



Local food-global labour: contradictions and tensions between farmers and migrant farmworkers and possibilities for solidarity in Canada

Martha Jane Robbins¹

Received: 18 August 2025 / Accepted: 20 August 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

The logic of the corporate food regime requires a system of labour based on migration. Free trade agreements have entrenched a drive for ever-expanding export agriculture and resulted in both a devastation of peasant agriculture, creating migrant workers, and an increased need for temporary labour on Canadian farms. Family farmers in Canada face labour challenges exacerbated by the current food regime and, for some, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) is seen as an answer to those challenges. However, the SAWP is based on systemic exploitation of migrant workers. This paper seeks to assess the role of migrant labour in Canadian food systems and reveal the contradictions, tensions, and possibilities of farmers acting in solidarity with migrant farmworkers by exploring the formation and political direction of the National Farmers Union's Migrant Worker Solidarity Working Group (MWSWG).

Keywords Local food · Global labour · Farm income crisis · Migrant farmworkers · Farmer to farmworker solidarity · Corporate food regime · Moral economy · National Farmers Union – Canada

On Donald Trump's first day in office in his second term as President of the United States, he announced that sweeping 25% tariffs would come into force against Canada on February 1, 2025 (Grantham-Philips 2025). What followed was a typically bizarre back and forth: tariffs signed into effect, a 30 day pause on tariffs, a new date for tariffs, and a downgrade from blanket tariffs to tariffs targeting certain products. In the midst of the uncertainty caused by the whiplash of on-again, off-again tariffs, many in Canadian agriculture have been unsure of how the escalating trade war between Canada and United States will impact food production — from export markets to input costs to farm equipment manufacturing, and other elements of the food system.¹ The scramble to respond to the torrent of tariff decisions from

the Trump administration illuminates how integrated Canadian agriculture is with the United States and the world. That integration is not by accident. Canada first entered into a trade agreement with the US in 1989, an agreement that, according to the Government of Canada, put the two countries "at the forefront of trade liberalization" (Global Affairs Canada 2025). The initial trade agreement became the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 with the inclusion of Mexico and eventually the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) in 2020. Trade liberalization via these trade agreements achieved what they set out to and agri-food exports increased dramatically over the following decades, making Canada the fifth largest exporter of agriculture and agri-food products in the world by 2016 (Zhang et al. 2021).

The impact of trade liberalization proved far-reaching. In the free trade era, farmers in Canada have been successful on a variety of trade liberalization metrics: production, exports and output per farm and per acre have all gone up. Yet, as Canada became increasingly tied to global markets and oriented towards exporting agricultural products particularly to the US, net farm incomes continued to drop or remain stagnant, often hovering at or below zero (Qualman 2011).

¹ See Rutgers 2025; Gilmour 2025; Edwards 2025; Price 2025; and Garvey 2025 for examples of news media coverage of tariff uncertainty related to agriculture.

✉ Martha Jane Robbins
robbins@iss.nl; marthajaneerobbins@gmail.com

¹ Erasmus University Rotterdam, International Institute of Social Studies, Hague, Netherlands

“[S]ince 1985, Canadian farmers have been grappling with the worst farm income disaster in Canadian history” (Ibid: 26). The cycle in the north is one of ever-increasing production for export, further mechanisation and a farm income crisis that results in consolidation of farms into larger and larger operations. As farms get larger, rural communities have shrunk, creating a shortage of labour, especially in labour-intensive operations like greenhouses and vegetable production.

Mexican farmers have not fared any better. Subsidized staple crops flooded in from the United States following the implementation of NAFTA and undercut local markets decimating the countryside and turning many peasants and small-scale farmers into migrants (Weiler 2018; Otero 2011). Mexican peasant organizations estimate that four million people were impacted (Robbins 2007); Otero (2011) confirms that it has been the largest migration out of the countryside in the country’s history. Ironically, migrants from the Mexican countryside often work in agriculture in the US and Canada, at agricultural jobs directly linked to industrial agriculture for export. In Canada in 2024, over 40% of the temporary foreign workers in the agriculture sector were Mexican (StatsCan 2025). Trade liberalization served to dismantle local agriculture and food economies, which created a migrant workforce that is used to grow commodities to continue the cycle of exports and dumping or exporting at less than the cost of production.² As Wise and Veltmeyer (2016: 3) note, “[T]here is little question that the vast majority of economic migrants and migrant workers migrate not by choice but in response to the limiting or oppressive conditions created by the workings of the [sic] capitalism[...].”

Constrained by the barrier of the US, it is much more difficult for undocumented workers from Mexico to enter Canada. Unlike the migrant worker flows between Mexico and the United States, most migrant farmworkers travelling to Canada arrive through a temporary foreign worker program called the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). The SAWP was established in 1966 with Caribbean workers before expanding to include Mexican workers in 1974. While the program began well before trade liberalization escalated the need for migrant farmworkers in Canada and exacerbated the availability of migrant farmworkers from Mexico, Dunsworth (2023) argues that the rapid expansion of the SAWP (beginning in the late 1980s and really taking off in the early 2000s) coincided with “the hyper-consolidation of agriculture, resulting in the ever-greater domination of Canadian farming by heavily capitalized, scaled-up operations that can afford the higher up-front costs of employing guest workers compared to Canadians.” In 2022, according

to Statistics Canada (2024a), almost 25% of all agricultural workers were temporary foreign workers. The majority of the 64,660 workers — an increase of 6% from the previous year — who came in 2022 worked in greenhouses, vegetable, fruit and tree nut production and worked for operations with farm revenue exceeding two million dollars Canadian (Ibid).

However, not all migrant farmworkers work on large farms. Over 26% of workers worked on farms with farm revenue below two million dollars Canadian, and perhaps even more surprising, 2,922 workers worked on farms with farm revenue below \$100,000CAD (Ibid). While many of the farms employing migrant farmworkers are producing for export, some of these farms participate in local markets or are otherwise engaged in alternative food systems (Weiler et al. 2016; Fitting et al. 2023). This poses an interesting dilemma — small-scale farmers producing for local food systems yet relying on migrant labour. Why are some small-scale farmers hiring migrant labourers? How do small or medium-scale farmers and farmers trying to unhook from the export-oriented industrial system view the role of migrant labour on their farms?

Scholarship to date has generally focussed on the migration flows from Mexico and the Caribbean into Canada, the mechanisms of the SAWP, and wider discussions of the systemic ‘push and pull’ of migrant workers, but worthy of further exploration is the theme of building solidarities and bridging gaps between existing social movements and migrant farmworkers. In the current context of trade uncertainty in a system built on integration into global supply chains and reliance on export agriculture partially fuelled through migrant farmworkers, an interesting alliance has emerged between farmers and farmworkers.³ The National Farmers Union of Canada (NFU) initiated a Migrant Worker Solidarity Working Group (MWSWG) in 2017 that works within the organization to develop policy and advocates for migrant farmworkers’ rights. In response to the announcement of US tariffs, in February 2025 the NFU (2025) released their top 6 priorities for action, which included “Protect agricultural workers: [...] for migrant workers, full labour rights, open work permits, and a pathway to citizenship.” How does a national farm organization representing family farmers find itself advocating for migrant worker rights? As Wise and Veltmeyer (2016: 6) write, “[A]n individual’s social or class consciousness — an awareness of their social or class position and relation to others in the groups or society they belong to — is a critical factor of social or political action.” How do we understand solidarity efforts between

² For a detailed analysis of US post-NAFTA export dumping, see Wise 2009.

³ Throughout this paper, the term ‘farmworker’ refers to migrant workers, except in the discussion of class differentiation where local vs. international distinction is not immediately relevant, or where otherwise stated.

farmers and farmworkers? This paper seeks to understand why and to what extent small and medium-scale farmers, particularly those engaged in building alternatives to the global industrial food system, employ farmworkers through the SAWP and, as migrant labour in Canadian agriculture continues to grow, what the potentiality and obstacles are for solidarities between farmers and farmworkers.

Methodology and location

The qualitative methodology of this paper is grounded in scholar-activism. Scholar-activism, according to Borras (2016: 23), describes “those who explicitly aim not only to interpret the world in a scholarly way but to change it, and who are connected to a political project or social justice oriented movement.” To situate myself in this research, particularly in relation to the NFU, it is important to share the ways I am connected to this work. Scholar-activism is a more recent iteration of my experience, though as Borras and Franco (2023: 67) point out, “scholar-activism is dynamic” and individuals often shift throughout their lives along a spectrum of activism and scholarship. In my case, I began as an activist with the NFU — first as an elected official serving as Youth President from 1999 to 2003, as a national board member, and eventually in a staff role as International Coordinator, responsible for the MWSWG (a position I’ve held twice, once from 2007 to 2011 and again during the COVID-19 pandemic from May 2020 to August 2021). During my term as Youth President, our youth caucus proposed a series of resolutions to the national convention to support migrant farmworkers’ rights, prompting the NFU to engage in a deliberate discussion on whether or not to take a political position and how to navigate the terrain between employers’ and employees’ respective positions. The debate which ensued piqued my interest in the tensions and possible solidarities between farmers and farmworkers and informed my project during the Global Youth Fellowship, a fellowship I held in 2006/07 from the Gordon Foundation. As part of the fellowship, I travelled to El Paso, Texas and participated in a Food First tour that followed the migrant worker trail in reverse, from El Paso, through Mexico as far south as Oaxaca and back to the US-Mexico border. The tour provided an opportunity to visit Mexican communities struggling with the effects of NAFTA and the resulting increase in migration and to speak with both those who had been part of the migrant flow and those left behind (see Robbins 2007). The experience solidified the importance of peasant organization solidarities between the Global North and South and highlighted the contradictions inherent in building those solidarities.

