



Fair Pay for a Fair Day's Work on Farms

November 2023

“And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”
Deuteronomy 10:19

For approximately a decade, the JIM Cluster has advocated for more significant safeguards to prevent the exploitation of people working on Australian farms. People on temporary visas are particularly vulnerable to such abuse. We have provided you with letter-writing actions and postcard actions on the issue. Significant progress has been made with the implementation of many of the safeguards we have called for. In addition, many rural congregations provide spiritual, social and material support to people working in their areas on temporary visas, especially those from the Pacific Islands on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

The Commonwealth Government commissioned a review of Australia's migration system by three independent reviewers, Dr Michael Parkinson, Professor Joanna Howe and John Azarias. The review was completed in March 2023 but only recently was made public. One of the review's recommendations was to limit the working holiday-maker visa to a year rather than giving working holiday-makers (also called “backpackers”) the ability to extend their visa by a year if they work 88 days in a regional area. Such work often takes place on farms. Research by the Fair Work Ombudsman and other organisations has found that the option to work 88 days in a regional setting to get a visa extension opens working holiday-makers to exploitation. They are willing to put up with wage theft and sexual harassment to get the visa extension.

The review recommended that the program's primary focus should be cultural exchange and not operate to tie the length of stay in Australia to the performance of work. The reviewers suggested that if working holiday-makers wish to work longer term in Australia, they should apply for explicit employment-related visas.



Farmers who gain a competitive advantage by exploiting backpackers working on their farms undermine the businesses of farmers trying to pay their workers fairly in compliance with the law.

On 15 June 2021, Unions NSW released a survey of 1,300 people on working holiday-maker visas who had worked on horticulture farms. They found:

- 78% reported they had been illegally underpaid;
- Some workers were paid \$1 an hour; and
- The lowest daily wages were reported by workers employed on grape and zucchini farms, earning an average of \$9 per day, followed by blueberry farmworkers who averaged \$10 per day.

‘Kate’, aged 32, came from Taiwan to Australia on a Working Holiday Visa.

“I was working on a mandarin and lemon farm, it was a cash-in-hand job, and they didn't even provide proper equipment for picking. I've earned just \$24 per day. Such hard work.

I also worked on a strawberry farm where the farmer advertised for ‘Asian workers only’. I think that's so discriminatory.”



Business groups have been lobbying the Commonwealth Government to reject the reform suggested by the review of the migration system.

We need to show our concern to the Commonwealth Government that we do not want to see ongoing exploitation of working holiday-makers on farms and in other regional employment.

What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

The Hon. Andrew Giles MP

Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and
Multicultural Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

Senator The Hon. Penny Wong

Minister for Foreign Affairs
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP

Prime Minister
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

The Hon. Tony Burke MP

Minister for Employment and Workplace
Relations
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

Points to make in your letters:

- Express concern at the evidence that working holiday-makers have been exploited in Australia, especially when working on farms.
- Note that the requirement to work 88 days in a regional setting to get a visa extension of a year has facilitated much of the exploitation. Working holiday-makers put up with the exploitation to get the second year on their visa.
- Express concern that such exploitation undermines the working conditions for other people working on farms and in other regional employment.
- Ask that they end the option for working holiday-makers to work 88 days in a regional location to get a second year on their visa.
- Note it is desirable for Australians or people on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme to take on the work that working holiday-makers would do in regional areas.
- Point out that both these groups of workers have greater protections against exploitation.