

Essential but Disposable Labour

Episode 4: Transcript

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: All right, welcome back. My name is Sarah Guinta. It's wonderful to be here again, I'm joined by Alberto. He is originally from Mexico. But I would actually love to hear a little bit more about his background. Alvaro drawing, from your own experience, maybe would you like to give us a little bit of context about your background as well as where you come from in Mexico?

Alvaro: Well, I'm born and raised in Mexico City, I'm 45 years old. I studied economics, in National University in Mexico.

Sarah: And so drawing from your experience, could you give us a little bit of insight into maybe the political situation in Mexico, maybe the economic situation as well as how it pertains to you and your experience?

Alvaro: Well, economic situation in Mexico, it's really complicated. I think, most of the half of the population lives in poverty, a large percentage of that population lives in extreme poverty. All the political decisions, impact severely a large population and make us or push us to take decisions that goes against us. A long time ago the president has started talking about international agreement with the United States, and Canada. And suddenly, in 1994, Mexico, the United States and Canada signed this agreement, I think the first impression that we have in Mexico, it was like is going to be a good thing for the Mexican system was like the feeling that you're going to be part of this fierce world in this kind of live, this way of live, right? The Mexican says, yeah, probably is a good thing. But we don't see it, the whole impact this political decision is going to have for the economy for the Mexicans. We will see it later, right?

So, we start to see in that the Mexican companies start to closing, and another ones start to be absorbed for the rest of the largest companies on the United States and Canada. In that way, Mexico lost a lot of power of that decision. It's like the sovereignty and the economy started to be dependent of what these guys were doing. And for going through this process, Mexico sacrifice the benefits of the salaries that we were receiving in those times and put certain rules, like control the inflation, like no raises the salaries, no, no go further than the minimum wage. So, they put a line in there and the Mexicans while was trying to control the inflation the sacrifice was doing for the workers. The companies decide to be part of this agreement with the government and sacrifice no to raising the prices of the certain products. So, in that way, we control the inflation. But eventually, the company started to denying this agreement. The only ones that were making the sacrifice, it was the Mexicans, right, the workers, the Mexican workers. Every dollar that we produce, it is not going to the Mexican government, it's going into another countries. The decisions of the government is start to be less, and less, and less everything. And the decision of the government it was sacrificed more, more and more and more. So at the end, we have poverty, we have

lower salaries, we have no health, we don't have a government trying to investing in people and universities and schools.

Sarah: Now, you mentioned the political decisions and trade agreements made between Canada and Mexico. So, you're referring to the originally the North American Free Trade Agreement NAFTA. Now it's been more recently renamed the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMC). These agreements are always kind of perceived and promoted as positive free trade agreements between direct trade partners, which in North America, that has been the case between our three countries for some time. Yeah, in this conversation in this dialogue around migrant workers, we talk a lot about this push and pull factors. And from what you've said, these agreements have largely favored Canada and the US, but not so much Mexico. And so it's giving Mexico and its companies, its business owners fewer and fewer options and choice really to thrive and provide support for employees and laborers. So now we have these push and pull factors that have largely been created by these trade agreements, giving fewer and fewer options to employees who would, I am sure, ideally like to be working locally. And now they are steered towards this Temporary Foreign Worker Program, which then touts these opportunities to go and earn a greater minimum wage in places like Canada, send remittances home to Mexico. And this, this is a beneficial program. Though it's quite quite broken at its at its core, because it's really fabricating these kind of environments in which people feel as though they have no option but to migrate or participate in these temporary foreign work programs. That's kind of the picture I'm getting from what you've you've just described, correct?

Alvaro: Definitely the sign of this agreement created conditions for having this population ready for come to work to another countries. So, in that way, we, the government decide to sacrifice the benefits of the Mexicans, and they start to try to find the money for somewhere else. And that's where they say, well, we can send it, for example, Canada, but they don't want to have the same benefits that we have in here, we need to translate that in money. But then means that for Canada there are no responsibilities with those with these workers, we can treat it like whatever we want. If they don't want it, we can send it back and we can bring another ones. Yeah, it's part of the deal with this push and pull. And also the story just crossing here the border with Detroit, a huge example of what happened with the General Motors, for example. They decide to remove the whole plant and put it in a different place. They put it in Mexico, because they were looking for lower salaries, less benefits. But that means that translate in half our population just completely destroyed. It was just like release a bomb into Detroit. That way of life, it is not like the way of live it used to be we used to have. They are preparing the conditions for these kinds of things. And we are suffering the consequences.

