

# Essential but Disposable - Finale

**Sarah Guinta:** Hello and welcome back to the podcast. My name is Sarah Guinta, and I am joined today by Leah Watkiss. Hello, Leah.

**Leah Watkiss:** Hi Sarah. How's it going?

**Sarah Guinta:** Good! How are you doing?

**Leah Watkiss:** Good.

**Sarah Guinta:** So, Leah, why don't you introduce yourself and kind of some of the work that you do before we get going with the episode.

**Leah Watkiss:** Thanks, Sarah. So, my name is Leah Watkiss. I'm the director of the Ministry for social justice, peace and creation care of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto. Our office administers and runs the Collaborative Network to End Exploitation, so I sit as the chair on that committee.

**Sarah Guinta:** Fantastic. So, the reasoning behind really starting this podcast and the focus of each of the episodes, we really want to have a moment to kind of look back and understand a lot of kind of the themes that have come out of the podcast, and each of the conversations that we've had with all of our guests to reflect on, but also to kind of wrap this up in a way that honors where the conversation started and where they're going. Where do we go from here? So, looking back, what would you say is one of the things that stood out most to you, as you listen to some of the conversations that we had.

**Leah Watkiss:** When I was really listening to the opening episode with Gabriel. And he kept talking about how this is by design by design by design, it set off bells in my head, because when we were trying to decide on the title of this podcast, and we had a bunch of different options, one of them was exploited by design. And I think that systematic piece is such an important theme that has come up in each of the episodes. That yes, there are good employers, we're not saying that every single employer out there is exploiting their workers. But that this system is designed in such a way that it makes it really easy for this kind of exploitation to take place.

**Sarah Guinta:** And for those vulnerabilities to persist, and to create an environment in which any other employee or labor in Canada would not be subjected to those same vulnerabilities, we have labor laws specifically to prevent that. So, seeing the disparity between what migrant workers have to face versus any other employee in Canada, you really start to see that discrepancy.

**Sarah Guinta:** So, in looking back at some of these episodes, I think looking at the ways that these vulnerabilities are present, but also the ways in which as you said, many of the immigration laws and systems or programs, temporary work programs have been designed in a certain way to really limit

workers and their ability to advocate for themselves, to find recourse and find safety in moments of either vulnerability or exploitation. And I think it was very enlightening to see that not much has changed, especially talking to Faye Faraday who's a human rights lawyer with a great deal of experience with immigration law in Canada, talking about the history of immigration law in Canada, how black and brown and people of color were largely rejected from even being able to enter Canada, seeing that those pathways for recourse really aren't there have not evolved over the course of any of these programs really running, which has been since the 1950s. In Canada. That really struck me that not much has changed, and that there's very few ways in which migrant workers can truly advocate for themselves, if they end up in these situations. It really is very limiting.

**Leah Watkiss:** Very limiting. And it's incredible to think of how much migrant workers have done, and how, how far they have come and how they have banded together and held one another up in the face of all of those systemic barriers, is just incredible. I contrast this to the experience of my parents. So, my parents came from England in 1981. And they are white, they speak English. They have degrees, but there was a recession in England, and they couldn't find work. So, my dad got a job with de Havilland in aerospace. So, they emigrated. And when I talked to them about their experience, my dad was a professional engineer. And he didn't have huge hurdles to jump over in terms of getting those credentials recognized here in Canada. And when they landed, I said you know what, what was your status when you arrived you like temporary where you this read that? My mom just kind of shrugged. I was like, no, we were landed immigrants. We were landed immigrants and there was a wait period for Oh hip, but you could pay to skip that wait period, which my family was in a position to do. But, you know, they landed, and they were landed immigrants. And then after however many years they got their citizenship, and here my family is. And you compare that to the experience of these workers who are from colonized countries, as opposed to the colonizer countries,

**Sarah Guinta:** "Largely the global South"

**Leah Watkiss:** Yeah, and the type of work that they're expected to do and the type of conditions that they're expected to put up with. And they're still supposed to be grateful for the opportunity to come here, just really that that racism and xenophobia, and that settler colonial mindset is so obvious.

