

Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 2
Migrant Workers and “The Pandemic Paradox”: The Unseen Hands That Truly Keep Us Afloat

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ANNOUNCER: You’re listening to *Needs No Introduction*. *Needs No Introduction* is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we’re all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: From ensuring Canada's food supply to providing it's care and support, to looking after us and our families and even helping to strengthen our social safety net, temporary migrant workers in Canada -pandemic or not - have long been Canada's essential workers. So why are they still denied belonging? How are they trapped within a paradox of being essential, but expendable and needed, but not wanted? And how do they, how do we, collectively resist?

In this episode of the *Courage My Friends* podcast, *Migrant Workers, and the "Pandemic Paradox": The Unseen Hands That Truly Keep Us Afloat*, we are very pleased to welcome Canada Research Chair in Canadian Migration Policy, Impacts and Activism and Associate Professor of Politics and Social Science at York University, Ethel Tungohan. Organizer with the Caregivers' Action Center and

Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change, Jhoey Dulaca. And activist and organizer with Justicia for Migrant Workers, Chris Ramsaroop.

Welcome. Jhoey, Ethel, and Chris.

CHRIS: Thank you for having us.

JHOEY: Thank you.

ETHEL: Thank you.

RESH: Great having you here. So Ethel let's begin with you. Could you, first of all, tell us a bit about your work and your current focus.

ETHEL: Absolutely. My current focus right now looks at temporary labor migration and also the effects of Canada's temporary labor migration policies on different groups of migrant workers.

I also have a longstanding interest in partnering, through socially engaged research projects, with different migrant organizations. I've had research partnerships with Migrant Resource Center Canada or MRCC, GABRIELA Ontario which is a Filipina feminist organization. And also Migrante Alberta and the Alberta Workers Association for Research and Education or AWARE. And one of the things that we explore in our various research partnerships are how different policies, which tend to invisibilize migrant workers, actually have longstanding effects on them. And we also have a focus looking at how migrant workers fight back through their organizations, but also through everyday forms of resistance.

RESH: And, just going back to you, Ethel, in order to understand the many calls for systemic change, we need to understand the system. So could you give us sort of a quick overview of what the Temporary Foreign Worker system in Canada looks like?

ETHEL: Absolutely. The thing about Canada that I find very perplexing is that it's always been constructed as a liberal immigrant receiving state. And to a certain extent that's true, but only for certain groups of people. So the easiest way to think about Canadian immigration policies is that there's citizen-track immigration and non-citizen-track immigration. And I would argue that temporary labor migrants tend to fall at the latter group.

So Canada historically has relied on temporary foreign workers, be it migrant farm workers, migrant domestic workers. And so when you look at today's system of temporary labor migration, you can see that Canada actually relies on the labor of temporary labor migrants in order to support its industries.

And COVID made that really clear, right? When the pandemic hit, exceptions were given when it came to border closures for migrant workers. So Canada tends to recruit migrant workers to work in farms, through programs like the Seasonal

Agricultural Workers. To work in private households through programs such as the Live-In Caregiver Program, which has been modified and is now the Caregiver Program. And through different time-limited contracts through the low-skill Temporary Foreign Workers Program. And there are different policies associated with each program, but that's generally what the program looks like.

And the final thing I'll add is that a lot of the entitlements that migrant workers were able to get through these programs were only given to migrant workers because they fought hard for it. Because they had the capacity to organize. So for example, migrant domestic workers, weren't given the right to apply for Canadian citizenship. But it was only because migrant domestic workers organized that they were given the eventual right to apply for Permanent Residency.

RESH: And in terms of the organizing and activism for the rights of migrant workers, Jhoey, you are with the Caregiver's Action Center and the Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change. So could you tell us a bit about your work with the Action Center and the Alliance and what actually brought you to this work?

JHOEY: I am an organizer with Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change and I am a former Caregiver myself.

And this is an organization that is member-led, migrant- led. We are a coalition of migrant farm workers, care workers, healthcare workers, migrant international students. And we are supporting each other to win fair immigration rights, fair immigration laws and worker rights.

We migrants, we want a better life. For me and my family, I went abroad because there's barely work in the Philippines. A lot of, our people are, studying, graduates, but there's not much work offered in the Philippines in our fields.

What made me come here is what Canada sold me when I was outside the country. It's the Canadian dream where everybody's nice, worker friendly. You work eight hours, you get paid by eight hours. You get paid overtime. You can exert your rights. You can say no if, they're abusing you and also the offer of getting your PR after working,

RESH: And that's your Permanent Residency status, right?

JHOEY: Yes. Getting your Permanent Resident status .

In the beginning it was a dream. It's not what happens in reality. The promise of Canada is like, when you get in, you are allowed to apply for permanent residence. That's the selling point, why I came here. When I got here it's different. Especially like my first employer. I was working for 15 hours, I'm getting paid seven hours.

It's not the good first experience for a lot of people.

RESH: It's interesting. You know, a lot of people don't quite realize how aggressively and actively people are actually recruited, as you're saying, to come to Canada on these promises of the golden paradise that you're gonna get housing..

JHOEY: Exactly

RESH: ..And you get job and all of this, and then suddenly when they get here, the story changes.

