

# Essential But Disposable Labour: Working Hard and Abandoned

## Transcript, Episode 5

**Sarah:** Welcome to Essential but Disposable Labor: Migrant Workers Exploited in Canada. The goal of our podcast is to center the voices of migrant workers who come to Canada for dignified employment only to find themselves in situations of exploitation and precarity in a limited number of biweekly episodes. We will join in conversation with former and current workers, immigration specialists and front-line advocates to understand the systems and policies that perpetuate this labor market. In their own words, workers tell us their stories, dreams and realities and share what folks at home can do to make Canada a more equitable place for all. Thank you for being here. Let's get started.

**Sarah:** So, hello, welcome, everyone. I'm joined today by Jim. Thank you very much for joining us, Jim. Jim is coming to us here in Canada, but is originally from the Caribbean, and has a great deal of experience coming to work here in Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Welcome Jim.

**Jim:** Thank you very much for having me.

**Sarah:** So, Jim, I would love to hear a little bit more about yourself, if you would be so kind to share where you're from, and maybe your experiences coming from the Caribbean.

**Jim:** Yeah, I'm from the Caribbean. Then I came here, I started working in Canada, with a migrant farm workers program, as it is now agricultural workers program. And I started in 2005. And I stopped in 2017. There was a memorandum of understanding my government signed with the Government of Canada, or they're called countries that signed up before us what we happen to be part of it since we are part of the OECS organization of the Eastern Caribbean States. And so we have a kind of understanding where the governments when recruit workers back in our countries of origin. And then if we make it the top of the list, we are shortlisted, we do medical exams. And once we pass that medical exam, we are good to go. And then from this, it's pretty easy. We'll just go to the Ministry of Labor, the labor officer will have to bring in the necessary documents, travel documents. And then once they're in, they send in the passports to the commission- Canadian High Commission, and then there, they will agree that we have already gotten the visa and everything. We take all of our passports as a travel document, and we traveled to Canada. Once we arrive at the immigration departments at the Pearson International Airport, then we go through whatever we have to do actual necessary protocols, then they give us the handoffs, the work permits, and then we head on to wherever we are going to work. What happens next, the very last story which I can discuss.

**Sarah:** And so just for some context, growing up in the Caribbean, did you have a particular career in mind? Are there jobs that you were drawn to? What kind of experiences were you having before joining the program?

**Jim:** I was into farming afterward. But before that, I'm a statistician. I'm an enumerator. I used to do send statistics tally data and everything like that. I used to go from home to home to gather information from people, for different companies, on different servers. What after that, then I didn't have a job long, long, very long time. I went into construction and then farming and then I decided it would be a good thing to go to Canada, through the farm program. And maybe after a while, go to school and I could just continue make some money.

**Sarah:** And so how did you hear about the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program?

**Jim:** Well, they advertise it on the radio, we get to know that from friends, relatives and other people because the program has been going on for many, many years. So my cousins were part of the program. I knew about the program.

**Sarah:** And so you said that you went through the process signed up for the program, passports and visas were issued, you arrive at Pearson Airport, and you are then processed by immigration and taken into your place of employment. And so you said that this was specifically within the agricultural industry? When did you start to feel that something wasn't quite right with your employment experience?

**Jim:** Yeah, the living conditions were not up to date. They said that the inspectors came in to inspect the houses on the poor living conditions. The employers always said they passed inspections, so then we were allowed to live in these buildings and so on. Some of these buildings could be in deplorable condition. I knew about a couple of friends of mine who did not even have hot water in their place of residence. The amount of space shared between dormitory spaces were limited for grown men. When it comes to the kitchen area now, there was not always enough space for everyone to cook at the same time. We would have to cook by turns that really affected quality of life of many of my friends. That was one particular bunkhouse over the years and on a particular farm there were 18 people that live in one house and they had bunk beds. Imagine two grown men with almost 200 pounds, sleeping on a bunk bed. Someone could get hurt. That was not right. That was not government approved. They said it was approved by the government they said it was inspectors who were government employees who inspected and they give them the approval so they could have people living there.

