



Giving Voice: A Public Forum on Migrant Justice
Sunday, October 29, 2023
Charlottetown
FORUM REPORT

Fifty people gathered in Charlottetown on a Sunday afternoon at the end of October to hear Gabriel Allahdua speak about his experience as a migrant farm worker, activist, outreach worker and now, author. Also on the agenda: a panel discussion with four migrant workers currently living in Prince Edward Island, as well as poetry and music by Tanya Davis, Julie Pellissier-Lush, the Good Company, and Jorge Peña and Mark Carr-Rollitt.

Gabriel spoke passionately about the injustice inherent in the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program and the ways in which it discriminates and harms migrant workers. Local migrant workers, in sharing their own experience, said they felt validated by his words.

In small group discussions, forum participants noted that when workers come to Canada looking for a better future, they contribute to our economy and communities, but they face many challenges. The system, based on closed work permits and lack of access to permanent residency, creates vulnerability and fear and must be changed. Some ideas for action emerged:

- Organize and participate in events to increase awareness of the role of migrant workers
- Support individuals to share stories and identify the systemic roots of the challenges they face
- Engage and work within other action-oriented networks to advocate for change
- Advocate for access of all workers to Employment Insurance & Canada Pension Plan benefits
- End to closed work permits
- Ask the PEI government to provide health cards to workers on arrival in the province
- And importantly, lobby for Permanent Residency of workers, upon arrival in Canada

Giving Voice: A Public Forum on Migrant Justice

1. Welcome:

Ryan MacRae welcomed everyone, acknowledging the land we were gathered on was the unceded, ancestral land of the Mi'kmaq people.

2. Opening songs:

By Julie Pellissier-Lush, Mi'kmaw storyteller, actor, drummer, author, and the first Indigenous Poet Laureate for PEI, and Tanya Davis, writer and artist living on Epekwitk/Prince Edward Island and the province's current Poet Laureate.

3. Harvesting Freedom: Presentation by Gabriel Allahdua

On behalf of the PEI Action Team for Migrant Workers' Rights, Mary Cowper-Smith introduced Gabriel Allahdua. Gabriel is a former migrant farm worker from St Lucia, an island in the Eastern Caribbean. He is an organizer with the collective, Justice for Migrant Workers (J4MW), and is currently an outreach worker for migrant workers in Ontario. He was the first person to hold the position of Activist in Residence at the University of Guelph recently published his book, *Harvesting Freedom*.

Gabriel spoke with passion about the collective experience of migrant workers in Canada. He spoke of migrant workers as not just a vulnerable class, but people *without* class. He criticized Canada as a country that on the world stage appears to uphold standards of human rights but remains silent on the treatment of migrant workers within its own borders. Where freedom is denied, rights are abused. Dignity, he said, is the longest word in the dictionary, so far from reach.

Much of the food we eat in Canada is a product of migrant labour. The federal government introduced the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) in 1957. Gabriel drew a picture of a tree with three parts, a stem, branches, and leaves.

The stem: In Canada migrant workers to do jobs that Canadians don't want to do, the "D" jobs, that is, dirty, dangerous, and deadly. On average, two SAWP workers die every year. "How many more are injured or sick?", he asked. The employment standards for non-unionized farm workers are poor. There is no holiday pay or other basic protections that other workers have.

The branches: A SAWP worker is not entitled to apply for permanent status. It is a two-edged sword – immigration vulnerability and labour vulnerability.

The leaves: The closed work permit which ties a worker to one employer, who then has the power to send the worker home.

Gabriel noted that there are many people who believe tomorrow will be better than today, lots of people who believe in change. Individually we may be weak, but collectively we are strong. Still, the loudest noise in Canada is not English French or Spanish – the most popular language is silence, the language of the poor – those who are putting food on your table – food that we eat can be our safest medicine if we eat well. In Canada, food is not a basic human right – it's a commodity.

Gabriel noted that his story is related to our stories – food and music connect us. Injustice is injustice. Injustice to one is injustice to all.

It's said that his book is the first time a migrant worker writes his story. There were 101 reasons for writing this book, Gabriel said.

“I want a healthy and sustainable food system. If we want that, we are similar. Are you concerned how your food is grown? Are you concerned about exploitation of land, workers, and soil?”

