



## WHAT'S YOUR STORY

# 'Only my hands are in Canada': A migrant worker's May Day wish

'Difficult working conditions are all human-made and can be changed.'

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Gabriel Alladua is a former migrant worker who is calling for the federal government to grant permanent residency status to all migrant workers. (Justicia For Migrant Workers)

Throughout 2017, we're asking people across Canada: "[What's your story?](#)" On International Workers' Day, we hear directly from one of the thousands of migrant farm workers who power Canada's agricultural sector.

Gabriel Alladua from St. Lucia shares how his idea of Canada has changed since coming here for work.

Canada was good to me when I was in my home country, St Lucia.

Thirty-one years ago I was on a verge of leaving school when, miraculously, I was accepted into a different school — one that turned out to be a gift from Canada. In a country where illiteracy is very high, I was able to complete a full secondary school education. During those years, I really studied and developed a very deep love for Canada.

Then, in 2010, [a severe hurricane](#) completely destroyed my livelihood. Unemployed and with a young family to support, I was at the lowest point in my life. Then, in 2012, I got the opportunity to work in Canada as a migrant farm worker. Oh how grateful, thankful and happy I was!

## Harsh realities

My welcome to Canada was in the cold of January. I was not properly dressed for the four hour bus ride, without a heater, to a farm in Leamington, Ont. Then 17 of us were dropped off at the wrong bunk-house where we spent the balance of the night without heaters and beds. It was during this early experience that my high hopes and expectations were quickly crushed by reality.

- [\*\*'They just dispose of them': Injured migrant farm workers sent home without treatment\*\*](#)

I've since learned that being a migrant farm worker under the 51-year-old [Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program](#) means being dehumanized and exploited. Migrant farm workers are here to do jobs Canadians do not want to do — but with no rights, no status and no choice but to be tied by work permit to one employer.





About 30,000 farm workers come to Canada annually through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. (CBC)

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When I first arrived, I lived in a bunk-house with 62 other colleagues. We had and hitherto have no Internet to communicate with our families. I started my day at 5 a.m., just to get to one of 13 burners on the stove shared between all of us. I relied on energy drinks for the extra push to work above and beyond the expectations of management. If we don't like something, they remind us that there are several workers lined up in our home country willing and available to take our places.

- [\*\*Public forum aims to overcome 'wall of disbelief' over abuse of migrant workers\*\*](#)

None of this reflects modern working conditions, especially in a developed country like Canada! This is what creates and maintains my poverty.

## Hope springs eternal

Canada is celebrating 150 years, decades built on injustices against Indigenous people, Chinese railway workers and now migrant farm workers. The system is carefully designed to create fear rather than build an environment of hope, equality and fairness.

- [\*\*Labrador whistleblower, facing deportation order, returns to Philippines\*\*](#)

I've made a list of things that stand between my high expectations of Canada and reality

for me here. I call it the 20 dark sides of Canada. For one, I face working conditions I thought only existed in history. I never once thought that Canada — a land that prides itself on freedom, diversity and human rights — would treat us like workers in the 18th century.

If I speak about it, I do so at the risk of being deported.

Gina Bahiwal, a migrant worker activist from Leamington, was supposed to be deported in January, but got permission to stay at the eleventh hour. (Meg Roberts/CBC)

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The hardest thing on my list: the program physically separates me from my family. On top of the working conditions, I battle the constant worry and emotional distress over my young family back home.

Not having the same rights that Canadian workers enjoy, and being so far from my home country, I feel like only my hands are in Canada, but my heart is elsewhere.

Still, this May Day, I am very optimistic — not because of the system I work for but

because of the people I have met here.

People like Louis, who took me to his home every weekend to use the Internet and shared the best sides of Canada with me. Or friends like Denis, Ron, Tina and Steve, who inspire and motivate me constantly and show me that Canada can be the land of the free. Or the people I've met through Justice for Migrant Workers, who give voice to us, the voiceless. Or storytellers like Min Sook Lee ([El Contrato](#), [Migrant Dreams](#)) who make sure we're not cut off completely.

- [\*\*Leamington, Ont. migrant worker receives last-minute deportation reprieve\*\*](#)

I am well aware that there are several groups in Canada that face one injustice or another. Because we are all connected in this struggle, I'm confident that people and worker power will bring about real change in a land where governments only give when we fight. No justice, no peace.

Difficult working conditions are all human-made and can be changed. So can the dark side of Canada.

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