**Sarah:** And so congregate living and the status of bunk houses has been fairly well reported on in terms of conditions are quite dire. But at the same time, it really took COVID and the spread of the pandemic, to really highlight how deplorable these conditions are, because congregate living became such a challenge in the spread of the virus. But this has been going on for much longer than the pandemic.

**Jim:** Yeah, I didn't experience it during COVID, because I had already left a long time before. But the conditions that have always been there in all my years, for 15 or more years, the living conditions were never up to date, they were never good enough.

**Sarah:** To kind of move forward, then with the next step, you find that the living conditions are quite unfortunate, not up to standard, not safe in many instances. Do you want to walk us through maybe what an average day would be like as a worker on this farm?

**Jim:** Yeah, on an average day from five in the morning till six in the night. When I was on a particular farm when the workday started at 5am in the morning. So one would have to wake up at four in the morning, cook breakfast and lunch. Imagine the kind of space which was not adequate for all these 18 men. So then some would go to work, having only cooked breakfast only, and they would come back at midday to do lunch. Some would not even have enough time to eat. That is five in the morning, someone would have to leave to go to work, and they would work, they will get their break sometimes. And then they will come back for lunch. And then in the evening, people would have to be lined up in a queue or something like a queue or a waiting list. Imagine if one guy takes 10 to 15 minutes, half an hour to finish his back, then you would have to wait to two-three hours, then you would have to cook lunch in your dirty clothes. And then some people would go to work late in the night, some guys wouldn't be overnight, they would spend the night talking and so on. But while some guys would want to sleep if they would like to, that would never happen. All this noise it could affect them psychologically, physically, mentally, that would create medical condition.

**Sarah:** The mental health challenges posed by congregate living in subpar housing, the constant exposure to having no privacy or really security of person or property. Being away from your home, culture, network and all kinds of social supports that you might have. And farms are very remote often and isolating. You don't really discuss the impact that this has on the workers and their mental health and psychological state. Can you give any insight into that at all?

**Jim:** Well, it's now the year I've been studying psychology on my own. I do it voluntarily, I'm not certified. During my studies, I have come to realize some things that were happening in the past that I didn't have any idea about. A lot of people would go through many psychological problems. People leave their homes, their families, their friends, and they go to live together with total strangers, maybe sometimes all people from different countries, they live together with them. So people while they're at work they may think about this one guy who is going to steal my money, this one guy going to pick up my valuables. People who used to be a church going people, they can go to church anymore, because they open Saturday or Sunday. So all these kind of things, you know, that affects the whole psyche. It affects body mind, spirit. And everything. We never had access to a therapist, or a psychologist or psychiatric doctor or something like that. You only could go to see an MD or medical doctor or dentist. So I would like to see a change in the system where we give the option for someone who is going through any psychological problem to have the opportunity to see a psychiatric doctor or a psychologist.

**Sarah:** For supports that they need.

**Jim:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** So if you feel comfortable, would you be willing to share some experiences that you've had here in Canada in terms of your experiences with employers, and your experiences on the job, and what it was kind of like working day to day?

**Jim:** It would vary on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes, for the first month or a couple of months everything would go nicely with the employer, they will display the nicest behavior. And because they would not want the crops to go bad, they will try to be nice and so on and so forth. But I've never met a very nice employee. For the payment we will get the minimum wage, the lowest minimum wage. If the minimum wage was between 10 and 15, you will not give 15 or 12 or 13, they will give the 10, the minimum. Sometimes one would have to do extra work even if they don't want to do it. If only one wanted to rest on a Saturday or Sunday and if the employer says OK you have to come to work, then one has to go to work because according to the contract that was signed whenever the employer requires one person to work, that employee has no say in it, in making that decision to stay in the bunkhouse, and he just have to go to work. The only thing that can stop them is if there are medical problems, if they're sick. There was never a good employer employee relationship. There was a time where I worked for three months, 90 days, without one day of rest. That was just like slavery, that was not good at all.

