

Stories of Collective Care in the Time of COVID-19: Part Two Video Transcription

Nadine Villasin F.:

Welcome to today's program, Precarious Workers are Essential Workers. My name is Nadine Villasin Feldman. My pronouns are she, her. I'm the Director of Programming at Myseum of Toronto. For those of you who are new to Myseum, we are a museum of Toronto that aims to tell the narratives of our city, past, present, and future through exhibits, events, and experiences, both across the GTA and online as in with programs such as this one today.

This program is part of an ongoing series that looks at how various communities are experiencing and responding to the COVID pandemic, and we're very pleased to have with us today, the Kwentong Bayan Collective who had been the artists collective in residence at Myseum for the past year and are today's moderators. So I'd like to invite, Jo and Althea to introduce themselves, the panelists and our storytellers, who will be sharing their stories with us today.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Nadine. Hi, my name is Jo, my pronouns are they, them and =and I'm the other member of Kwentong Bayan Collective. Kwentong Bayan is a literal translation in the Filipino language of 'community stories'.

Althea Balmes:

Hi everybody. My name is Althea. My pronouns are she and her, and we want to say that before we begin this webinar this is hosted in the territories of the Anishinaabe, the Mississaugas and the Haudenosaunee, under the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. This is an agreement of reciprocity and good relations for those who live and stay in these territories, including settlers, immigrants, newcomers, and guests between each other, the land creator and the elementals, such as the [foreign language] earth, the [foreign language], which is wind, [00:02:03], fire and [00:02:04] which is water.

Althea Balmes:

So the Dish With One Spoon treaty is a reminder to extend our care and our relationship with each other and outside of us for now, and future generations. And as we begin this event, we ground ourselves in this understanding, and thank you for joining us.

Well and acknowledgements are important, there are many ways to embody good relations and one way is to support indigenous-led art projects. So we wanted to give a shout out to eco-influencer poet, Malaika Areri who is also an educator, medicine keeper and knowledge keeper, who's offering Tionnka:non medicine series online on her IG or Instagram, sharing

some teachings around celestial planetary grandmothers and the medicine that they can share with us to help better ground ourselves and expand our relations beyond us.

So this Friday, May 22nd she's offering one called Grandmother Moon Medicine and Ritual Awareness: New Flower Moon in Gemini and another one next week, May 29th called the 3 Pathways of Being: Sun-Moon-Rising Signs. So please check her out on her Instagram @Malaika Areri.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Stories of Collective Care in the Time of COVID-19 is a series of online conversations with essential workers, food justice advocates, and the adult literacy community. We will learn about strategies of mutual support and grassroots organizing and experienced some of the cultural practices being created during this time of global transition, namely the stories that are being generated and that we will be sharing in this panel today.

Althea Balmes:

So we're really excited to introduce you to this panel called Precarious Work is Essential Work, and it's really about how grocery store workers, farm laborers and cleaners, they were already precarious even before the pandemic and they've been facing job insecurity, low wages, hazardous working conditions and this looming threat of becoming undocumented. And yet their work is still essential to ensuring society's basic needs. So this panel is really about how can we better protect our workers who are providing essential services but they're marginalized by the system.

Althea Balmes:

And this panel features workers sharing the realities of their daily lives and some of the recommendations on how to ensure their safety and protection. We want to remind those folks who are listening that we have a Q&A chat going, and so we invite folks to post their questions over the Q&A, and afterwards, after the discussions, Jo and I will look at them and we'll try and answer your questions. We won't be able to answer all of your questions, but feel free to vote other people's questions if it really resonates with you.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Great. And now we're going to ask each panelists to please join us and I'll ask them to introduce themselves, introduce their names, the pronouns they like to use and a bit of their role in the community. So first I'd like to call on Laura.

Laura Pena:

Hello everyone. Nice to meet everybody of the attendees. Me and my co-worker Nathalie Vengal work at the United Food and Commercial Workers. We're a labor union working in the private sector, but we also have a branch called the Agricultural Workers Alliance, through which we help agricultural workers know their rights, and we help them in any capacity we can. And in my role for the United Food and Commercial Workers is as a national representative. I'll help the locals in any capacity we can. And I also involve Nathalie on helping agricultural workers through the AWA as well.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Laura. And we'll invite Nathalie to join us Please.

Nathalie Vengal:

Hello everyone and thank you so much for inviting us and thank you Laura for the kind introduction. I'm also a national representative and organizer for the United Food and Commercial Worker Union. As Laura as said, we represent workers in the private sector and we also assist migrant workers in Canada who aren't able to organize themselves. We help organize workers who are precarious workers and indeed in this times of COVID the precariousness has grown significantly. So I'm happy to share and listen to the stories and see how we can help each other and we can lift the standards for workers in Canada.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you. And we'd like to invite Valrie to join.

