



MIGRANTS BUILDING POWER!

Understanding injustice facing migrant workers and how to fight back.



***This zine was produced on unceded
Wurundjeri and Bunurong lands.***

***When we understand the deeply-rooted
interests of the Australian State and
corporations in profiting from Indigenous
land and people, we can begin to
understand how to fight the exploitation
of migrant workers.***

REMEMBER

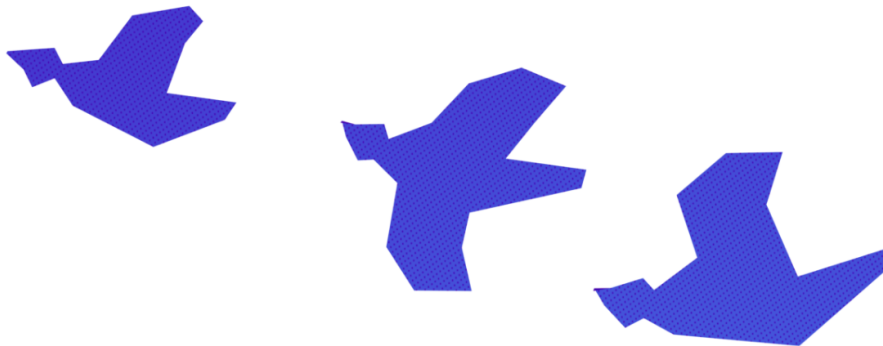
Leaning into fear and choosing silence does not protect migrants or our workmates from our bosses. It does not grant us humane working conditions, a living wage or shield us from harm.

Exploitation is rampant precisely because bosses can count on migrant workers not to address the injustices we face.

The only thing that can guarantee our collective safety and dignity is to be strongly organised. Until then, our rights will often be unenforceable.

Many news reports, studies and writings highlight the problem of migrant exploitation, but the point is to fight it.

Migrants Building Power isn't just educational, it is an aspirational program that proposes a way to resist. Stick with this booklet till the end and you can see how to get involved with our program and join the fight.



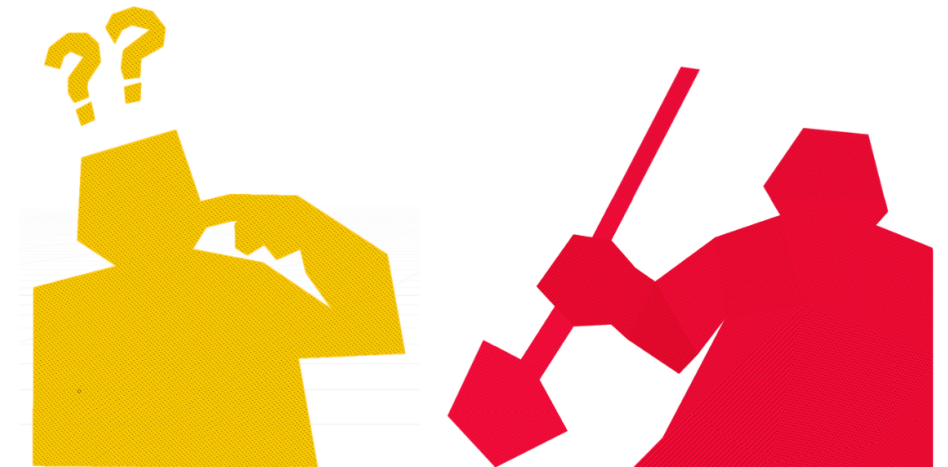
THE ROLE OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

When we say migrant workers, we mean any worker on a visa. This includes refugees and asylum seekers.

Why does Australia take in a few hundred thousand migrants per year, and grant millions of temporary visas?

Is it generosity to those coming from more difficult circumstances to make a life here? Or is there some other motive?

Let's look at the visa system to figure out just what the government expects from migrants coming here.



THE VISA SYSTEM IS BUILT FOR BOSSES



Like an arcade claw machine, Australian bosses have their pick of willing workers that seek a better life and higher wages in Australia. Unfortunately, too many find exploitation or deportation instead.

Through the **Working Holiday Visa** the government can allocate 'specified' jobs in industries that are crucial to Australian bosses, but lack the labour force.

Bosses get to sponsor workers through the **Skills In Demand Visa** and keep them here as long as they are working for them, otherwise they might be deported. This visa and the **Temporary Activity Visa** also restrict pathways to permanent residency, while still ensuring migrant labour force.

On average, it takes workers 5.1 years to acquire permanent residency, with the longest wait time being 13 years for some refugees. During that time migrants must survive without government assistance.