Sarah: Certainly, so we're creating the environment in which people are continuously pushed more to more and more vulnerable places, right? We are legislating ways in which folks can be made vulnerable and then the necessity or incentive or requirement to then provide benefits and actual compensation and proper protections is then continuously negated because folks are pushed to such a place of vulnerability that they then have to choose these kinds of dire situations and these may be less desirable opportunities. But it continues to be touted in a way of this is this is a great program this is this is serving everyone and this is positive, even though it actually is perpetuating these these vulnerabilities and this oppression. So, I just want to circle back for one moment. You said that you recall these these programs for work in Canada and the US. Can I ask a little bit about your experience when you first joined the worker program, how you first heard about it, and what the process was like joining the program, when you initially started?

Alvaro: I was I was studying economics, I was finishing that career, I was starting mathematics. So suddenly I saw my wife get pregnant. One day, we went to one of those places like Walmart, and we don't have money, it was just looking for what stuffs are there, right? And coming back and maybe have hopes for trying to buying something later. Me and her was looking to the ground without money and suddenly we find 200 pesos. So we went back to the store, we buy meal, eggs, bread, nice. So probably I'm going to have with this for three days, it's enough for three days. And I say to myself, I cannot have in my pocket less than 20 pesos, everything, if I can have more is going to be better for me very well, at least I need to have 20 pesos. 20 pesos is like, two dollars, right? Is the thing that now was my goal for take it out from the poverty that I was living in Mexico. So it was go against what am I what am I doing in that moment in Mexico, and I said, I'm going to take whatever work in front of me, it doesn't matter if it's it doesn't have to be with the economy or mathematics, it doesn't matter. So one day, I saw the opportunity to start to sell water jugs, those bottles from 20 liters, I can sell ten of these ones, I'm going to be available to have those 20 pesos everyday to my to my life. But the reality in Mexico, it's always pushing you more more more until you decide that you cannot live anymore in Mexico, you need to find another way.

I was leaving the violence that robberies, the abuse against my wife she in the place that she was working. Because they put it to work and they don't pay you until one year later. You need to find a way how to pay your bills, with the promises that you want to pay when the government pays you the money that they get you. And maybe, sometimes take more than one year. And that is the way of your live. And and you're leaving a step behind, always a step behind. Nothing is enough. And with that as I was leaving the violence. So my brother was sick. I stopped selling water jugs. I receive another threat from another guy. My daughter was in there. Many, many situations. Even one day the police took me outside my house because they they say that I was selling drugs and I said I hadn't understand. And so, in that way we normalize what is the violence in Mexico. It's stay too close to the violence. It push you out of a way of life, that you don't deserve, that your daughter doesn't deserve. I find this place online. That is an agency they pay you if you go to work to Canada, so I can do it. But I've been been living through this. I can do it doesn't matter. So I went to the interview there the guy just saw me and rejected me. He said no you are not the kind of guy that we are looking for. You have studies, you have a different kind of life. But I tell him I have studies but I know how to work. I've been working for the last couple of years very hard. I know how to carry on a lot of water jugs all the time and every day. I start to work six o'clock in the morning. He said show me your hands. How many water jugs do you carry on every day? And I told him. And he said you know how to speak a little bit of English. I said yes. He start make me an interview in English. So he said, I think we are good for that. We need to prepare some physical tests for to see if you are available to work in there. And it was simple. It's, well you need to pay for it your visa, your work permit. At that moment, he has asked me for my passport. I spent like 1200 may have maybe 1500 pesos. I think it's like, two or three weeks later, they say, well, your ticket to go to Canada is ready. It was fast. They don't ask me anything about about nothing. They don't told me nothing about about what kind of work I was doing. I asked like a couple of times, but they told me the minimum wage. And I said, well, it's much more than the money that I'm just receiving here for working from 6am.