Valrie Francis:

Hi, thank you for having me. My name is Valrie Francis and I'm an employee at The Real Canadian Superstore located at one of their locations in Toronto. I work in the cash office and I also assist with front-end department and I'm also a member of the United Food and Commercials Worker, local 1006A.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you. And we'd like to invite Jesson please.

Jesson Reyes:

Hi everyone, my name is Jesson Reyes. I am a migrant worker advocate as well as I work as a managing director for Migrant Resource Center, which is a migrant service institution that provides one-on-one and group support for migrant workers, including undocumented workers. And we're very thankful to be part of the conversation today, so thank you to Myuseum of Toronto and Kwentong Bayan Collective for inviting us. I'm excited to share the work that we do.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you everyone. As part of our panels, we always have a storyteller who is sharing from their lived experience and we would like to introduce, the story teller with this panel is Lourdes De La Pena, a worker and leader of Migrante Ontario.

Lourdes De La Pena:

The global pandemic that we are experiencing now unfolds the importance of migrant workers to the Canadian community and economy. We are the workers who are willing to work in the essential jobs that most Canadian are not willing to take on you. You can see the working in warehouses, food processing farms, home care facilities and grocery stores, taking on jobs like domestic work, cleaning, caregiving, packaging and food attendance.

We the precarious workers or under workers suffer the most. We cannot say no even if we deem that the job is dangerous for us or most likely we will get the virus because we are working in a crowded workplaces, where we cannot practice social, physical distancing and with no personal protective equipment. And if we lose our job and cannot work because the company that we work will declare bankruptcy and close us down, we cannot access income support like EI and the CERB the government is offering.

We are not ready for this pandemic. We are advised to stay home for our safety not to get the virus, but if we will not... we won't have the money to pay our rent, pay our bills and buy food, and we do not know how long or until when we are going to practice the social and physical distancing. We won't die from the virus but we will die from hunger and poverty.

Lourdes De La Pena:

When I came here in Canada to work, I am not aware of my rights as a migrant worker. I was easily swayed to sign documents and pay exorbitant fees for a promise to have a work permit and become permanent resident after working a caregiver. None of these promises came true. I have no work, no status. I feel that I was abused and used by this agency. It is not our fault that we lost our status. We still did everything to maintain it. We are unfortunate that we fall in the hands of the people who have no conscience and opportunists. People who exploit our being ignorant of the law for their own benefit.

With the help of Migrante, we find ways to regain our status. We thank them for the work and advocacy to protect and fight for the rights and welfare of the migrant workers. Through learning about migrants' situation, trainings and workshop, we learn about our rights as women, as an undocumented worker and as a human.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

The last line was learning about our rights as a worker, an undocumented worker, and as a human being. And that was only a four-minute excerpt due to time restrictions. And the whole

video of Lourdes De la Pena's story will be available after this panel for viewing. [foreign language 00:12:01], thank you very much Lourdes for sharing your story.

Althea Balmes:

Thank you Lourdes. Her story is really powerful and I really recommend that you all make time to really listen to her whole story because what she tells is a very complicated story that only really migrant workers have to go through.

And Jesson, you've worked closely with Lourdes and other folks like her in that position who are undocumented and also as migrant workers. Some of them working under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program. So can you tell us more about what makes our work so precarious and what's going on now with COVID?

Jesson Reyes:

Definitely. Again, thank you for showing or allowing Lourdes to represent the voices of migrant workers in today's panel. It's very important to hear directly from the workers. So I can talk more about what we do as a MRC, but before that I just wanted to just put things into context and speaks a little bit about what Lourdes is talking about.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed insecure living and working conditions of many workers, especially the most vulnerable ones. But what was the underlying situation of workers prior to coming into COVID? And the situation is that there hasn't been a crisis, right? There's been an economic crisis that has long plagued in our economy in Canada that's been around for almost three decades now.

And this economic crisis is a crisis that has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. It's a crisis that has caused massive displacement globally, which has driven the global migration regime today. It is a crisis also that has slashed funding for basic social services and healthcare and other support. And this is a crisis that is brought upon by neoliberal policies, right?

Globally there's about 250 million migrants and close to 150 million out of that are considered temporary foreign workers or low-skilled migrant workers. More than half of that total population are women and Canada is no different when it comes to... And in fact in many aspects are at the forefront of enticing the best and the brightest over the last decade.

Over the last decade, there's been a shift to Canadian migration from permanent to temporary, and we're seeing this and this Temporary Foreign Worker Program where Lourdes and many migrant workers have entered Canada. The appetite of big employers in Canada to hire foreign

workers has grown beyond the years. And again, we're seeing this in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and more recently in this international students program.