This means many migrants have to maintain jobs to survive or even to keep their visa status, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

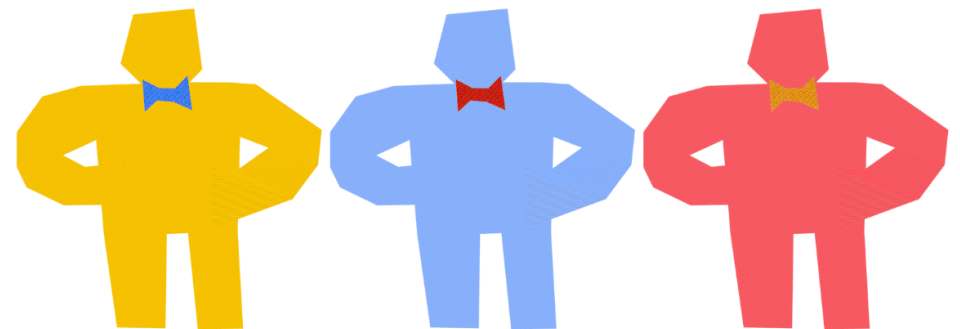
AUSTRALIA'S PERFECT MIGRANT

The Australian government and bosses want migrants who are financially stable enough to not be a 'drain' on the economy, but also desperate enough to accept terrible pay and work conditions willingly. They want migrants to fill gaps in their economy without 'flooding' their country.

They want international students who can pay huge university and living fees without government support, but can also afford to live on just 48 hours of work every fortnight. Work that is often irregular and seriously underpaid.

Government and bosses know that financially well-off migrants do not make up most people who submit visa applications.

They know that migrant workers are stuck in a vice grip by the visa system. This puts migrants on visas in the vulnerable position bosses need them in to make profit.



WHY DOES MIGRANT EXPLOITATION HAPPEN

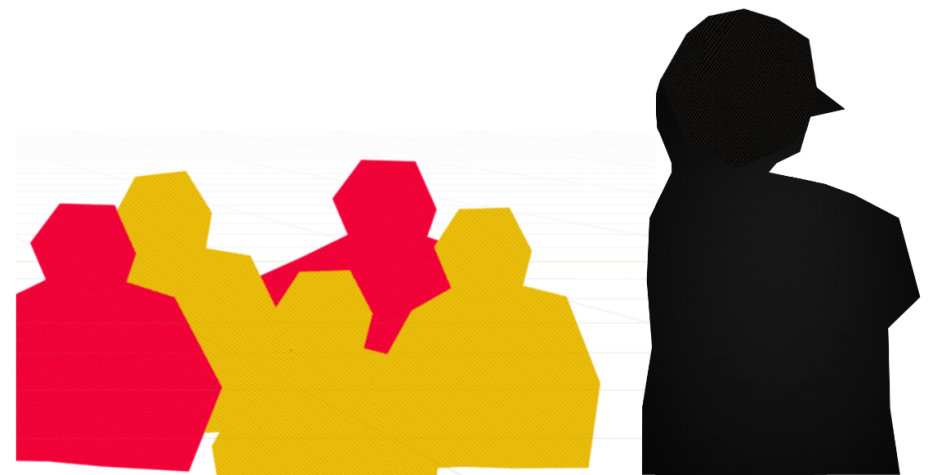


- 1. Capitalism is a system motivated by profit, often at the expense of human need, safety and security.**
- 2. Global South countries are weakened by colonial and imperial powers. This facilitates exploitation and lower wages for the profit of capitalists from Australia and other places.**
- 3. Migrants without citizenship cannot vote, so politicians often ignore their issues because it won't help them win elections.**
- 4. Rich capitalist countries rely on cheap foreign labour. Without it, living costs would go up, and politicians who try to fix this might face backlash from capitalists.**
- 5. The visa system keeps migrant workers vulnerable, letting bosses exploit them for profit. The state regularly cancels visas for issues caused by bosses at work, who are not held accountable.**
- 6. Exploitation flourishes because labour laws aren't properly enforced by regulators. Bosses use threats or visa cancellations to silence workers.**
- 7. Unions in Australia have been weakened through anti-union laws. Many are aligned with the Labor Party, and some even represent bosses over workers. This leads to increased labour law violations and lower wages.**

LACK OF ACCESS

- 1. Migrants who get sick don't have clear support written into their visas. They cannot access welfare or disability services subsidised by the state.**
- 2. Spousal visas tether a person to be financially dependent on the main visa holder. This makes them more vulnerable to abuse, because leaving their partner could mean losing their legal status in the country.**
- 3. It is also not uncommon for a visa holder's disabled family member to face discrimination from the immigration system, which may find reasons to exclude them from the visa application process.**
- 4. International students may be scammed into paying high fees to fraudulent schools that don't provide actual degrees.**

These schools have inadequate facilities and supports. Students may face bullying and even threats of deportation if they ask for their money back.