And, again, this is, one of the major hypocrisies within the system.

Now, back to you, Jhoey, the Alliance for Change has been in the news fairly recently because of a letter that was sent to the Jamaican Ministry of Labor by some of your members, a group of migrant farm workers from Jamaica. And Jamaica is one of those countries that's in a bilateral arrangement with Canada under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program. And in this letter, these workers likened their experience in Canada to "systemic slavery". Could you speak a bit more to this?

JHOEY: It's not only with the farm workers, it's across all sectors for migrant workers. They allow you to come here, but they won't allow you to have permanent status. And with permanent status, you are exercising your rights.

A lot of these people are tied to their employers. When I was working as a caregiver, I was tied to my employer and I couldn't do anything. If I was being abused, I couldn't just go and look for another work. Just like the farm workers, they're tied to their employers and the system is made for them to shut up.

First and foremost migrants come here to support their family. And with that in mind, even if you're being abused, you cannot do anything because the fear of losing your job. The fear of not coming back to Canada to work and support your family. That's what makes it hard for workers to stand up for their rights.

RESH: This type of assessment is certainly not new. And Chris, how have advocacy organizations like *Justicia* characterized the system of migrant labor. And could you speak a bit to your work within this area?

CHRIS: So I think for us, it's important to characterize this program in threefold. One, many of us will consider this a legacy of slavery. And when we talk about the legacy of slavery, it's looking at the legal structures, the legal institutions of exclusion, where workers - whether it's caregivers or agriculture workers - are excluded from many of the myriad of labor protections that exist in workers in other industries. Whether it's the right to organize, whether it's the right to holiday pay, right to employment standards, right to occupational health and safety protections.

And when I talk about a legacy of slavery, this comes from the work of both Mark Linder and Angela Davis. They look at the trajectory of labor protections and labor

rights post-slavery period, and Canada has very much been influenced by two employment regimes; the United Kingdom as well as the United States.

We see in particularly United States in their, legislative frameworks, the inherent racism that exists in who is provided what protections and who is not. This leads to forms of racial subjugation and the devaluating of some people. And the devaluating and de-skilling of particular communities in our current context, is people from the Global South.

For myself - I think Resh also has the same ancestral lineage - many of our families came to the Caribbean as indentured laborers, post- slavery period. So we were brought over to feed the plantation system. And when I say feed, I mean feed the economic, generating profit motives of the plantation industry.

And, for myself, it's not rhetoric to talk about all the temporary foreign worker programs, as forms of indentured labor. Because as my comrades, said earlier, people are tied to an employer. There's a constant threat of being sent back home, repatriation. A constant threat of being disbarred and not being able to ever work in Canada again. - Especially if you're exerting your rights, or if you try to build families here in Canada.

And if you look at the contracts that brought many of our ancestors to the Caribbean, and to other places across the world, it's very similar to what you find in those contracts to what workers have to sign today.

Finally, I think that the idea of these programs is, in addition to a legacy of slavery, indentured labor, it's also unfree labor; where an entire system is benefiting from the exploitation of particular groups of people.

And a big word is export production. So many of our families came to Canada as a result of colonialism and the way that our communities were made to be dependent on the Global North. And when our families come to Canada to migrate and to work in it's fields or factories or as caregivers, our labor is being used for the primary purpose of export production. In agriculture, for example, most of the products are for overseas. It's not meant for local markets as what's always produced, or what's always constructed. So it's important to see that profit motives, capitalism is a driving force behind immigration, not building communities.

Lastly, why would we say white supremacy? And I know right now people are gonna be like, well, yo, why you bringing up white supremacy in this conversation for my family being able to come to Canada - how dare you use such language?

If we look at both the internal government documents, as well as enhancer documents, particularly with the agricultural workers, we see the idea of something called "agricultural exceptionalism". Where at one time, agricultural workers from the North - whether it's Dutch people or Polish people or whoever - were given the ability to live here as equals, and it was encouraged by government officials.

It's only when we started to change our labor pool and started to have people first from Jamaica then other countries from the Global South, that it became restrictive. And we use multiple ways for controlling, containing this population, so they would not be members of our communities.

RESH: And so it goes back to, again, what Ethel was also saying, that we essentially have had two types of immigration systems in this country. That one is about bringing in people. And the other one is about bringing in labor. And certainly, Chris as you've pointed out, throughout the history of this country we have had what could be characterized as indentured labor. We know this from the building of the railroad across Canada and labor that was brought in from China is one of the the big examples.

And it can be quite dire. Again, going back to this letter, it was followed by the death of a Jamaican man on a farm in Southern Ontario. And this is not an isolated incident.

CHRIS: Actually that week, as far as we've been able to tell, two workers died. A Mexican worker died in Leamington. He was a mushroom harvester. And to date, anywhere from 10 to 12 workers that we know of have died in Canada, particularly here in Ontario.

Dozens and dozens of workers have died, because of dangerous working conditions.

And it's not just that people from the Global South are coming to take work that's considered dangerous, dirty and deadly. That they're just gonna come to Canada and accept any work, number one.

Number two it's just not that workers do not know their rights.