Jesson Reyes:

With what Lourdes was talking about, she was talking about the situation of migrant workers as far as their living situation, and I'm sure it will be shared here that even prior to COVID migrant workers do not have access to a good standard when it comes to housing. Right? And this is now even more highlighted during a health pandemic like COVID. She was also talking about having to obviously leave their family behind, and this is because the fundamental feature of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is that you come to Canada as a temporary a worker. That means you cannot bring your family with you. And this is a reality for many migrant workers and refugees, that they come to Canada alone and they are not very aware of the policies that govern the program. So it is very easy for them to be lured to different directions.

Lastly she spoke about paying fees. And this has been a major issue also for many migrant workers, that are subject to unscrupulous recruitment agencies. In fact our connection with Lourdes as MRC started with our work around unscrupulous recruitment agency. What we mean by this is, in Canada when a migrant worker would like to come and work, they have to go through what we call a third-party recruitment agency who provides service by applying for their worker permit, by servicing their house and even their transportation.

These third-party recruitment agencies are like a small business in Canada, but the problem is they are not regulated. They're regulated in some provinces, like in Manitoba and the BCBC, but in Ontario, given the number of migrant workers coming in, they aren't regulated, so it's a free for all. A third-party recruitment agency can say that their service will cost \$5,000, and a migrant worker will willing pay this to be able to stay in Canada, quote-unquote.

So this has been a constant struggle and it has actually... became a campaign for Lourdes and her colleagues to fight for of course, the working and the living standards of migrant workers including regulating recruitment agencies here in Canada, particularly in the province of Ontario, and that has been the work that we've been doing with migrant workers in Migrante and as well as with MRCC.

Althea Balmes:

Thank you Jesson. There's a lot there and it's only the first question.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Jesson. I want to turn to Laura now. We hear similar stories about the working conditions of migrant farm workers. Laura, can you share with us some of the stories you've

heard working with the folks in the community and how has their working conditions been affected by this global pandemic?

Laura Pena:

Well some of the work me and my co-workers at AWA, what we do is we help workers get an open work permit, due to their abuse. When workers are prone to get abused by their employer, we use their testimony to help them and assist them in any way possible to have an open work permit. And through this work we're doing through the Agricultural Workers Alliance, we have been hearing a lot of abuse cases even before this pandemic hit. And now with the current pandemic situation, their working conditions have worsened. Now they are being directly affected by this.

They're considered essential workers, thus they are not able to close operations or be laid off because of the pandemic, so they need to keep operating. But in spite of the government providing certain guidelines that are to be followed by employers to prevent contamination, the employers refused to provide workers with sanitation stations with proper social distancing. It's impossible to keep social distance in these warehouses and in these greenhouses. They're very close operations where there's no safe distance to keep on each other, no proper ventilation.

And even before this pandemic, their working conditions are terrible. They're prone to physical abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse is something me and Nathalie hear in every testimony and every story from farm workers.

They're considered essential workers and they're indeed essential for the operations of the rest of society or food producers, but in spite of this, it's very ironic that they're very insecure in their own food security. We have heard stories of workers coming and being terminated without any just cause in a matter of days. And they're here without speaking the language, and they don't know where they are, they don't know what to do. And we have had cases where workers are basically homeless and have to rely on regional food banks in order to survive while they process their case at the immigration center, basically.

So it's hard to understand for people that are not involved, but we that we see this every day, they are very, very much marginalized. Nathalie can speak to this as well, there has been cases where workers did not even know there was a pandemic going on because nobody told them, nobody explained to them the measures or what was going on. So when they were terminated that didn't even know there was a pandemic until they reached out to the AWA and we explained to them the situation and how they can take care of themselves. So this is very precarious people, and at this time that marginalization is heightened to a lethal degree I will say.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you for sharing that Laura. We are going to ask Nathalie to join us, but first we want to thank you for connecting us with a migrant farm worker named Emilio who has prepared a story, a sharing here. So I think Althea will introduce that and then we'll come back to the discussion.

Althea Balmes:

Thanks Jo. Yeah, so Emilio who is also a migrant farm worker under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, is working right now in Southern Ontario in a mushroom operation. So let's hear his story now.

Emilio:

[English translation of Emilio's speech].

My name is Emilio. When I was hired I started as a cutter. After 2 years I renewed And I'm now on the packaging department. Every week we are working around 40-50 hours, about 12-14 hours per day. Since I started in 2017 I haven't taken vacation I still haven't taken any.

At my job we arrive every day, we punch in and join the packaging area and take our respective places on the assembly line.

We are over 100 people and we are all weighting the mushrooms, sorting and collecting them in piles, all of us at less than 1 meter from each other. When we are working we are not able to maintain proper distance due to the configuration of the assembly line and we can't move around. During our break time we can maintain proper social distance, but not during actual work time.