INDUSTRIES RELIANT ON MIGRANT LABOUR



7% of the Australian workforce holds a temporary visa. When temporary visa holders left during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, labour shortages revealed how vital these workers are to the Australian economy.

Agriculture. Recruitment to remote farms and factories often happen through labour hire companies, which lack effective regulation. There are between 60,000 to 100,000 undocumented workers on Australian farms.

Hospitality. Underpayment in the food services sector is more than any other industry. Bosses frequently exploit migrants from their own communities, who may have limited English or alternative employment options.

Healthcare. Migrant workers bolster child care, aged care and disability industries, many of whom are women.

Construction. A significant number of migrant construction workers lack the necessary trade qualifications, often due to issues with recognising overseas qualifications and complex migration processes.

Education. Australia is a popular destination for international students, and education is Australia's third biggest export, which means this sector produces migrant workers.

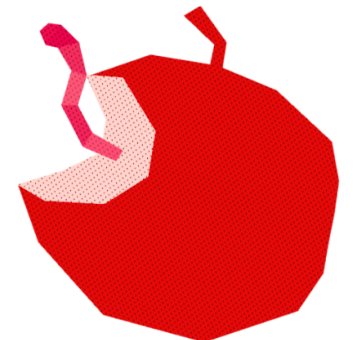
Transport. Migrant workers tend to fill truck driving roles due to a skills shortage, and also work for food delivery or rideshare services on vulnerable 'gig work' contracts.

Meat industry. PALM workers in this sector are severely underpaid, often forced to work unpaid overtime, live in overcrowded and expensive housing, and face barriers if they wish to change jobs.

HOW BAD IS MIGRANT EXPLOITATION?



- 30% of 4000 migrant workers surveyed reported they were paid \$12 per hour or less. The minimum wage is \$24.95 per hour as of 2025.
- 38% of migrant workers had their lowest paid job in agriculture, especially in fruit and vegetable picking.
- At least 74% of temporary migrants who earned \$15 per hour or less, believe that many or most people on their visa are paid less than the national minimum wage.
- Regulatory bodies set up to help migrants are not used because 9 out of 10 migrants fear visa cancellation for speaking out.
- Many of the worst cases of abuse and exploitation aren't reported at all as bosses can use threats to job security and reputation as damage control.
- Migrant exploitation is so embedded into the Australian economy that businesses regularly exploit migrant workers to remain competitive.
- The new **Workplace Justice Visa** allows workers to stay in the country to pursue legal cases against bosses, but it is largely inaccessible to undocumented migrants whose visas have expired - the group that needs it most.



SCAPEGOATING MIGRANTS

You might hear people claiming that migrants take jobs, decrease wages and drive up rent. This is scapegoating by bosses and nationalists, who try to deflect from the truth that **bosses and landlords are responsible for increased poverty.**

There is no evidence that immigration harms the labour market outcomes of those born in Australia. In fact, the employment rate of citizens in regional areas increases with migrant labour supply due to more people wanting products and services.

Migrants positively benefit the economy, paying more tax than they use up. This leads to more jobs which in turn lessens population pressure on the labour market and downward pressure on wages.

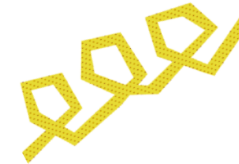
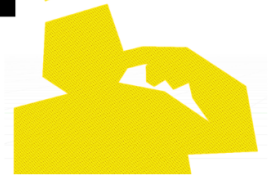
Though migrant wage theft is a massive problem, migrants overall have a minor effect on wages whether positively or negatively.

The most significant effects on wages have been the suppression of unions, and the casualisation of the workforce by bosses.

The way to more wealth for the working class is through **acting together as workers.** This is done through unity. Division by nationalists just works against this goal, to the benefit of bosses.

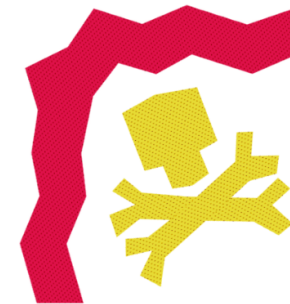
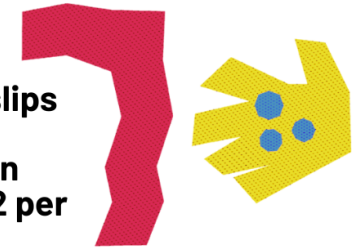


THE MIGRANT JOB MARKET



CASH IN HAND

Jobs that pay in cash without pay-slips tend to grossly underpay workers. Though it's legal to pay employees in cash, 70% of people who earned \$12 per hour or less are paid in cash.



UNAUTHORISED WORK

Working beyond visa conditions is illegal, but workers often have no choice. Bosses often underpay such workers.

FORCED LABOUR

Forced labour is when any reasonable person would not feel free to stop working, or leave their place of work, because of coercion, threats or deception. It is a crime in Australia to make a person undertake forced labour, to keep someone in forced labour or to conduct a business that involves forced labour.





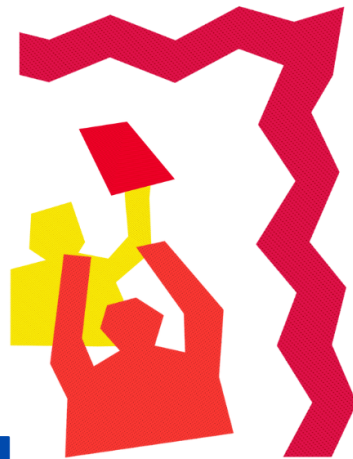
DEBT BONDAGE

Debt bondage is forced labour. Recruitment agencies charge high fees for travel, documents, and housing, which workers must repay.

This traps them into exploitative contracts as they are forced to pay their debt. If they refuse, they may be threatened with visa cancellation

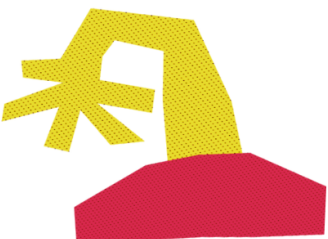
PASSPORT CONFISCATION

Common in food services and horticulture, passport confiscation forces workers to comply to their exploitation, due to the threat of having no ID to prove legal status.



PALM EXPLOITATION

Employers of PALM visa holders often charge high fees for housing, food, transport etc. Workers struggle to pay off these debts due to having insufficient hours. Plus, changing jobs requires official permission from the government - even if they face poor working and living conditions.



SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Migrant workers have conditions imposed upon them by the visa system, like **the 88-day minimum farm work requirement**, or **visa sponsorship**.

Due to these conditions, bosses or managers have an undue amount of power over migrants, that they can use to exploit migrants not just financially, but sexually.

Of 3,000 migrant women, across multiple industries, **more than half have experienced workplace sexual harassment**.

75% of respondents didn't report the sexual harassment they faced.

A large number of women reported facing additional issues when they attempted to defend themselves, including being fired, forced into resigning, having shifts cut and threats of deportation.

Meanwhile, 50% were concerned that reporting sexual harassment could result in losing their job.



REFLECTIONS

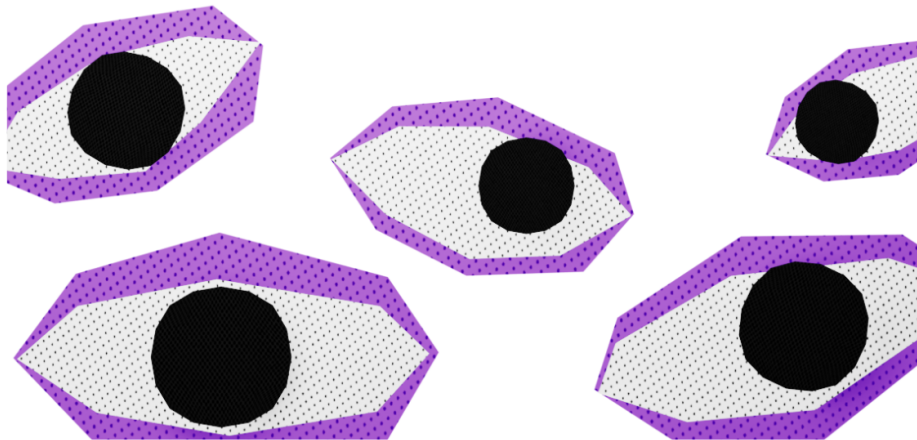
Instead of seeing migrant exploitation as the fault of a few bad employers, we should recognise that this behaviour is encouraged and protected by the current visa system.

The reality is, **bosses seek profit**. That's why they start businesses. If they can secure that profit through exploitation, without facing much consequences, there will be many bosses who will do this.

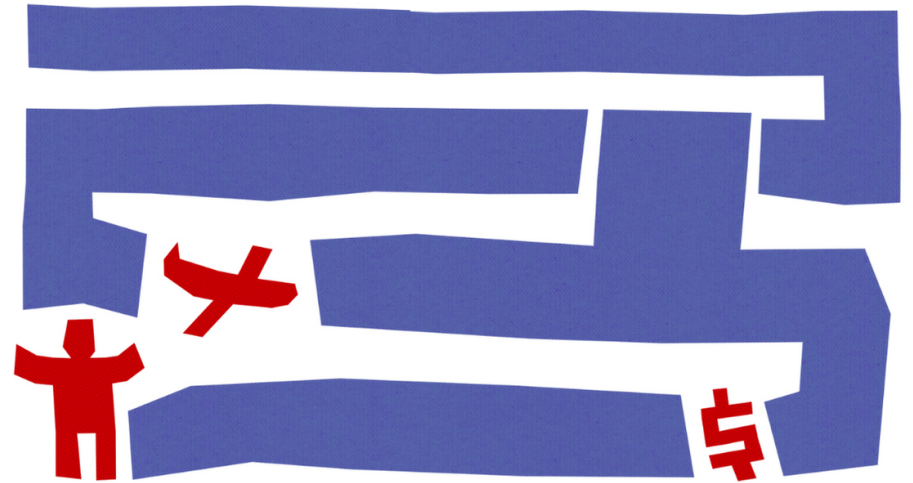
When businesses profit by exploiting migrants, it pressures other employers to do the same in order to stay competitive.

As long as **the visa system allows bosses to wield power over workers**, then underpayment and exploitation will happen. And as long as the system punishes or prevents migrants from coming forward, then this problem will only get worse.

This is why the system itself needs to be addressed at a **structural** level.



DEAD ENDS IN SEEKING JUSTICE



WAGE THEFT PROSECUTIONS

In 2021, new laws were passed that mean Australian bosses could go to jail for 10 years and be fined \$1.65 million if they 'deliberately' underpay their workers. Companies found liable can be fined up to \$8.25 million.

However, Fair Work are likely to only go after high-profile and shocking examples of intentional wage theft. They will also not prosecute employers who self-report 'possible wage theft'. This leaves many workers unable to recover stolen wages through these laws.

There is often no mention made about how migrant workers are especially without the means (money, time, support, legal status) to fight wage theft in court against well-resourced corporations.

THE LIMITS OF RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORKS

Rights-based trainings involve teaching workers about their rights at work. Workers on visas have the same workplace rights as permanent residents and citizens.



Knowing and standing up for our rights is important, but we must acknowledge that it is not easy to enforce them due to the power imbalance between bosses and workers. If the problem can't be solved at the workplace, it may end up in a lengthy and difficult court battle. Sometime unions may help cover legal costs, but that is not always promised.

It's like being given a key to a door you can't access.

Of 5000+ temporary migrants who earned substantially under the national minimum wage, 86% already knew that they were being underpaid at the time.

This is why we must go beyond rights-based frameworks to make rights something meaningfully upheld by employers of migrant workers.

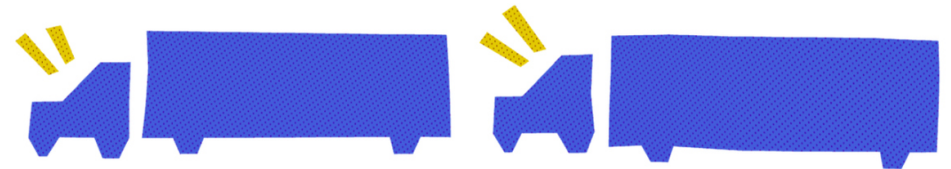
THE LIMITS OF FAIR WORK

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) was set up to force unions into arbitration meetings, where bosses and workers meet to figure out suitable agreements.

This was a move away from effective strike actions that cost bosses money. Through arbitration, workers give up their true bargaining power and with it the hope to win better wages or conditions.

In giving up strikes for arbitration, unions have become far less effective, won far less for their members, and lost many members altogether. It's no wonder that the Fair Work Commission (FWC) is so favourable to the bosses.

Workers have no control over FWC decisions, and the verdicts of the FWC are consistently less than what workers demand. The FWC was even behind clear anti-worker policies like cuts to penalty rates in the past. It is a tool consistently used by bosses against workers.



During a strike by Woolworths distribution workers in 2024, the company ran to the Fair Work Commission to shut down a picket blocking access to the business. The picket had cost them \$50 million so far.

Fair Work ruled against the workers, allowing Woolworths to continue business with labour hire workers, which reduced the striking workers' bargaining power to zero.

FAIR WORK OMBUDSMAN

The Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) is a workplace regulator that has minimal enforcement power and takes on a small number of cases per year.

The Australian government issued an Assurance Protocol that meant the Department of Home Affairs *generally* won't deport a migrant if FWO is assisting with an inquiry. Still, there are very few migrant workers who access this service per year.

THE PROBLEM PERSISTS...

Government initiatives are limited because many migrants have their visa conditions breached by their bosses. This leaves them hesitant to pursue legal avenues for help, or they can't afford to.

Those in power might believe that migrant workers are protected by law, without those laws offering meaningful protection.

The structural failure to win justice for migrant workers doesn't just let migrants down. It weakens rights and protections for all workers because bosses realise they can mistreat others too.

SO HOW DO WE FIGHT?



WORKERS POWER

Migrant workers in Australia make bosses profit. Refusal to play this role until certain demands are met is a historically-backed way for exploited people to exercise real power against those who exploit them.

Protests outside the workplace don't cost bosses their profits, nor do electoral campaigns where we hope the politician will support us.

But workers acting together and refusing to work does. This is where the potential power of migrant workers lies.

REAL POWER PROVES ITSELF

Here are some things won by workers making demands and acting together:

- The weekend
- The 8 hour work day
- Welfare
- Medicare
- Public Housing
- Maternity Leave
- Minimum wage

None of these things are gifts granted to us from above by politicians or bosses, they were fought for by workers from below organising together.





MAKING UNIONS FIGHT FOR US

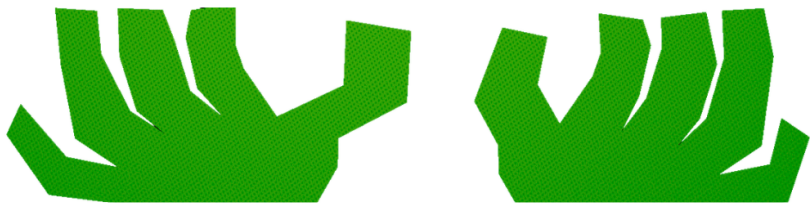
A good union is a worker's insurance against exploitation. Workers pay dues to the union that covers their industry, and the union backs its members in campaigns.

Because unions have been effective in Australia, bosses united with government to fine unions for strikes. This can result in paid union officials squashing workers action to protect the union from government fines.

But, under enough pressure from the members who pay union official wages, unions can be changed to work better for their members. Unions want to avoid fines, but they must keep workers happy to exist.

Many migrant workers are not in unions. Among employees in 2022, only 3.8% of migrants who arrived in Australia less than 5 years earlier are members of a trade union, compared to 14% of employees born in Australia.

The question is, how do we get unions to care about migrant workers and make them a powerful force against exploitation, so that migrant workers will want to join and fight back?



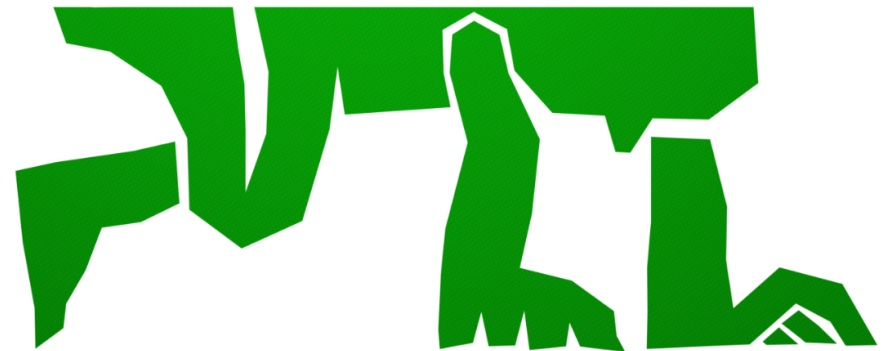
BUILDING POWER FROM BELOW

Workers in unions must create a pressure from below greater than the pressure from bosses above, in order to make our unions into organisations that truly fight for all workers.

It is crucial to get workers together in groups to meet, learn together, study our unions and strategise to build the power that pressures them to take issues facing migrant workers seriously.

If enough workers are united in their goals, we can act across workplaces, unions, and industries to coordinate fights against injustices and for our communities.

This is how we start to build the power necessary to tackle the visa system and the bosses that abuse it for their profit.





QUALITIES OF FIGHTING UNIONS

- **Power.** Good unions need the will to resist pressure from government and bosses and exercise the power of their members to the fullest possible extent.
- **Accountable official positions.** Some unions have paid their officials the same wages as the lowest paid worker in the industry who is covered by the union. This incentivises officials to fight for the average worker in the union.
- **Democratic elections produce new paid organisers and delegates.** Workers choose people they know will fight for them and who are accountable to their democratic wishes.
- **Fights beyond the workplaces.** Fights on Indigenous peoples issues, the visa system, against wars overseas. Solidarity with all people and against all oppression.
- **Unions for everyone.** We should fight for unions to be effective while remaining open to all workers regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion etc.



MORE THAN UNION SIGN UPS

Our interest should never just be to sign people up to corrupt unions, or to support unions that prevent workers power. Our commitment must be to meet workers, inside or outside existing unions, and to build workers power.

If existing unions are too resistant to workers power, workers around the world have found success building new unions to reach and organise workers to build real power.

Whether inside or outside existing unions, these are the struggles that need to be built now, so that migrant workers might find justice and end their widespread exploitation.



In Canada, migrant care workers campaigned for 10 years to win permanent resident status on arrival, an end to the requirement for their one-year post-secondary education to be accredited, and a lowered language benchmark score.