**Sarah:** Now, if a worker were to report something like that, what would be the process to do so?

**Jim:** Okay, so we have people, the liaison officers who will stand in between the worker and the employer.

**Sarah:** Typically, someone who either works with the consulate or is affiliated with the program in some way.

**Jim:** Yeah. And then, in an incident, if ever happened, we'll have to call in the liaison officer. And they will try to come to ratify the things. They would more or less be in favor of the employer. The one particular farm that I mentioned that they even said that if you don't want to work, then go, there's another person waiting to pick in your spot. We don't want to lose the employer, we would prefer to lose you instead of the employer.

**Sarah:** You would call the liaison officer, and often it wouldn't go anywhere, because the employer tends to have the greater interest of both governments in terms of employing many workers at the same time, so the needs of a particular worker would likely go unmet.

**Jim:** Yeah, the needs would most likely go unmet, in terms of statistics 90% of the time.

**Sarah:** If you don't like it, you can leave but you're sacrificing your spot in the program.

**Jim:** Yeah, and then you may not come back to that same employer, you may get another chance to go to a different one. It may take some time, before they recognize you, because the liaison officer may label you the trouble maker or something like that.

**Sarah:** In terms of the kind of connections between Canada and the Caribbean, some folks may not be particularly familiar in terms of what impact Canada really has on the Caribbean, what the perception is what the relationship looks like? Can you shine any light on what that looks like?

**Jim:** So what the government said from the beginning is that there will always be a memorandum of understanding between the two governments, the Canadian government and the country of origin where we come from. They agree for people to come to work. They officers, government officers, the labor officers of the country of origin, will call in or advertise. The people will come in, and then because of the states of the economies, the people are usually flocking, okay, Canada is a big country, its developed, there are many chances and opportunities, so why not try. And then they sugarcoat all the conditions for you and say, okay, well, I'm gonna take the journey, let me go. And then when they have the shortlist, so one can start the wait, then they can travel. It does help in the process to alleviate a lot of poverty from certain countries, Caribbean inclusive. It helps in the economy, but it does not help the one who is working, the employee in any way, except in the make up of a few more dollars more than he would in his country of origin, or even have a place or permanent job for the season. Doesn't help that much.

**Sarah:** Absolutely. And I think another important kind of connection here to to highlight is the Caribbean was hit almost immediately by the impacts of colonialism, right, in terms of the very early contact. And so that legacy has continued. But in particular, for the most part, the eradication of many Indigenous groups within the Caribbean, the sugar trade and bringing enslaved people largely from Africa to the Caribbean. And a lot of those impacts continue in terms of the impacts not just of colonialism and that legacy with regard to trade relationships with places like Canada and the UK, the Commonwealth. And now the impacts of climate change, which we know the Caribbean islands get hit very hard by climate events. Now, this has ongoing impacts and consequences for the economy and the economic livelihoods and opportunities for people working and living within the Caribbean. Do you feel as though there is an opportunity for Canada to support the Caribbean islands or ways in which we can be more aware of the impacts that the Caribbean is having at a very disproportionate rate to other places in the world?

**Jim:** So since we are a hurricane prone region, we are usually impacted by devastating hurricanes, strong winds, a lot of rains and all the a lot of flooding, high seas, and everything. Rooftops will be gone in the wind and people will be left in poverty. I would like personally to see the Government of Canada, which is a very much developed country and Canada as part of the Commonwealth, and my country is part of the Commonwealth. They should help, let's say less fortunate countries in that regard. They should help them financially, diplomatically and they should help them in, in health and in all other departments. I think personally, I don't know if everyone will agree with me but they're not doing enough. There was one point in time there was no need for visa or work permit to come to work to Canada. We had such a good relationship with Canada. And then that has something happened along the line and they just

discarded that kind of relationship. And then sometimes it takes a lot of time, a long time, a lot of hard work, a lot of money spent in order to get a visa and work permit. The system, it's not right at all. The way they treat people who come to work for many years, you work all their lifetime, they leave you for everything to do this country. And this is what we get in return, we don't get anything in return. We should always get help from them. Since we are we are helping them through it, especially in agriculture. Sometimes if an employer does not get enough people from the Caribbean or Mexico, and those are the countries to work on the farms, all the crops will go bad. We are the ones who are really helping the farmers to produce crops, to the people who everybody to the doctors to the lawyers, teachers, children, everybody in the country, depend on agriculture, everyone in their life depends on when you we been on preventing food, clothing and shelter. And since we are part of the department, we should be treated better, we should be helped economically, and we should be helped nationally, and we should be helped individually. You have some kind of incentive from the government. We do a lot.