We don't feel safe at work, the company hasn't taken enough measures. We don't have safety items They don't provide fresh face masks They give us one that we have to reuse for 2 weeks. They don't allow us to go and wash our hands often. When we take more than one washroom break, the supervisors call us out. They can actually send you home for that. And if you continue going to the washroom too often. They can even send you back to your country.

We try to stay informed about the pandemic by watching news and other media, through co-workers and union groups, the company doesn't give us any information. We have to do our own research, through TV or the Internet.

As agricultural workers we don't have the right to unionize, but we have approached UFCW and they have provided us support. When we approached the UFCW Union, we received support for open work permits, training, information about our rights and responsibilities, the Union has helped us with any issues we've had. It's very sad to learn that agricultural workers in Ontario don't have the right to unionize. That makes us feel alone and abandoned. And that's why there are so many abuses from employers towards workers, because we don't have anyone protecting our rights. I'd ask the Premier of Ontario to allow us to unionize. With the support of a union

We will be treated right, with dignity, we wouldn't be discriminated against. I believe we all have the right to be treated with respect, we need the support to be able to unionize, as well as support to receive higher wages and permanent residence, because we work hard to ensure the food supply stays working.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Emilio for sharing your story and for your essential work. I want to move now to Nathalie. And that was such a moving story and we want to understand, how does the union support its members like Emilio?

Nathalie Vengal:

Thank you so much Althea. Thank you so much Emilio for sharing that story. So as Emilio mentioned at the end of the story, agricultural workers in the province of Ontario are unable to organize. In other provinces such as BC, Manitoba, Quebec, they have the legal right to form a union. So technically the workers that reach out to us are unable to organize and we are unable to represent them.

However, that doesn't mean that the United Food and Commercial Workers isn't doing everything possible. For over three decades, we have pushed the government, we have lobbied the government at the provincial and federal level to make sure that workers, agricultural workers in Ontario have the legal right to unionize and improve their working conditions.

These workers are primarily vulnerable because number one, their conditions can be violated from day one, and number two, they are so isolated apart, that the community, us, are unable to hear about their stories. So in the AWA what we do is, now that the temporary foreign workers, the agriculture workers have the ability to apply for an open work permit in the case their being abused by their employers, we assist the workers in filling all those documents and applying for those work permits.

We need to get their testimonies just like Emilio shared today, we need to get their testimony what happened at work, the conditions, the housing conditions that they're living in right now. The working conditions during COVID-19, not being able to isolate, not being able to keep distance, being unable to go to the washroom is a story that is very recurrent when we talked to these workers.

Nathalie Vengal:

And for those workers who are in the Seasonal agricultural Foreign Worker Program that, the employer provides the house for those workers, we have seen many cases where the employer does not follow the guidelines provided by the federal government to maintain and ensure that the workers are at all times separated by two meters in distance. There's no signing not at work and not in the houses in a language that is mostly Spanish and English as well, that the workers can look at for information about COVID-19.

Employers are not paying workers the wages they need to... In the event that those workers are just coming to Canada, they need to isolate mandatory. The employers are mandated to pay at least 30 hours of the agreed wages in their contract and they're not paying that money. Instead, they're providing workers with a loan so they can pay and they can buy food while they're in quarantine.

So the abuses have just like my co-worker Laura and like Emilio said, the abuses and the working conditions are going to extremes. Agricultural workers, especially agricultural workers in Ontario are being disrespected and it's time for us to move forward and lift the standards and give them the opportunity to join a union and have access to permanent residency and fair working conditions.

Thank you Nathalie and also to UFCW Canada, Agricultural Workers Alliance for leading the way.

Althea Balmes:

We're going to ask Valrie now, because you're also part of UFCW, UFCW being your union, and thank you so much for being able to join us now and take time off from your work because you're actually considered also as an essential worker.

Valrie Francis:

Yes.

Althea Balmes:

So tell us a little bit about what it's been like working during the pandemic, working at a grocery stores and how has it been being in a union and how has it helped you and your co-workers?

Valrie Francis:

So everyone will know that there's been different steps Within a grocery store, whenever you're visiting a grocery store. And now we have social distance in lines outside, there's also social distance and lines when you're about to cash out at the cash registers. We have limitations of how many people are allowed in the store, including with the staff now, so we have a security guard at the front of the door. We only use one entrance for exiting and entering the store, so we have a hand washing station there. That's where we also disinfect the buggies. You'll see more staff wearing gloves and masks, depends on their comfort level, and we also have pixie glasses at all the cash registers and the customer service desk.