It's about the role of power and asymmetrical power imbalances. Agricultural workers, for example, are excluded from provisions under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

There are no industry specific regulations. And coupled with this constant threat of deportation and permanent loss of work. This is why workers are working in greenhouses for instance, working at heights without protections, being sprayed with pesticides and chemicals, working at a piece-rate system which has numerous and multiple forms of injuries on their bodies.

So it is critically important to see this as structural violence. And not just simply that it's a one-off, a few bad apples or a few bad players in the industry that need to be removed. This is an entire system that's been built to meet the needs of the employers, with not thinking about the needs of workers. And this is why trying to build power across the industry and across all forms of temporary work is necessary and essential to change the power imbalance that exists.

RESH: Okay. And Ethel, is this a system where abuses are the result of abusive employers flouting a system that could otherwise work well, which is something that we hear from those who advocate for the system. Or are these failures that, as Chris is saying, are endemic to a lax system where it's really just a matter of luck whether a migrant worker is treated humanely or abusively?

ETHEL: I think it's definitely the latter. I mean, the former argument assumes that there are good employers and so honestly it's not the system that's the problem, it's just that employers are abusing the system. I 100% agree with the analysis Chris offered, which is that the abuses that are part of migrant worker systems, make it such that having good employers becomes the exception.

And if we dive in and look at specific policies that make abuse so systemic, well one only needs to look at tied worker permits, right? Where workers cannot leave their places of employment easily because their immigration status and their work permits are tied to their employer, which means that employers' power over their workers is magnified.

Regulations surrounding where workers should live. Up until recently, migrant care workers were mandated to live with their employers. That was part of the Live-In Caregiver Program. Even now that happens for the majority of the cases for care workers coming in through the In-Home Childcare stream. And with that comes violations with respect to work time.

When you live in dwellings owned by your employers, when you live with your employers, it's much harder to get days off. It's much harder to say, "look, I can't work anymore, I'm actually on my off-time" because you want to get along with the people that you're living with.

But the fact of the matter remains, and this is something that Chris was saying as well, is that if you extend your analysis and look at this from a wider lens, right? You see a lot of rich countries exporting workers from Global South countries. So there the problem is systemic as well. And we have to ask the question, why are we prioritizing the needs of a wealthier group of countries over the needs of others. And alongside these policies there are all sorts of awful human considerations that accrue as well.

Especially for migrant care-workers, you see forced family separation, you see years if not decades of living apart from people's children. And so a lot of these abuses are baked into the system. In other words, migrant worker programs work because these systemic abuses are part of the system. These systemic abuses keep workers compliant. And so this is why it's so important to shed light on how the system actually functions,

RESH: And policing plays quite a role here as well, right? So we're hearing a great deal about a type of captive workforce who are afraid of reporting due to fears of reprisal, deportation of course being a big one and the end of much needed work.

Jhoey, could you speak to these types of fears that exist among migrant workers in terms of the authorities and the enforcement of these programs?

JHOEY: The authorities should protect your rights. Should be there for you, help you out. If you have rules to follow, they should also follow rules. It's not to intimidate you just because you don't have permanent resident status.

The authorities also inflict fear. If I, say something to the authorities, it might come back to me and I might lose my job. I might lose my source of income. I might lose the help for the families. Because what makes us stay here and, endure all of these, things are our families back home that we support. Right? The promise that we can bring them here and be together.

RESH: So insecure status, the threat of deportation really hangs over your heads.

JHOEY: Yes. Because sometimes it's beyond your control to lose your status. In situations that a worker is abused - instead of assessing the situation, giving a chance for the worker to, explain or do something about his situation, It comes out like a bullying thing. Especially when, workers lose their status, the authorities keep sending letters and the workers will be like looking at their shoulders all the time. Scared, you know, they don't know to where turn to. When you apply for PR for example, and they reject your papers, but they don't even tell you why they reject it. You have to figure that out on your own.

That's why a lot of organizations like ours, like Migrant Workers Alliance for Change is existing, because of these situations.

RESH: Right? So you need to mobilize among each other in order to protect yourselves

JHOEY: Yes. Yes, exactly.

You cannot really rely on authorities when you are working as a migrant. The authorities usually side with the employers. For example, when you make a complaint and the authorities would knock on the door of the employer and inspect the house and, the working conditions. But the employer is there and the caregiver is behind. So what are you going to expect when you ask, the caregiver how is your work? Of course they will say, "oh, I'm okay" because the employer is basically watching and it's the same with the farms. I don't know if you read the letter. But it's said that, when the inspectors are coming, the employers are preparing for them because the inspectors come announced. Everything you wanted to see will be there like all good and dandy. But in reality, after the inspector, goes out like the, the farm workers will be, transported to the, same old, bad conditions they were having.

So sometimes it's hard to rely on authority because they are with the system. That's where the fear comes from as well. So who am I going to trust? If I cannot trust these

people inspecting, am I going to trust the police? Am I going to trust other authorities?

If I were allowed to apply for Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers - during the pandemic it was okay. But now there's a lot of, disapprovals with that policy. You have to have an anonymous... that you can report your abuse anonymously, but at the same time protect your income.

RESH: Just picking up on that, Jhoey. So in 2019, the federal government introduced this Vulnerable Worker Open Work Permit that would essentially allow workers to escape abusive employers. Ethel, I wanna bring you in, on this as well. So what has happened in terms of that?