In Spain, unions of migrants won new laws that establish gig workers as employees, against multinational companies like Uber who argue workers are self-employed through an app. The new laws establish Uber as responsible for minimum wage and other protections for their workers.



THE BUILDERS LABORERS FEDERATION

The Builders Laborers Federation (BLF) is an example of a Australian union that was accountable to its members, democratic and also extremely powerful.

During the construction boom of the 1960s and 1970s, construction workers took numerous actions that created meaningful social change. One time, they laid concrete for a giant skyscraper and then made demands of the boss, who had 2 hours to concede or have the foundation of the building ruined. This was one way they won high wages, fair conditions and the right to strike.

They also held back developments that pushed the poor out of their homes and instead stepped in to make housing livable for working people. The BLF were the muscle to enforce the will of communities that came to the union for help.

Workers build the world, so if we decide what to build or produce and what not to, workers can meaningfully shape the world by our design.

FOOD WORKERS BITE BACK

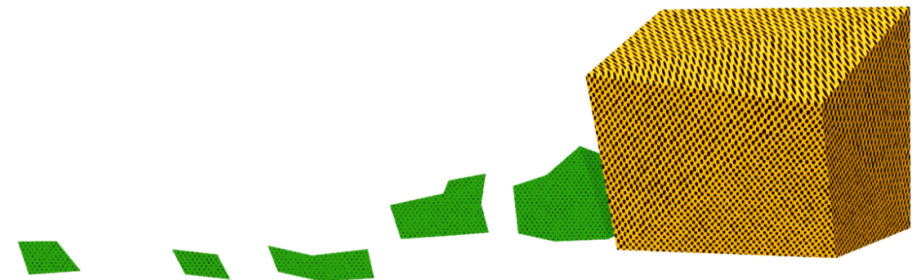
Hussey is a producer of baby leaf vegetables for big supermarket chains across four Australian states and internationally.

In the south-east of Melbourne in July 2023, migrant women workers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Burma, led the first strike in the company's history, and the first protected industrial action in the farm industry for generations.

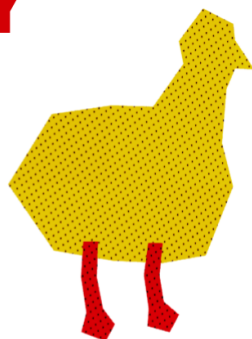
They were organising against employment through contractors, cash-in-hand pay and poor working conditions that lead to a worker dying in a car crash after working a 20 hour shift.

Worker delegates would go door to door to people's homes after work, persuading them to join the union and take collective action. During the strike, they blocked the factory gates, and prevented labour hire from loading a single truck.

Within 24 hours, workers won wage increases for all workers, weekend penalty rates, weekly overtime pay for casuals, union rights and protections, and guaranteed consultation on any new labour hire providers.



WORKERS PLAY CHICKEN WITH BOSSES

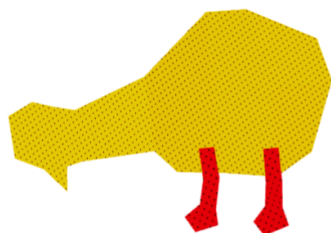


Inghams is a major supplier of chicken to supermarket giants and fast food chains. The company purposely hires a largely migrant and refugee workforce to take advantage of them, paying them low wages and pressuring them to work faster - even toilet breaks were timed.

1000 workers in South and Western Australia went on strike in September 2023 due to extremely low pay. They blocked the gates into the plant, and tried to convince new labour hire workers to join them, to some success. This campaign brought together workers from a multitude of ethnic groups.

Management was so desperate that they cut holes in wire fences to get workers in, despite the lack of safety. Inghams also placed huge tubs of rotting chicken guts right next to strikers.

After 5 days of striking, Inghams came back to the workers with a better pay offer and improved working conditions. This included 5.12% rise in the first year, 4% rises in subsequent years, full back pay, better conditions for labour hire workers and improved breaks.



In an inspirational show of solidarity, workers at the SA factory refused to sign on to the improved deal until the workers in WA were offered the same conditions.

REAL POWER LASTS

Real power doesn't live and die with a single politician in office, and it isn't built up only within a single movement against a single social issue. It is not enough to build power for each issue separately because to fight another issue means to start from scratch.

A workers movement is a strong and lasting power base that can be mobilised in solidarity with all workers and all social issues.

The workers movement we need has to be willing to defy laws that attempt to make it ineffective. But it also has to have enough power to resist any punishments aimed at workers that defy these laws.



In May 1969, union leader Clarrie O'Shea went to jail for refusing to pay fines accrued by the Tramways Union while taking unprotected industrial action.

Unionists were furious and knew this was a huge step back for workers power. About a million workers stopped work, even defying union officials. Trains and trams stopped running, electrical workers shut off power. Media was disrupted and logistics workers restricted deliveries.

These strikes made courts and employers nervous to use anti-union laws. The confidence of workers built up over this period led to the highest wages in Australian history as well as extensions to annual leave.

WORKPLACE ORGANISING

To achieve big things, we must start small. That means beginning with our own workplaces. This is where we talk with our workmates about their issues at work and see if they're willing to build power with us.



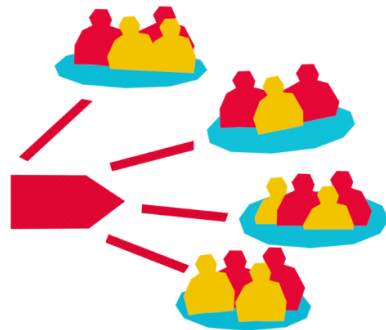
With workplaces standing together, individual workers are much more difficult to single out to punish. Together we start to realise our power to win better wages and conditions at work.

SOLIDARITY ACROSS INDUSTRIES

If many workplaces are organised, they can strike together, increasing their power to win demands beyond better wages and conditions at work. Perhaps to change visa conditions for workers to better protect us from exploitation.

The wider the base of support the stronger our movement is and the harder it is to uproot.

When one group of workers are attacked, all other workers should be ready to stand up to defend them and make bosses think twice next time.



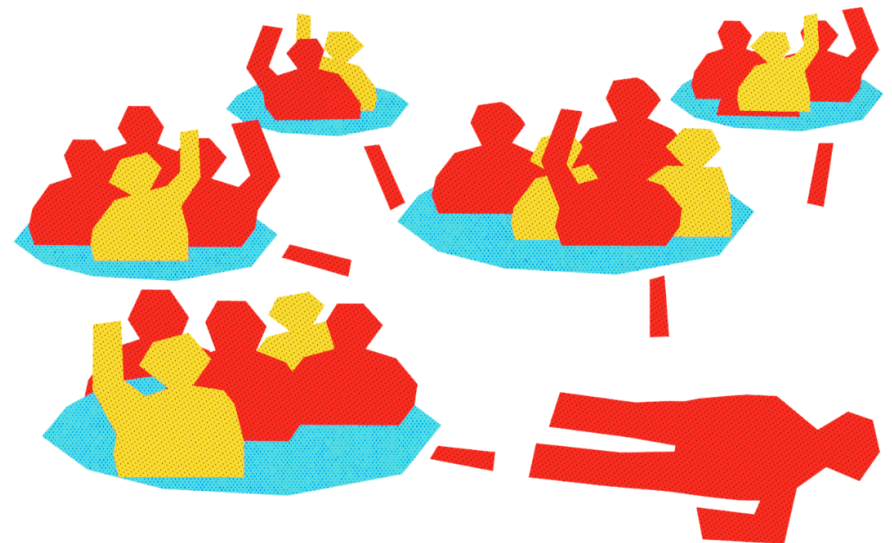
SOLIDARITY WITH ALL STRUGGLES

But we don't have to stop at solidarity with workers issues. The broader the solidarity we are willing to bring to other people suffering any kind of injustice, the more their solidarity can aid our fights when we are attacked.

If we've organised effectively, our movement should be so interconnected, communicative and strong that any group in society that is scapegoated has our unquestioned solidarity.

This is what unionists mean when they say '**Touch one, touch all**'. If you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.

This is the kind of strength and power we need to altogether win a fairer, more just and equal world for everyone. This should be our ultimate goal.



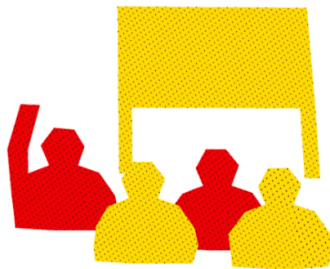
MIGRANTS BUILDING POWER

Since our goal is for migrant workers to be highly organised, we developed a program to prepare migrant workers for taking their first steps into workplace organising and building power as workers.

This program is tailor-made for migrants, informed by experienced organisers and lawyers who have worked with migrant workers.

WORKSHOPS

We have workshops to explore and discuss common forms of migrant exploitation, scams, legal and union rights for migrants, and to share and connect with others that want to seek justice and build power to fight back.



WORKPLACE ORGANISER TRAINING

We also run a 5-part training course so you can learn how to organise your workplace.

This course was adapted from reputable trainings to fit migrant workers organising on visas, with lots of local case studies from Australia.



NETWORK

After going through our trainings, join our network to stay in touch, find support for ongoing workplace organising efforts and get help navigating unions.

Bring your workmates along to our program sessions and stay connected with workers with shared goals.



GET INVOLVED!

To join our program or to help run it for your communities, workmates or language groups, get in touch at:



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