Valrie Francis:

So with all these things being placed since COVID-19, a lot of people are appreciative of it, but we also do still get the one, two customers who are complaining about it saying they don't understand why they need to wait in a long line if they have to buy one, two items or they complain about, why can't we just moved the process faster, or why do we even have limits of how many people is allowed in the store.

Valrie Francis:

So sometimes some of my co-workers get frustrated with that just to hear that you're still coming out to work and to hear the complaints of just because the lines are long. Some people get quite frustrated based on they've been there for like over eight hours, they're working long hours to hear just little complaints about little things, just to ensure that you're able to come in to shop. Some co-workers of mine don't necessarily appreciate that.

In regards to physical distancing, it can get quite tricky at times because since the start of the pandemic, we have lost some of our staff because either they have underlining health conditions, they don't feel comfortable working anymore or they're older age and they don't want to bring it back to their families. Because we do hear the stories of other grocery stores where they have to shut down and clean because some of their employees have gotten COVID-19 and that's at the back of their mind too, they're anxious, they're worried, they're scared that they might get it just by coming to work. So they feel like they are putting their lives at risk.

And to see the different dynamics between people just to see how people are, they're thankful for it but also not thankful for the different procedures that we have in place, it's quite interesting during this pandemic. To see how we try to social distance but it's quite difficult in regards to like our lunch room, we only have one size of a lunch room. So if everyone going on

break at the same time, it's quite difficult for us to go two meters apart from each other because everyone wants their break, everyone is hungry.

So they have opened up the cooking school area for us, so we are thankful for that, but it does get quite difficult at times, especially when it gets really busy at the grocery store. Also what the union has been doing for us is that we have interactive webinars. So the one recent one they have is regards to our mental health, how we are dealing with it, how we are coping with it. So that is free to all the members, which is really great to have because some people don't think they necessarily have that support.

And we could go onto the website and get more information as to what we can do by washing our hands, making sure that we stay home if we do not need to be going outside. And also if you do not have access online then we also have the union reps that's calling the union new stores, which I'm one of them at my location where they're calling in, seeing if there's any concerns or questions or if all the members are okay at work.

Althea Balmes:

Well thank you Valrie. I'm grateful that UFC is on your side and they're able to help you throughout this pandemic and even before that. That's great.

Valrie Francis:

Yes.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Jesson, I want to ask you about the different campaigns that the MRCC is supporting and leading, and particularly if you could tell us more about Kapit-Bisig.

Jesson Reyes:

Yes, definitely. So since COVID-19 hit we've obviously had to adjust some of our work, and practice all the safety measures necessary, but we ensured that our work doesn't stop obviously. And one of the things that we've been a part of is a mutual aid network called Kapit-Bisig, which is essentially a network of different organizations, progressive organizations and institutions and individuals who have come together to assess the immediate needs of our community.

Jesson Reyes:

This includes the Filipino community, but also beyond and try to just... It's as simple as, what are the needs and how can we help them? Whether it's masks, gloves, groceries, things of that nature. And so far since Kapit-Bisig has launched together with the work of MRCC and Migrante and [inaudible 00:36:35] and other organization, we've been able to organize about 50 volunteers. So 50 individuals.

There is a phone line set up, and I think that there have been about 120 people who have reached out to the phone line and about 50 households, received Goodfood boxes. There's a company called Goodfood who has been in support of our work too, but there are many more. There have been families who have specifically asked for baby supplies, for different donations that they can access.

So it's still an ongoing work but what's also different with Kapit-Bisig is, aside from addressing the immediate needs is, we also take this opportunity to educate, similar to what UFCW's doing with agricultural workers. It's an opportunity for us to discuss, to talk and to educate workers and families about their rights. Now more than ever is an important time to actually provide information, because of the situation. So we've been very busy doing that work.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

That's great. Thank you so much Jesson.

Althea Balmes:

We're actually about to close the panel discussion, but I want to ask a last question to Valrie before we move into the Q&A, and we're getting a lot of really great questions, so I'm really looking forward to answering some of these questions. But, Valrie, I wanted to ask you, as an essential worker, do you have anything you want to share to the public of why it's so important to support precarious workers?

Valrie Francis:

For me, I feel like precarious workers are very important and should have the support of the public based on the fact that we rely on their services and their work, in order for us to get our basically sick needs. Everyone knows that we all need food to survive and we have this mindset or this expectation that whenever we go into the grocery store, everything should be there, everything should be fully-stocked, we should have fresh produce, fresh meat, everything should be there, and we do not think of the process it takes for those items to get to the grocery store.

Valrie Francis:

So as soon as this pandemic started, I realized it highlighted the flaws that we have in our system and also in society by how we under-value the work of precarious workers. And since it started, when you go to the grocery store and there's a lot of stocks or, sorry, shelves that has been emptied and it's because the demand is so great, but yet we don't have enough workers or they've been working so hard in order for us to be able to get our basic needs. So just by looking at our food sector, we should be appreciative of all the work that everyone has been doing.