Navigating the scholar-activist space includes acknowledging that “[...] scholarship and practical politics dynamically shape each other in political processes filled with contradictions, tensions, and conflicts” (Borras and Franco 2023: 3). My firsthand knowledge of the NFU and the MWSWG affords insight into historical context and provides me access I would not otherwise have, and yet, it simultaneously risks obstructing my view by standing too close to the subject. While some scholar-activists can find themselves acting as exponents for the movements in which they work, Edelman (2009) notes that the most useful contributions of academics connected to social movements is to ask challenging questions and to record the voices of those who are marginalised within the movement. It is from this aspiration that I approach the paper, with an eye to assessing the role of migrant labour in Canadian food systems and a desire to reveal the contradictions, tensions, and possibilities of farmers acting in solidarity with migrant farmworkers.

The following analysis is based on participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured key informant interviews. Key informants are people with certain expertise or position within a movement (Blee and Taylor 2002; della Porta 2014). As Blee and Taylor (2002: 106) nicely differentiate, “in key informant interviews the interviewee’s experiences and motivations are not the unit of analysis; rather the interviewee is being asked to serve as an expert to inform the researcher about various aspects of the movement.”⁴ Document analysis includes press releases, policy statements, briefs, and convention agendas, reports and presentations directly linked to the MWSWG, migrant farmworkers, and farm labour. Due to my positionality as a scholar-activist elaborated above, participant observation has taken place over many years in a variety of venues, but specifically for this research from 2018 onward at NFU annual national conventions and in MWSWG meetings.

⁴ This paper relies heavily on two key informants who have expert knowledge of labour on Canadian farms, the NFU’s migrant solidarity work and in one case, firsthand experience as an employer of migrant workers. Three other farmer voices, all NFU members, are present here. For a list of the interviews drawn on here, see list of interviews in references. This research does not represent the voices of migrant farmworkers but rather focuses on farm movement perspectives, specifically the NFU, and is part of an ongoing larger research project. Beyond the scope of this paper, further research into these themes would benefit from interviews with migrant farmworkers, non-NFU farmers and migrant rights organizations. I have let the key informants speak in their own words as much as possible.

Tensions: questions of labour on Canadian farms

The corporate food regime and its labour imperative

The current trajectory of migrant agricultural labour in Canada is not divorced from history nor from the wider systems underpinning global industrial agriculture and its logic of capital accumulation. The framework of food regimes, devised initially by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), provides a way to zoom out and view global agricultural supply chains, the circulation of food products and the flow of labour over time. Food regimes are defined as “stable periodic arrangements in the production and circulation of food on a world scale, associated with various forms of hegemony in the world economy” (McMichael 2009b: 281). The first food regime is identified as the period of British hegemony consolidated in the 1870s and characterized by the flow of staple crops from the colonies to Europe to fuel industrialization, particularly in Britain (McMichael 2009a, 2013; Bernstein 2010). The second food regime is distinguished by the export of surpluses from the United States to post-colonial states in the political context of the Cold War from the 1950s to 1970s (McMichael 2009a, 2013). McMichael contends that a third food regime, a corporate food regime, has been established that maintains residual elements from the previous regime, yet is a distinct new arrangement on a global scale (McMichael 2009a). He argues, “Market hegemony defines the third food regime and its role in a broad neoliberal project dedicated to securing transnational circuits of money and commodities (including food) — displacing smallholders into a casual global labor force for capital” (McMichael 2013: 3).

In a comparative study of Italy and Sweden, Corrado et al. (2024: 1255) make the case for connections between a third, corporate food regime and “a migration/labour-mobility regime”. They argue that labour shortages are politically constructed and a result of a drive for cheap labour in the context of corporate concentration, increased competition in global markets, and rural depopulation. As agricultural production processes have been influenced by these forces that define the corporate food regime, there has been a parallel change in labour processes, requiring “a large number of flexible workers” (Ibid: 1271). McMichael (2013: 45) notes that the dispossession of peasants (or what he calls “smallholders”) leading to the creation of “casualized labor on a world scale” is at the core of the corporate food regime. He argues,

“The connection between food and the reproduction of labor power, from a value relations perspective, is no longer the obvious one of provisioning labor with cheap food, as a function of reproduction and rule. Under the terms of

the corporate food regime, food, in its price- form, has performed a very different kind of reproduction, namely the expanded reproduction of a labor reserve. [...] That is, the artificial cheapening of traded food has undermined peasant agricultures, eliminating barriers on the land to agribusiness and generating a labor reserve” (McMichael 2009b: 285).

Li (2009), using examples from Asia, explores the idea that a labour reserve caused by dispossession is not always incorporated by capital in a direct line. The labour surplus created by dispossession from land seizures, enclosures for conservation and, most relevant here, “the piecemeal dispossession of small-scale farmers, unable to survive when exposed to competition from agricultural systems backed by subsidies and preferential tariffs”, may be absorbed in a different geography (migratory labour beyond country to city), at a much later time, or not at all (Ibid: 72).

The Canadian case differs from the Italian and Swedish examples, yet it is clear that the shift in labour processes in Canada towards increasing numbers of migrant farmworkers — from 6.2% of all agricultural workers in 2005 to 16.1% in 2017 to 23.2% in 2022 (Zhang et al. 2021; StatsCan 2024a) — has coincided with corporate concentration in agriculture, increasing integration into international markets and rural depopulation. Whether or not it is necessary to differentiate a migration/labour-mobility regime or simply regard increased migratory labour flows as intrinsic to the internal relations of the corporate food regime, it is often peasants and small-scale farmers who become the casual, temporary labour force required in agricultural production in the Global North, which is labour absorption geographically removed from sites of dispossession and still a relatively linear path from dispossession to incorporation by capital.

Labour challenges for small-scale farmers

While peasants in Mexico struggle to survive subsidized dumping of staple crops into local markets facilitated by trade agreements and many of them end up as migrant workers coming north, Canadian farms struggle to survive and to find workers. But the juxtaposition is not as simple as that. Let us turn now to the question of labour on Canadian farms, with particular attention to family farms or small to medium-scale farms⁵. The reasons for hiring migrant

⁵ There is no consensus on a precise definition of ‘family farm’ or small or medium-scale farm. Scale is very relative to context — small farms in Atlantic Canada and small farms in the Prairies are vastly different in terms of number of acres; dairy farms and cattle farms are very different in terms of capitalization. See Robbins 2015: 456–458 for a longer discussion of scale. This paper follows Magnan et al. (2023: 279): a “flexible definition of ‘family farming’, one that includes operations of different sizes, with varying amounts of family versus hired labour, and where farming contributes to some, most,

farmworkers on Canadian farms are multiple. A Statistics Canada report cites seasonal work, long hours and physically demanding work, low wages comparative to other industries, and the remoteness of agricultural work as reasons for labour shortages in agriculture (Zhang et al. 2021).

As Statistics Canada reported, farmers interviewed in this research pointed to the seasonality of the work as a barrier for finding farm labour. Jenn Pfenning⁶, who owns and operates Pfenning's Organic Farm with her spouse and his brother's family, says, "People are not, have not been as interested in working in agriculture, especially seasonally. And the reality is that it's difficult for people to live on a seasonal income. It's difficult for any of us, right? [...] For us, specifically, we had a reasonable abundance of students, because we have two universities in, you know, within 20 minutes of our farm, but students go back to school in September. We're at the peak of our harvest, September, October. So that wasn't a fit, right?" Pfenning also mentioned that it was difficult to hire local farmworkers who may not have any farming experience or be prepared for the physical nature of the work.

Stuart Oke⁷, co-founder and farmer at Rooted Oak Farm, did not grow up on a farm and learned to farm by being a resident farmworker.⁸ His experience both as a farmworker and subsequently as a farmer himself, informs his perspective. "Since we started the farm, we recognized long term we didn't want to have to chase seasonal labour, because it's been real clear to me over the years, working for other people, what a dice roll that often is building a business around a seasonal workforce, which is sometimes reliable and sometimes not reliable. And that's always been a real source of stress, and the main source of stress, and also the main source of expense for all the farms that I've ever worked on" (Oke interview). Retention of hired farm labour from year to year is one factor of reliability. In the NFU-Ontario

or all of the family's income." The farmers interviewed here are the (co-)managers of their farms and invest a substantial amount of their own labour into the farm. The paper in some ways seeks to raise this question of definition.

⁶ Author conducted interview with Jenn Pfenning, 2 July 2025. All quotes from Jenn Pfenning and much of the data about her farm comes directly from this interview. Jenn Pfenning is also the National Farmers Union President, which is more relevant later in the paper. For more information on Pfenning's Organic Farm, see: <https://pfenningsfarms.ca/>.

⁷ Author conducted interview with Stuart Oke, 12 December 2019. All quotes from Stuart Oke come directly from this interview. At the time of the interview, Stuart and his partner Nikki Oke were farming on rented land in Quebec. They have since purchased land in Ontario. Stuart Oke was also serving as the National Farmers Union Youth President at the time of the interview. For more information on Rooted Oak Farm, see: <https://www.rootedoak.ca/>.