ETHEL: I think what's difficult about any policies where there is basically a tip-line, where in theory, workers could report abusive employers. Is that in the absence of other protections, given to workers, i.e. that if they reported an abusive employer, they would then be able to be placed with another employer, right, in order for them to continue working; then these policies end up not protecting workers as much.

One thing that we have to factor in is that with respect to carework; a lot of these policies simply don't apply to private households, because then employers would - rightfully, I would argue - resist having their homes inspected, even when that is the place of work for migrant careworkers.

And so I think when we look at policies designed to protect migrant workers, and we see a lot of tweaks coming in here and there - the creation of anonymous hotlines for workers to report abusive employers, I think at one point in 2013 there was also an employer blacklist where abusive employers are put in this blacklist and in theory are unable to hire other workers.

We keep tweaking the policies. We keep trying to put in these bandaids to try to stem the tide of abuses. But honestly what we really need to do is give workers status on arrival. So they won't have the pressures put on them to comply to the wishes of their employers, right? Employers power gets diminished and thus migrant workers can better call for the protection of their rights.

RESH: Okay. And with that, then let's go to you, Chris. So what about these call for status?

CHRIS: I wanna talk about the nuances associated with permanent status on arrival. Our thinking and our analysis is greatly influenced by organizers with the Live-In Caregiver Program. And peeps like Pura Velasco and many, many, many other comrades spoke about the concerns about a carrot-stick approach and having a pathway system and why a pathway system still kept, at that time predominantly Filipina women, in exploitative condition.

Any pathway system where people would be either in precarious immigration status or still face control or containment of an employer, would simply lead to further exploitation.

So after many of our organizations start to make the call for permanent status upon arrival, the employers, and the employer organizations - like the rats that they are - tried to jump on the bandwagon. And what they were supporting was employer input into who would be able to live here after their contract ended. And why this is very dangerous is because workers, for instance, if they knew that they would have the ability to apply for Permanent Residence, they more than likely will not speak out against dangerous working conditions that would hide workplace injuries.

And they would not want to expose or address those longer systemic issues that exist because of deplorable, dirty and dangerous works and and the ineffective useless and employer-driven Employment Standards and Occupational Health and Safety laws that we have in provinces such as Ontario.

The other component here is to understand and name and name directly how the temporary foreign worker program and restrictive immigration work permits are simply tools that employers use to divide workers. Where workers from Mexico and Barbados and Trinidad, Jamaica, women or men, are divided against each other.

And there's always constant threats. If you don't work quick enough, we'll get rid of "all the Mexicans or the Jamaicans or the Filipino workers". So, it's understanding that our retire work permit system is used by employers for profit and to divide workers from building solidarity within the workplace.

So any intervention by employers in our immigration system will only meet their needs and not, our needs of trying to build a society of compassion, care and fairness for all.

RESH: So, what about abolishing the programs? Just getting rid of them?

CHRIS: Many of us will not call for the abolition of the programs. The first reason is the larger global economic conditions that are facing and forcing people to migrate. If we simply look at abolishing the program, 30,000 or 40,000 farm workers would lose work with no ability to collect unemployment insurance or other streams of revenue to take care of their family.

So it's about rethinking about the role of global capitalism and how it's disfigured and destroyed economies around the world. So when we're talking about changes to the program, it's ensuring that people whose labor is valued, are able to continue to work here in Canada.

Up to the fifties, we did not have restrictions on White people coming to Canada. It's only when we changed and started first with the inception of Black workers in agriculture, and then other communities coming to work in agriculture, that we saw a

change in how people came to Canada, not as permanent residents, but tied under our work permit and under the control of employers,

This of course has a longer history of racial exclusion, that we've used to try to deny people to live here as permanent. So it's not something that's exceptional in how we've treated people from the Global South, but it's just part of a longer history.

RESH: And we do need to understand the historical context to all of this. For example, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program.

It was created in what was it? 1966. At that time, civil and labor rights activism were on the rise. So was urbanization, more Canadians were migrating to the cities for better opportunities. This left fewer workers to do the work that was needed to be done on farms. And so they were now demanding better conditions, fair wages, workers' rights. But instead of meeting those demands, you had the creation of SAWP, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program to bring in temporary foreign workers from Global South countries to work harder and for cheaper. So again, it seems that this system right from its origins was created not only to bring in needed labor supply, but needed labor supply in order to get around workers' rights and fair wages. So again, to that point that it really created sort of a schism between Canadian workers and foreign migrant workers.

Ethel, is this a schism that still exists and what happens in terms of the potential calls for unionizing foreign migrant workers, you know, bringing them together with workers in Canada?

ETHEL: As we've been talking about, these temporary migration programs are deliberately designed to prevent worker solidarity.

If you have a look at some of the restrictions put into place that make it harder for workers to come together to organize, you can see why. So for example, migrant care workers tend to live in the private households of their employers. And so it makes it harder to meet other workers.

And a lot of the migrant care workers who I know live in isolated areas as well, right, where it's harder to hop on transit and meet other people as well. So I think there is this divide and conquer strategy that prohibits worker organizing.