**Sarah:** And that is such an important point, right? Like, and again, I don't want to keep coming back to the pandemic as kind of the highlight or spotlight in this story because these issues have been happening for decades and decades. But to see that one of the first frontline kind of industries that was said to be of crucial importance to Canada was ensuring that migrant workers were still able to fly back and forth to come and be here in time for harvest and be here in time to really cultivate this agricultural industry within our country on which we all rely on these food systems, our food systems rely on this process. Yet, we're continuing to fund and promote this program the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program as an option of bringing labor in when it's needed, and then discarding it when it's not. And that is obviously no way to treat human beings. When it comes to your experience of immigration and working within Canada, particularly with regard to the Temporary Resident Permit, would you be able to kind of shine some light on what that looks like in terms of your experiences with the TRP?

**Jim:** I am not saying that I should come with the reason of entitlement saying that I've been looking here for so long, that I shouldn't become a permanent resident automatically or anything like that. But since I was part of the TRP program, I was supposed to work for five years, you don't go back to my home. And then after five years, then I would get an opportunity to become a permanent resident. After five years they should allow us to personally decide whether we want to stay become permanent, if we want to go back home or anything like or get another type of visa where we can go back and forth. And another opportunity for those who would like to go back to the farms. Because one of my friends went back to the farm he can't work after his visa has already expired and his work permit as well. Government, I know they are not doing very good. They let us down a great deal. I am speaking on behalf of all the others in situations like that. They ask them to work so hard. And after a while, let them down. Let them on their own. If it will not for humanitarian groups and NGOs that help people, a lot of people would suffer and would fall down into the cracks. And they will never be able to make it back home. And I'm now ashamed to go back because they did not accomplish what they came to accomplish the goals and everything. So the government listen policies and have the new bills set up and presented in parliament that said that once one person has been working for more than 10 years, proper for the country, they shouldn't be allowed an opportunity to become a permanent citizen once 15 years better than that, or even you know and when someone has been living in Canada for three consecutive years, working very

hard, paying all the taxes they have evidence to show their bills on their pay stubs and tax some reason also to show that they have been working very hard. They have been making a very good contribution towards the economy, they have documents to show that they have been helping voluntarily, in different groups for different people, marginalized people, and so on and so forth in communities, religious communities and so forth, they should be given I believe, personally, they should be given an opportunity and a chance, or see, make a decision whether they want to see a permanent or not.

**Sarah:** Now, for those that aren't familiar with the Temporary Residence Permit, it's usually issued for the length of your visit to Canada, sometimes very short instances, sometimes a little bit longer. Can you give some context as to why you had to apply for the TRP?

**Jim:** Yeah, so what happened in 2017, we had a problem before employer. He didn't want to allow certain guys to work and so on and so forth. There came in the liaison officer, and she told us that we should leave. So anyone who does not want to leave, and wants to stay as an employee of that particular employer will be left on their own, they will not be responsible for them in any way. So then we left and we went to live somewhere else on a farm for three months, without work, and then they helped us to get a visa for three months. And that was it. They turn their backs on us from that time. So we left on our own until new, the FCJ got to know about us. And the FCJ came in to help us. And then we got visa, and so on and work permits and everything like that. And everything was going quite well. And I had the last one we had was for three years visa. And then since they tried to reapply reapplied for us, the government rejected. And we are out of status right now. I have been paying a lot of money. Try to get back in to restore status.

**Sarah:** Now, do you know what the next steps are in terms of your kind of path to advocacy and kind of next steps in terms of immigration? Do you know what the journey entails for you coming up now that this is where you're at.