Althea Balmes:

Amazing. Thank you so much Valrie. I think that's very important points for us all to consider.
Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

So we're going to move over to our Q&A. It's a chat box that people have been adding to throughout the panel. And I'll start off with a question and maybe ask the panelists, but if anyone ever wants to jump in, please let us know.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

The first question is from RD, "Do you feel that there has been more coverage about migrant workers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the delayed arrival of many temporary workers?" So maybe I'll ask Laura if you would like to comment on that question.

Laura Pena:

No, I don't think there has to be more coverage and it should be. It should be at any time of the year. I think they are the invisible hands that feed us all but at the same time they're ignored by not just the public but all faces of the government. UFCW like Nathalie mentioned, is one of the only organizations advocating actively for farm workers' rights, and it shouldn't be like that. We should all be accountable of having this workers feel respected at their workplace and being in a safe environment.

Laura Pena:

But I do think that the coronavirus situation should bring more light from the public and from the news media to the issues that are faced by these workers, not just at this current time, but at all times.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you, thank you Laura.

Althea Balmes:

Yeah, I totally agree with you, Laura. This question is from Ann Zooey, "What can individuals do to help advocate for temporary workers and are there any resources we can access?" I'll start with Jesson, and see maybe there's resources that we can provide folks.

Jesson Reyes:

Definitely. There is a lot. There's a lot of things that we can do, the public can do to advocate for temporary foreign workers. At the immediate, reach out to different organizations that are around you, to unions that you may know of and talk to migrant workers. That's the first thing. It's understanding their plights, I think that's the first thing. I agree with what Laura was saying, many of us still, for the most part do not really understand, and migrant workers do feel like they are invisible in our community. So that's the first thing.

Jesson Reyes:

And as far as resources are concerned, MRCC is part of it, there is a migrant justice community in Canada and there's many... including Migrants Rights Network, there's Migrante Canada, Migrant Resource Center, AWA, who are doing the work on the ground and are also putting out different policy recommendations. So these are organizations that many can reach out to, and sort of guide them in their advocacy for migrant workers.

Althea Balmes:

Thank you Jesson. And I think I want to extend this to UFCW too because your focus is in agricultural work. Is there any resources that we can provide to folks if they're interested in supporting the work that y'all do and how to support better them agricultural workers especially. Do you have anything like that Nathalie, that you can share with folks?

Nathalie Vengal:

Absolutely. I will invite everyone to check out our website. We have a lot of petitions going on, but I would also advise people to go and talked to the MP. At the end of the day we need to be talking to the people who are making laws on our behalf. The people we elected should be aware of the changes we want to see in the conditions of temporary workers in Canada. It is essential.

And just to get back to the question that Jo asked about coverage and I completely agree with Laura, it is important to have coverage, but what type of coverage? Are we talking about agricultural migrant workers from a food supply chain? We really need them because they need to put food on our table or are we talking about, agricultural and migrant workers and their working conditions?

We need to bring into light, just like co-worker said, we need to bring to light the reality and essentiality of their work. And that those are the conversations that we need to be having with organizations alike and with our local MPS and politicians. At the end of the day, the laws will make the difference for these workers that would like to have the right to unionize and to have access to permanent residency and the right to advocate for their own rights at work.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

That's great. Thank you so much Nathalie. That's very important. We have a question from Sophia for Valrie, "Valrie, how do you practice self-care as a grocery store worker during COVID-19?"

Valrie Francis:

So before COVID I used to travel a lot, that's not going to happen anytime soon. So during COVID-19, I'm enjoying all my snacks, to tell you the truth. I'm eating a lot of snacks.

Sometimes I will more of the books. I haven't been time to read any books or the Bible. I will also just listen to music and just dance, just enjoy the time I have. Since COVID-19, yes it's a sad time, but also it has given us time for us to do things that we didn't necessarily have to do beforehand. So those are just some of the things that I didn't have time to do because of work. I'm trying to do them now.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Great. Thank you Valrie.

Valrie Francis:

You're welcome.

Althea Balmes:

Thank you Valrie. This one is another question from RD, and I think this one is specifically for Jesson and the idea around the unscrupulous agencies. "How are the employers or employment agencies being held accountable for falsely promising workers PR status and what advocacy work can we support to push for PR status for all migrant workers?" That's a great question.