Sarah: So you didn't know what industry you were necessarily going to be working in?

Alvaro: I wasn't sure, nobody tells you. Only tell you, you need to go that day, I think it was a Sunday. They say that somebody is going to be there in the airport, and they give you a ticket. And you're just

going to jump in the airplane. You're going to go for one year. One year, you're going to come back to Mexico for small vacations and you need to be going back. It's a contract for two years.

Sarah: We're talking about experiences for you in terms of opportunities for work, it can take up to a year to get paid with your average government job within Mexico. Yet you paid 12 to 1500 pesos, and within a couple of weeks, they had lined up this opportunity for you in Canada.

Alvaro: Yeah, it was weekly. The first check that I received, it was like 800, 800 dollars for two weeks of work on the minimum wage. In that moment, I think it was like \$11.25 or something like that. We are talking about 2015, at the end of the town 2015. It doesn't look too bad to me. I started to sending money. My wife was finishing the master. After the she was working. She was carry on with my daughter.

I told in that moment that it was only eight hours. They told me you need to only go to work for eight hours. And so probably that will give me a chance to improved my English and have contact with the people that speak another language and you can be better in that. When I arrived in this place in Leamington. The first impression is the house of the owner. Probably this is the place where I'm going to live. They put us in what is the name of this thing?

Sarah: A bunkhouse?

Alvaro: Bunk bunker house with 30 people. And I wasn't living with another six guys in a small room with these bunk beds, no privacy, just one small window. The air conditioner it's always not working well. When it's wintertime it's really hot and when it's summertime it's really cold. You need to use an extra blanket for to cover you and you continue sacrifice things, right, because you're thinking in the people that it's in Mexico.

That's when I find the first time that I step inside the greenhouses. This is going to be like jail. The smells, the heat inside the greenhouse. The temperatures are insane, total insane. So, I was get used to work hard. And I was saying to myself, okay, just do it, somebody needs to. My first work it was on the cucumber. The cucumber needs more temperature than another product. They have, spines, the plant have spines on the tips. And it stich you all the time close to the to the eyebrow.

I was trying to do as fast as I can, just like the rest of the guys, but never is enough with the owners never enough. They say something and and another thing happened to control you inside the green house. I started working like from 7am to 7pm and sometimes after that they send us back in for another three or four hours finishing at 11 o'clock every day, every day. And never have a day off. After six months of work. In your contract they say you're going to have one day off at least per week but never have. It was just work, work, work. And they want to see if you are capable to do it. And after that they tell you well, they say that they pay you per hour. But that then it's you are working by piece. You need to punch every time. Every time that you finish the work in one row, and you are going to punch everything there and the computer is taking the numbers that you are doing working with a plant- how many plants you be leaving, how many plants you are rolling, what is the amount of harvesting that you are been doing in every row, every minute. So you are watching the numbers and at the same time you are watching the numbers that they ordered. So, it's a lot of pressure. Suddenly you stop drinking water, the water is there, but you don't go to the water because if you stop for the water you are behind of the numbers that the other workers are doing. And another people says, well, I cannot do that, I'm going to start working before, an hour before the start of work. And you start work at 7, they start to work at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning in the greenhouse. And they are leaving with a flashlight, just for trying to stay one step

ahead to the rest of the guys. No?. It's too much control. They feel that they have the power to say, well, if you want to bring your family, we are not allowed to bring your family. When you said why if you if I'm paying for the tickets of my family, why I cannot bring them here. And that's when you realize that the minimum wage is not enough to live. And you find that nobody in Canada is working inside of the greenhouse.

Nobody wants to earn the minimum wage. It's a process of selecting people all the time. If you have a huge area with 10 workers that are leaning and rolling the plant, and suddenly you are watching the numbers, you said, well, probably if I only have 4 guys doing all this work, and send it back to their country, it is another six, they can do the work. So in that way, I'm going to save money from six guys. That's just an idea how is the pressure for the guys that they stay in their. So I just stay in there for four years. And at the end of those four years, I start feeling sick, stop to sleep, I stopped to eat, I was losing weight, I was feeling pains.