“I want to bring hope and freedom to all workers who are vulnerable and tired. I want to bring freedom to myself. I inherit slavery from mother, and indentured labour from father. In Canada, I faced another type of exploitation – I wrote the book to stop the exploitation in my family.”

“I wrote the book to empower, enlighten, and expose, because migrant workers are made invisible in Canada. This is a country with a culture of silence. I want to break this silence, to confront deniers. Because people are good at denying, delaying, or deflecting the conversation. The book is a tool. I am on a mission. I want peace and for peace you need justice. There is power in your hands as a consumer, voter, singer, or songwriter. My power is in my mouth – if you take some time on your own, reflect on what skills you have then you have the power within to change the world – discover and then unleash it – we can work together to create change – we are fighting human made unjust laws, not natural laws.”

4. Questions:

Nouhad Mourad thanked Gabriel, and invited questions from the audience.

a) Why, after 57 years, does the same situation still exist? Is it a plot of the companies (sharks)? Or is it the rules of the companies to allow this to be created time after time? Is it something that belongs to the country (Canada) or is it particular interests?

Gabriel: Canada is a huge emitter of greenhouse gases and a major contributor to climate change. Countries in global south that are not as big contributors to climate change are more severely affected – this causes people to look to other countries, countries in the global north, for work. It's capitalism – a few people living at the expense of/exploiting the majority. 1% of the world's richest people own almost 70% of the world's wealth. The exploitation of workers isn't confined to this country, but Canada tries to convey different impression to the world – we champion human rights around the world but ignore what's happening in our own home.

b) How do we get keep people oriented towards what's happening here? How can we push government to take real action? How do you keep pushing?

Gabriel: There are good examples of workers who have come together to fight injustice. Workers who were injured and required to keep working, or workers who are denied EI, or others treated unfairly in other ways. These are the little things that motivate me to continue.

For example, in [Montreal in 2023](#) when workers came together to file a class action suit, asking if it's fair for migrant workers to be tied to their employer. Or in [Ontario in 2015](#) when workers complained to the Human Rights Commission about treatment by the OPP, eventually winning their case and being awarded compensation. And in [Ontario in 2013](#) when 100 seasonal agricultural workers who argued that they were wrongly denied Employment Insurance benefits won their case.

It's frustrating when Canada tells China to improve human rights or goes to the United Nations and boasts about how it welcomes so many refugees. That's the image we have of Canada. Why then does Canada treat migrant workers so badly? There are so many injustices. When it comes to war and supplying ammunition to countries such as Ukraine, we have lots of money. But when it comes to social programs, there's never enough. We boast about our supply of freshwater in Canada – but 25 Indigenous communities are still on boil water orders after years of government promises.

We are fighting to change the world, for reallocation of resources, not asking to go to moon. We need to work together and use our collective skills to take action and push for change in the world. At some point you need to decide, are you going to be a spectator, or will you join the fight?

c) Do you have tips for organizing?

Gabriel: In a foreign country we are made vulnerable. Treat me consistently with dignity and there will be trust. Trust is basic. Also, if you treat one worker well, it spreads like wildfire. That's networking. Language a barrier – helping workers to navigate system and overcome challenges builds trust and expands networks.

5. Poetry

The Gøod Company performed 4 poems – they are a group of four poly-disciplinary artists dedicated to crafting good community on Epekwitk.

6. Panel Discussion with PEI-based Migrant Workers

Ryan facilitated a discussion with four migrant workers currently living in PEI. Their answers to four questions have been compiled here.

Where did you come from and why? What sector are you working in?

The panellists were from Saint Lucia, Mexico, Philippines. They were working in asphalt paving, agriculture, seafood processing. One person was looking for a new job, as the company they were working for folded. One person had been coming to PEI since 2002. They came here looking for a better quality of life, because they wanted to become a resident of Canada, looking for good opportunities, for themselves and their families, to take advantage of the many privileges that come with living in Canada. There was not much work in their home country, they felt they needed to do something for themselves. Also, to make friends and learn a trade.

How have your ideas of Canada changed from before coming to now that you're here?