Jesson Reyes:

Yeah, definitely. Well, largely there isn't a lot of accountability on the employers and the agencies' part, and that is the most unfortunate thing because the power is actually a lot... a lot of the power comes from them as far as how the program is set up. So we do, there needs to be a push to hold them accountable. And one of the concrete things that we are doing is the campaign that J4M4 started, which is essentially a campaign focused on the labor laws in the province. Specifically, number one is to regulate all recruitment agencies who are hiring temporary foreign workers.

Currently, right now in Ontario, the Ministry of Labor do not have any data as to who are the recruitment agencies and how are they dealing with the workers. So it's hard to penalize anybody if you don't have any data to begin with. So that's one. Number two is to register all employers who would like to hire temporary foreign workers. There is a registry at the federal level, but it hasn't been very useful because abuses are still happening. So we believe that even at the provincial level, this should happen.

And of course lastly, we believe that the fundamental law of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is the fact that people come in temporarily. So part of our advocacy call is to provide permanent residency upon arrival. And this as a package is what J4M4, Justice for Mushroom 4 is campaigning, and we fully support it.

I just wanted to add in line with the recruitment agency, it is really a transnational issue. And so what I was just mentioning is just what we can do here in Canada or in Ontario. But many

people will say, "Well, even if we registered them?" Before coming to Canada, if they're coming from Hong Kong or Taiwan or any other country, the legislation in those countries are is also a factor.

Jesson Reyes:

What I mean by this, for example, a country like the Philippines actually promotes paying recruitment fees for migrant workers. It's in the law, right? So a Filipino migrant worker coming to Canada, they have to pay or they can be charged an equivalent of their first month salary by their recruitment agency. So it is a transnational issue, given that there is an imbalance as far as how we understand fair recruitment.

Jesson Reyes:

So there should be also advocacy on their part, and it's not just the Philippians, many [inaudible 00:49:24] countries have this thing called labor export policy where they really... it's definitely, it's making money out of the migration programs. So I wanted to just put that there, but at the immediate here in Ontario and Canada, there is a campaign to register recruitment agencies.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Jesson. We have another question from Anne, "Is there any indication that working conditions such as health and safety precautions will be improved or changed drastically in the future as a result of this global pandemic?" Anybody. Maybe we'll ask either Laura or Nathalie if they would like to try that question.

Laura Pena:

Well, I think the question will be the working conditions will improve for whom? If you're in a private sector in an office, maybe you're able to work remotely and then maybe you can see some improvement. But if you're already a precarious marginalized worker, like the farm workers who are talking about there's no improvement. We continue to advocate for this workers but without a continued pressure and actual policy change, there's nobody right now that is enforcing the policies that exist right now. They're not even in the current legislation of Ontario particularly.

They're not under the Employment Standards Act. Many of the measures that protect all their workers in other sectors do not apply to them, and when they do apply, like is the Ontario Health and safety Act, nobody enforces them and nobody is out there looking for these policies to be actually applied for them. Like yes, like I mentioned previously, the measures to prevent coronavirus spread, they are already being recommended by the governor but there's nobody actually going out there and checking that they are being applied.

And I also want to mention this is not just an issue of saying, "Oh well, poor people," or just being sad about these people. It's about feeling outraged because workers' rights are human rights, and that's something we at UFCW strongly believe that. These are human rights that are being violated, and it's not just feeling pity about these workers, it's about feeling outraged that human rights are being breached and it's not just workers' rights is everybody's rights.

When these rights are being attacked, it's your right, it's everybody that is at stake. They begin by the marginalized workers, but if we don't enforce them, we don't look out for each other, we will all be affected. We will all be in a dangerous working condition in the future, you know? So I think we all owe each other some respect and some dignity, and it's everybody's responsibility to feel personally involved in all this as we are. It is our food supply.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Yes. Thank you so much Laura. This global pandemic is really showing us how interconnected we are more than we actually, I think, could understand or appreciate before. Thank you for your answer.

Althea Balmes:

We have a question from Paula Hughes who asked that, "The COVID has forced government and business to adapt and change at an incredible rate, not possible under normal circumstances. How are you as different organizations using this opportunity, specific to certain strategies and campaigns? How are you using this opportunity and how should we be aware of..." I guess-

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Do you want rephrase the question?

Althea Balmes:

I guess, yeah. I guess it's more like what are some of the campaigns that already exist before and how have the organizations that you work for, are already using the pandemic to kind of highlight and kind of make these strategies more known? Is there anything like that, that's happening, for instance, for agricultural workers in UFCW?

Nathalie Vengal:

Well, I think that when it comes to agricultural workers, we're trying to reach out to many. We're trying to share information through the platform. We encouraged the workers that have the courage to reach out to us for help to share information and within our community and partners, we always remind them that we're happy to advocate on their behalf and assist them in whatever capacity we have, but there's also a component that we need to understand when it comes to change. You need this ability and you need options if you want to change.