They never care about you. The chemicals and products that they use inside the greenhouse. If they need to spray over you, they spray over you. Yeah, never give you gloves never give you face mask. It's, it's insane. That's why when COVID happened, everybody started to be sick in there. Really poor conditions of life. And everybody knows, and nobody wants to do anything. Because they are having profit. And it's only about profits. Like all life, it's about profits.

Don't speak the language, it's like you're not available, they make you vulnerable. If you have a day out, but you want to buy a coffee and you're not having the words or to ask for a coffee, it's like everything goes against you, no? The health system- if you are start feeling pain, and you cannot express what you're feeling. And at the same time, the owners use that information for to go against the worker. For example, if you are feeling like depressed, you go to the doctor, you are sharing things with this specialist. And suddenly the owner can call and say, hey, what's happening with this worker, and they share the information, no? And at the end, they take the decision, well, we can have this guy for depression, you send it back, replace it with another guy. One day, for example, another guy told me, hey Alvaro, you know, one day we were working in another greenhouse and the owner start to throwing tomatoes in our backs for tried to push us to work faster. He was doing a lot of things like against us. One day we decided not to work more for him. And we went outside. The owner complaint with the police about the workers broke the windows, and start inventing things against it. So at the end, the police says well I would like to hear both the both sides of the story, that police decide they need to do something about. So at the end, another greenhouse took the workers and the complaint don't process too much with the owner, no? And they continued with their lives. And that's all and stories like that happen a lot of the time.

I was having another friend always was telling me. He was very fast, very strong. But he couldn't. He couldn't sleep during the night. One guy was snoring all the time and this guy just wake up, like you finish at 11, you wake up like one o'clock in the morning. And after that he couldn't sleep. So this thing was affecting him. And one day go with the doctor and the doctors have some pills for sleep during the night. So the guy said, I'm feeling very tired. When I wake up, I cannot do it my work. He went again with a doctor. And the doctor says, well, I need to give you pills for to wake up. And this guy doesn't know the language, there was doesn't know what it was labeled in the bottle. So he was taking the pills to sleep in the morning and the pills to wake up during the night. The stress, the pressure and the anxiety, everything combined. He was like a bomb just to explode. One day, it's, of course, the the manager decides not to bring him back to Canada. They put him in a blacklist for not coming back again to Canada.

So if you go to the same agency, they can say, well, you are here on this blacklist, we cannot bring you again to Canada.

Alvaro: So that kind of stories happen. For example, if you fall one of those cars, when you're rolling and leaning the plan, you are in a very bad place. Right now, I know that there's rules to work on the safety conditions, right? But those guys don't, don't follow the rules. It's just, if you felt it's your fault, and they tell you they don't have they don't have afraid for to tell you. They say sign off these bunch of papers, they give you the papers in English. You don't know it really well what you are reading. The paper says that the company is not responsible for the accident.

Sarah: And farms are dangerous places. I don't think most people realize how dangerous a farm is. You're working with machinery, equipment, chemicals, you name it, there's so the environment alone how hot it can get in the summertime, especially if you're in a greenhouse like they are dangerous places there's risk.

Alvaro: One day I was watching one of these little worms on the cucumbers. The worm was aggressive. And I decided not to say nothing to the manager, no? The next day I came back to the same area, they've finished a little piece of a huge area. And that's when I said oh my god, this is warm, it's really aggressive. That's a really aggressive attitude for an insect. So what kinds of things we are growing up in here? Grower says, okay, we need to put chemicals here and see what happens. But the worm is still going aggressive. So the grower changed the chemicals. And then they started putting more chemicals more aggressive.

