

MEDIA RELEASE
MIGRANT WORKERS ALLIANCE FOR CHANGE

Media Contact: Karen Cocq, 647-970-8464 (EN/FR).

Email info@migrantworkersalliance.org for a recording of the press conference.

Migrant workers call for permanent resident status in shocking new report on abuses

Toronto, June 8, 2020 -- The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC) is releasing a report today of complaints made on behalf over a thousand migrant workers, warnings that were unheeded by federal and provincial authorities and consulates in advance of the recent COVID-19 outbreaks that have led to two worker deaths and at least two in Intensive Care. [Read the shocking report “Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Canada” here.](#)

“Most of the workers we spoke to knew they would fall sick because of their living and working conditions but could not speak up because doing so means termination, homelessness, loss of income, deportation and not being able to come back in the future,” says report co-author and MWAC campaigns coordinator, Karen Cocq. “To stop this grave crisis from worsening, it is necessary that all migrants be given permanent resident status immediately.”

The report situates these abuses in the decades long history of unheeded warnings made by migrant workers about Canada’s temporary immigration and labour laws.

The report provides a snapshot of farms with large COVID-19 outbreaks, the largest of which is Scotlynn Farms in Ontario. Edgar, who works at Scotlynn, and is currently in a hotel with workers who have tested positive spoke at the press conference launching the report. He said, “They treat us like robots. They only care about the work we do and the money they make because of our labour. Scotlynn Farms is saying that they took care of us, but when the first worker fell sick here, they didn't do anything. We workers got together and called the ambulance. I am speaking out for my co-workers and for myself, because I don't agree with what the boss is doing. It's not fair that they treat us like this. We need equal rights and permanent resident status.”

“The federal government has given nearly a billion dollars to agri-food businesses, while migrants who actually grow the food are falling sick and dying,” says Sonia Aviles, an MWAC organizer who staffs one of the hotlines where the complaints were made. “We need the federal and provincial government to go in and see what’s going on, and fix things to ensure workers are protected before more people die - that means snap inspections, social distancing measures and permanent resident status.”

Migrant workers accounted for 41.6% of all agricultural workers in Ontario, and over 30% of the agricultural workers in Quebec, British Columbia and Nova Scotia in 2017.

“Employers are using COVID-19 to lock migrant workers up, refusing to let them leave even to get groceries or send remittances home, while threatening them - specifically Black men - with increased policing. This is racism and it is anti-Black racism,” says Kit Andres, an MWAC organizer who staffs the English hotline on which complaints were received. “Workers know that what they are facing is wrong, and they need permanent resident status so they can assert their rights.”

Since COVID-19 started, over 6,000 people have signed a [petition](#) calling for status, and the Migrant Rights Network has sent [several letters](#) regarding migrants to the federal government that have also been ignored. The Migrant Rights Network is organizing a digital rally for Full Immigration Status for All on June 14th at 12pm EST. Media is invited.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT & WORKER QUOTES

Please read the full report here:

<https://migrantworkersalliance.org/unheededwarnings>

The key trends in “Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Canada” are:

- **Lack of permanent resident status makes it impossible for workers to assert their rights**
 - *“Bosses just want us to come here to reap their crop and then send us back home. But just like they have a life, we have a life too. We are not dogs and we should have a say in this country. We work and feed the people of this country. We work in the rain and in the sun. We work in the snow to feed these people. I work here, I pay taxes, I should have a say. I would like to see a better offer on the table for seasonal migrant workers because we are not animals and we should be treated fairly. We deserve better treatment and better living*

conditions. We deserve permanent resident status. I don't want to live this way." Damian, Jamaican seasonal farm worker for over 20 years, father of five.

- **Employers are not taking COVID-19 precautions**
 - *"Right now they got 10 [COVID-19] cases on the compound. They have the guys going to get tested and have them still coming to work and working with everybody the same way. The more they get tests, the more cases they find and they have the guys all working together."* - Lloyd.
- **Wage theft is commonplace:** We confirmed reports of \$57,369.46 stolen from workers in the form of deductions and unpaid wages.
 - *"The boss gets money from the government for quarantine costs and still we get a bill for soap and grocery. He's taking bread from our kids' mouths - we need to send that money to our families back home!"* Winston, seasonal tree nursery worker for 5 years, father of two.
- **Border closures resulted in loss of income, and workers were coerced to travel to Canada because no income supports were available:** 155 complaints were about delays and difficulties faced by workers trying to come to Canada to start work.
 - *"My flight to travel to Canada on March 31 got canceled due to border closure! My 15 year old daughter has fallen sick and needs immediate care including blood transfusion, but I don't have the money to pay for that. I'm desperate and need income support as my daughter's life is at risk."* - Gilberto, Mexican farmworker, father of two.
- **Workers could not socially distance and did not receive decent food, income or health information during quarantine:** We received complaints from 316 workers who were either not paid for the quarantine period at all, had their quarantine incomes clawed back, or were paid less than the required 30 hours per week. In addition, 539 workers cited inadequate access to food. Another 160 complaints were from migrants not able to maintain social distancing.
 - *"If we couldn't reach anyone I think our boss would let us starve before helping. He doesn't care about us."* - Anthony, pear farm worker in the Hamilton area.
- **Housing conditions worsened dramatically after quarantine and greater limits have been placed on worker mobility:** We received 109 complaints about housing conditions not specific to or after quarantine. Such complaints included lack of essential supplies, cleanliness, cramped quarters, and the presence of animals and pests.
 - *"We know our boss will use this virus to enforce rules he wanted already. He's using the pandemic as an excuse to get control over us. He shouldn't be allowed to treat grown men this way."* Joseph, Jamaican seasonal worker

- **Intimidation, surveillance, threats and racism have greatly increased:** In all, 209 migrant workers reported increased intimidation, surveillance and threats from employers often under the guise of COVID-19 protocols. Critically, while complaints among Spanish-speaking and English-speaking workers are largely consistent, complaints about threats were disproportionately higher for Caribbean workers who are largely Black men (**19.7% of Caribbean workers, as compared to 12.8% of Spanish-speaking workers**). Racism, and specifically anti-Black racism, underpins workers' experience.
 - *“These people are cruel and I’m tired of them. They have no heart for Black people, they use us like slaves. I tried getting away from this farm for a very long time and I cannot.”* - Delroy, seasonal worker for 23 years, father of 5 and also taking care of elderly mother back home.
- **Work has intensified greatly during COVID-19:** 128 workers reported working for weeks without a day off, being forced to work long hours, and suffering increased strains, injuries and sickness due to increased pace of work.
 - *“We’re treated like machines. We just want them to recognize that we’re still human.”* - Raymond, Jamaican seasonal worker for 11 years, father of two.