**Sarah Guinta:** And that empathetic gap that's created by you know, my parents had this experience, and this is how it went, why can't you just accept that that's just the way it is, you know, this was such a necessary experience for my family or ancestors, what have you. And so sometimes it's also removing that veil of not realizing the change, or the very specifically designed ways in which folks from the global south are treated differently, even here in Canada, and that this has been going on for decades.

**Leah Watkiss:** Yeah.

**Sarah Guinta:** I think something that came out of our conversation with all of our guests, but also as well in particularly Gabriel, was that this is packaged in a very specific way. This is marketed these temporary foreign work programs are marketed in a very specific way, both by Canada and Canadian government, but also by recruiters in the countries of origin. And I think you've done quite a bit of work talking with and working with local workers who have spoken about their experiences with recruiters

locally and some of the conversations they had in terms of how this program was marketed to them in the first place. Has there ever been anything that's kind of stuck out to you in those conversations about how workers initially sign up from their country of origin.

**Leah Watkiss:** I met a migrant worker the other week, who sold his car in order to pay all the fees that he needed to get here. On the assumption that he would make that money back. And then some, you know, within a very short order. And then others that we spoke with who talked about sort of the trap of getting into you're told, okay, come to Canada, all you have to do is pay this amount. So, they pay that amount. Oh, now you have to have a medical done. So that's going to cost X amount of dollars. Okay, well, now you need to pay for the paperwork to be filled out. And that's X amount of dollars. And so, they get caught because where they thought it was only going to cost maybe one or \$2,000. They ended up having to pay \$15,000 to get here. But it's one of these things where you've sunk. \$5,000. So, are you going to lose your \$5,000? Or are you going to scrounge together another 1000, but it just keeps adding up and adding up and adding up. So already, when they come here, they're already behind so far behind, and they have to work to pay off those debts just to break even before they can start thinking about actually earning the money that they were promised?

**Sarah Guinta:** Yes. And then also engaging in that battle of am I being paid the money I was going to be promised. And there have been many issues that that has not been the case once workers arrive here in Canada.

**Leah Watkiss:** Yeah, once they get here, there's things taken off their paycheck for transportation for housing, there's all these fees that they weren't expecting. They have to pay into CPP and EI, those deductions are made, even though those workers can't actually claim CPP or claim EI. They still have to pay into it. They are told they're going to be paid hourly, when they arrive, they find out it's only going to be piecemeal. And so, they're already getting paid less than they thought they would. Then they are seeing these deductions made that they didn't know would be there. And it's just one thing after another after another.

**Sarah Guinta:** You can see how that really spawns and how once you start down that path, the precarity builds. The layers of precarity and vulnerability build to the point where you, really many guests expressed that they felt trapped, they didn't really have much choice as the process continued, right? Because I know many people have kind of said, you know, why don't you just go home? Why don't you just change? Why don't you just do something else. And that isn't, that isn't the option that isn't the choice being made here.

**Leah Watkiss:** That was really a strong motivator for us behind developing our migrant worker exercise is when you're trying to talk about these issues with folks and they, they don't understand how big these issues are, and how many different layers they have to fight through. So, with our migrant worker exercise, we have folks take on the role of being migrant workers and they physically go through some of the things that migrant workers have to do. So, they start in their country of origin, they get recruited. So, they kind of imagine themselves in these challenging and difficult situations where they want to provide for their family, everyone wants to do that, like everyone wants a better future for their kids or take care of the parents who took care of them. Everyone wants to kind of have a better life. And they

buy into this myth of Canada, the good, they think that Canada is a good place, right. And then they arrive at the border, and they show up on the farm and nothing is how it was supposed to be, nothing is how it was promised. They don't even have the proper clothing that they need. Something that I've heard from workers over and over again, is like, they thought that they were going to die on their first night of a Canadian, not even a Canadian winter, but just the Canadian fall because they're in a house that doesn't have any heating. And they were told to bring warm clothes, but to them warm clothes might be just like a sweater, right? Not two wool socks and a winter jacket and stuff. So, in our workshop, people go through some of these experiences. And at the end of it, they asked the question, so what are you going to do? Are you going to stay working with the employer? Are you going to stay in Canada and try and find a different employer? But then you lose your immigration status? Are you going to go home? Well, why don't you call the Ministry of Labor? Well, how are you going to call them? They're only open between nine and five? How do you know who the Ministry of Labor is? How do you know that they're the person that you're supposed to call? Well, what if you get a lawyer? Well, how are you supposed to access a lawyer, You're the lawyer is probably only open between nine and five, the lawyer speaks English, the lawyer costs money. So, we kind of go through these things with the participants, so that they can see and sort of experience what it's like to feel so trapped.