Sarah: Yeah, it's just about the bottom line. And I think you've you've given a lot of really important experiential context to what folks don't typically see conditions are typically painted as better than what you would be experiencing at home. So therefore, it seems like a great opportunity. And then slowly, that trust is really eroded as you begin to see the levels with which you know, it's not actually minimum wage, now you're being tied to the amount of work you accomplish, and how that's just intended to continue to grind and chip away and chip away until you're asking too much of one human to be able to provide this labor. And yet, if this labor program were to disappear, many producers would not be able to fill these roles because they would be going against their own labor laws in order to try and fill these roles in the ways that they are using labor from other places. So, I think you're beautifully demonstrating and discussing what that looks like, as as a human and what that was like for you. I'd really like to know, in your opinion, what your decision to come and work in Canada has really meant for you now that it's several years later. COVID has started to recede a bit still very much present. But certainly COVID brought a spotlight to the challenges faced by workers in this industry and here under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, the congregate living the appalling living conditions that are really going unchecked on different farms and in these remote areas where folks don't know really see the conditions in which these bunk houses are really held in what kind of state these living conditions are. So, I would love to hear a little more about what your decision to come to Canada has really meant for you and your family. But also where things stand now, a couple years later?

Alvaro: I think it was about the sacrifice. My wife was telling me I want to go in there studying something different. So I said, well, just finished the master, and hm coming here and try to find a scholarship and see if we can change our way of life. Right? That is your hope. Right? You don't, you never know if it's going to happen one day, you are uncertain about the future, but you continue doing. My wife came like a couple of times and suddenly find a scholarship for a PhD. That was a way for to get it out from the

greenhouse. I find another job, in here in Windsor, and I was washing floors. And it was the same situation- minimum wage, working all night. My daughter was asking me, hey, that you're sleeping all day. I'm feeling very tired and I need to go back seven days a week, Monday through Sunday, and working around- sweeping, washing with those huge stores you need to go three times around. And then after that more work, at the end, you're running all over the place trying to finish it. And I said now it's a no. I need to find another thing. And I went, and one agency here. That's how I changed, just asking. And the language helped me a lot. But at the end help me to find another work.

Sarah: Now, so you were changing jobs, doing your best to try and keep grinding away as best you could your wife was finishing her PhD here in Canada, and your daughter had joined you. So, I wanted to ask maybe what some of the impacts now in terms of on your family, on your community on yourself, and where you're at now in terms of your outlook for the future, and kind of the journey that you've had up until now.

Alvaro: We are different right now. Since the moment that we broke the family for to start another way of life. Everything is different with my daughter, with my wife. We lost everything in the middle. So, we are not being capable to fix all those things. I hope that in the future those things change. I don't think I can recover time that I lost with my daughter. I don't have too much expectations about it. If I leave my daughter over there, that is a possibility that she be kidnaped. Or if you find her at least death. It's a it's a good choice. But but the numbers in there, it's just going up going up going up, nothing change. Right now the left party that isn't in the government, they say that they're going to end with with the poverty in Mexico. But you see that the numbers it's they are increasing the poverty of Mexico. So there's just lies and lies, nothing changed. We are normalizing the collapsing of our lives in a different way and we need to get used to.

Sarah: And I think that's such a critical point. We're so desensitized. We're normalizing kind of the dysfunction of our society and becoming gradually more and more used to the ways in which that dysfunction chips away at what we normally would want to uphold. And I think that that's such a crucial piece, because many folks don't understand that larger narrative that you've so eloquently put together here, in terms of the realities that you're facing in Mexico, the decisions being made by governments that are kind of promoted as being for the people, but really work against their mandate. And now being in this situation of having to sacrifice and sacrifice and sacrifice in order to play by the rules of this game, which are really structured in a way to further marginalize you. And I think now you've arrived at this place where you see through a lot of that propaganda and those methods for marketing a lot of these policies. Can you speak at all to Canada's role in this kind of force displacement of people from places like Mexico due to a variety of different reasons, but what that kind of looks like now, do you have any kind of insight as to what Canada's role in that looks like and what the impacts are?

Alvaro: Since the moment that Canada signed the agreement with the United States and Mexico, it was the moment of destroy of one of those countries. And the only the only people that is going to be losing everything it was the people in Mexico. There's no chance that a company from Canada absorbed one of those huge companies in the United States. Mexico is not doing anything to protect their companies. So they push all the society to change and to sell everything. And give us another chance. The people said, well, the only thing that we can do is sell drugs, we need to start selling more drugs to United States. And there's a lot of communities in Mexico that lives off harvesting marijuana. And they can tell you 10 years ago, 20 years ago, I prefer to live from this harvesting marijuana that to don't have anything on my table.