⁸ Resident or local farmworker refers to farmworkers who have either permanent resident status or citizenship in Canada and are not part of SAWP or the TFWP.

(Thompson 2021) labour study, with a response rate of over 650 farmers in Ontario, almost half struggled to retain workers longer than one season.

The remoteness and isolation of many Canadian farms poses a real barrier to hiring workers as well. For example, a farm located an hour to an hour and a half away from an urban centre in rural Ontario often received no responses to job postings despite offering "a wage that would be attractive enough", simply because of their remote location.⁹ Magnan et al. (2023) describe the increasing isolation of farms and farming communities as a result of land and farm consolidation. They argue that concentration into larger and larger farms has resulted in depopulation in rural areas which in turn translates to fewer services in those rural communities. Access to fewer services and fewer neighbours makes farms that are not close to larger urban centres less attractive for workers.

The question of wages is perhaps less straightforward. On one hand, there is evidence that small and mid-sized farms pay above minimum wage, and therefore labour shortages cannot be blamed on low wages alone. In the labour report mentioned above (Thompson 2021), 85% of respondents paid above minimum wage despite the exemption of agricultural workers from minimum wage standards. Pfenning points to the asparagus harvest at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when regardless of farmers in her area paying around \$10/hour more than minimum wage, they faced a serious labour shortage — an indication that higher wages alone are not always enough to overcome the barriers for hiring local farmworkers. On the other hand, even with wages at or above legislated minimums, "they can't pay [farmworkers] enough to be actually competitive with any other trade within a rural setting" (Thompson interview). Small and medium-scale farmers are squeezed by the farm income crisis, which effectively limits their ability to raise wages. According to Alberta meat producer and vegetable farmer Mandy Melnyk¹⁰, making a living as a farmer without the benefit of an off-farm job is precarious even before hiring farm labour.

"I set out to believe that a single person could make a full time living direct marketing. And I don't actually know that that's possible. You know, in most sustainable models, one person is off the farm making money, and the other person is farming. So I don't know if it's possible" (Melnyk interview).

⁹ Author conducted interview with David Thompson, 2 July 2025. All quotes from David Thompson come directly from this interview. David Thompson is currently the NFU's Executive Director.

¹⁰ Author conducted interview with Mandy Melnyk, 23 November 2018. All quotes from Mandy Melnyk come directly from this interview. For more information on Meadow Creek Farms, see: <https://www.meadowcreekfarms.ca/>.

It is a combination of these factors that makes farm labour difficult to find — the need for “maximum labour flexibility” (Thompson interview), including seasonal work in often remote locations and the physicality of the work combined with wages that don’t always offset these other factors that contributes to labour shortages. There is also another set of difficulties facing farmers as they attempt to hire reliable, longterm, skilled local farmworkers that is more difficult to quantify but important to consider nonetheless. The social and cultural significance of farming has shifted over time and, “There’s a stigma attached to being employed on a farm, and that creates a significant barrier for a lot of people to making this a career” (Pfenning interview). Alongside the perceived stigma, there are very real barriers to entry for farmworkers to become farmers themselves (such as cost of land and equipment) which can be seen as limiting the possibility of career advancement (Thompson interview). Farm work is often considered to be an entry-level job, without the possibility of turning it into a lifetime career or transitioning from employee to farm operator.

Pfenning also argues that labour conditions in agriculture have stagnated in part as a response to the availability of migrant farmworkers, who are subject to increased control from employers and are highly motivated to stay for the duration of the season and work in whatever conditions they are afforded. “When you have that kind of access, access to that kind of a labour situation, it breeds a society and a general concept that that is how labour should be undertaken, managed and performed in the sector. So agriculture has stayed stuck in a very antiquated, racist and sexist, and otherwise negative kind of mentality as it pertains to employment and labour standards” (Pfenning interview). She asserts that Canadians are less likely to accept those terms of labour than they would have been 60 or 70 years ago and that the existence of migrant farmworker programs has allowed outdated terms of labour to persist in agriculture.¹¹ Reid-Mussen et al. (2022) dissect the exclusion of farm labour from existing labour standards using the case of a 2016 Alberta legal change that moved to include agriculture under labour law for the first time, and then was promptly reversed by the next government. In more detail than can be parsed here, the authors show how the narratives around farm labour as family labour reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, precariousness and exploitation.

¹¹ In Canada, agricultural labour is often exempt from labour standards that cover other sectors. Employment standards are set at the provincial level and therefore vary from province to province. Migrant labour standards also may vary from provincial standards via the specific labour contracts of the SAWP. See the NFU FWWG for a table of standards that apply (or not) to resident farmworkers: https://www.nfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Farm-Workers-Know-Your-Rights-Zine-National-Farmers-Union_compressed.pdf.

Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)

In Canada, migrant farmworkers mainly arrive through two temporary foreign worker program mechanisms - the agriculture stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the SAWP, where this paper concentrates. As should be the case, scholarship on migrant farmworkers in Canada focuses on the farmworkers as protagonists, and gives attention to both the structure of the SAWP and its various implications for workers (e.g. Fitting 2025; Allahdua 2023; Basok et al. 2023; Cohen and Hjalmarson 2018; Binford 2019; Weiler 2018; among many others). Fitting (2025; this special issue) provides an overview of the SAWP and accompanying literature and highlights how migrant workers are racialized and exploited. She also notes the significance of migrant workers for the continued operation of many Canadian farms.

One of the contentions Borrás et al. (2022) make in their study of cross-border migrant workers from Myanmar is that migrant workers can be both illegal and essential, a contradictory status that allows employers an unregulated and more easily exploitable workforce. The recent raids on undocumented farmworkers in the US and that country’s agriculture industry pushback further illustrates the contradiction (Matza and Ventas 2025). In contrast, the SAWP instead provides a workforce that is highly regulated and controlled, yet remains precarious. This form of formalized and legalized precarity is often touted as a model for temporary foreign worker programs (Basok et al. 2023; Binford 2019; Hennebry and Preibisch 2012), a ‘best practice’, and it *could* be argued that regulated precarity leaves workers better off than unregulated precarity — insecurity and exploitation are relative and having some sort of status offers the protection of being ‘legally’ in the country of work. However, using the worst case scenario as the benchmark ignores the implications of state-regulated inequality and the exploitation built into the system.¹² More productive is an analysis of the SAWP that seeks to understand why the program continues to expand, who benefits, and what and how effective are the counter-movements against the program (or elements within it) and the wider corporate food regime in which it thrives.

Bernstein’s (2010: 22) four questions of political economy — Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with it? — each deserve attention in relation to the SAWP and migrant agricultural labour in

¹² The H-2 A guestworker program in the United States has also been described as a “win-win”. Yet CDM (2020) found rampant workers’ rights violations in their survey of H-2 A workers. A comparison of temporary migrant agricultural worker programs in the US and Canada focussing on both legalized precarity and employer exploitation is ripe for further research.

Canada in the context of the capital accumulation logic in the corporate food regime. For now, let's turn briefly to the second question of 'who does what?' or the social divisions of labour. From its inception, the SAWP was built on the racist premise that there were desirable (white, British) and undesirable (black, Caribbean) immigrants (Dunsworth 2023; Mayell 2024a; Istiko et al. 2022). In UN Special Rapporteur Tomoya Obokata's (2023: 3) end of mission statement following his visit to Canada in 2023, he notes of migrant workers that he is "particularly concerned that this workforce is disproportionately racialized, attesting to deep-rooted racism and xenophobia entrenched in Canada's immigration system." The 'who' in this case are racialized workers from Mexico and the Caribbean working on Canadian farms.

Who benefits from this arrangement of a regulated temporary workforce? Jenn Pfenning is an employer of migrant farmworkers from Jamaica through the SAWP. The Pfenning farm has been part of the program since 2005 when they initially hired 10 migrant workers. They now employ 45 migrant workers alongside local farmworkers for a total of 150 staff in the high season and around 50 or 60 in the low season. The farm grows organic vegetables and fruit (mainly strawberries) on around 700 acres of rented and owned land, and would likely qualify as a medium-scale operation in their context. The advantages of hiring migrant workers, according to Pfenning, are that,

"They are a very highly motivated workforce, which you know is quite beneficial. They return season after season, which means that they come back with skills that you know, and are able to build on them year over year. And generally, they have a concept [of the work] and are pre-screened by the originating country."

David Thompson, NFU Executive Director and author of the 2021 report "Reframing the Labour Crisis in Ontario", offers that in addition to employers benefitting from an "affordable workforce that is highly dependable and highly skilled", they "can count on them being there for the duration of their contract." This, to a great extent, is due to the program design that ties employees to sponsoring employers and offers employers the ability to name workers they would like to have return the following year. The SAWP uses closed labour contracts or closed work permits, which means that workers can only work for the employer in their contract and can only stay in Canada for a maximum of eight months, though they can return year after year (Binford 2019; Hennebry and Preibisch 2012; Allahdua 2023). UN Special Rapporteur Obokata's (2023) report recognises that the Canadian government contests this categorization — technically workers can be transferred to a different

employer¹³ — but explains that the barriers to changing employment are high and in effect workers are tied to their employers in a "dependency relationship". Mayell (2024a) calls it "akin to indentured labour". It has also been referred to as "unfree labour" based on closed work permits and lack of access to workers' rights (Thompson 2021: 8). The SAWP labour strategy works for employers by providing a secure workforce with seasonal availability. The SAWP benefits the Canadian state by providing labour from low-income countries without offering residency (Hennebry and Preibisch 2012).