**Sarah Guinta:** ... “and isolated.”

**Leah Watkiss:** Yeah, with so few options, so little choice for moving forward. But then we do also then shift into with the exercise, the things that migrant workers have done, and the way that they are organizing and the workers that we meet, who got connected with some social service supports, who got connected maybe through the local church, or were able to pool their money together so that they could afford a lawyer. And we talk about how those workers need our support. We need to listen to them, we need to honor them, we need to recognize that this country can only exist because of the work that they do. We need to respect that we need to honor that.

**Sarah Guinta:** I think you touched on three really important points. And one is the push and pull factors that have really been identified in a lot of the conversations we've had and why people make these choices to come and be part of these programs, despite how they're packaged and marketed as well as the intentional temporary nature of these programs and how it becomes a barrier to workers being able to fully engaged either in their country of origin or in the country where they're working. They don't have the ability to vote here in Canada, they can't impact policy or change. And similarly, they spend eight months often out of the year here in Canada with these work permits going home. That's the first opportunity they're getting to spend with family friends within their own space and within their own people and their own networks. There isn't enough time to fully engage on that side either. And so that presents its own kind of set of challenges and problems. And the other piece too is that these programs have been around and for so long, and many of the conversations that we're having now have been had many times over. What do you think needs to happen to kind of breakthrough that cycle of we've known for decades that these permits and programs are problematic? How do we finally see sustained change at a legislative level that will start to close some of these loopholes that cause vulnerability?

**Leah Watkiss:** It's so frustrating to see, like a new minister come in who is completely clueless. Like, oh, I didn't know this was a problem. Let's study it. Like we've studied it, we've studied it to death, have

like parliamentary reports that say, closed work permits are bad, and create a situation for rampant exploitation, like this shouldn't be a surprise. And this should be your job to know. And a big part of the challenge is we've got all of these little Gabriel talks about it, like the band aid solutions, like there's so many, basically our whole immigration system needs an overhaul. And what we're finding is there are these little band aid solutions of like, oh, well, we'll try this pilot over here, where folks can get PR, permanent residency, or we'll try this over here are okay, so the problem is that people are having their passports taken away, one of the recent things by the Ontario government was, we're going to make this huge, fine. Okay, well, that's a great way of looking like you're doing something that doesn't actually cost you anything like how are you going to enforce that you're still relying on workers to know and understand that their rights are being violated, and for them to go and make a complaint and navigate their way through? I mean, I don't know when the last time was that you had to navigate a government website. But as like someone who was born here in Canada, I struggled to understand those sites and to understand that information.

**Sarah Guinta:** And you aren't constantly at risk of deportation. Should whatever complaint you lodge not, it's not followed through on, right.

**Leah Watkiss:** Exactly. So, you think of how, how much harder that is. And at the end of the day, the work is permanent? It's not like we're going to suddenly be like, oh, guess what, we don't need workers in the fields picking crops anymore. Yeah. Like the need is there, the jobs are permanent. Why don't we make the people temporary, other than this desire to control? Who can be Canadian and what a Canadian looks like?

**Sarah Guinta:** Yeah. And a human worthy of basic labor rights, rights, and protections. And I think when we talk about how these things are made by design, it is profitable to maintain these loopholes to maintain these vulnerabilities right, keeping things temporary and disengaged, keeping people in a place of precarity allows for larger margins. We've talked with many guests about how this is not unskilled labor, though, it benefits the profit side to deem them that way. When you talk about how many of the workers have been coming here for decades, they spend majority of each year in Canada for decades of their lives. And then their children also joined programs and find that they spend most of their year in Canada working in these conditions. And it starts becoming this cyclical thing over and over. This becomes a generational issue for many of these workers. And you we saw, for example, with conversations with Alvaro who's from Mexico City, and we talked about the North American Free Trade Agreement and how these agreements were made in the spirit of benefiting our various countries and free trade and supporting workers. But as he states in his episode that workers are always the ones to lose, always, and we have these structures in which these permits are being granted. And the vulnerabilities that have been presented over and over again to those with legislative power. But they are often not in the room making the decisions when you have immigration law being reviewed. The ways in which our trade agreements are being crafted. This is where corporations and those with the capital and profit to be able to shape these conversations. And those with the most benefit of maintaining these vulnerabilities. They're the ones in the room making these decisions. And I think that becomes a very frustrating piece.