The reality of Mexico, this agreement helps that push those people more. Right now, they are having small towns and cities, airports, politicians control it for everything. This is the reality that we are living in Mexico's consequences. Destroyed everything that one. If you have people that they can sacrifice everything, because they already lose everything. That is the people that you can bring to your country. They don't going to complain about it. If you see those people and you try to tell them a let's go and make a union to go against the owners. Those people not going to be organized for that. They just want to send some warning for their family.

Sarah: And so, what gives you hope toward the future, what is giving you the energy and motivation needed given your experience over the last several years and bringing your family to Canada? What gives you your drive now moving forward with the next steps in moving towards the future?

Alvaro: My daughter. She wake up, she doesn't feel that it's under threat. She can't walk to the school. She told me about the friends, the games. She started talking about the future. That's one thing that the kids don't do in Mexico. I think so. I'm just a father. And I saw all the good things in in my daughter, right. This chance we talked about future that you hear your daughter about while all the things that she wants to do. It's priceless.

The first time that I separated my daughter, the separation of the family, I cannot describe it, its pain. But the second time it was really...she was screaming and I remember that she told me "just put me in a bag, in one of your bags." I was very sad. Very sad. And when I arrive in Canada, it was sat in the kitchen and another guy was coming with me and he said that, hey Alvaro, you know the first time always is this, it happens. And he told me the same story. His son tells him, hey dad, put me in a bag. I'm not going to make a sound.

Sarah: Alvaro, what would you like to see if anything in terms of changes on the part of Canada with regard to their immigration policy or treatment of migrant workers? Like you said, there are so many people now with the exact same stories where you are faced with an impossible decision, and then gradually more and more sacrifices to try and make something work in what is otherwise a very overwhelmingly uncontrollable situation?

Alvaro: Ah, I don't know, I just, I don't believe that these things are changing in an easy way. It's like, they just make you part of the huge circle. In that way they use you. They say, hey, look at this, as a government, we are doing some. I don't believe too much in that. But the things that I would tell it, well, you need to go there and find what is the things that the owner is doing against the workers. You need to give the permission for have a union. Because in Mexico, if you have them from that union, the government just decides to destroy all the unions just for to have this agreement with Mexico with Canada and the United States. But the union sometimes help a little bit to the worker in the way that the owner don't go through all the human rights or the benefits or the this power of negotiation for salary and other things. One day, I saw that the minimum wage just jump from \$11.25 to \$14. So I said, well, probably, it's going to be a good thing. And the government announced that the next year is going to jump to \$15. And just ran away. The owners organized something and called Justine Trudeau in Leamington. I saw some pictures with migrant workers taking pictures with Justine Trudeau, and I said, oh, I think this is going to be huge. I don't realize about what was the reunion. But the reunion was for the owners trying to stop the minimum wage from rising. And I said well these guys have a lot of power, and the workers don't have the power. Something wrong is happening inside the greenhouse and you need to come and see it. Because they do it. they prepare first everything before that the government go

and check what's happening. And so that is not the proper way to find what the greenhouses are doing wrong. Because they hide the machines that they use them for spread the chemicals, they give you gloves, in that they give you gloves, they give you face masks, they they give you proper clothes and of course, they put the people that cannot speak with with the other guys in their own language.

Sarah: So, I do commend you, and also express deep gratitude for you being willing to share some of these experiences, which I have no doubt is not the easiest thing in the world to do. But telling your story so that we can bring a more accurate real conversation of what it is actually like to participate in some of these programs that are really marketed as being so great, but have immense capacity for human suffering, and that the average Canadian and community member needs to be aware of that they need to be informed of what that reality actually feels like and to maybe step up in terms of being a little bit more present in solidarity and a little bit more present in this fight to have policies that actually protect the humans that are intended to serve. Thank you, Alberto for sharing your story.

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 www.cnee.ca . Our theme music is by the musician bio Unit. This podcast is funded by the sisters of ST Joseph of Toronto.