But I also want to kind of think about the potentiality of, migrant worker organizations in ensuring that worker solidarity is something that takes place. And here I'd like to shout out all of the different migrant organizations that we're representing here in this podcast. Right. And I know best the work of Migrante Canada, which, started in the wake of a migrant worker's death by hanging in Singapore, Flor Contemplacion in 1992. Prior to that, there were no migrant worker organizations that elicited the same kind of transnational type of solidarity.

And because of this event, different Migrante chapters popped up first in the Philippines and basically everywhere where there are Filipino migrants present, there are Migrante organizations representing them.

Migrante Canada here in Canada has chapter organizations across all provinces. They have regular assemblies and they have regular joint campaigns that allow workers to provide support for each other at a grassroots level, where if a worker is finding that they are living with, for instance, an abusive employer, there's this network, there's a hotline that they can call, ran by Migrante, that can place them in shelters. Place them in places where they can have safety.

So what I'm alluding to Resh is that a lot of the organizing that I'm most familiar with occur almost at the grassroots level when migrant workers themselves find and lead organizations that allow themselves to meet each other's needs and also allow them to issue demands for greater worker protections and greater labor protections. Not just towards the Canadian state, but also towards the Philippine state and other sending states as well.

They're also present in transnational assemblies too. So they're part of the International League for Peoples Struggles, which is also part of the International Migrants Alliance. So you could see kind of this multi-scale approach to activism.

Now onto the question of unionization. And maybe this is gonna be somewhat controversial. Quite honestly, not all parts of the labor movement have been supportive of migrant workers, right? Like some unions are actually not really jazzed with the presence of migrant workers.

I saw this when I was living in Edmonton, Alberta, 2013 to 2015 at the height of the scandal surrounding temporary foreign work. I was completely and utterly gobsmacked to see that, when we were, and we meaning Migrante Alberta, when we were trying to get greater labor protections for temporary foreign workers. We were trying to say, look we understand that the TFWP is an awful program, but the people, the workers who are part of the program should be kept separate from the policies that are being put into place. But a lot of the resistance we faced were from some union members. And so I think the labor movement itself is fragmented too, when it comes to this, right? The labor movement has a long history of racism against foreign workers. And so that's something we have to grapple with.

And I will say that some locals have also obviously been completely supportive. It's not all unions. I mean, the labor movement is not something we can discuss as though it's one unified being right. But I will say that for some parts of the labor movement, there is still some resistance to the idea of organizing with migrant workers. Not all labor unions, obviously, but some, and I think that is a big barrier preventing, worker solidarity. The labor movement also has to look inwards and also has to look at the racism of it's rank and file members and it's leadership as well.

RESH: Absolutely. And we do have that history and the labor movement certainly has those systemic factors that have been playing out for a long time in terms of

racism and xenophobia, sexism, and the list goes on. And at the same time, certainly during the pandemic, it's good to see that, you know, some of the larger unions have been saying, look, we need to extend our vision to what's happening to migrant workers.

There's also that great point that when we're looking at any rights struggle, almost in every case, they have come from the grassroots. And the Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change again, is a great example of that. And right now they're organizing across the country. So Jhoey, could you speak to what are some of the current demands and the core demands of the Alliance?

JHOEY: Right now there is a historic moment, that we've all been waiting for. That the government said that they will make a pathway for undocumented and low wage workers. Right? So the focus of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change is fighting for everybody to have rights. With rights, like what Ethel was saying and, Chris we are asking the government for permanent residence status on arrival.

You have equal rights to resist the abuse, right? Like you have a choice. What's good for you and your family, you have the right to decide.

And also with having equal rights, everything else falls under. You can choose to leave your employer without worries, without all those long processing papers.

You can leave your employer, obviously, right? Even if you're in close work permit. And you can apply for a new work permit. But looking for that - and there's a lot of other factors, with looking for employer processing your work permit, you have to have a job offer from an employer and a Labor Market Assessment that employers doesn't wanna pay \$1000 just to get that. It takes time to process all those things and it takes time for you to be settled. And, you know, you worry about your family.

And also the system requires you to have all this eligibility with applying for PR, right? For example, care workers. You apply for PR, you have to have level five English exam. You have to have one year post-secondary educational requirement. Why would you need, such a high level English exam, result of the exam for application, if you already worked here and spoke the language. Right?

And they require you one year post-secondary education, but the assessing agencies doesn't assess your paper if it's incomplete; meaning if you don't have a diploma or a certificate. Which means they're also requiring you to have like a college diploma, college degree or university, which by the way, when you get here, even if they assess your papers and give you bachelor's degree, would you be able to practice that degree in Canada?

Most of the time people come here and as soon as they get their PR, they end up studying and getting, a Canadian certificate of education in order to apply for other work. Right? We are asking the government why would you require a caregiver to be a university degree in order to take care of child, to cook, clean.

RESH: And that's a lot. This bureaucracy, all of these demands. The credentialism, that people's qualifications from outside of Canada might not be recognized within Canada. And then you have that double-standard that in order to get the Canadian job, you need the Canadian qualifications. But in order to get the Canadian qualifications, you need the Canadian job. And again this is the unfair expectations that are put on migrant workers. So a lot of barriers.