Of course, migrant workers also benefit from the program; thousands of migrant workers and their families depend on remittances from the work (Ibid; Weiler and McLaughlin 2019; Thompson interview). Carvajal Gutiérrez and Johnson (2016) claim that about 80% of the income earned by Mexican workers in the SAWP is sent home as remittances. In their study, the authors found that remittances were largely spent on general consumption, housing improvements and school fees, and interestingly, close to 10% of remittances were spent on investing more into their farms at home (Ibid). Workers acknowledged that their standard of living had improved due to their work in the SAWP (Ibid).

Critiques of the SAWP are many and range from the above mentioned closed work permits to health and safety concerns, which were particularly stark during the COVID-19 pandemic when many migrant workers became ill and at least nine workers died in Ontario between 2020 and 2021 (Caxaj et al. 2022; Istiko et al. 2022). Mayell's (2024b) study reports numerous employer violations of workers' rights — including lack of protective equipment when working with pesticides, inaccurate or late paychecks, overcrowded and inadequate housing, and pressure to work despite injury or illness. A Migrant Rights Network report (2025)¹⁴ highlights that 66% of workers report "poor or very bad" housing and 37.5% report "employer interference with healthcare access". United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW 2024a) reports that between 2000 and 2022, approximately 1600 migrant farmworkers were repatriated after work-related accidents without receiving sufficient healthcare and these accidents were not reported to provincial officials. Workers pay into employment insurance but are ineligible to claim benefits. Employers are required to provide housing and transportation but this also means workers are often isolated on farms, living and working together and do not have

¹³ See Government of Canada SAWP contracts for details:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/agricultural/seasonal-agricultural/requirements.html#sawp-contract>.

¹⁴ This report included respondents from both SAWP and TFWP, with a sample size of 514 migrant workers.

freedom of mobility. Migrant farmworkers often work very long hours, on average working more than one and a half times the standard forty hour workweek and during peak times working up to double the standard (Carvajal Gutiérrez and Johnson 2016). Importantly, there is no pathway to citizenship or preference for residency, even if a migrant worker has worked many years in the program (Dunsworth 2023; Alladuah 2023; Fitting et al. 2023). Alladuah (2023: 121), a farmworker from St. Lucia and author of the first firsthand account of a SAWP worker, sums up his experience, “Looking back at my working life, my worst working conditions were without a doubt under the SAWP.”

The corporate food regime and the global food system it has generated are characterised by the flow of commodities moving freely, which both creates and necessitates a flow of labour. Yet that labour is highly controlled. In the case of SAWP and other temporary migrant labour programs, the state has a significant role in determining who will come, for how long, and what their rights are upon arrival. This framework provides much more state control over temporary foreign workers than systems that rely on an undocumented or “illegal” workforce. Yet, the corporate food regime has market hegemony at its core, and to a certain extent it is the market that determines the labour needs and labour fulfilment for agricultural production on a world scale. Even within the SAWP, the direct intervention of the state is minimal beyond the state-to-state agreements upon which the contracts are built. Most of the administration of the program has been delegated to third party organizations, largely employer-driven. Hennebry and Preibisch (2012) argue that, “In a neoliberal policy environment, greater state involvement is unlikely.” Observing where the state intervenes — on the parameters that control the movement of people — and where the state does not intervene — ensuring labour protections and working conditions that meet Canadian labour standards — it is clear that labour needs and economic benefits for employers take precedence over migrant rights.

Local food—global labour

In the context of a looming trade war with the US, more Canadians are turning to local food, both as a way to insulate against potential price jumps due to US imposed tariffs and as a political statement, as a turn towards ‘Buy Canadian’ campaigns and away from US products in protest (Harder 2025; KPMG 2025). Canadian consumers are attracted to claims that buying Canadian food products means support for “local farmers, businesses and workers” alongside keeping jobs in Canada and meeting high safety and environmental standards (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2025). Of course, Canadian government guides to ‘buying local’ do

not mention the role of migrant labour in local food production (ISED website 2025; CFIA website 2025). Lozanski and Baumgartner (2022) focus on agri-tourism in Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL), Ontario, a community that relies heavily on showcasing local wine and food to tourists in a picturesque location and simultaneously relies on around 3,000 migrant farmworkers through the SAWP each year to pick the grapes and grow the vegetables. They argue that migrant workers are intentionally made invisible, “as their presence challenges the narrative of NOTL’s local—and implicitly ethical— production of food” (Ibid: 74). Likewise, Weiler et al. (2016) point out that Alternative Food Networks in British Columbia are not immune to reliance on migrant labour and justify the morality of precarious migrant labour conditions as providing jobs to people fleeing poverty. Fitting et al. (2023: 979) contend that migrant farmworkers play an increasingly large role in local food production in Nova Scotia and that government and industry “local washing” is used to “celebrate and fetishize the local, often commodifying it for tourists to the region, while providing, according to farmers, little meaningful support for relocalization efforts, climate-forward agriculture or an alternative to a deepening reliance on migrant labour.” These examples showcase the incongruity of local food produced with transnational labour, particularly since ideas of ‘local’ often go beyond simple geographical distance between field and plate and are imbued with other social, cultural, and ecological characteristics.¹⁵

To complicate the picture, it is unclear how much local food in Canada is produced with migrant labour. Statistics Canada (2023b) states that only 7.8% of all farm operations in the country sell food locally. Thompson (interview) asserts that “The vast majority of small and mid-scale family farms do not hire migrant farmworkers” and the report he authored backs this up: In their survey, only 3% of farms with staff hired migrant farmworkers (Thompson 2021). An in-depth study on just how much local food in Canada is produced with migrant labour would likely reveal interesting evidence, but two factors are worthy of curiosity here. First, even though the strong majority of migrant farmworkers, almost 74%, are employed by large farm operations with annual revenue over 2 million dollars (StatsCan, 2024a), there *are* migrant farmworkers working on medium and small-scale farms. Second, almost all local food production in Canada, accounting for 90.4% of all local food sales, is attributed to farms with sales over \$250,000 (StatsCan 2023b), which constitutes Statistics Canada highest sales

¹⁵ See Robbins 2015 for a differentiation of local food via character, method and scale; see Feagan 2007 for a discussion on notions of place in relation to local food.

category.¹⁶ Perhaps an equally pertinent question then is how much local food is produced by small-scale farmers in Canada?

Leaving aside migrant farmworkers working primarily on large-scale farms producing for export, there is a tension around whether or not local food can be claimed as ‘local’ if it is grown with migrant labour and how farms of any size that are engaged in local food production as a way to contest the export-oriented global food system integrate migrant labour from afar. (Of note, most farms selling food locally have a variety of reasons for doing so, including the utilitarian reason that local markets can often provide a higher profit margin than other markets (StatsCan 2023a)). Pfenning (interview) sees these issues in terms of just relations rather than geography:

“Our local food supply has artificially been made reliant on imported labour. And so if you want to make a food supply that is truly local, and you want to make it more just, the answer isn’t to throw out the migrant workers. The answer is to make their life and their access to working here a more dignified experience. And that is truly the answer to combining and solving that tension point between local food and migrant labour. Make their time here a dignified time, make their employment conditions dignified. Make farm labour a dignified way to earn a living, and make farming a dignified way to earn a living. Because we have an entire system that is predicated on making it undignified, both for farmers, local farmworkers and for migrant workers, and we can’t create a truly whole and stable and sustainable local food system until we address that and face the issues that are driving that particular aspect of injustice [...] We have a lifestyle and a quality of life in Canada, like the US and Europe, that is absolutely predicated almost 100% on the continued subjugation and oppression of other populations around the globe, and so if we want to have a just and sustainable food supply, we can’t forget that aspect of it, either.”

As Lozanski and Baumgartner (2022: 74) remind, food produced in a local geography but reliant on migrant workers from the Global South “signals that this ‘local’ remains embedded within the practices of global capitalism.”

Solidarities: farmer to migrant farmworker solidarity

Peasant character and class differentiation

To analyze the possibilities and challenges for farmer to farmworker solidarity, a political economy approach

provides a useful set of tools. Edelman (1999: 4) argues, “it is impossible to understand the politics of rural movements without examining their bases and constituencies in particular social classes.” While it can be argued that a political economy approach does not place enough emphasis on gender, racial or other identities as a source of division within and between movements, the importance of class (often undervalued in other approaches) is central here. Bernstein (2010) argues that class dynamics, whether overt or hidden, shape all agrarian struggles and, while recognizing the impact of other social and structural dynamics, contends that an analysis of class dynamics must be central to the study of agrarian movements. He cautions that ignoring class altogether or making broad claims that agrarian movements consist of a single class ignores existing complexity and may hide important contradictions. In blunt terms, farmers and farmworkers (both local and migrant) belong to different classes — one group with access to land and other productive resources, power over hired labourers, and a higher level of decision-making and the other group without access to productive resources and reliant on their labour power to reproduce themselves.