Nathalie Vengal:

And I think they're struggling to connect a structural change and the migrant workers, and the status quo of migrant workers is that their options are limited. They're limited by provincial and federal legislation that denominates them as lower-skilled workers. I think that we can all agree that harvesting food is not only essential, but it's a lot, it requires a lot of high skills, so there needs to be a structural change in our society, the way we see and perceive labor and the essentiality quality of the work in order to see those restructuring and systems in place.

Nathalie Vengal:

As UFCW, as a worker's advocate, workers reach out to us via phone, email, text, asking us questions about their health and safety and what can they do during COVID-19. We're happy to assist them and we're happy to provide answers if there's questions about services available to the community, we have information in hand to be shared it with workers, and as we get more information and changes from the federal operation at local government, we try to share that with the community as well and make sure that people are informed as changes occur.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Nathalie. We have a question for you Valrie.

Jesson Reyes:

Can I add if it's okay?

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Oh, sorry. Go ahead Jesson.

Jesson Reyes:

Yeah, just a quick addition to what has been discussed. Definitely I think the situation also because, obviously it's a health pandemic that cuts across everybody and has affected everybody, it's an opportunity also to create solidarity amongst different workers that have... permanent resident workers and migrant workers.

Jesson Reyes:

For instance some of the sectors that have been hit directly are frontline workers. So nurses, PSWs, caregivers, and of course workers in the grocery and the food supply. And as we know, many of these sectors do hire migrant workers, but at the same time, there's also a considerable amount of workers showing up [inaudible 00:57:03] migrant workers.

So I think this is an opportunity to come together, because we are affected by it all at once, come together and understand that you may be doing the same work essentially, but one is

precarious because they don't have the immigration status that one has. So this has allowed us to kind of create some sort of a solidarity and make each other understand each other's situation.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you Jesson. We just have time for one more question. And Valrie, we were going to ask you this question from Anne. "How many grocery store workers are unionized and what protections do non-unionized workers receive?"

Valrie Francis:

So I can only speak in regards to Loblaws. So we are all unionized underneath UFCW, which is United Food and Commercial Workers. That's the full-time and the part-time staff. Some management is within the union and all department managers and store managers are not. In regards to non-unionized workers, we don't have any, I don't believe in the Loblaws stores, So I won't know necessarily into that aspect of it.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Okay. Does anyone want to comment on that or...

Althea Balmes:

Yeah, I think UFCW, you also work with non-unionized workers as part of your members, so maybe you can comment on what kind of protection or support some of your members who are not unionized are able to... What are they able to get?

Laura Pena:

So all of our members are unionized we're particularly are from the private sector. We're representing workers currently employed in the private sector that are under our union and we help them achieve better working conditions through collective bargaining. Workers that are not unionized, they're only covered by the minimum standards set by the province, which is the Employment Standards Act, the ESA. So it's through unionization and through collective bargaining that we help achieve better working conditions. If you're not unionized, you're only covered by your provincial Employment Standards Act.

Althea Balmes:

Okay. That's good to know.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Jesson, do you want to comment on that?

Jesson Reyes:

Yeah, for MRCC actually a majority of the clients that we see are not unionized and for many actually are undocumented workers, so definitely they don't have the access to the services that have been mentioned. But despite that we continue to look for ways to provide support. One of the things that we've been doing is looking at the possibility of undocumented workers or [inaudible 01:00:05] workers to access the Canada Emergency Response Benefits. And I believe much more recent or actually, yeah... So there's been discussion and advocacy to include everybody, including our folks who don't have an active SIN card. So that's one of the things that we're doing, despite the situation of the worker.

Jo SiMalaya Alcampo:

Thank you so much to all our panelists for your time and energy and stories and might, collective care examples. We want to thank all the audience members for listening in and adding their questions. Sorry we couldn't get to everybody's, but we really appreciate your participation and we want to acknowledge the Myseum curatorial and production team for their guidance and support.

Nadine Villasin F.:

Yes. Thank you so much Jo. On behalf of Myseum, we just really want to thank Kwentong Bayan for leading us in this important conversation. Thank our panelists, Valrie, Jesson, Laura and Nathalie for really helping us better understand the working conditions of precarious workers as well as contextualizing why the concerns of precarious workers are our concerns, are all of our concerns.

Nadine Villasin F.:

I also would like to give a special thank you to Valrie, Lourdes and Emilio for sharing their experiences with us today and their stories, and for your work in helping to provide us with our essential needs. So thank you so much. And I'd like to thank the audience for being with us today and invite you to join our program tomorrow, Pull Up! Digital Music Experiences at 4:00 PM. We also have a live set on Instagram at 7:00 PM, so please follow us on Instagram, go to our website to find out more about our programs. Thank you so much.