



VANCOUVER and DISTRICT LABOUR COUNCIL



August 25, 2023

The Honourable Marc Miller
Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship
House of Commons Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A7

Via email: minister@cic.gc.ca, marc.miller@parl.gc.ca, marc.miller.p9@parl.gc.ca
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Re: Action for Migrant Workers Impacted by Wildfires

Dear Minister Miller,

I'm writing today on behalf of the Vancouver & District Labour Council, a regional labour body uniting approximately 80 local unions and over 60,000 unionized workers in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia.

As we are sure you are aware, there are currently over 300 wildfires active across the province of British Columbia. The situation is so serious that the provincial government declared a state of emergency, indicating that this is the worst summer on record for forest fires. The worst are presently in the Okanagan Valley, a region with a significant agricultural industry.

Naturally, this situation has seriously impacted businesses and farms, and the workers who are employed at them. The Migrant Workers' Centre indicates that hundreds of migrant workers have been displaced and are without work.

These are workers who already live and labour under precarious conditions and are now left in an alarming predicament. We are therefore writing to call upon the federal government to take urgent action to provide support to these workers and those who depend upon them.

We echo the calls of the Migrant Workers' Centre for immediate issuance of emergency open work permits to migrant workers, as well as granting migrant workers affected by the fires the ability to avail Employment Insurance benefits during the period when they are unable to secure alternative employment. This includes the extension of benefits to individuals who haven't fulfilled the stipulated minimum hours prerequisite for eligibility for regular benefits.

Since these workers are hired under employer-specific work permits, they face significant obstacles seeking alternative employment. These obstacles, which are detailed in the aforementioned Migrant Workers' Centre letter, mean that even though work is potentially available elsewhere, these workers may very well be unable to access it, unless the government acts.

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Migrant workers should not be forgotten or overlooked in the response of governments to these disastrous fires. They are an important part of our communities, and our economy. They have worked hard to come to this country, where they perform backbreaking, but essential, labour. Abandoning them to return to their home countries would be a dramatic miscarriage of justice and may in fact be impossible due to flight cancellations related to the fires.

For all these reasons we hope that the government will act swiftly to remedy the situation. Recommended criteria for the issuance of these permits, as taken from the Migrant Workers' Centre letter, would include:

1. Automatically grant the permits without requiring affected workers to submit an application. Numerous migrant workers lack proficiency in English and lack access to computers. Compelling them to apply for new work permits would impose an unjust burden, further straining organizations dedicated to assisting these workers.
2. Grant the permits without imposing processing fees. Given the current reliance of many workers on the tireless efforts of service organizations to meet their urgent requirements, subjecting them to a \$155 work permit fee and a \$100 open work permit holder fee would be financially catastrophic in these trying circumstances.
3. Issue the permits for a period of at least 12 months. Issuing emergency open work permits for a period of 12 months is consistent with IRCC's established guidelines. For example, the guidelines for the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers indicate, "on average, it may take approximately 12 months for migrant workers to find new employment and a new work permit and LMIA, if required".

Combined with extending Employment Insurance benefits to migrant workers impacted by the wildfires in British Columbia, this would represent what we see as an ethical and humanitarian response to these extraordinary circumstances.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Stephen von Sychowski
President, VDLC

cc: VDLC Executive Board
Migrant Workers Centre

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