This simple differentiation makes the idea of solidarity between the two groups difficult to navigate and can help to explain the class dynamics and tensions inherent in attempts to create joint political positions (explored below in practical terms). Yet, these categories are far from definitive. Do farmers constitute a social class?¹⁷ Two approaches to this question are explored here. The first is regarding the moral economy¹⁸ — at its base, the idea that those with power have moral obligations stemming from notions of the right to subsistence (e.g. food provisioning) (Thompson 1971) and the right to just prices or a basic living (Scott 1976). Central to the moral economy argument is that peasants operate outside the logic of capital accumulation, not only in pre-capitalist or purely subsistence-based economies but also in contemporary settings and while engaging in market activity. One of the axes of differentiation in the local food system typology I created in previous research (Robbins 2015: 455) is described as ‘character’ — situating peasant character as “substantively different” from capitalist character and claiming that “peasants can and do operate outside the capitalist logic of accumulation yet still engage in markets and the production of a marketable surplus beyond basic subsistence production”. In the early debates between Lenin and Chayanov regarding the future of peasants, Chayanov argues that peasants relied on self-exploitation rather than the capitalist wage relationship and yet, could produce a surplus for sale in the marketplace (Bernstein 2010;

¹⁶ These two high-end categories measure slightly different things: farm revenue accounts for farm income from all sources while farm sales refers only to income from the sale of farm products.

¹⁷ Bernstein (2010) raises this question.

¹⁸ See Thompson 1971 and Scott 1976 for the history of moral economy and in-depth discussions of its relation to peasant politics.

Chayanov 1966). Scott (1976: 13–14) holds that the peasant household as a “unit of consumption as well as a unit of production” is a defining feature separating peasants from capitalist logic – economic decisions follow from the need to provide subsistence for the household first rather than to further accumulation, even at the expense of what classical economists call “rational behaviour”. For example, subsistence logic allows peasants might take an inferior price in the marketplace rather than wait for a better price and sell nothing in the short term (Ibid).

Instead of operating outside the logic of capital accumulation, the counter-arguments suggest that where peasant agriculture exists it has simply been by-passed by capitalism (in which case it is a remnant of a pre-capitalist system); that it has been or is in the process of being consumed by capitalist agriculture (peasants don’t exist anymore and those who claim to be peasants are in fact operating within a capitalist logic, though perhaps on a small scale); or finally, that capitalism tolerates the existence of peasants as long as they serve the interests of capital (e.g. taking risks that capitalist enterprises would not undertake) (Bernstein 2010). Clearly, farmers in Canada are deeply entwined in the capitalist system and even those who are working to build alternatives are doing so in the context of markets dominated by powerful corporate players. However, starting from the perspective that peasants have not been consumed by capitalism’s accumulation imperative and that they can and do use a different economic logic, based on a moral economy, provides an opportunity to explore how some types of farmers are attempting to build solidarity linkages with farmworkers.¹⁹

Second, rather than placing all farmers into one unified class, differentiating farmers allows for a more precise discussion of which class of farmer or, from the other end, which characteristics of a particular class allows room for solidarity between farmers and farmworkers. Updating Lenin’s categories, Bernstein’s (2010: 104) differentiation of small-scale farmers or peasants into ‘emerging capitalist farmers’, ‘medium farmers’, and ‘poor farmers’ begins to complicate the picture. At first glance, it is only the emerging capitalist farmers that hire labour outside of the family. Yet Bernstein (2010) contends that medium farmers also hire wage labour and, sometimes simultaneously, engage in off-farm employment to then invest off-farm income back into the farm. The latter is a regular occurrence on Canadian farms, where over half of the total income for farm families is from off-farm income (StatsCan 2024b). Wendy Manson’s²⁰ mixed grain and cattle operation is an example

of this. Manson and her husband Bruce Hopkins farmed with Bruce’s brother and cousin and only one of the adults involved in the farm did not work off the farm. In the midst of a generational farm transfer to Wendy’s daughter and her family, Wendy noted that both her daughter and her daughter’s husband have off-farm work, as a lab technician and a plumber respectively. “And I think it’s anticipated that they will always have, they will have off-farm income for as long as we did, probably. That’s my guess” (Manson interview).

While many small-scale or family farmers have off-farm employment, Reid-Mussen et al. (2022) note that in their study, five of six farms relied to various extents on non-family labour and all of these farms identified as family farms. In this more complex picture, family farmers can then be exploiting their own and other family members’ labour, hiring wage labour and working as wage labour themselves in other sectors.²¹ Bernstein (2006: 455) calls this phenomenon “fragmentation of classes of labour” and argues that globalization or perhaps for the purposes of this paper, the consolidation of a corporate food regime, has heightened this fragmentation. He contends, “In short, most have to pursue their means of livelihood/reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment” (Ibid). But how is acknowledging the fragmentation of classes of labour and the messiness that it illuminates instructive? First, unlikely solidarities between farmers and farmworkers may be partially attributable to farmers as wage labourers in other contexts themselves, blurring the lines of identity and building understanding of workers’ demands. Second, Bernstein (2006: 459) offers the beginning a resolution to the class tension between farmers and farmworkers when he concludes that an agrarian question of labour is rooted in a “multi-class character” and “contradictory sources and impulses”, which is apparent in the class dynamics of ‘medium farmers’ as employers of farm labour. Despite the possibility for convergences between farmers and farmworkers, Borrás et al. (2022: 316) caution, “Farmers who hire workers, and workers who sell their labour power to farmers (to varying degrees), may share a common vision of a just transition into a positive future [...] but this does not easily or automatically resolve conflicting class interests and contradictory political impulses.”

comes directly from this interview.

²¹ While I’m focusing this point on Canadian farmers, this may be true both in the Global North and in the Global South where migrant workers are themselves small-scale farmers who hire out their labour internationally and simultaneously may rely on hired labour in addition to family labour to maintain their farms at home. Carvajal Gutiérrez and Johnson (2016) hint at this.

¹⁹ In contrast, Weiler, Otero and Whittman (2016) argue that a moral economy lens can also be used to reinforce precarious and unfair working conditions, specifically the notion of trading labour for opportunity.

²⁰ Author conducted interview with Wendy Manson, 6 December 2019. All quotes from Wendy Manson and information about her farm

Solidarity in practice: NFU Migrant Worker Solidarity Working Group (MWSWG)

As elaborated above, the SAWP is not a panacea for migrant workers, yet the program has not faced widespread public opposition and movements for reform have faced challenges in organizing a temporary, precarious workforce and in achieving larger goals like Status for All. In circumstances where workers are working informally or illegally, it is not surprising that “it is rare to see organized political contention by migrant workers” (Borras et al. 2022: 327). Still, organizing workers who *are* formally recognized and have legal status as temporary workers remains challenging. The coercion migrant workers in the SAWP face may not be extra-judicial but the combination of their fleeting presence in the country and the power their employers have to repatriate them or not invite them to return the following season are serious disincentives for collective organizing (Allahdua 2023; Basok et al. 2023; Weiler 2018). Language barriers are another challenge to organizing (Lozanski and Baumgartner 2022) — between workers from the Caribbean and workers from Mexico, between workers and allies, and between workers and government officials, including inaccessibility to documents outlining their rights.

There are a number of organizations in Canada that work on behalf of and in alliance with migrant farmworkers, including regionally based organizations such as British Columbia (BC)-based Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture (RAMA) and Toronto-based Justicia for Migrant Workers, labour unions such as UFCW, and a national umbrella of organizations called the Migrant Rights Network. Rosol et al. (2022: 9), referencing both food and farmworkers, argue, “The key is the power of workers, who have the potential to shut down production, distribution and service through strikes and other means of direct action.” There are at least two examples of direct migrant worker organizing in Canada: Migrant Workers Alliance for Change supports migrant farmworkers in self-organizing and only migrants can become members (MWAC website); UFCW represents migrant farmworkers at specific workplaces, such as the Highline Mushrooms farms in BC where in 2024 UFCW successfully organized and now represent almost 400 workers in collective bargaining (UFCW 2024b).²² These examples of migrant workers organizing themselves and allies organizing to implement rights for migrant workers cannot be diminished, yet Rosol et al. (2022: 9) suggest that a gap remains: “Unfortunately, little

work has been done by North American food movements in organizing together with workers.” It is to this area that this paper now turns.

The MWSWG of the NFU represents the only example of Canadian farmers systematically working on migrant farmworker rights. The National Farmers Union of Canada (NFU), founded in 1969 and recognized by an Act of Parliament in 1970, is a voluntary direct membership, multi-commodity, non-partisan farm organisation representing farm families across Canada (NFU 2019, Wiebe 2019). While its primary focus is agriculture and food systems policy, the NFU has been at the forefront of other issues of public concern including healthcare, rural services, and childcare, among others. Wiebe (2019: 20) notes, “The NFU, from its inception, has been an organization that gives voice to the demands, aspirations and frustrations of its members as citizens as well as farmers.” Members, like Mandy Melnyk, speak of a supportive community within the NFU that offers both policy and advocacy work as well as practical advice and assistance between members.

“The farmers union has helped me understand what a local food system is. A farmers union member gave me my first sow to start. So I farrowed my first pigs. Farmers union members today are the people that I call to when I’m in trouble. So it’s farmers helping farmers, but it’s also the likemindedness, that there’s a value to what we do, there’s a value to our profession” (Melnyk interview).

In the desire to build a responsive and lasting multi-generational organization, the NFU relies heavily on its democratic decision-making and member driven advocacy. Not all members actively participate in the campaigns and actions undertaken on various issues or by holding formal positions in the organization but there is always a core group of activists driving the work and mentoring newcomers. The NFU has been a trailblazer in representing more than just the typical white, male Canadian farmer.²³ From its inception, women and youth positions were entrenched in the leadership structure and, more recently, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) positions have been added and the membership categories have been broadened (more on this below). By increasing the diversity of farm voices in the room and at decision-making tables, NFU policy positions have also shifted over time, from a developmentalist view that Canadian agriculture ‘feeds the world’ to an understanding of power relations that includes a critique of globalization, trade policy, and corporate concentration and a belief in collective action at the global level.

²² The Government of Canada ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 98 that guarantees the right of agricultural workers to unionize in 2017 (Employment and Social Development Canada 2017). However, not all provinces include migrant workers in collective bargaining rights.

²³ In the 1970s the NFU Women worked to change the law and gain matrimonial property rights for women. Once these rights were granted in the late 70s and early 80s across Canada, women’s farm labour was recognized and they were entitled to half the property acquired during marriage (NFU 2019).

The NFU has been working on deepening and strengthening its solidarity with migrant farmworkers since the early 2000s. Its policy demands have shifted from calling for collective bargaining and better working conditions to permanent residency and more recently “full and permanent immigration status for all migrants including undocumented people” (NFU 2022). National convention resolutions adopted by the membership in 2001 and 2003 included calling for collective bargaining for all farmworkers; registering support for migrant farmworkers via the NFU’s participation in the international peasant movement La Via Campesina (LVC), which has Dignity for Migrant and Waged Workers as one of its key themes (LVC website); and urging both federal and provincial governments to uphold migrant worker rights and improve living and working conditions. Much, if not all, of the discussions on migrant farmworkers at this time came to the floor via the Youth Caucus²⁴ and in subsequent years via the International Program Committee, which coordinates the NFU’s participation in LVC. There was no dedicated space within the NFU to work on these issues.

Then, following a national convention roundtable on migrant labour, now-NFU President Jenn Pfenning and resident farmworker and current LVC-North America coordinator Ayla Fenton started the Migrant Worker Working Group in 2017, which eventually became the Migrant Worker Solidarity Working Group (MWSWG) (Pfenning interview). The MWSWG bills itself as “farmers seeking to extend and deepen solidarity with migrant workers in Canada and internationally” (NFU website). Typically, the MWSWG consists of a small active group of NFU farmer and ally members, some of whom employ migrant farmworkers, with a larger group of members who stay informed via an email list (Pfenning interview; personal observation). The group provides educational opportunities such as panels and webinars and meets regularly for members to share information, learn together and develop policy recommendations for consideration by the national board and general membership. The MWSWG also follows public conversation and newsworthy events, drafts public statements on migrant farmworker issues, participates in migrant rights’ actions and boosts the campaigns of allied organizations.

Aspirations to include migrant workers themselves in the group did not come to fruition and, partly in response to a lack of interest or an inability of migrant workers to join the MWSWG directly, the group engaged in two processes. The first was an internal reflection on who they are and who they represent. One result of this reflection was acknowledgment that the group consists of farmers rather than migrant farmworkers and so they added “Solidarity” to the working

group’s name. Although the MWSWG is not explicit in its materials about being a group of employers, according to Pfenning (interview), “The focus has been to try to make it a space that allows farm employers and migrant worker employers to stand productively and positively in solidarity with the men and women that we employ and to stand up for their rights in our roles as employers.” This reckoning with who the MWSWG represents has been helpful for the group to assess their capacity and their role in migrant farmworker issues and has made them arguably more effective in their advocacy. Pfenning (interview) cites the example of how she pushed for changes to the SAWP to allow employers to pay migrant workers more than the contracted wage as a way to eliminate the wage disparity between resident and migrant workers on her farm and how responsive the government was, enacting the necessary process changes the following year. Thompson (interview) observes how powerful it can be to have a group of farmers, of employers, pushing for changes to the SAWP and supporting the demands of migrant farmworkers.

The second process was an effort to address the lack of involvement by farmworkers generally in the NFU. The MWSWG worked with others in the NFU to change the membership structure of the union to include a farmworker membership category in 2021. Historically, the NFU membership base has consisted of family farm memberships and associate (non-farm, non-voting) memberships but the membership structure has evolved in recent years to include farm unit memberships for cooperatives, collectives or partnerships that are not familial and, pertinent to this discussion, farmworker memberships which are open to “any farmworker engaged in farming in Canada” (NFU website). This new membership category was not without its opponents as it fundamentally changed who the NFU represents — from farmers who coalesced around a shared politics and vision of a food system with family farms at its centre to farmers *and* farmworkers in a sometimes uneasy alliance and with quite different positions within the food system. Pfenning concedes that there was an internal debate among members before the change was accepted and that there is sometimes a struggle in representing both employer and employee interests. “[W]e understand that there is a very significant power imbalance between employer and employee, even if the employer doesn’t want to wield that power negatively. That power can, you can never divest yourself of it, just like I can never divest myself of my white skin and the privilege that it affords me in certain spaces, in many spaces” (Pfenning interview). Yet she believes, “We have far more to gain by standing in solidarity with the men and women we employ than by separating ourselves from them. And so we have to create space.” One way that the NFU has created space is the creation of the Farm Worker

²⁴ I was NFU Youth President at the time. Personal notes and recollections.

Working Group (FWWG), which “combines peer support with political visioning to forge long-lasting community, compassionately address workplace issues and improve agricultural labour standards across the sector” (NFU website). The FWWG is specifically a space for farmworkers within the NFU; to-date it is largely made up of resident farmworkers.

As the NFU has worked its way through these debates on who they have been historically, who they want to be going forward and how to open the organization up to include seemingly disparate interests while maintaining cohesion as a progressive farm voice in Canada, the MWSWG has pushed from within for political positions that assert migrant worker rights. By 2016, the NFU’s advocacy had moved beyond calling for better conditions (though those are still relevant calls and became more urgent during COVID-19), to calling for permanent residency status for migrant farmworkers (UFQ Winter 2016/2017: 20). In 2022, the MWSWG sent a letter to then-Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Sean Fraser voicing their support for migrant farmworkers to have a pathway to permanent residency and asserting that, “they are essential and permanently needed to maintain food production in Canada” (NFU MWSWG 2022) — a position incidentally that both reinforces the call for migrant worker rights and simultaneously illustrates the employer position of requiring a sustainable source of farm labour.²⁵ The positions advocated by the MWSWG spark internal debate at times and there remain unresolved questions on certain political stances. The NFU has openly supported migrant worker organizations whose slogans include “Status for All!” but do not use that language in their own press releases and public documents, instead preferring language that is less politically charged. Thompson (interview) acknowledges that some NFU members have questions about what Status for All would mean in terms of their access to reliable farm labour and cautions that there are still, “a lot of nuanced conversations that have to happen”.

The apprehensions that the NFU and in particular the MWSWG are attempting to address point again to the underlying tension: security for the employer is directly related to precarity for the worker, an inherent contradiction within the current corporate food regime. As Borras et al. remind, “It is easier to claim that farmers will take up the issue of migrant workers than to operationalize it, to address it in scattered and isolated local instances, than to institutionalize it class struggle- and system-wide” (Borras et al. 2022: 331–332). This is the struggle facing the MWSWG — how does

a farm organization rooted in the interests of small-scale, family farms widen the lens of solidarity and effectively incorporate farmworkers and their interests? How can the NFU recognize that both farmers and migrant farmworkers are immersed in the same corporate food regime systems of production and accumulation without glossing over the very different experiences and implications the system has on these two groups?

Roots of solidarity

Without overriding the clear power imbalance and different class positions of farmers and farmworkers, there are at least a couple of points of convergence that allow space for solidarity work to begin. The first is a connection to the work itself — family farmers are engaged directly in the physically demanding, difficult work of farming. “If we allow migrant farmworkers, or farmworkers generally, to have their rights eroded and dismissed, then we are also allowing our own rights to be diminished. Every time that we allow bad treatment to happen towards somebody who’s doing the same general labour as we are, we are diminishing ourselves”, says Pfenning (interview). Thompson (interview) reflects on his initial assumption that workers and employers would always be adversaries and how that was challenged by both the farmworkers and farmers that he interviewed and their shared understanding that the farm labour crisis is intricately connected and indivisible from the farm income crisis. He sees this as a starting point for solidarity. If farmers and farmworkers understand the larger forces exerting pressure on their livelihoods, there is room for shared action.

One key characteristic of NFU members that differentiates them from other farmers is their participation in an agrarian movement, both at the national level in the NFU and at the international level as members of LVC. This incorporation into peasant politics and attendant social movement dynamics reinforces a collective belief in a moral economy. Edelman (2005: 339) argues that the moral economy and calls for “‘just’ behavior by the more powerful” are not relics of the past but rather form the basis for many contemporary peasant movement demands. Agrarian movement underpinnings of a moral economy are linked to and lead to the NFU work for justice, including for those outside of their class interests. Rosel et al. (2022: 11) encourage “continuous critical reflections, debate and political education” as a way to guard against a re-entrenchment of old norms and dominant discourses within food movements²⁶. The NFU’s long history of activism provides an organizational culture in which to have these difficult and evolving conversations

²⁵ See Minkoff-Zern (2025, this issue) for an analysis of immigrants (in this case, Latinx farmers) accessing land in the US and becoming the new generation of small-scale farmers. Under the right conditions, this is one possible outcome of allowing status for all in Canada.

²⁶ Food movements in this case include those beyond peasant and agrarian movements such as urban movements for food security, etc.

around migrant worker rights and the role of migrant labour in the food system. Yet building “political literacy” (Ibid) on these topics is relatively new to the organization and therefore at times contentious and fraught. For the NFU, making demands for migrant worker rights in parallel to demands to address the farm income crisis and ensure the viability of small and medium-scale farms is a coherent call for broad system change to circumvent or replace the labour and accumulation imperatives of the corporate food regime.

Conclusion

“The most consistent and significant blind spot in the agenda of agrarian and food movements is labour” (Borras et al. 2022: 331). This paper is an attempt to dig into that blind spot and reveal some of the contradictions, tensions and challenges of building solidarity between a farmers organization and farmworkers, particularly migrant farmworkers. The logic of the corporate food regime requires a system of labour based on migration that accompanies its accumulation imperative. Free trade agreements have entrenched a drive for ever-expanding export agriculture and resulted in both a devastation of peasant agriculture (in the north as well as the south) and an increased need for temporary farm labour. Family farmers in Canada face labour challenges exacerbated by the current food regime and, for some, the SAWP is seen as an answer to those challenges by providing skilled, reliable farmworkers who are available seasonally. However, the SAWP, relying on the economic motivation of workers willing to migrate seasonally, is based on systemic exploitation of farmworkers. Security of a reliable workforce for employers is directly linked to precarity and insecurity for workers.

To break this cycle, solidarities between farmers and farmworkers building alliances based on convergences, rather than the erasure of different positionalities, is key. The nascent solidarity movement found in the MWSWG of the NFU provides evidence that there is space for solidarity between farmers and migrant farmworkers but that the path is not straight and paved. This struggle may resemble what Bernstein (2006: 456–457) describes as “uneasy and erratic, contradictory and shifting, alliances of different class elements and tendencies”. There are broader questions as well about the increasing reliance of migrant labour in local food production — Can migrant farmworkers be part of local food systems and still call those systems ‘local’? To what extent do local food systems challenge the internal logics of the corporate food regime, especially when relying on transnational labour? Solidarity efforts will have to grapple with these larger systemic questions. Is it possible to change

the agricultural labour system to one based on justice for workers and sustainability for family farmers?

Acknowledgements The author wishes to thank the farmers and movement leaders who agreed to participate as key informants in this research. Key informants signed an informed consent form prior to their respective interview. The author is also grateful to be included in this special issue and in the Beijing workshop that preceded it.

Author contributions The author contributed all of the work associated with this paper.

Funding This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has been an elected official and a staff person for the National Farmers Union - Canada in the past.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. *Taste the Commitment*. https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/sector/canadian-food-system/taste-commitment?utm_source=ext_web%26utm_medium=web%26utm_campaign=ISED-MiC-EN%26utm_content=2025-03-14_107. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Allahdua, Gabriel. 2023. *Harvesting freedom: The life of a migrant worker in Canada*. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Basok, Tanya, Eric M. Tucker, Leah F. Vosko, C. Susana Caxai, Jenna L. Hennebry, Stephanie Mayell, Janet McLaughlin, and Anelyse M. Weiler. 2023. The ‘contract’ and its discontents: Can it address protection gaps for migrant agricultural workers in Canada? *International Migration*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13121>
- Bernstein, Henry. 2006. Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century? *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne* 27(4):449-460.
- Bernstein, Henry. 2010. *Class dynamics of agrarian change*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Binford, Arthur Leigh. 2019. Assessing temporary foreign worker programs through the prism of Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program: Can they be reformed or should they be eliminated? *Dialectical Anthropology*. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10624-019-09553-6>

- Blee, K., and V. Taylor. 2002. Semi-structured interviewing in social movement research. In *Methods of social movement research*, ed. B. Klandermans and S. Staggenborg 92–117. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Borras, Saturnino M. 2016. Land politics, agrarian movements and scholar-activism. *JSS Inaugural Lecture*. <https://www.iss.nl/en/news/land-politics-agrarian-movements-and-scholar-activism>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Borras, Saturnino M., and Jennifer C. Franco. 2023. *Scholar-Activism and land struggles*. Warwickshire, UK: Practical Action Publishing Ltd.
- Borras, Saturnino M. et al. 2022. Rurally rooted cross-border migrant workers from Myanmar, Covid-19, and agrarian movements. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-021-10262-6>
- Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). *Origin claims on food labels*. <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-labels/labelling/industry/origin-claims#e4>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Carvajal Gutiérrez, Lidia, and Thomas G. Johnson. 2016. The impact of remittances from Canada's seasonal workers programme on Mexican farms. *International Labour Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1564-913X.2014.00022.x>
- Caxaj, Susana, M. Tran, and S. Mayell et al. 2022. Migrant agricultural workers' deaths in Ontario from January 2020 to June 2021: A qualitative descriptive study. *International Journal for Equity in Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-022-01692-7>
- Centro de los Derechos del Migrante, Inc (CDM). 2020. *Ripe for Reform: Abuses of Agricultural Workers in the H-2A Visa Program*. <https://cdmigrante.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Ripe-for-Reform.pdf>. Accessed 4 August 2025.
- Chayanov, A. V. 1966. *The theory of peasant economy*. Manchester: Manchester University.
- Cohen, Amy, and Elise Hjalmarson. 2018. Quiet struggles: Migrant farmworkers, informal labor, and everyday resistance in Canada. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715218815543>
- Corrado, Alessandra, Lucio Pisacane, and Cristián Alarcón Ferrari. 2024. The agrifood-migration nexus: Migration regimes and the politics of labour shortages in Italy and Sweden. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2279749>
- Della Porta, Donatella. 2014. In-Depth Interviews. In *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, edited by Donatella Della Porta, 228–261. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunsworth, Edward. 2023. Preface. In *Harvesting freedom: The life of a migrant worker in Canada*, by Gabriel Allahdua. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Edelman, Marc. 1999. *Peasants against globalization: Rural social movements in Costa Rica*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Edelman, Marc. 2005. Bringing the moral economy back in ... to the study of 21st-Century transnational peasant movements. *American Anthropologist* 107(3):331–345.
- Edelman, Marc. 2009. Synergies and tensions between rural social movements and professional researchers. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36(1):245–265.
- Edwards, Chris. 2025. Sask. Farmers brace for more uncertainty while awaiting Trump tariff news. *CBC Saskatchewan*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/sask-farmers-brace-for-more-uncertainty-while-awaiting-trump-tariff-news-1.7573719>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Employment and Social Development Canada. 2017. News Release: Canada ratifies international convention, supports workers' rights to organize and collective bargaining. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2017/06/canada_ratifies_internationalconventionsupportsworkersrightstoor.html. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Feagan, R. 2007. The place of food: Mapping out the 'local' in local food systems. *Progress in Human Geography* 31(1):23–42.
- Fitting, Elizabeth. 2025. The transnational agricultural care chains of migrant farmworkers: Land, livelihoods, and social reproduction. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-024-10698-6>
- Fitting, Elizabeth, Catherine Bryan, Karen Foster, Jason W. M. Ellsworth. 2023. Re-centering labour in local food: Local washing and the growing reliance on permanently temporary migrant farmworkers in Nova Scotia. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10397-0>
- Friedmann, Harriet and Philip McMichael. 1989. Agriculture and the state system: The rise and decline of national agricultures, 1870 to the present. *Sociologia Ruralis* 29(2):93–117.
- Garvey, Scott. 2025. Agco to pause equipment deliveries to the U.S. amid tariff uncertainty. *The Western Producer*. <https://www.producer.com/machinery/agco-to-pause-equipment-deliveries-to-the-us-amid-tariff-uncertainty/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Gilmour, Gord. 2025. Tariffs Day 2: Canadian agriculture remains in crosshairs. *The Western Producer*. <https://www.producer.com/news/tariffs-day-2-canadian-agriculture-remains-in-crosshairs/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Global Affairs Canada. Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/trade-agreements-accord-s-commerciaux/agr-acc/united_states-etats_unis/fta-ale/backgrund-contexte.aspx?lang=eng%26_ga=2.10594484.1609795356.1641921650-1622305536.1641921650. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Grantham-Philips, Wyatt. 2025. Trump has imposed sweeping tariffs. Here's a timeline of how we got here. *The Associated Press, CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trump-trade-tariffs-timeline-1.7481280>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Harder, Isabel. 2025. As more people buy Canadian, these farmers are reaping the benefits. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/as-more-people-buy-canadian-these-farmers-are-reaping-the-benefits-1.7454750>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Hennebry, J.L., and K. Preibisch. 2012. A model for managed migration? Re-examining best practices in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. *International Migration*. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00598.x>
- Innovation, and Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED). Shop local, support Canadian communities. https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/office-consumer-affairs/en/modern-marketplace/tips-support-local-businesses?utm_campaign=ised-isde-shop-local-support-canadian-24-25%2526utm_medium=link%2526utm_source=web-link%2526utm_content=eng. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Istiko, Satrio, Jo Durham, and Lana Elliot. 2022. (Not That) essential: A scoping review of migrant workers' access to health services and social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. *Int J of Environmental Research and Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052981>
- KPMG. 2025. News Release: Canadians want retailers to highlight local products amid trade war threats. <https://kpmg.com/ca/en/home/media/press-releases/2025/02/canadians-want-retailers-to-highlight-local-products.html>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- La Via Campesina (LVC). Dignity for migrants and waged workers. <https://viacampesina.org/en/migrations-and-rural-workers/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Li, Tania Murray. 2009. To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations. *Antipode*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00717.x>
- Lozanski, Kristin, and Kayla Baumgartner. 2022. Local gastronomy, transnational labour: farm-to-table tourism and migrant agricultural workers in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada. *Tourism Geographies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1765014>

- Magnan, A., M. Davidson, and A. A. Desmarais. 2023. 'They call it progress, but we don't see it as progress': Farm consolidation and land concentration in Saskatchewan, Canada. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10353-y>
- Matza, Max and Leire Ventas. 2025. Hiding in the fields – farm workers fearing deportation stay in California's shadows. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c989zrggn14o>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Mayell, Stephanie. 2024a. "We are like broken vessels; we get thrown out": The triple violence of injury among Jamaican migrant farm workers in Canada. *Dialectical Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09742-y>
- Mayell, Stephanie. 2024b. "It's like we're still in slavery": Stress as distress and discourse among Jamaican farm workers in Ontario, Canada. *Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010016>
- McMichael, Philip. 2009a. A food regime genealogy. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36(1):139–169.
- McMichael, Philip. 2009b. A food regime analysis of the 'world food crisis'. *Agriculture and Human Values* 26(4):281–295.
- McMichael, Philip. 2013. *Food regimes and agrarian questions*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Migrant Rights Network. 2025. Migrant workers expose government plan to allow employers to steal their pay by up to \$15,600/Year. <https://migrantrights.ca/controlsnotprotectionsrelease/>. Accessed 4 August 2025.
- Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC). Become a member. <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/membership2024/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Minkoff-Zern, Laura-Anne. 2025. Land access among immigrant Latinx workers and farmers in the United States: Racialization, invisibility, and possibilities for reform. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-025-10744-x>
- National Farmers Union (NFU). www.nfu.ca/. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- National Farmers Union. 2019. NFU history in the making: Celebrating 50 years of fighting for fairness. <https://www.nfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/NFU-anniversary-booklet-web.pdf>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- National Farmers Union. 2022. NFU calls for full and permanent status for all migrants! <https://www.nfu.ca/nfu-calls-for-full-and-permanent-status-for-all-migrants/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- National Farmers Union. 2025. Media Release: Bolster Canadian food sovereignty during tariff "pause", says National Farmers Union. <https://www.nfu.ca/bolster-canadian-food-sovereignty-during-tariff-pause-says-national-farmers-union/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- National Farmers Union Migrant Worker Solidarity Working Group (NFU MWSWG). 2022. Migrant workers are essential and permanently needed to maintain food production in Canada. <https://www.nfu.ca/letter-migrant-workers-essential/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- National Farmers Union-Ontario. 2020. NFU-O Statement on the deaths of two migrant farm workers. <https://www.nfu.ca/nfu-o-s-statement-on-the-death-of-bonifacio-eugenio-romero/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Obokata, Tomoya. 2023. End of mission statement: Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/slavery/sr/statements/eom-statement-canada-sr-slavery-2023-09-06.pdf>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Otero, G. 2011. Neoliberal globalization, NAFTA, and migration: Mexico's loss of food and labor sovereignty. *Journal of Poverty*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2011.614514>
- Price, Greg. 2025. A seeding season of uncertainty ahead in U.S. trade. *The Western Producer*. <https://www.producer.com/news/a-seeding-season-of-uncertainty-ahead-in-u-s-trade/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Qualman, Darrin. 2011. Advancing agriculture by destroying farms? The state of agriculture in Canada. In *Food sovereignty in Canada: Creating just and sustainable food systems*, eds Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais and Nettie Wiebe. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Reid-Musson, Emily, Ellen MacEachen, Mary Becki, and Lars Hallström. 2022. Work without workers: Legal geographies of family farm exclusions from labour laws in Alberta, Canada. *Agriculture and Human Values*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10302-9>
- Robbins, Martha Jane. 2007. Free trade's refugees: Mexico's migrant workers at home and abroad. *Briarpatch Magazine*. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/free-trades-refugees-mexicos-migrant-workers-at-home-and-abroad>
- Robbins, Martha Jane. 2015. Exploring the 'localisation' dimension of food sovereignty. *Third World Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1024966>
- Rosol, Marit, Eric Holt-Giménez, Lauren Kepkiewicz, and Elizabeth Vibert. 2022. Towards just food futures: Divergent approaches and possibilities for collaboration across difference. *Canadian Food Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i2.598>
- Rutgers, Julia-Simone. 2025. How a trade war could hurt farmers on both sides of the Canada-U.S. Border. *The Narwhal*. <https://thenarwhal.ca/manitoba-farmers-trump-tariffs/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Scott, James C. 1976. *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Statistics Canada. 2023a. Tables 32-10-0461-01 Main reasons of agricultural operations for selling food locally, by farm size, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210046101-eng>
- Statistics Canada. 2023b. Survey on Local Food and Beneficial Management Practices, 2022. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230905/dq230905a-eng.htm>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Statistics Canada. 2024a. A Look at Agricultural Workers in 2022. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/6205-look-agricultural-workers-2022>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Statistics Canada. 2024b. Total Income of Farm Families, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240126/dq240126a-eng.htm>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Statistics Canada (StatsCan). 2025. Tables 32-10-0221-01 Countries of citizenship for temporary foreign workers in the agricultural sector. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210022101-eng>
- Thompson, David. 2021. *Reframing the Farm Labour Crisis in Ontario*. National Farmer Union–Ontario Report. https://www.nfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Reframing-the-Farm-Labour-Crisis-NFU-O-Farm-Labour-Study_compressed.pdf. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Thompson, E. P. 1971. The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past & Present* 50:76–136. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650244>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Union Farmer Quarterly (UFQ). Winter 2016–2017. Vol. 22 Issue 4. <https://www.nfu.ca/publications/union-farmer-quarterly-winter-2016-17/>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). 2024a. *The Status of Migrant Agricultural Workers in Canada – 2023: Special Health & Safety Report*. https://ufcw.ca/templates/ufcwcanada/images/Agriculture_Workers/2024/Migrant-Workers-Report-2023-V7-EN.pdf. Accessed 4 August 2025.
- United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). 2024b. Media Release: Largest group of farmworkers in Canadian history join union – UFCW 1518. https://ufcw.ca/index.php?option=com_content%26view=article%26id=33685:largest-group-of-farmworkers-in-canadian-history-join-union-ufcw-1518%26catid=10413%26Itemid=6=en. Accessed 23 July 2025.

- Weiler, Anelyse M. 2018. A food policy for Canada, but not just for Canadians: Reaping justice for migrant farm workers. *Canadian Food Studies* <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v5i3.312>
- Weiler, Anelyse M., and Janet McLaughlin. 2019. Listening to migrant workers: Should Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program be abolished? *Dialectical Anthropology*. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10624-019-09563-4>
- Weiler, Anelyse M., Gerardo Otero, and Hannah Wittman. 2016. Rock stars and bad apples: Moral economies of alternative food networks and precarious farm work regimes. *Antipode*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12221>
- Wiebe, Nettie. 2019. Recounting the past, counting on the future: Stories of the NFU. In *Frontline farmers: How the National Farmers Union resists agribusiness and creates our new food future*, ed. Annette Aurélie Desmarais. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Wise, Raúl Delgado and Henry Veltmeyer. 2016. *Agrarian change, migration and development*. Warwickshire, UK: Practical Action Publishing Ltd.
- Wise, Timothy A., December 2009. *Agricultural dumping under NAFTA: Estimating the costs of U.S. agricultural policies to Mexican producers*. Global Development and Environment Institute Working Paper No. 09–08. Tufts University. <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/179078/?v=pdf>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- Zhang, Yan, Yuri Ostrovsky and Amélie Arsenault. 2021. *Foreign workers in the Canadian agriculture industry*. Statistics Canada Economic and Social Reports. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2021004/article/00002-eng.htm>. Accessed 23 July 2025.
- David Thompson — NFU Executive Director, PhD in labour history, author of NFU-Ontario farm labour report.
- Stuart Oke — Former NFU Youth President, certified organic vegetable Community-Supported-Agriculture (CSA) and farmers' market farmer in Ontario, former resident farmworker.
- Wendy Manson — NFU member, farmer on multi-family, multi-generational Saskatchewan grain and beef cattle farm, direct marketed beef but grain marketed into the conventional grain handling system.
- Mandy Melnyk — Former NFU Youth Vice-President, Alberta organic vegetable, meat, egg subscription box, employer of non-migrant farm labour.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Martha Jane Robbins is a PhD researcher in International Development (Political Ecology) at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam. She has a background in farm politics and social movements through her connection to her family's farm and her work with the National Farmers Union (Canada), La Via Campesina, and the Treaty Land Sharing Network. Her research interests focus on food sovereignty, local food systems and agrarian movements.

List of interviews utilized in this paper

Jenn Pfenning — NFU President, Ontario certified organic vegetable and fruit farmer, mostly selling into the local food system, employer of migrant farmworkers.