

Wednesday 29 September 2021

New visa program a green light for worker exploitation

The Morrison Government's new "Agriculture Visa" has already expanded to cover at least agriculture, fisheries, forestry and meatworks and contains many of the worst elements of previous visa programs which have resulted in systemic exploitation and mistreatment of migrant workers as well as the displacement of local jobs. It also fails to properly test if workers in Australia are first offered available jobs.

Initially touted as a working visa for ASEAN member countries, the visa now has no restrictions on where workers can come from, where in Australia they can work, what jobs they can do or the number of visas available.

A factsheet on the program circulated by the Department of Home Affairs shows that there will be no safeguards put in place to prevent the kind of mass exploitation that has been seen under previous visa schemes, no checks to ensure that visa holders entering Australia have the qualifications or licenses needed to do the job they are being brought here to do, or checks to ensure that workers are receiving pay and conditions that they are entitled to under the law.

This visa will create a pool of almost completely unregulated labour in sectors which have track records of underpayment, mistreatment and abuse of migrant workers at a time when local workers in regional areas are counting the days until they can get back to work.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil,

"This visa will create a second-class workforce in the agriculture, fisheries, forestry and meatworks sectors who will have none of the protections or rights that all Australian workers should be able to rely on.

"Workers in regional areas know what happens when employers get their way on visas – mass exploitation, rock-bottom wages, dangerous conditions and no jobs for local workers.

"Visa programs should be aimed at filling genuine skill gaps and providing a path to permanent residency for workers. This visa scheme makes no attempt to independently verify gaps in the labour market and has no guaranteed path to residency for workers.

"This program is simply about giving big business a way to slash wages by exploiting vulnerable migrant workers. Once again, the Morrison Government has caved to business interests and abandoned working people.

"This visa represents an enormous step back for workers' rights. Minister Littleproud describes it as 'the biggest structural change to the agriculture workforce in our nation's history'. Australian workers should be able to expect that historic workforce changes reinforce and advance their rights, not remove them.

“The visa will even undermine the limited existing protections for workers under the Pacific Labour Scheme and Seasonal Workers Program.

“With youth unemployment at 10.7 per cent and underemployment at 9.3 per cent, there appears to be no requirement that local workers be offered jobs before businesses bring in vulnerable migrant workers.”

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