**Jim:** So where I'm right now, is going to a lawyer to help me gain restoration. Then I will go from there to see what is happening. The lawyer wants me to be legal in the country so I can be restored as a visa. And then from there, we'll do our best. And then I'll have to go back home and apply for another visa.

**Sarah:** So in total, how long has this process taken from kind of that first moment where you decided with the liaison officer? I'm not doing this anymore until essentially now.

**Jim:** That was in 2017. Until now.

**Sarah:** So that decision alone to kind of advocate for yourself has basically taken six years.

**Jim:** Yes.

**Sarah:** So it becomes very clear very quickly how many folks, many workers in this position can't wait six years. Like that is something that is just so unattainable and not possible for many, right?

**Jim:** Yeah, it's not possible for many people. A lot of people gave up along the way. I think some people will be given up soon. So you will find that one in ten will decide to stay and fight against and try their best to work in Canada or to come back to Canada.

**Sarah:** So can you give any insight into maybe some advocacy efforts that you are either now a part of or that you've seen who are advocating on behalf of workers rights, organizing, resisting that kind of thing, in terms of pushing back on some of these policies and flaws that are very well known within the system?

**Jim:** I know there's a lot of flaws within the system. There's a lot of ways that the government tried to push people back to their own country. What I do not know many, many advocacy groups that can help people to obtain visa, work permit. This is a dire condition. What if one doesn't have any financing? When if finances are pretty low? How can he be able to live without a job in Canada? We all know that one cannot live if you don't have a job in Canada, or have some social help in some organization. Can that happen for many years? No. Everybody wants to work and have their own money. I would like to see some government people or some help or somewhere. There are some people can get some help too. To make sure they have they live in and they are comfortable there- good work permit and good visa and so on.

**Sarah:** And so now you did mention FCJ Refugee support Center as one organization that's been very helpful and supportive. Are there any other organizations or individuals that you felt has been particularly helpful or that folks listening should consider supporting?

**Jim:** Um, yeah, I only know the FCJ. They have helped me tremendously over the years. I want to say thank you very much to them. And if I may say, so I will say clearly God bless all of them. All, the workers work very hard. And I make particular mention of one person. I am not saying he's the only one- Luis Mata. I say Kudos to this guy, he has been working quite well. And I wish him well in all his other endeavors.

**Sarah:** So is there anything else that you would like to share in terms of steps, the Ministry of Immigration here in Canada can take that folks listening to the podcast can take what are your recommendations for the future?

**Jim:** Yeah, my recommendation for the future is when one comes, whenever you start to work here, do not always see that everything is going to be 100%. To prepare for disappointment. And I hope that it will not come at all, but even if they come, better they'll be prepared for something that does not happen, or something to happen, and then we are not prepared. I would like to see the government put in new plans, policies, strategies, laws, bills in place, or people who have always wanted that to happen for people who have been working for very long and have been making a tremendous contribution to the Canadian economy, paying taxes on all working very hard in industries and places, wherever nationals will not take these jobs up. And we come from all over the world, take these jobs up, then we should be given an opportunity to become part of the country as a permanent resident. So, I would like



to see any government official at any time with their children or their grandchildren on the broadcast, to listen and talk to that talk to your mom, whoever is involved in government and politics, tell them to treat migrant workers and immigrants better than this. And those who have been working very hard, try to put in laws in place that they can become part of this country who can help continue to develop this country. And this country will have a better, brighter future. And the name of Canada will be all around the world as the number one country that helps immigrants, migrant workers. I want to see that happen.

**Sarah:** Wonderful, Jim, I can't thank you enough for taking this time to share your experience your expertise, your thoughts. Your recommendations we very much appreciate you chatting with us today.

That concludes this week's episode. Thank you to our guests for the experiences and stories they have shared and to our listeners for your interest and support. Please like follow and share this podcast with your networks, talk soon and take care. This has been a podcast from the Collaborative Network to End Exploitation. Find us online at [cnee.ca](http://cnee.ca). Our theme music is by the musician bio-Unit. This podcast is funded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto.