



Poll results: Migrant workers identify key provincial issues, call for equal rights in Nova Scotia

On August 5, 2021, No one is illegal - Halifax/Kjipuktuk sent an informal poll to migrant workers in Nova Scotia with regards to the key changes that they would like to see at the provincial level. Over 100 migrant workers responded. Those who replied were migrant workers in Temporary Foreign Worker Programs, the majority being from the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). A number of migrant workers in the seafood processing sector also responded. The respondents were primarily Jamaican and Mexican, including men and women.

Priorities identified by migrant workers:

- 1) **Increase the minimum wage to at least \$15/hour:** Migrant workers are adding their voices to the ongoing calls for an increase to the minimum wage in Nova Scotia to at least \$15/hour. Many come to Canada to support their families, yet they have difficulty making ends meet on Nova Scotia's minimum wage (\$12.95). The work they do is physically demanding and they often work long hours, rain or shine.

"It would be good for them to increase the minimum wage, since the pay is cheap here compared to Ontario and British Columbia." said one Mexican farm worker in the SAWP program.* In Ontario (\$14.25) and British Columbia (\$15.20), where many migrant workers go to work, the pay is significantly higher than in Nova Scotia.

- 2) **More inclusive immigration policies:** Migrant workers are renewing calls for full and permanent immigration status in Canada. In addition, they are calling for a provincial immigration program that is accessible to migrant farmworkers.

Each year, migrant farmworkers in the SAWP program come to Canada for up to 8 months of the year. Some have been coming here for 10, 20 and even 30 years. However, permanent residence is beyond the reach of most due to a number of barriers. While they are essential workers, they are considered to be "low-skilled" by Canada's immigration system, which limits the immigration programs available to them. The programs they could apply for are wrought with barriers, including the requirement of a job offer for full-time permanent position, inaccessible language requirements and, at times, the need for employer support.

"I have been traveling on the program for about 15 years, so Canada is basically my second home. I am a family man and to leave my wife and kids every year is very hard but I know it's something I have to do," said one Jamaican migrant farmworker in the SAWP program who would like to apply for permanent residence in Canada. He added: "I work very very hard everyday when I am here and all I want is better treatment, more respect, more benefits and for the government to offer help to those who wish to migrate here because Canada is a family country and I strongly believe in my family and I want them here with me."

Permanent residence would mean not having to leave their families behind to come and work here, having the ability to exercise the same labour and human rights as Canadians (without the fear of being sent back to their home country by their employer) and access to public services such as healthcare.

- 3) **Healthcare for all:** In Nova Scotia, most migrant workers do not have access to public healthcare. For non-residents with a work permit, it must be valid for at least 12 months in order to be eligible to enroll in the provincial health plan. However, migrant farm workers in the SAWP are only able to work for up to 8 months of the year in Canada. In Ontario, SAWP workers are eligible for the provincial health plan as soon as they arrive.

“We don't have access to the healthcare system, yet we pay taxes the same as any other resident or Canadian citizen, without receiving the same benefits,” says one Mexican worker in the seafood processing sector.

Instead, migrant workers in Nova Scotia must rely solely on private health insurance, which they pay for through deductions made by their employer. This can leave migrant workers vulnerable, for example, if there are delays in receiving their coverage or if the employer withholds their health insurance card, etc. In addition, the private health insurance system can be difficult to navigate and there are a number of barriers to access. Oftentimes, migrant workers are not provided with information about what is covered and they must pay up front for medical services, then request reimbursement from the insurance company.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen how lack of access to public healthcare has contributed to inequitable vaccine access for migrant workers, as well as other migrants.

- 4) **Ten paid sick days:** Paid sick days are important to ensure that the health of workers, their families and communities is protected. Unfortunately, under the Labour Standards code in Nova Scotia, employers are only required to provide a maximum of three unpaid sick days for all workers. While we are told as workers to stay home if we are feeling under the weather, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, some workers can simply not afford to do so. Furthermore, for migrant workers, who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing abuse in the workplace, they are sometimes not given that option.

“Why is it that we don't have paid sick leave? If we don't go to the doctor, for the doctor to write us some record to show that we are sick and it has to pass a certain number of days to get something. And, even if we present that to our boss, they are forcing us to work and we don't get nothing. These are issues that need to be addressed. Where I work, I know of cases where people have fallen sick and even me, myself. When I took my second shot of the vaccine, I was sick, I couldn't go to work for 1.5 days. I didn't even get a pay. I didn't even get a cent and it wasn't my fault. I lost out on my wages with no compensation,” said one woman migrant worker from Jamaica.

For this reason, migrant workers are joining the call for ten paid sick days. Paid sick leave in Nova Scotia must be universal, permanent and accessible.

5) **Holiday pay:** While most Nova Scotians get access to holiday pay, this is not the case for most migrant farm workers. While Nova Scotia's Labour Standards Code gives employees who qualify with six holidays with pay, “most farm employees” are excluded from these rules. This means that employers of migrant farm workers, as well as other farm workers, are not required to give them holiday pay. Migrant workers are calling for a change to the rule, which they consider unfair and exclusionary.

**The names, as well as any identifying information, of the migrant workers who have provided quotes has been withheld to protect their identities.*