**Leah Watkiss:** It's all about opening up borders and letting things move freely. But we don't let the people move.

**Sarah Guinta:** No.

**Leah Watkiss:** Because we still want control over who those people are.

**Sarah Guinta:** Yeah! And just the limiting of choice. And you know, what the human side of it that I find particularly heartbreaking is in conversations, for example, the episode with Elizabeth and Jesse, when we were talking about the Philippines. And so many workers have talked about making the decision to join these programs being so that they can provide for their families when they have really no other option of livelihood, whether it's been the economic or political situations in their country of origin, whether it be the presence of climate change and natural disaster, especially in the Caribbean, which wipes out so much of the economic employment sector, all at once and for extended periods of time. And so, you have folks talking about how they're making these choices, so that they can provide for their family. But then the realities of these permits make it impossible to really sustain or be a part of those families. As we said, this is a generational thing. It's become a generational thing where more and more parents are seeing their kids enter the program as they reach adulthood. And Elizabeth was talking about being away from her children for 10 years, 10 years caring for someone else's kids as a live in caregiver and nanny, but not being able to be with her own children in the Philippines for over 10 years, how can she continue to be a part of her family and that important parent figure when that is the reality of really one of the only choices she has to provide for her kids?

**Leah Watkiss:** What an impossible choice for a parent to make. Like to have to choose between providing for your kids in terms of their material and physical needs, versus being able to be present to your kids, I can't imagine.

**Sarah Guinta:** So, impossible to reconcile that reality really. And so we really did tease out a number of threads, whether it be the very racist structural pieces, the systemic pieces, the fact that this is something that folks get caught in this cycle, and really can't get out of it due to the fact that there's so few choices, and such great levels of precarity that make it far too risky to break out of this system, we also chatted a great deal around ways in which folks might be able to help, especially those in Canada, when we talk about I know you mentioned, and we talked at great length with a number of different guests about how this is often deemed unskilled labor or low wage labor, right, that farmers and other industries often can't find local labor to fill these roles. And so, this is a great opportunity to bring folks to Canada who wouldn't have the same economic opportunities elsewhere that's often how it's packaged. When in reality, COVID really did shine a very bright spotlight on the risks to the lives of migrant workers, but that that was somehow acceptable, because they were so essential to the functioning of our economy, to our food systems to our industries, that they were some of the only ones allowed to travel during the pandemic so that they could go to their jobs and continue with harvest, continue with planting continue with the agricultural process necessary for our food security here in places like Ontario, but that they are still deemed disposable labor, something that's to be hired in these moments of great need, and then disposed of afterward, that they can come here but they don't get full worker and labor rights and protections as any other Canadian. It really doesn't match up with the

reality of this low skilled labor designation and the intent behind keeping these programs at such a vulnerable place. So, over the course of this podcast, we've talked about many themes. We've talked about the immigration system, kind of the history and context for a lot of these temporary foreign work permits, whether it be live in caregivers, agricultural workers, a number of different industries here in Canada. We've talked about those push and pull factors both in Country of Origin in hearing Canada, and some of the more nefarious kind of reasons and intentions behind maintaining these vulnerabilities within these temporary work programs. And we've talked a great deal about different things that local organizations, workers, rights groups advocates are doing to try and continue to fight this fight. I know we've said it's been going on for a long time, but half the battle is educating the broader public on what the realities of this issue are, as well as directing them to the agencies and people who are doing the work now to see that some of these vulnerabilities are addressed. And so, I just want to touch on that very quickly, before we close and end off. If folks are looking for more information, there's a number of different campaigns that they can educate themselves on a great resource to check out is migrant Rights Network, you can find them online, they've been behind a number of these different campaigns that are really pressuring government to consider things like regularization, status for all, open work permits some of the things legislatively that would close a lot of these gaps and change a lot of these issues that are consistently faced by migrant workers here in Canada. I know that there was the United Nations Special Rapporteur this past summer, is there anything you wanted to mention about that?

**Leah Watkiss:** So, one of the reasons that the UN Special Rapporteur tour came to Canada was because of an open letter that was sent by a group of Jamaican workers to their ministry, saying we are in these horrendous conditions, we need you to help, and we need the situation to change, and they pin that as an open letter. And that was one of the things that brought Canada to the attention of the Special Rapporteur, and when he came, I mean, his findings are that the closed work permits are creating rampant exploitation and calling for change. So, we'll continue to watch for the response of this government to that rapporteur, not holding our breath. But you know, every action like this is another, another brick and low wall. It's part of building this movement. And we will get there, I'm confident that the work that migrant workers are doing will get there. But I think for those of you who are listening to this podcast, for those of you who are here in Canada. We need more Canadians to know about what's going on. When I tell people about the work that we do, people are shocked and appalled. Just the other week, I had a meeting with Sister Norma Pimentel. She's a Mexican American nun who does a lot of work on the border in the US. And we were telling her about our work. And she was gob smacked. Like she was totally shocked that this was happening here in Canada, she had no idea. So, we still have this myth about Canada, the good and we're a safe haven and we're a welcoming place, and everybody here has human rights. So, we need to dispel that myth and look at the hard truth of our country and our immigration systems and reconcile. Reconcile what is, with what we wish we were.

**Sarah Guinta:** Yes, getting to that requires the action of everyday folks in engagement of everyday Canadians, in these fights in these issues, and that it's worthwhile to strive toward that ideal. But let's be real about the fact that we're not there. We never were there. We weren't built with the intention of getting there, but that we have the power as Strong Communities That Care about making a better society for everyone. We all have a role to play in informing ourselves getting engaged and supporting a lot of these agencies and advocates who are trying to do this work. I think it's been a really lovely opportunity to kind of look back at each of the conversations we've had with our guests, whether they

be workers or frontline advocates, lawyers, specialists, and I know we've learned a lot along the way we've had really meaningful personal experience is shared. And so, I just want to reiterate that for those of you looking for more information, the CNEE.CA website is a great place to learn more as well as Migrant Rights Network, Migrante is another local organization as well as the FCJ refugee center, all of whom contribute greatly to the work that we do and vice versa. And I think on a closing note, our first episode, our guest, Gabriel had spoken about the book that he had just released Harvesting Freedom, which was released earlier this year in 2023. And I encourage all of you to go and look for that book and read it. But he lists a poem both in the beginning of that book, and at the end. And when he was a guest on our show, he shared the opening part of that poem, and it would be wonderful if he would be willing to share the closing part of that poem now, as we close off this podcast.

**Poem: I'm Many Things by Gabriel Allahdua (from his book "Harvesting Freedom")**

I am many things in Canada.....

a God

For my surname, Allahdua, a Muslim name for God.  
From my ancestor, on my father's side, an indentured worker from India

an Angel

for my given name, the Angel Gabriel; from Christianity,  
a religion imposed on my ancestors, through colonization.  
they've made me an angel, because my labor is used  
to create somebody else's heaven

a Slave

like my mother's ancestors, exploited for my labor  
far away from home

a Half Human

denied basic human rights; second class on the Canadian law

a Lab Rat

in a grant employment experiment  
Everything that has been introduced into the Canadian workplace- short term, contract,  
"flexible" employment- has been tried on us for fifty-seven years.

**What they try on migrant farm workers, they'll try on you next.**

**I am Many Things**

(reprise)

I am many things in Canada...

a God

Reclaiming my dignity,  
my godly position

that was snatched from me

An angel  
with a message of justice for the world

A Slave  
proud of my ancestry,  
fighting to break the chains that held my forebears  
and that still hold their descendants today

A Half Human  
who has found his other half

a Lab Rat  
who has escaped from the maze

**and has come back to show orders the way out.**

**Sarah Guinta:** That concludes our podcast documentary. Thank you to our guests for the experiences and stories they have shared throughout this series and to our listeners for your interest in support. Please Like and Share this documentary with your networks.