Panellists said they had dreams before coming, but there have been many surprises and disappointments:

“Every day we try to be positive. Every day you have two options: complain and cry or decide to fight. Maybe tomorrow will be better.”

“In the corner there may be one light. Why do people not talk? What happens if I talk? They'll send me back. But I didn't care, I went and explained. I feel good, I helped, I'm doing good.”

“Compared to my job in my country, I eat and sleep again. I'm safer here. I'll never go back.”

“I had a lot of ideas before I came here, a beautiful country (true), big opportunity. Now that I’m here, not everything is as it appears to be. A lot depends on the boss, and it depends on the other workers. It also depends on the attitude that I bring in, and how I manage what I encounter when I’m here. So that now that I’m here, it’s clear, I want to stay here and bring my family and the basis of that is my ability to work and keep working.”

If it were possible to get Permanent Residency, how would it impact workers here in PEI?

“I think it would be a big possibility. A big open door. I had opportunities to be a leader.”

“We’re coming here to make a contribution – if we can’t do that, we must ask why are we doing it?”

“If we could get PR, we are still leaving behind people who are still suffering, and we need to consider that. We all have hearts and a body that gets tired, we need to remember that.”

About housing, we know it’s hard for lots of people, but especially migrant workers. How would you like to see it addressed?

Managers should tell bosses about the terrible housing conditions. With the SAWP the government inspects housing, which is good. Except (inspections only done once, at the beginning of the season) the heater is not working. We asked at a meeting with all workers, but nobody has come to fix it.

Living conditions/housing should be inspected 3 times. Because if 12 or more people are living there, there should be decent living conditions. Living without adequate heat or refrigeration that’s not working is not appropriate. There should be more pressure brought to bear on employers to make sure workers have decent, adequate housing. Everyone requires privacy but in many cases there is no privacy.

“Loud stories change our hearts, and as we turn, we see the changes across society – change doesn’t happen by accident – it’s hard work and takes energy, power to move all of us – Gabriel’s story should inspire us all – not just to sit still bit to be our own activist in whatever way we can.”

7. Group Discussions

Participants divided into four groups to discuss a set of questions. Time was limited, but some good conversations took place. Here are the questions, and the combined notes. See Appendix A on page 7 for more complete notes for each group.

What stood out for you today in what you heard?

Workers come looking for a better future and contribute to our economy and communities but face many challenges. The system of closed work permits and no access to permanent residency creates vulnerability and makes workers fearful. *“If we speak out, we can suffer, even when we are with others”.*

The challenges are experienced at work and at home. Housing can be a big issue, often crowded and lacking in privacy. When things break down, such as heating and refrigeration, they don’t get fixed right away. Workers are completely dependent on their employer, which can be challenging when for example, an employer goes bankrupt, and your work permit is tied to that employer. We need to stick together, collaborate and work together!

What kinds of actions can we take as a community to ensure migrant workers are respected for the important roles they play?

We could increase community awareness of the role of migrant workers in PEI by taking part in events such as Farm Day in the City. And we could support individuals to share their stories and

identify the systemic roots of the challenges they face. It was suggested that we look at working within other networks (i.e., those working on food sovereignty) to advocate for change. It was also suggested that we identify employers who treat workers with respect and invite them to the next forum. (But it was also noted that the people who already have a voice are also the oppressors.)

What kinds of policy changes are needed?

Workers should have access to Employment Insurance & Canada Pension Plan benefits since they pay into those programs, often for many years. Migrant workers should be eligible for Permanent Residency. We need an end to closed work permits – open work permits for everyone, and health cards on arrival in PEI.

We are grateful for the support of Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARISA) and the Atlantic Council for International Cooperation (ACIC) that enabled us to present this forum.

APPENDIX I: FULL GROUP DISCUSSION NOTES

Group 1

1. What we learned:

Housing is an issue;
Lack of consistent regulation;
Secrecy around the program;
Suppressing people who are trying to assist migrant workers;
Absence of mediation;
Separation, fear and vulnerability;
Fear of consequences to families back home;
It's narrow and close minded to think migrant workers are here to only take. They have lots to give;
Gathering and listening to stories of workers;
The need to be collaborative working towards a common good;
Jurisdictional clarity, resource responsibility;
Wondering about role of Human Rights Commission.