JHOEY: Yes. And with all these barriers, they cannot find a new employer. They end up undocumented. With international students, for example, while they're working, they're only working for 20 hours and those 20 hours during those times is not included in their Canadian experience.

They pay a lot of tuition fees, but like they have to have high paying jobs in order to apply for PR.

We're fighting for everybody to be included with no barriers to application, to permanent residence.

RESH: I want to go back to COVID right. Because as was said, All of this has been going on for a really long time, but COVID, as it has done with so many other issues has really shone a spotlight on what's been happening with migrant labor as well.

Now it may be an obvious question to begin with Chris, but who benefits from the system of migrant labor in Canada, especially in terms of what was happening with COVID.

CHRIS: The employers as well as the state of Canada.

There is a couple things that happened during COVID. The borders were closed, and, this meant that thousands of workers, migrant farm workers, were either stuck in Canada or were not able to come to Canada and were stuck in their home countries.

And as some of your listeners may recall migrant farm workers have been paying into the Employment Insurance scheme since 1966. However, because of their only ability to receive EI with with a valid work permit. But then even if, you do have a valid permit, because you are tied to an employer, you're not gonna be able to get access to EI, particularly regular benefits. When workers needed EI employment insurance, in their greatest time of need, they were not able to access it.

RESH: So not only are we benefiting from the fruits of their labor in terms of, you know, our food supply and all of that, but also they're actually contributing into our social security system, because they are paying, as you say, into Employment Insurance and CPP that they're never going to get to collect on, but we benefit from that. And that's something that I don't think many people realize. Just the many hidden ways in which they contribute as well.

CHRIS: Absolutely. And this, I think is the first thing that breaks this narrative that workers from the Global South are stealing jobs and are just trying to drain our resources from our society.

In effect, we have been benefiting from the theft of both labor as well as entitlements from workers from the Global South, who've been paying into our EI system, our pension system, and have not been able to reap the benefits of either

Workers who were already in Canada, were not allowed to leave the farms. And this was irrespective if there was a COVID outbreak or not. So workers were basically told you can go to work, but you could not leave the farm. Period.

When COVID hit and the first huge outbreak occurred in Chatham, Ontario; the narrative is this, that one or two workers would feel sick. They will tell their supervisor. The supervisors would not take it seriously and they would be threatened with either being sent back to the bunkhouse or threatened with termination. The workers then would get other workers sick. And workers would be put in quarantine. Workers who are negative and positive would not be separated. And in fact, the entire cohort of workers would be all sick. And this was a result of crowded, overcrowded conditions. Workers live in congregate settings. Many workers have bunk-beds. And COVID policies in Canada have worked in such a way when employers found it beneficial not to follow COVID protocols, they did so because it didn't impede production.

Now we're seeing some COVID protocols put in place, and if it works in tandem not to impede production, it will continue.

Workers faced a brunt of this because of deplorable housing conditions, the inability to exert democratic rights in the workplaces and they could not access social safety net benefits; something they've been paying into for generations

And I'm sure for many listeners, this, is all new to them and you're probably angry knowing about workers going hungry. If they did try to leave their farms, they would be fired.

However, the Canadian officials and the media knew. We had gone immediately from the first crises on the farms to let people know about it and nobody cared. And then we wrote to the government immediately to express these concerns and the government was there also very silent.

So the narrative very much became about feeding Canada, protecting our farmers, protecting our agricultural industry. And believing this exceptionalism, this idea that if our food system did not have migrant workers to come under dangerous and dirty and deplorable conditions, we would all die because of starvation.

So it was an entire lie that was built just simply to open the borders without providing any protections for workers.

During the pandemic, multiple workers, resisted work, went on strike for protections against chemicals, against being sprayed around COVID. If they didn't engage in strikes, they exposed working conditions and housing conditions on social media. They shared images and asked us to talk about what was happening to them. Workers engaged in go-slows. And for many years now, workers have been taking to pen and writing open letters to Canadian officials, to governments in the home country, to the general public, to expose what's happening to them.

RESH: So going to that point about the exposés that happened during COVID. Last year, the Fifth Estate, the Canadian news show, focused on this. And said that migrant workers have been facing "a pandemic paradox", where they are essential, but treated as expendable. Where they are definitely needed, but might be made to feel that they're not wanted.

I don't recall us applauding migrant workers the way we were applauding other essential workers. Ethel does the nature of labor change when it is done by foreign workers. In caregiving, for instance, what are some of the key differences between these jobs being done by Canadian, non-migrant workers versus them being done by temporary migrant workers?

ETHEL: I think one of the things that we need to bear in mind when thinking about the differences between labor and treatment between foreign workers and Canadian workers, is that foreign workers tend to be seen through kind of this inferior light. And Joey talked about some of the unfair policies that migrant foreign care workers had to prove.

The fact that migrant care workers who have already worked in care work, who have already shown that they are more than capable of performing the job, the fact that have to pass these language exams and achieve an intermediate level. And the fact that they have to show proof of one year of post-secondary education training in order to qualify for Canadian citizenship highlights one of the filters through which Canada used these foreign workers - which is that they have to keep proving constantly that they belong.

And for the specific case of migrant care workers, these requirements were never in place before, certainly not under the Live-In Caregiver Program. These are new requirements. And it seems as though the bar for entry gets higher and higher. And again, I want to emphasize this, right? The fact that these requirements are put into place for care -workers who are already doing their jobs well in Canada, shows I think quite a myopic policy.

And these are standards that migrant care-workers have to fulfill that other care-workers in the same setting, in the same sector don't have to fulfill as well. And I know that this seems as though we're talking about really arcane policies, but allow me to emphasize that these language policies which require that migrant workers pass English language level five, require migrant care-workers to pay a lot of money to take the test each time. I think it's around \$300 each time...

RESH: Wow.

ETHEL: ...to take test right. And so this is why it gets absurd. Why are we imposing these draconian requirements on migrant care-workers who are already doing their jobs?

And I also would like to say, why don't we ask other Canadian workers to see if they'd pass the same tests.

So it seems to me to be yet another filtering mechanisms and this kind of alludes to what Chris was talking about as well. This is why pathways to permanent residency as a policy are actually insufficient. These pathways come with a lot of caveats. These pathways are designed to just keep filtering migrant workers out.

One of the glaring inconsistencies I see as being evident when looking at the treatment of foreign workers versus Canadian workers, are that foreign workers have to keep proving their belonging, right? Foreign workers have to keep paying money to keep working. Foreign workers, in certain workplaces- and certainly this is from my research and I've heard directly from migrant care-workers - Foreign workers also have had to withstand a lot of racism in different workplace settings. This was especially evident during COVID where a lot of the migrant care-workers in my circles and in my advocacy work, are visibly Asian, a lot of them are Filipina, right? So, you know, we would hear accounts from migrant care-workers who would feel that they were being stared at weirdly, but they would also, in some cases be verbally chastised. They would be accused of being spreaders of COVID because they're visibly Asian, because of all of the stigma against Asian folks during COVID. And on top of that, the fact that they're wearing scrub suits and, show that they are care-workers.

I don't really understand it, but why is it that healthcare workers are under attack when they're the ones who are, helping us get through the pandemic.

So you see all of these different factors at play here, Resh, and I really I'm just shaking my head as I'm talking about it.

RESH: Which is understandable because with migrant workers within these professions, especially in caregiving settings, we're seeing a double or even a triple jeopardy that they're facing, right? The xenophobia and racism. Plus the anti-health care worker sentiment that was coming from some parts of the population. And a gender component as well; after all these are heavily female dominated areas.

ETHEL: Well, migrant care worker programs have always disproportionately had women working in these settings. Right. And it could be because care work is seen as a gendered profession. It could be because, and this I completely disagree with, but women are seen a "natural caregivers". But it could also be because, and this is where we widen our analysis a little bit further as well, where migrant-sending states like the Philippines deliberately market Filipina women as the perfect ideal nannies.

But what I'm witnessing now is that there's been a range of different source countries for migrant care worker programs.

RESH: But as you say, at one point, the field really was dominated by women from the Philippines. And I remember years ago, there was some research that was done on remittances, on the little bit of money that these women who were working here, but also in many countries throughout the world that they were sending back to their families in the Philippines. And even though by and large, they were drastically underpaid, this money was cumulatively adding up to billions of dollars, which was then, contributing to paying down on the national debt of the Philippines. And this really speaks to the sheer volume of Filipina nannies and domestics and caregivers that were actually working globally at that time.

JHOEY: The number one export of the Philippines is sadly migrants like us. I've heard number one is nurses. Definitely because a lot of the care workers that comes here are also nurses. A lot of my comrades, the people that I'm organizing with, are mostly professional nurses back home, but they had to apply as a caregiver to come to Canada.

Because we're all over the place as well, we could be in the Middle East, Hong Kong. Taiwan in care and also construction workers. My brothers are construction workers in the Middle East. Because we have to take care of the family.

RESH: So Jhoey, again going back to COVID, and we know that people working in healthcare services, people working as personal support workers, people working in long-term care homes. These are also settings for migrant caregiver workers. So could you speak again a bit more to what was happening during the pandemic with these populations?

JHOEY: First let me add something with what Ethel said earlier with the distinction between a Canadian care-worker and a migrant care-worker. So sometimes what happens is they hire more migrant workers for caregiving, because most likely we do everything.

If it's a Canadian, if it's just care-work with a child, it's only the child, right? But when you hire a migrant care-worker from other countries, speaking from my experience, we do everything.

We clean the house on top of helping out with the kids. We even tutor the kids sometimes. We cook, we do everything. Even sometimes plumbing, whatever electrical, you know.

And with that being said, , migrant care-workers, are predominantly women. Because in the countries where we've come from that's the offer, right?

The first requirement is you have to have a care-work experience. And most of the women that came here are mostly mothers. So, what better experience for a care-worker to have than to be a mother yourself, right?

The irony is you are taking care of, other people's child, but you left yours behind.

So nowadays there's just a little shift in care work, especially with elderly care where men also are needed because, with lifting the clients, with lifting the elderly, it needs strength, right?

Canada is always, telling that there's labor market shortage. And those labor market shortage depends on migrants.

And during the pandemic, it's really hard because most of the people are staying at home, even the employers, right? At least half of the care-workers lost their jobs because their employers also lost their jobs.

