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# New Brunswick debate on migrant workers leaves a lot to be desired

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**[Raluca Bejan \(/category/bios/raluca-bejan\)](/category/bios/raluca-bejan)** May 4, 2020

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Stories on seasonal migrant workers have been making headlines since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a universal story repeated across national sites. For example, **migrants from Romania entered Germany in April 2020** (<https://verfassungsblog.de/covid-19-and-disposable-migrant-workers/>) to work on asparagus farms, while **migrants from Bangladesh and India** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/23/singapore-million-migrant-workers-suffer-as-covid-19-surges-back>) were asked to continue their construction work in Singapore. And in Canada, it was **Jamaicans and Mexicans** (<https://theconversation.com/migrant-workers-face-further-social-isolation-and-mental-health-challenges-during-coronavirus-pandemic-134324>), who were expected to arrive to work on farms.

Temporary foreign workers (TFWs) to Canada are migrants who hold a limited work permit for a specific employer and for a predetermined period of time.

Cross-border travel to Canada has been **restricted** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/justin-trudeau-closes-canada-borders-coronavirus>) since mid-March 2020. The federal government, however, has provided **exemptions** (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2020/03/canada-provides-update-on-exemptions-to-travel-restrictions-to-protect-canadians-and-support-the-economy.html>) for international seasonal workers willing to disregard the COVID-19 health and safety risks to work on Canadian farms and food-processing plants. It is now asking employers to facilitate self-isolation for workers in accordance with **public health guidelines** (<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/employer-compliance/covid-guidance.html?fbclid=IwAR29seSjPQG4A0RYCIFhr-X6dXZN2H3M6xMqaaHBQuS1mmRn720KA9Oh1yo>), by



Nearly **300 Jamaicans** (<https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/news/provincial/jamaican-farm-workers-land-in-nova-scotia-438753/>) had landed in Halifax by mid-April. A **charter flight from Mexico** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/covid-19-new-brunswick-temporary-foreign-workers-1.5548331>) was scheduled to land in Halifax on April 28, carrying TFWs to be placed across farms in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In an unprecedented move, defying the **lobbying efforts** (<https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/news/canada/temporary-foreign-workers-will-be-allowed-into-canada-428460/>), carried out by the seafood and agri-food sectors in favour of the travel exemptions, the New Brunswick government banned the entry of TFWs into the province. To justify the decision, Premier Blaine Higgs mentioned the health and safety risks, and called on residents and TFWs already in the province to fill the vacancies across the agri-food industry.

## Higher health and safety risks for migrant workers

The New Brunswick government's decision originated from a questionable standpoint, one that prioritizes the safety and protection of New Brunswickers from foreigners who might be carrying the virus. It is a position that most likely stems from nationalist grounds and is guided by an exclusionary logic that should have no space in a country that prides itself on its multiculturalism.

Yet the New Brunswick government's decision might also have had the unintended consequence of protecting TFWs from the further exploitation that would undoubtedly occur during the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant workers employed in the seafood/agri-food sectors are in a doubly **precarious position** (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621020902850643>), in terms of both their work and their immigration status. TFWs are more likely than Canadian citizens and permanent residents to be subject to **unsafe occupational practices** (<https://theconversation.com/canada-the-good-myth-exposed-migrant-workers-resist-debt-bondage-90279>), and to live in **substandard and overcrowded conditions** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/migrant-workers-kelowna-sawp-program-complaint-sandher-farm-1.5316512>). During a pandemic, these conditions might deteriorate further, triggering greater health and safety risks. What happens if a worker falls sick? What type of care will be offered? And what happens in cases of workplace abuse? What protections do workers have?

## Farming profitability trumps migrants' rights

The media response to the decision to close the provincial border has been heavily focused on the profitability of the agricultural sector, raising questions about the losses anticipated from curtailed access to migrant labour, the contribution of the migrant workforce to the economic growth in the province, the



The community has responded on similar lines. On April 28, the National Farmers Union in New Brunswick, the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick and the Really Local Harvest issued a **statement** (<https://nfunb.org/en/2020/04/joint-statement-from-the-nfu-nb-aanb-and-really-local-harvest-in-regards-to-tfw-restriction/>), condemning the decision to restrict the entry of TFWs into the province. Concerns were raised about the impact of such a decision on the local community: it was pointed out that foreign workers are an integral part of the local food production, and that closing the border will endanger the financial viability of family farms in the province, which already operate on low profit margins. Also thrown into the mix was an argument that migrant workers should be free to decide for themselves whether they want to come work in the province -- as if migrants from Mexico and Jamaica were leaving their homes to exercise self-determination and not because of economic constraints resulting from an unequal global distribution of resources, where the well-off nations of the Global North hoard all the wealth, while people from the Global South are forced to look abroad for the higher wages that their home countries cannot provide.

## We're not all in this together

Border closures are usually seen as negatively impacting migrants, yet in an unexpected turn, the closure in New Brunswick has made an exploitative situation no longer viable. What then is the community actually advocating? The opening of the borders, so migrants can get infected by the hundreds? While Canadian employers are required to keep TFWs in self-isolation for **14 days** (<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/employer-compliance/covid-guidance.html>), upon arrival prior to starting work, a lack of any system to monitor social distancing could make an already marginalized population even more vulnerable.

This is exactly the result that has already occurred all over the world. At a pork plant in South Dakota, about **800 migrant workers** (<https://www.leftvoice.org/800-workers-at-a-pork-plant-get-covid-19-the-company-is-responsible>), mainly from Ethiopia, Mexico, South Sudan, Honduras, Myanmar, Somalia and Guatemala, got infected. In Singapore, there has been a **growing number of infections** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/21/singapore-coronavirus-outbreak-surges-with-3000-new-cases-in-three-days>) in the crowded migrant worker dormitories. And in Alberta, over **500 cases of COVID-19** (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-albertas-covid-19-crisis-is-a-migrant-worker-crisis-too/>) were confirmed at the Cargill meat plant in High River, which was already notorious for its reliance on TFWs. Everywhere you look, migrant workers are being exploited during this crisis.



The debate in New Brunswick brings the exploitation inherent to the TFW system back into public view. Either workers should have access to permanent residency and pathways to citizenship so they can benefit from the same rights as the resident population, or the TFW program should be scrapped all together: let Canadians support their communities in times of a pandemic.

The expectation that others should come and labour in your fields for low pay so that you can make a profit and feed the local population, while these very same workers are risking their lives for your safety and comfort, perpetuates a logic that some people are better, more valuable and more deserving of care than others.

If New Brunswickers deserve to be protected from exploitation and asked to stay home, TFWs should have the same protections. The last thing a community should do is to lobby the government to continue this exploitation.

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bncatchesthelight/15419306963/in/photolist-o8VTDb-6jY5Nu-6jU1Lz-6jTSy2-0aQc5T-6jY6iy-6jYcwo-08VH4y-nRyQZA-08XFFY-08VDvS-YaGn40-08YgJs-nRyFdU-YaGnaL-YqN5p2-YdmazH-08XE5m-YdmaJF-nRyLiy-6jU5j4-6jU2Zv-6jY4Bs-6jTZk2-6jYg6w-6jYa60-6jYdwE-6jTXpn-6jU2CH-6jTZ4r-6jYfPs-08Vvuw-YdmaNP-YaGndw-YaGnjU-YqN5x8-YdmaFp-YaGn90-YaGnn9-YdmaRp-YaGngs-LbyeVW-MnUQw6-M5MBp9-08L5xH-MnUCwz-puxYL4-08YdXq-7KXCVW-7KTEJc>

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