

UN special rapporteur condemns Canada's temporary foreign worker program for "breeding contemporary forms of slavery"

Felix Gauthier
20 August 2024

United Nations Special Rapporteur Tomoya Obokata has restated and amplified his condemnation of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) as a "breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery." His finding is a devastating exposure of the claims Canada is a staunch defender of "human rights" and a "progressive" society, which are so assiduously promoted by the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government, the New Democrats, and their trade-union and pseudo-left backers.

When Obokata first denounced the TFWP, following a research visit to Canada last year, his conclusions were largely met with indifference. His final report has been far more widely discussed in the media. Far from expressing any concern for the plight of the impoverished migrant workers, the coverage has been a cynical and opportunistic attempt to use their plight as ammunition in the ongoing, far-right-instigated campaign against immigrants and immigration.

Obokata's final report found that Canada's temporary foreign worker program, which is a means to secure cheap labor from impoverished countries, is spawning contemporary forms of slavery and exploitation.

Obokata's comments followed a two-week tour of Canada to assess the government's preparedness to address modern slavery, including forced labor and other forms of abuse. The report, based on meetings with officials, academics, and migrant workers, highlighted the exploitation of migrant labor under the TFWP, particularly in agriculture. It noted that employer-specific work permits make migrant workers vulnerable to abuse, as they have few legal rights and fear deportation if they speak out or try to report abuses to the authorities.

The *World Socialist Web Site's* initial article on the UN special rapporteur's visit outlined some of the inhumane conditions he documented in his initial report:

- *Closed work permits bind migrant workers to their employers and make them subject to immediate deportation if they are fired;

- *Appalling and overcrowded living conditions;

- *Low wages, no overtime pay, and long hours (12-hour shifts

are common);

- *The burdening of workers with extra-contractual tasks not stipulated in their agreements;

- *Sexual harassment, intimidation and violence from employers;

- *Denial of access to health care and/or transport to medical facilities;

- *Lack of access to social services, including language courses and other supports for newcomers;

- *Frequent debt bondage to recruiters in their country of origin.

While the exploitation of migrant labor has a long history in North America, its contemporary Canadian form dated from the end of the post-war period. The TFWP, formalized in 1973 under the Liberal government of Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, was an extension of earlier programs designed to address so-called "labor shortages" by importing migrant workers, particularly from the Caribbean and Latin America.

Over the last fifty years, the TFWP has served as a means for employers to reap large profits from brutally exploiting migrant workers desperate for a means to support themselves and their families and to find a route to gain permanent residency status in Canada.

Under the Harper Conservative government, the number of temporary foreign workers was expanded from 30,000 in 2008-9 to more than 110,000. By 2023 this number had then doubled to 240,000, according to Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) data, as the Liberals responded to calls from employers to address "labor shortages," while continuing to prohibit most immigration by non-professional and/or unskilled workers under Canada's discriminatory "points-based" immigration system.

The increase in demand for the cheapest labor possible must itself be seen as a symptom of the rapidly deepening crisis of world capitalism, which has impacted Canada especially in the aftermath of the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The exploitation of temporary workers is accompanied by constant pressure and attacks on the working conditions and social standards of all workers.

The TFWP is not just a way for employers to bypass the legal protections and living standards reserved to citizens of Canada. It also serves as a mechanism for the systematic undermining of these standards, since the methods used against the most vulnerable sections of the working class are invariably expanded throughout the economy. This is one of the reasons why all workers, regardless of their immigration status or national background, have a direct interest in defending the rights of all migrant workers.

Obokata's report has been seized upon by sections of the media and political establishment to condemn the Liberal government's immigration policy from the right.

Over the past year, there has been a growing ruling class furor over an alleged "immigration crisis" in Canada. Far-right Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre, Quebec's CAQ government, the pro-independence Parti Québécois (PQ), and major media outlets incessantly claim that immigration is the primary or a leading cause for the housing crisis and a lack of social services.

While much of big business supported increased numbers of temporary foreign workers as a means to supply Canadian capital with cheap labor, corporate Canada, or at least large sections of it, frightened by the growth of social opposition, has joined in the attack on the Liberals' supposed "open door" immigration policy and is encouraging the far right and outright fascist forces that are spearheading the anti-immigrant agitation.

In November 2023, Immigration Minister Marc Miller announced that the target for permanent resident arrivals in Canada would be limited to 500,000 for two consecutive years. This was followed in January 2024 by the imposition of a cap of 360,000 on student visa admissions permits. In March, Miller announced restrictions on temporary immigration. For the first time, Non-Permanent Resident (NPR) arrivals will be limited similarly to permanent resident numbers.

Obokata's report has criticized the latest shift in government policy, noting that the reduction of NPR arrivals will not address the abusive nature of the TFWP program itself.

Rather the government's response is in line with the demands of the far right, which is cynically attempting to use the plight of migrant workers as an argument against immigration.

This was made clear in a press conference held earlier this month in Hamilton, Ontario by Poilievre. The Conservative leader, who routinely denounces the corporate media for "liberal bias" and generally shuns press conferences, called on a reporter from the far-right outlet *Rebel News*, which championed the fascist-instigated "Freedom Convoy" while it menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa in 2022, and promotes the British fascist Tommy Robinson.

In what was clearly a pre-planned exchange, the *Rebel News* reporter asked Poilievre what a Conservative government would do to "prevent temporary foreign workers taking the jobs of unemployed young Canadians." In response, Poilievre

denounced Trudeau for "destroy(ing) our entire immigration system ... he has expanded the temporary foreign worker program by well over 200% at a time when we're losing jobs." He went on to decry the program for bringing in migrant workers who supposedly "take jobs away from or suppress the wages of Canadian workers." "I challenge Canadian business to hire Canadian workers first," continued Poilievre, "and I challenge the government to end the chaos in the temporary foreign worker program."

In Britain, similar far-right agitation by the political establishment, including the Labour government, has emboldened fascists like Tommy Robinson to lead riots of far-right thugs in cities with high immigrant populations.

Contrary to the claims of the far right, the pressure on workers' wages does not arise from the importation of cheap labor. Both processes are symptoms of the deepening world capitalist crisis, which the ruling class in every country seeks to overcome with intensified exploitation of the working class

Workers must recognize that the official ruling class debate on immigration is an effort to push politics sharply to the right. The ruling class aims to split the working class, and make immigrants and refugees the scapegoats for the social misery produced by capitalism and their policies of war abroad and austerity at home. In a desperate attempt to compensate for the lack of popular support for their policies, Canada's politicians are whipping up xenophobia and nationalism as they wage an imperialist war against Russia and prepare for war with China.

Obokata's report represents a devastating blow to those who still seek to present Canada as a safe haven and defender of human rights. The fact that this report is being seized upon to further fan the flames of the far right's anti-immigration agenda underscores the advanced stage of Canada's social and political crisis. Above all, it points to the urgency of the working class breaking free of the political stranglehold of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which are four-square behind the Liberal-NDP governmental alliance, and fighting for a workers' government that will put social needs before capitalist profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact