



Canadian Council
for Refugees

Conseil canadien
pour les réfugiés

**Empowering Voices: Advocating for Migrant
Justice and Reforming the systems**

National Migrant Workers Forum Report

November 24, 2024



Land Acknowledgement

The event took place on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe. We recognize the Algonquins as the customary stewards of the Kichi Sibi watershed and its tributaries. The Algonquin Anishinaabe have been here in the watershed for thousands of years long before European contact and will continue to be here well into the future. We honour them as our Host Nation and thank them for their history of welcoming many nations to this site — we can only hope to replicate their generosity when we welcome those fleeing to safety, here and elsewhere on Turtle Island. We were honoured to be on this land.

Event organizers

Canadian Council for Refugees and its Precarious and Exploited Migrants Committee. Members:

- **Shelley Gilbert** – Legal Assistance of Windsor
- **Varka Kalaydzhieva** - CCR Associate member
- **Veronique Tessier** -RATTMAQ
- **Jovana Blagovcanin**- FCJ Refugee Centre
- **Marco Luciano** - Migrante Canada Alberta
- **Cassandra Henske** - Act Alberta
- **Carey Collins** - Act Alberta
- **María José Espejo Rivas** – Canadian Council for Refugees



Thanks and Appreciation

We want to recognize the hard work and dedication of all the migrant workers who joined us at the Forum. We're incredibly grateful for them sharing their stories and insights with us. Despite the risks they face from broken policies, they keep pushing back and standing up for what's right. Their strength and commitment inspire all of us, and we truly appreciate everything they continue to do.

We would also like to express our sincere gratitude for the financial support of the:

- United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW)
- United Church of Canada
- Sister of St. Joseph in Canada
- Oxfam Canada
- CUPE 2424
- CUPE 2626
- International Migration Alliance (IMA) – Migrante Canada (Alberta)



A special thanks to the International Migration Alliance for its financial support through Migrante Canada Alberta, as well as for assisting with logistics and providing support during the event.

Thanks to the generous financial support from these organizations, we were able to fully cover the costs of organizing the meeting, as well as assist with the travel, accommodation, and per diem expenses for migrant workers traveling from Ontario and Québec. This support ensured that these workers could participate in the event without facing financial barriers, allowing us to foster greater collaboration and engagement across regions.

Introduction

The National Migrant Workers Event, “Empowering Voices: Advocating for Migrant Justice and Reforming the systems” was held in Ottawa on November 24 at the Montgomery Legion. It brought together more than 70 people, amongst them migrant workers, faith-based members, settlement workers, students, CCR member organizations and staff, and community organizers.

The event was held on Sunday to better accommodate migrant workers and increase attendance. Breakfast and lunch were provided to enhance accessibility, and whisper translation to Spanish was available for those who required it.

Migrant workers continue to be subjected to illegal recruitment practices and face ongoing challenges that need to be addressed. This forum enabled discussions on unscrupulous recruitment strategies that exploit vulnerable workers, as well as identification of effective remedies and advocacy strategies to combat these issues.

Objectives

- **Create a collaborative space** for diverse stakeholders (migrant workers, activists, and frontline workers) to share insights and experiences.
- **Explore solutions and develop key messages** to support advocacy efforts for migrant worker rights.
- **Empower participants** to navigate challenges and advocate for the rights and dignity of migrant workers.



Photo : Renaude Grégoire 2024

Morning Session

The event began with a warm welcome from María José Espejo, the Settlement Policy Director of the CCR, who highlighted the significance of creating a platform where CCR members and participants could come together to learn, exchange ideas, and identify key policy and advocacy priorities. She emphasized that this gathering was important as a collaborative environment where migrant workers, community workers, and member organizations, could share their experiences and insights. Above all, she stressed the importance of ensuring that the space remained safe and inclusive, allowing all attendees to engage openly in meaningful discussions and advocacy efforts.

Panels

1. Unscrupulous Recruitment Practices and the Spectrum of Exploitation

Shelley Gilbert, Executive Director of Legal Assistance of Windsor, introduced and moderated the morning panel “*Unscrupulous Recruitment Practices and the Spectrum of Exploitation.*” The panel’s focus was on recruitment as a form of deception trapping migrant workers in exploitative situations, including human trafficking. The panel began with opening remarks from Danilo, a migrant worker from the Philippines and passionate advocate for migrant justice. Other speakers included Guillaume Lavoie, Lawyer and Advisor for the Fédération des travailleurs et des travailleuses du Québec; Susan Orlando, Lead of the Human Trafficking Prosecution Team at the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ontario; and Cheolki Yoon, representative from the Immigrant Workers Centre and Professor at Université Saint-Paul. The speakers addressed various aspects of unscrupulous recruitment practices affecting migrant workers, focusing on exploitation, deceptive tactics, and systemic issues.

Danilo shared his personal experience, highlighting how recruitment agencies charge migrant workers exorbitant fees—up to \$30,000—to work in Canada. Despite paying these fees, workers often discover there is no job or that the job offer was misleading. Additionally, some recruitment agencies engage in the practice of selling spots in Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) for as much as \$45,000. Danilo also noted the rise in educational trafficking, where migrants are promised false academic opportunities in Canada, leaving many stranded after paying fees for non-existent programs.

Guillaume Lavoie, an advisor to the FTQ’s occupational health and safety department, discussed recruitment practices in Quebec and the limitations of existing legislation. He explained that, under Quebec’s 2020 Regulation on Recruitment Fees, employers and agencies are prohibited from charging migrant workers fees, and recruitment agencies must be licensed by the CNESST. However, the regulation has significant gaps—it does not cover all migrant workers, particularly those under the International Mobility Program (IMP), and does not apply to recruitment fees charged abroad. Lavoie also reviewed international guidelines on fair recruitment, noting the limits of Quebec’s regulation in addressing exploitation.

Susan Orlando, Provincial Coordinator of Ontario’s Human Trafficking Prosecution Team, outlined patterns observed in human trafficking cases involving migrant workers. She explained that trafficking could occur even when recruitment is legal, particularly when workers are manipulated into believing they will be harmed if they do not comply with their traffickers. Orlando emphasized that trafficking is a criminal offense, with exploitation defined as causing someone to provide labor or services by instilling fear for their safety, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. She shared a case of migrant workers lured by false promises of better jobs and work permits, only to be exploited and trapped in abusive conditions.

Cheolki Yoon, from the Immigrant Workers Centre, discussed how migrant workers are often exploited by recruiters who manipulate the promise of permanent residency to extort money from them. He noted the systemic flaws in federal and provincial policies that allow such practices to flourish. These include the inability to control transnational recruitment chains, diverse immigration actors, and a lack of enforcement. Yoon pointed out that some recruiters exploit loopholes by charging fees both in Canada and abroad without facing violations. He also highlighted long-term consequences of exploitation, such as deepened indebtedness and interference in workers’ labor relations. Yoon recommended stronger enforcement, abolition of closed work permits, and a predictable immigration system that prioritizes permanent immigration.

Together, the speakers advocated for more comprehensive regulations, improved enforcement, and a system that prioritizes the well-being and rights of migrant workers. They called for coordinated efforts to combat deceptive recruitment practices, ensure fair treatment, and support migrant workers in overcoming exploitation.

2. Existing and proposed remedies for rights violations in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program

Varka Kalaydzhieva, Advocate CCR Associate member, moderated the panel “*Existing and proposed remedies for rights violations in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.*” Speakers included Hannah Deegan, Legal and advocacy counsel at the Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers; Véronique Tessier, Associate Director at Réseau d’aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec and Chenour Oechslin, Researcher, Observatory for Migrant Justice; Santiago Escobar, National Representative, United Food and Commercial Workers.

Hanna Deegan (Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers):

A sector-specific work permit is not a long-term solution for migrant workers’ mobility and rights. Such permits enable employers to exploit workers further. The root issue is privatized immigration, which gives employers control over worker recruitment and treatment. Instead, government-operated recruitment and services are needed to protect migrant workers’ rights.



Photo : Renaude Grégoire 2024



Santiago Escobar (United Food and Commercial Workers):

UFCW coordinates support for migrant workers, such as those in meat plants. Successful unionization efforts in BC involved migrant workers and locals at a mushroom farm, resulting in significant improvements in working conditions. The union helped workers organize against unfair practices like unrealistic quotas and unsafe conditions. Key gains included permanent status after 90 days and the establishment of health and safety committees for larger workforces.