But some of them couldn't access Employment Insurance and some of them just lost their status because they couldn't find an employer. And some who have the job - this happened to me personally. The usual job before COVID is already hard. We do everything right. But during the COVID, it doubled what you were doing?

A lot of the care-workers are complaining that they have to disinfect everything, on top of the jobs that we already have. Sometimes tutoring the kids while the parents are working at home, because the kids are not going to school in the beginning.

And some of the care-workers are not even allowed to go out, but their employers are allowed to go out. And some of these care-workers are not given food.

If you're not allowing them to go out, they're not even allowed to buy food for themselves and it's not like the employers will buy for them, right? And in some cases, employers are even locking the door of their fridge

Some crazy stuff that were already happening before, it worsened during the COVID.

RESH: Right. And this on top of obviously the dangers of being on the front lines of the pandemic.

JHOEY: Yes, exactly

RESH: Now, in terms of post pandemic recovery. In April of this year, the federal government announced that it would be easing limits on the Temporary Foreign Workers Program in order to deal with the labor shortage in Canada, that's going across all sectors, including very, very needed sectors.

So they announced that they would be loosening limits on hiring foreign workers, extending the length of stay while also trying to ensure their protection. Chris, what's your assessment of this?

CHRIS: I think one of the key concerns is not about expanding the plantation economy. It's about providing people the ability to live here as equals. So the concern is that people are coming to Canada simply to meet the needs of employers and the capitalist class. And that's not good enough for anybody in Justicia.

We're not opposed to people coming here to work, to live, but as equals. So I think as allies and as comrades, it's important to amplify those voices and try to build a multiracial workforce and a multiracial working class movement of solidarity, to fight against all forms of capitalism.

We can't just simply be looking at labor shortages, or claiming that there's labor shortages, without trying to improve and expand protections for workers in the workplace.

Having people work and employed under restrictive work permits, with multiple exclusions to labor protections, is not just a lack of oversight. It's basically a failure of this government, right? To basically reinforce the system of apartheid into Canada.

RESH: Okay. And so going on that Ethel, this is a very systemic issue that involves characterizations of systemic slavery, indentureship, apartheid, as Chris just said. It is not just a domestic issue, this is also a global issue that travels from global disparities between the North and the South, includes bilateral agreements, human rights, all the way into our domestic financial, social and political economies.

Beyond the bandaid solutions, what critical systemic changes need to happen?

ETHEL: I'd like to refer to some of the calls made by transnational migrants organizations, grassroots, migrant organizations, that have campaigns not just at the state level, but also at the transnational level.

And here Migrante international has been calling repeatedly for the importance of seeking alternatives to labor migration. They call for - well, this is where we get into abolition, right? - They call for abolishing interlocking structures of power, such as neoliberalism, capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy.

But beyond that, I think the ethic of critical hope infuses most of this activist literature.

I think one of the hardest things that we as human beings face when thinking about systemic changes is the counter argument that, well, you're just not being practical, right? This is the world we live in. Ergo the solutions that we have to seek, are solutions that are practical.

And I think a lot of the critical hope literature, a lot of the radical abolition literature - and here I'm shouting out the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore - is the importance of dreaming of what the world could look like, rather than being tethered to what the world is like currently.

And this is where I find a lot of inspiration, quite frankly. So even attending International League for People's Struggle meetings, International Migrant Alliance meetings, International Women's Alliance meetings - one of the things that strikes me as being so powerful is that we're not tethered to the here and now, but to the future.

We're future-oriented. Rather than thinking about, oh, well, so, and so government will not like that. Or employers won't like that. And even some migrant workers won't like that. We can begin imagining what it would look like without these other factors at play.

In other words, and this is what I ask a lot of my students to do when I teach classes on social movements - What does social justice look like to you? Right.

And I think, thinking about the important role that imagination plays actually makes it easier to see why our current world is inequitable, but also allows us to move towards an ideal that I think will inspire most of us to continue with our advocacy work

RESH: Uhhuh. So I am going to put that question to Jhoey. And Jhoey, I'm gonna give you the last word on this. So what does justice look like to you for migrant workers in Canada?

JHOEY: I would say equal rights for everybody. The right to choose what is good for you. What is good for your family. To decide for your life.

And permanent status for everybody. I believe that everybody contributes to the wellbeing and to the economy of Canada. And I believe that everybody has the right to have a permanent status because everybody has its own contribution, regardless of where the shortage is. Everybody contributes in their little ways.

So everybody needs equal rights. And not everybody wants to stay, even if you give them permanent residency, not everybody wants to be a citizen. But it gives them the right to choose. The right to exercise those rights with the employers for equality.

RESH: And with that, I want to thank you all. Jhoey, Ethel, Chris, it's been a pleasure.

JHOEY: Thank you.

ETHEL: Thank you for having us.

CHRIS: Thank you.

RESH: That was Ethel Tungohan, Canada Research Chair in Canadian Migration Policy, Impacts and Activism; Joey Dulaca, organizer with the Caregivers' Action Center and Migrant Workers Alliance for Change; and Chris Ramseroop, activist and organizer with Justicia for Migrant Workers.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of the *Courage My Friends Podcast*.

Thanks for listening.

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