

28 March 2023

Act now to stop abuse and exploitation of migrant farm workers

In 2019 migrant workers started coming to the UK on the 'Seasonal Worker Visa' (SWV) to pick fruit and vegetables for British farmers. The visa is tied to a single labour recruiter and restricted to work in either poultry for up to 2.5 months or horticulture for up to 6 months. These restrictions are known to significantly increase the risk of abuse and exploitation for workers, with increasing evidence of this in the UK. Workers on the scheme can be recruited from any country worldwide, further increasing their vulnerability. The UK has expanded the scheme from just 2,500 workers in 2019 to up to 57,000 in 2023, without recognising and properly addressing the high risks of this visa that have been highlighted by both government and non-government experts. ¹

As organisations supporting and representing the interests of workers on this visa and academics researching its impact, we are calling on the Government to take urgent action to address the risks of the scheme, including by:

- 1. Tackling the known risks to workers at the point of recruitment**, including by establishing government-to-government agreements with sending countries to protect workers and by significantly increasing funding for oversight of overseas labour providers;
- 2. Preventing debt bondage**, including by ensuring that no recruitment or migration fees or costs are charged to or borne by seasonal migrant workers and guaranteeing a minimum income to workers for the duration of their stay in the UK;
- 3. Preventing exploitation on UK farms**, by ensuring workers have accessible complaints processes and removing barriers that prevent workers leaving abusive and potentially exploitative employers or a job that does not give them enough work or income; and
- 4. Ensuring SWV scheme compliance**, by appointing an independent agency to uphold labour standards on the scheme, properly resourcing inspection and enforcement of workplaces and facilitating worker access to compensation.

Workers are incurring debt, travelling long distances and leaving their families behind with the promise of decent work. Unless the Government makes a serious commitment to protect them by urgently overhauling this visa scheme, they will continue to be abused and exploited in return.

Bev Clarkson, Unite the Union

Kate Bell, Trades Union Congress

¹ Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), 2019, *The risks of exploitation in temporary migration programmes: A FLEX response to the 2018 Immigration White Paper*. FLEX 2021 *Assessment of the risks of human trafficking for forced labour on the UK Seasonal Workers Pilot*. Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner 25 January 2022 PRESS RELEASE: Dame Sara Thornton raises concerns over labour exploitation risk for migrant workers in the agricultural sector. Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration 2022 *An inspection of the immigration system as it relates to the agricultural sector*. Migration Advisory Committee 2022 *Migration Advisory Committee Annual Report 2022*. The Migration Observatory 2018 *Exploiting the opportunity? Low-skilled work migration after Brexit*.

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