Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Supporting decent work on farms needs the supermarket chains

Issued July 2023

The Uniting Church in Australia has long supported decent employment conditions for everyone. Several Christian theological foundations support the proper treatment of all people in employment. These include the following affirmations:

- The love of God for all humankind compels a commitment to relationships of mutual love and respect between all people. Such love urges structures that serve the well-being and just treatment of all people;
- The God of the Christian Faith is a God of justice, for whom just relations are central, a God who is accordingly at one with the financially poor, disadvantaged, marginalised or exploited; and
- All people are created in the image of God, and all people are intrinsically valuable.

The exploitation of people working on Australian farms, especially in horticulture, has had a long history. The major supermarket chains play a crucial role in creating an environment where exploitation has flourished on Australian farms. For example, workers on the Vizzarri farm have alleged they were paid cash in an envelope, sometimes with no pay slips and no way for them to understand how their wages had been calculated. The United Workers Union (UWU) has been trying to resolve the issues with Vizzarri Farms, Coles and Woolworths for years. Between 2018 and 2022, the Vizzarri companies ignored multiple warnings from the UWU about the exploitation of workers in their labour-hire operations and their failures to comply with minimum Award standards for their directly employed workers.

In 2016, the Australian Border Force raided the Vizzarri Koo Wee Rup farm and uncovered systemic exploitation of its predominately migrant workforce. One of the corporate entities, M&G Vizzarri, pleaded guilty to eight charges resulting from the raid and was fined $60,000. In a decision handed down in the County Court in Victoria in June 2022, a judge found that workers at M&G Vizzarri Pty Ltd had been paid as little as $14 an hour in an elaborate sham labour-hire arrangement. Yet Coles and Woolworths have continued to source from Vizzarri Farms and have not taken effective action to require the companies to end on-going exploitation on their farms.

The Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania wrote to both Coles and Woolworths in July 2022, asking that they give preference to sourcing from farms that use people working under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. Coles engaged in discussion with the Synod but refused the request. Woolworths failed to make any response.

The PALM scheme allows people from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste to come and work in placements for up to nine months on farms.

People in the PALM scheme are given employment safeguards against exploitation that do not exist for other people from overseas working on farms. In addition, people in the PALM scheme are provided with access to unions and community groups, including churches, to ensure they are treated fairly. Churches across the country, including Uniting Churches, provide support and friendship to workers in their local area.

Research interviewing people on the PALM scheme found high satisfaction amongst workers with their pay and accommodation.

The Commonwealth Government vets employers on the PALM scheme to ensure that they are likely to treat people on the scheme well. There is cost to employers on the PALM scheme to meet the requirements of the scheme that other employers are not required to pay. Employers with a history of exploitation are excluded.

By contrast, Woolworths, Coles and ALDI use inadequate and opaque systems to try and ensure the wellbeing of people working on farms in their supply chains. There is a lack of clarity over how audits of farms and labour hire companies are conducted. Many of their systems appear to rely on self-assessments. ALDI provides the least information about measures it takes to address exploitation on farms it sources produce from. When cases of clear exploitation are brought to supermarket chains by external parties, such as unions, the response is almost always inadequate. To Coles' credit, it has published a list of complaints it received about farms and labour hire businesses in its supply chain. In most cases, Coles was unable to substantiate the complaint with its investigations. By contrast, in the experience of the Synod, most complaints about employers on the PALM scheme result in corrective actions being taken by the Commonwealth Government and its agencies.

Giving preference to farms using workers from the PALM scheme would be a significant step the supermarket chains could take to assist in eliminating exploitation on farms within their supply chains.

As an example of the critical role that buyers can play in curbing exploitation on farms, in the 1990s, a campaign was formed at Immokalee in Florida in the US to address the exploitation of people from Latin America on tomato farms. In 2010, an agreement was reached with Florida tomato growers to implement the Fair Food Program (see details here https://ciw-online.org/ffp_faq/) to curb exploitation on the farms. The breakthrough came because major retailers put pressure on the tomato farmers and gave preference to purchasing from those that could demonstrate they were not involved in exploitation.

What you can do

You can also write polite and respectful letters to:

Brad Banducci
Chief Executive Officer
Woolworths Limited
PO Box 8000
Baulkham Hills, NSW, 2153

Salutation: Dear Mr Banducci

Steven Cain
Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer
Coles Group Limited
PO Box 480
Glen Iris, VIC 3146

Salutation: Dear Mr Cain

Tom Daunt
Chief Executive Officer
ALDI Australia
1 Sargents Road
Minchinbury, NSW, 2770

Salutation: Dear Mr Daunt

Points to make in your letters:

- Express concern about exploitation on horticulture farms in Australia.
- While acknowledging that they have taken some steps to respond to exploitation on farms, express disappointment at the lack of meaningful transparency about the measures they have taken. It is unclear from their Modern Slavery Statements how their systems detect exploitation on farms in practice.
- Given the substantial safeguards and enforcement mechanisms built into the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, ask that they commit to preference to sourcing from farms that use people on the PALM scheme for horticultural goods. Such a measure would be a significant step towards eliminating exploitation on horticulture farms.
- Point out that employers meeting all the obligations of the PALM scheme deserve to be supported.