggle against the exploitative SAWP and to win citizenship rights for migrant workers and their families. In fact, the UFCW was intimately involved in consultations with the federal government to ensure that Canada’s agribusiness sector would be able to continue ruthlessly exploiting migrant workers during the pandemic.

In an April 6 press release, the UFCW and the UFCW-sponsored Agriculture Workers Alliance (AWA) enthused over the Liberal government’s policy towards migrant workers. The release stated, “Following lobbying efforts by UFCW, the AWA, and community allies, the government has lifted” the temporary ban it imposed on migrant and temporary foreign workers entering the country due to COVID-19, “and has implemented regulations requiring workers arriving in Canada to self-isolate for 14 days.”

For the thousands of migrant workers crammed into hopelessly overcrowded accommodation, such lines must read like a cruel joke. What they reveal is that the union bureaucracy, on the basis of a few token promises by the federal government—promises left completely up to the private companies to implement—“lobbied” for and welcomed the adoption of measures that created the conditions for commercial farms and other large agricultural companies to brutally exploit migrant workers.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>