Véronique Tessier & Chenour Oechslin (Réseau d’aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec & Observatoire pour la justice migrante):

Research conducted by the University of Laval, in partnership with three provinces, evaluated the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers Program (OWPVW). Findings show that the program does not effectively protect workers. Barriers include difficult access, burdensome proof requirements, recurring abuse, and the limited one-year duration of the permit. Migrant workers face multiple immigration processes and ongoing vulnerabilities, including issues with recruitment.

Afternoon Session

To wrap up the event, Marisa Berry from Amnistie Internationale – QC, Section Francophone, and Marco Luciano from Migrante Canada-Alberta hosted a session called “Working Together Towards Solutions.” In this session, participants broke into small groups to discuss and share ideas on a few key questions. It was an opportunity for everyone to collaborate, brainstorm, and dive into important issues together. The discussion focused on:

a. Recruitment:

- How do we raise awareness among CCR members and what kind of role could CCR, and its members play in awareness-raising, advocacy and mobilization on this issue?
- What position on recruitment would you recommend to CCR and Is there a resolution that can be formulated and proposed to CCR this week?

b. Open Work Permits:

- What should the main message(s) be to support the call for open work permits and how should we ensure our messages take into account and counter the current anti-migrant narrative?
- Is there a resolution that should be formulated and proposed to CCR this week or What resolution will you propose in this forum?

Conclusions

- **Campaign Strategy and Messaging:** The need for clear messaging in support of open work permits (OWP) is crucial. This includes addressing public misunderstandings, combating anti-immigrant rhetoric, and focusing on worker rights, such as improving working conditions through the freedom to change employers. Additionally, it’s important to balance the needs of workers and employers without giving employers too much power over workers’ mobility.
- **Political and Educational Opportunities:** With the upcoming election and the arrival of a special rapporteur on migrant rights, there is an opportunity to make the OWP issue a key political topic. This includes educating the public and policymakers about the importance of rights for migrant workers, especially those who support Canadian society by performing essential services.
- **Action Steps and Advocacy:** The campaign should include concrete actions, such as supporting petitions (e.g., Amnesty International’s petition), engaging in public education campaigns, and collaborating with organizations like Hannah’s to develop alternative labor and immigration programs. It’s essential to mobilize support from both members and the broader public to push for systemic changes.

Quotes from Participants

Jovana Blagovcanin – FCJ Refugee Centre:

“The forum was a crucial opportunity to identify shared concerns about illegal and exploitative recruitment across Canada. It reinforced the need for collective advocacy, stronger protections for migrants, and accountability for recruiters and employers. I left with a renewed sense that we are not working alone and together, we can push this issue further into the public eye and onto the agenda of government officials.”

Hannah Deegan – Association pour les Droits des Travailleur-ses de Maison et de Ferme-Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers (DTMF-RHFW):

“The Forum made it clear: small policy tweaks aren’t enough and have failed to deliver tangible results. Fundamental reform is needed – open work permits, access to permanent status, and real enforcement against abusive recruiters.”

Etoile Najm – ARAISA:

“ARAISA’s MWSP team participated in the Canadian Council for Refugees’ National Migrant Workers Forum in Ottawa in November. Through meaningful discussions with experts and advocates, the forum provided valuable insights into migrant justice, with a focus on the OWP-VW policy, exploitative recruitment practices and other challenges faced by migrant workers. The event was a valuable experience that reinforced our collective commitment to supporting the rights and safety of migrant workers.”

Marisa Berry – Amnistie International Québec :

“For me, it’s always energizing to get together with the CCR, with migrant workers and migrant justice activists.”

Véronique Tessier – RATTMAQ :

“The Migrant Workers Forum was a great opportunity for migrant workers and their allies to discuss the urgent issues of TFW recruitment fraud and the fight against abuses committed by recruitment and placement agencies in Canada.”

“Migrant workers and activists from different provinces forged bonds of solidarity and discussed the issues inherent in the Open Permit program for vulnerable workers, IRCC’s false solution to worker abuse.”



Photo : Renaude Grégoire 2024



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Thank You



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Social media:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/people/Open-Work-Permits-Now/100086293766624/

Instagram: www.instagram.com/openworkpermitsnow/

Twitter: www.x.com/OpenWorkPermits