2. Possible Actions:

Farm Day in the City – enhance visibility of those who help make food available to us;
People who control food system are organized, workers could join with others and organize;
Atlantic Food Action Coalition – get all vulnerable stakeholders to communicate with each other;
Reach a critical mass of voices;
Encourage good employees to become leaders;
Celebrate good employers, invite to next forum;
Increase awareness;
Support individuals to share their stories.

3. Policy Change:

Access to EI & CPP for workers.

Group 2

1. What we learned:

Learned from Gabriel's experience;
Better future here, but many challenges like being away from family and loved ones,
Having a closed work permit means you're vulnerable;
No proper heating facilities;
Coming to PEI for employment was a success but also very challenging journey because of unseen circumstances like our present situation (employer's financial difficulties/bankruptcy).

2. Action/Policy Change:

Continue doing what your organization is presently working – like working on PR for all – open work permits, providing a health card;
We are not familiar with the present policies so whatever best for the migrant workers to have better lives when arriving in PEI;
Listen to the migrant workers voices and bring these up to the authorities;
Again, if your organization can bring our voices to the government, the sooner the better!

Group 3

1. What we learned:

Vulnerability, invisibility and silence;
“Gabriel’s experience is what we are living; I identified with what he said.”
Don’t throw in the towel, we can succeed!
We have to confront the challenges;
If we speak out we can suffer, even when we are with others;
There is a lot of energy;
We have a poverty mentality;
Individualism and envy;
Fear of going outside of my comfort zone;
Islanders say hello but stay inside.

2. Policy Changes:

Having residency would help; if government granted residency, bad companies would cease to exist.

Group 4

1. What we learned:

The workers’ concerns about housing;
Employers actually ban visitors, lack of privacy;
Workers live in fear, vulnerability, and fear the consequences;
Lack of knowledge of their rights;
Workers want to give more when they can;
Workers were isolated and no resources;
We need to stick together, collaborate and work together.

2. Possible Actions:

Farm day in the city, do we celebrate with them?
Food season – our concern that workers in the food systems are marginalized. But the voice is fragmented, community has lost food security;
Atlantic Food Coalition – to advocate for food security, develop relationship with workers;
People who have a voice are also the oppressors;
There are some good employers, identify them and celebrate their achievements;
Invite employers to the next forum;
Educate the public about migrant workers;
Identify the deficiencies of programs and share with public.

3. Policy Changes:

Access to EI
Ask policy makers why?

APPENDIX II: EVALUATION

Today I liked:

The format, the speaker - Gabriel, the workers on the panel and the performers;
The people I met, the ambiance, the stories and the love;
Gabriel's advice, and he paid attention to what we want to convey and thanks for the food too!
Gathering, sharing leading to action;
Value, identified, lived, applied;
Intersectionality of everything;
Building alliances, networks;
The balance of presentations and entertainment & educative/interaction.

Today I learned;

The loudest voice is silence and the importance of breaking the silence. Silence is not an option;
More about allies, there is a PEI action group, and there are opportunities to help and be volunteers;
About the vulnerability of migrant workers in PEI;
That there is a great need for volunteers and help to push the conversation forward;
Not to give up right away and keep dreaming;
That every migrant has a different situation but one goal to success, here in Canada;
The experience of Gabriel and the issues he faced in coming to Canada;
Confirmation of some things – that there's few voices from the front line and why;
Everyone needs rights;
Conscious action will effect change/transformation;
Bravery is important;
Change within is the beginning;
EI and CPP deducted from income realistically not accessible by many workers;
Human Rights Commission could be/should be understanding and collaborating with other groups working on these issues.

I'd like to learn more about:

Migrant housing;
How to help and participate and how to involve others;
What people are doing to push the conversation;
What else we should do like me who is uncertain about future because of our company;
Rights of migrant workers because there are some circumstances that we don't know of our rights, especially when it comes to employer/employee issues;
Would like to connect with action team for my organization;
Action to be taken to celebrate migrant workers;

For next time, let's:

See more lawyers and systemic helpers;
Have a little more time for the event and conversation;
There is more to know and learn;
Talk more about migrant more experience, success, how they cope with the situations;
Connect with other people working in this area and doing other things;
More diverse voices (i.e. farmers).