

Toronto

Jamaican migrant workers in Ontario pen open letter likening conditions to 'systematic slavery'

Letter written to Jamaican labour minister before his visit to Canadian farms

[Ali Raza](#) · CBC News · Posted: Aug 20, 2022 9:01 PM ET | Last Updated: August 21



Jamaican migrant farm workers in Niagara Region penned an open letter to the Jamaican Ministry of Labour requesting support after citing poor working conditions. (Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press)

Jamaican migrant farm workers in Niagara Region wrote an open letter to Jamaica's Ministry of Labour requesting more support in the face of what they call "systematic slavery," days before a migrant worker died in Norfolk County.

Garvin Yapp, 57, of St. James, Jamaica, was killed last Sunday in an accident with a tobacco harvester at Berlo's Best Farm in Norfolk County, two hours southwest of Toronto.

The province has confirmed his death. The Van Berlo family, who runs Berlo's Best, said they were devastated by Yapp's death, adding "they did not lose an employee, but they lost a person they considered a member of their family," the family's lawyer Bernard Cummins told CBC Toronto.

In a statement on Tuesday, the Jamaican Ministry of Labour expressed "deep sadness" and said Jamaican Labour Minister Karl Samuda will be visiting and touring farms in Canada employing Jamaican workers under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) this week.

The Canadian government, meanwhile, said in a statement it "expresses its deepest condolences" to Yapp's family, friends and co-workers, and added that the investigation into the death is a provincial matter.

In its own statement, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, whom it falls on to investigate the matter, said the investigation is ongoing.

According to Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC), three other workers have died in Ontario in the last week alone. The workers who penned the open letter are members of MWAC.

CBC News has not independently confirmed those three deaths.

'Feels like we are in prison'

"As it currently stands, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) is systematic slavery," the workers wrote in their open letter.

The letter was sent to the Jamaican Observer, where excerpts of it were published on Monday. The workers said they sent the letter to Samuda on Aug. 11.

"Jamaicans have been coming for generations, our fellow Caribbean and Mexican coworkers have too, and there have been no significant changes since the program started," the workers said.



Karl Samuda is the minister of labour and social security in Jamaica. The ministry said he would be visiting farms in Canada that are participating in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program this week. (Government of Jamaica)

Workers wrote they were scared of sharing their grievances with Samuda directly for fear of being kicked out of the SAWP. They also said that workers from Mexico and the Philippines share the same grievances.

Workers described housing conditions as so poor that rats eat their food. They live in crowded rooms with zero privacy with cameras, and lack dryers to dry their clothes after it rains, they wrote.

"It feels like we are in prison," the letter reads.

On working conditions, workers wrote they're "treated like mules" and punished for not being quick enough. They said they're exposed to dangerous pesticides without adequate protection, and their bosses are verbally abusive.

"They physically intimidate us, destroy our personal property, and threaten to send us home," the letter reads.

CBC News did not receive a response from the two farms mentioned in the letter about the alleged conditions.

CBC News has also reached out to Employment and Social Development Canada, which oversees the SAWP, for comment on the letter and will update the story if they reply.

In 2016, when issues with the SAWP were brought to then minister of employment, workforce development and labour MaryAnn Mihychuk, [she responded](#) that there is a "lack of communication and awareness of what's happening" and promised to make the program part of a review.

Path to permanent residency would help, advocates say

Advocates for migrant workers said they were not surprised by the contents of the open letter.

"This is very much the reality of the migrant farm worker program in this country," MWAC's executive director Syed Hussan said. "Working in farms in Canada is a human rights disaster."





Syed Hussan is the executive director of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change and says federal immigration policy is the root cause of the crisis with migrant workers. (CBC)

Santiago Escobar, the national representative for the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, says this is a countrywide problem. The union has requested the federal government to make union representation a condition of the temporary foreign worker permits, as a result.

"With a union, these workers could exercise their labour and human rights," Escobar said.

It also asks the provincial government to include agricultural workers in their labour laws and offer workers a flexible path to permanent residency.

"We need to give them representation, better work permits, and a path to residency," Escobar said. "With these the workers will be able to overcome all the abuses they're experiencing."

- [Migrant worker from Jamaica dies in COVID-19 isolation in Ontario while waiting to start work](#)
- [OPP racially targeted 54 migrant farm workers while searching for a rapist, Ontario tribunal rules](#)

Hussan agrees.

"As long as we have a temporary immigration system, farm workers will be exploited," he said. "Farm workers themselves are calling on a system for full and permanent immigration status for all."

He says workers fear asserting their rights will lead to homelessness, loss of employment, and deportation. As it stands now, workers' permits are tied to their employer, Hussan said.

Hussan says labour laws would help, but farm workers would be unable to assert their rights under those laws without full and permanent immigration status.

"This is an ongoing crisis that's a direct result of federal immigration policy," he said.

With files from Derick Deonarain, Dale Manucdoc and Philip Lee-Shanok

[CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) | [About CBC News](#)

[Corrections and clarifications](#) | [Submit a news tip](#) | [Report error](#) ▼

Popular Now in Toronto

- 1** Clash with local health unit drains hot tubs at some Ontario resorts
 - 2** Police release images of woman believed to have been kidnapped in Scarborough
 - 3** Top epidemiologist resigns from Ontario's COVID-19 science table, alleges withholding of 'grim' projections
 - 4** **UPDATED**
3 siblings, all under 20 years old, killed in fiery Brampton car crash
 - 5** Burnt human remains found in 'shallow grave' in Pickering, Durham police say
-

©2022 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.

Visitez [Radio-Canada.ca](https://radio-canada.ca)