



# Behind the permits: trajectories and vulnerabilities of temporary foreign workers in Quebec

ÉRIQA Issue Briefs: N° 4  
February 2026



## TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS IN QUEBEC: NEW REFORMS AND PERSISTING CHALLENGES

In 2024, a report from the United Nations highlighted that closed work permits in Canada can create “[contemporary forms of slavery](#)”, reinforcing the violation of human rights for temporary foreign workers. Although the [Temporary Foreign Workers Program \(TFWP\)](#) has been an essential part of the Canadian immigration system and labor market [for decades](#), it has also been [criticized for creating a dependency](#) on employers. If any issues arise, such as poor working conditions or even workplace abuse, workers are less likely to complain because losing their jobs could mean losing their status.

While abuse has been mostly documented in the agriculture sector, precarity is present elsewhere: this ÉRIQA’s Issue Brief will explore three industries that face similar issues, and how effectively the federal government has responded to the situation. For instance, [Blain and Castracani \(p. 3-6\)](#) show how in the construction industry, workers are often exposed to work conditions that compromise their safety, health, and integrity, following the same patterns as the “agriculture model”.

In an underexplored sector like the trucking industry, [Baril and Stefaniuk \(p. 7-9\)](#) illustrate that the dependence on close permits results in lowering the minimum wages and creating abusive working conditions, which include illegally demanding that workers refund the costs of their work permits with their daily labour.

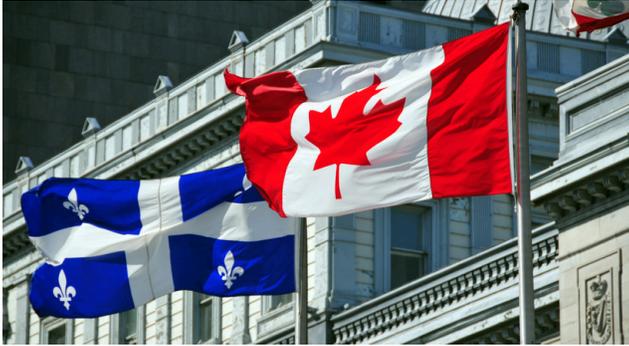
Even “skilled” workers, who benefit from higher wages, face vulnerabilities and precarity due to the [temporary nature](#) of their permits and the dependency they create. [Ngabusi Sapa \(p. 10-12\)](#) shows that even in regulated professions, such as those in the healthcare sector, the barriers persist: the recognition of credentials and diplomas adds to the limitations of their integration, due to their temporary status.

In response to documented vulnerabilities and exploitation across various industries, the federal government created in 2019 an [Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers](#), which seeks to protect foreign workers who risk or have experienced workplace abuse. Nonetheless, [Bélanger \(p. 13-16\)](#) explores how it often fails to address the issues it was designed to resolve, sometimes creating new vulnerabilities.

### Temporary Foreign Workers in Quebec

In Quebec, temporary foreign workers represent an essential part of the labour force, contributing to the provincial economy and service provision. As of January 2025, there were [273,522 temporary foreign workers](#) in the province, representing 44% of the province's total temporary residents. For foreign workers, the provincial government participates in the [authorization process](#) by processing and granting both essential documents: the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) and the [Certificat d'acceptation du Québec \(CAQ\)](#).

With the necessary documentation, temporary foreign workers (TFWs) are then authorized to apply for a closed temporary work permit at the federal level and work in Quebec for a defined period. However, in practice, many renew their permits, [staying in the province for several seasons up to decades](#), yet remain under a temporary status. Like temporary residents under other categories, some TFWs eventually obtain a permanent residency (PR). Nonetheless, [transition to PR is more limited for “lower-skilled” workers](#). Both federal and Quebec PR programs rank profiles based on the level of education required, giving more points to “higher-skilled” applicants. While some specific streams allow workers with technical skills and experience to obtain PR, these are mostly pilot programs or are directed only to in-demand professions.



## Recent contestations of TFWP

At both the provincial and federal levels, the program has been heavily contested, with recent changes aimed at reducing the number of temporary workers with closed permits in Canada and Quebec.

At the federal level, in September 2025, [the Conservative Party announced their proposal to abolish the TFWP](#), and to stop delivering new work permits immediately, framing it as a measure to confront the current high levels of youth unemployment.

In Quebec, at the end of 2024, the province introduced changes to the TFW program, which align with the government priorities on [French language protection and regionalization of migrants](#). However, those measures may create new challenges for TFWs in the province.

The government determined that workers from most areas, with some exceptions, including seasonal agricultural workers, will have to prove an intermediate level of French knowledge to be approved for a CAQ. As a temporary measure, this would apply only in 2028 to workers who have already been residing in the province for 3 years. This may set new barriers for workers, as full-time schedules limit their access to French classes, even those offered by the government free of charge (referred to in Quebec as Francisation courses).

Additionally, the government announced the [freeze of LMIA for low-wage positions in the regions of Montreal and Laval](#), until December 2026. This measure will affect future workers, as well as those already occupying those positions who want to renew their stay.

These new challenges add to the persistent realities faced by temporary foreign workers in Canada, particularly in Quebec. This ERIQA Issue Brief 4 explores lesser-known aspects of this issue by highlighting recent research from several disciplines (anthropology, geography, social work, and political science) on migrant trajectories and the consequences of political changes for migrants' trajectories and lives.

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# WORKING WITH TEMPORARY STATUS IN CONSTRUCTION: TENSIONS AND COURSES OF ACTION

Marie-Jeanne Blain & Lucio Castracani

The use of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) in Quebec's construction industry is a story in the making. Unlike Ontario and British Columbia, which have been using it for some 20 years, the Quebec model—characterized by highly regulation—has long limited this type of recruitment. However, [labour shortages](#) in recent years, combined with government initiatives on temporary immigration, have paved the way for [increased use of the TFWP in the construction sector](#).

Our research was conducted in response to a call from the *Commission de la Construction du Québec* and the *Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI)* to identify the issues and potential actions to support the inclusion of migrants in the sector, which could be characterized as traditionally “homogeneous.” Initially, the research did not address the issue of “temporary” workers, a blind spot in 2020. Our team [quickly identified the issue](#), enabling us to collect data and testimonials. As an invisible and underrepresented population, what are the specific issues that limit their inclusion in this field? How does construction differ from other sectors? What are some possible courses of action?

## Migration policies...

Since 2012, thanks to an agreement with Employment and Social Development Canada, Quebec has been compiling an annual list of occupations eligible for the simplified TFWP process. In 2025, most construction occupations were included on this list, making international recruitment much easier, as companies hiring for these occupations [do not need to provide documentation proving they have made efforts to hire locally](#).

Despite recent reforms aimed at limiting the number of temporary workers, construction remains a priority sector and benefits from exceptional measures: for example, it is not affected by the LMIA freeze for “low wage” positions in the metropolitan area, allowing for the hiring of laborers. The Quebec government also organizes international recruitment missions, including the construction industry.

It should be noted that **international recruitment through the TFWP is just one avenue among many**. Open permits (international students, asylum seekers, spouses), workers without status, and employees in marginal positions also comprise the migrant workforce in construction.



### TFWP: TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAM

A federal program that allows employers to address labor shortages in various sectors across Canada. This program has streams that define additional procedures to be followed depending on, for example, the salary offered or the sector of activity.

## Specific local regulations

Recruiting in the construction sector has one notable difference compared to other professions or national contexts: its regulations. The *Commission de la construction du Québec* (CCQ) issues licenses to practice and ensures compliance with the [Act respecting labour relations, vocational training and workforce management in the construction industry](#).

## First section

Access to trades (apprentice, journeyman, or occupation) is governed by demanding standards that guarantee the quality of work but can be an obstacle for newcomers, particularly those with temporary status. Temporary workers may find themselves faced with procedures that depend on administrative processes and variable or unpredictable delays. This is particularly the case when the procedures require a process based on local standards (local address, translated documents, detailed “pay stubs,” mandatory on-site training, etc.). A worker may also be employed in a construction trade in the “regulated” sector (subject to qualification procedures) or in the unregulated sector (gray or unregulated areas, such as residential renovation or manufacturing trades).

Employers must therefore navigate both the immigration process—which is often lengthy and unpredictable—and the CCQ’s qualification requirements. This situation is unique to regulated employment sectors, such as nursing, and very different from unregulated positions, such as agricultural labourers or restaurant clerks. Upon arrival, many workers must wait several weeks to several months before they can practice their profession, while they obtain the required certifications. Some companies, especially larger ones, work around this unpredictability by temporarily assigning workers to “unregulated” tasks (such as residential renovation and manufacturing) while they wait to obtain their certifications.

The [recent reform of the construction industry](#), which broadens access by “opening up the pool” for underrepresented populations (including people “from diverse backgrounds”), could facilitate the integration of internationally recruited workers. Under the new rules, when the availability of local labour falls below the 30% threshold (up from 5% previously), a company can hire a worker as an apprentice even without prior certification. At the time of writing, almost all trades and regions had “open pools” for the 30% threshold. This measure could reduce unpredictability and facilitate entry into regulated trades.



### LMIA : LABOUR MARKET IMPACT ASSESSMENT

This document authorizes an employer to hire a foreign worker. A favorable assessment indicates that no Canadian or permanent resident candidates are available to fill the position. The LMIA is issued by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Once obtained, the worker can begin the work permit application process.

### What about temporary workers in construction?

[An analysis of accepted LMIA applications for the ten construction occupations that make the most use of the PTET \(2017-2024\)](#) shows growth, particularly after the pandemic. “Trades support workers and labourers” are seeing the most significant increase, both in Quebec and Canada, although in much lower absolute numbers in Quebec (256 people in 2024, compared to 965 in Ontario and 3,600 in British Columbia). This increase could reflect seasonal needs and high demand on construction sites. For other trades, the use of PTET remains relatively stable across Canada but has increased more significantly in Quebec since 2021. In Canada, labourers and carpenters/joiners, followed far behind by painters, are the most common occupations among PTETs, while in Quebec, labourers, roofers, and carpenters are among the top three in 2024, although only a few dozen people separate from the other occupations.

However, the exact number of temporary migrants in the construction industry remains difficult to determine. In addition to PTETs, there are open permit holders, asylum seekers, and international students, not to mention people without regular status. Furthermore, many migrants are employed on the margins of the industry, sometimes on a temporary basis, in unregulated activities (such as residential renovation or construction equipment manufacturing), which makes counting them even more difficult. This situation complicates the analysis but shows that construction is not a “new” sector for migrant workers: what is new is the growth in formal use of the PTET.

## Challenges in the labour market

The testimonials gathered by our research between 2020 and 2023 reveal two main types of challenges for migrants working in this sector: (1) barriers to professional recognition and (2) working conditions and safety.

### 1. Professional recognition

Although the sector has formal recognition mechanisms in place, several systemic barriers limit access for temporary workers:

- high costs of training or skills upgrading;
- difficulty accessing certain recognition pathways (e.g., Recognition of Prior Learning - RPL) without student status;
- administrative requirements (local address, physical presence in Quebec);
- short-term work permits, making it difficult to progress through the ranks of the trades.

### 2. Working Conditions and Safety

Our research identified mechanisms of professional peripherization: migrant workers, even those with significant experience, often find themselves in marginal or temporary roles. These positions are frequently unregulated and offer fewer advantages in terms of scheduling, wages, and unionization.

This concentration in unregulated or "gray zones" can limit access to labor protections and professional advancement. While these tensions are not systematic, they appear to characterize the structure of the labor market, where migrant individuals are sometimes relegated—at least initially—to less "desirable" jobs or positions (due to hours, working conditions, location, seasonality, hazards, etc.). A particularly concerning case documented by several stakeholders (including employers, unions, and workers) is the use of undocumented workers in asbestos removal without adequate protection. This case illustrates how vulnerability linked to legal status can lead to severe occupational health and safety risks.



***“Migrant workers, even those with significant experience, often find themselves in marginal or temporary roles.”***

As documented in other sectors that utilize employer-specific work permits, the dependence on an employer to remain in the country can compel workers to accept tasks they deem inadequate or even dangerous. Conversely, and somewhat paradoxically, Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) may also benefit from more structured union oversight, as their status is formalized and they are more visible to labour organizations than workers with other temporary statuses. Overall, the construction industry offers higher wages to the migrant workforce than other sectors. However, access to these conditions remains restricted by the complexity of the system and the precarious nature of their legal status. Furthermore, in an industry unfortunately characterized by a high rate of workplace accidents and fatalities, the widespread reliance on such vulnerable populations is a serious cause for concern.

### Discussion and Proposed Avenues for Action to Promote Inclusion

Similar to the agricultural sector, construction is partly seasonal, as evidenced by the high number of labourers hired for specific projects. Our research has documented concerns, particularly from union representatives, that the hiring of TFWs (Temporary Foreign Workers) may be following the "agricultural model." This model is characterized by the high vulnerability of migrant workers, a structural dependence on low-skilled labor, temporary permits with no pathway to permanent residency, family separation, and limited career advancement.

## First section

However, construction also requires a skilled workforce in trades with less pronounced seasonality (e.g., carpentry, electrical, Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning). The central question then becomes: do current regulations allow temporary workers to progress toward and within these skilled trades?

*Several areas of concern remain:*

- Accumulated hour requirements to achieve journeyman status;
- Limited access to professional recognition for temporary workers;
- The orientation towards non-regulated positions;
- A potential for increased polarization between "low-wage" and "high-wage" temporary workers.

To address these challenges, the research has identified **six key recommendations** to promote the inclusion of temporary migrant workers in the construction sector:

- **Ensure universal access to professional recognition mechanisms** for all individuals within the territory, regardless of their immigration status.
- **Facilitate professional recognition prior to migration** or for individuals currently awaiting a local address or Social Insurance Number (SIN).
- **Strengthen multilingual communications** (e.g., regarding health and safety) and develop sector-specific French language training (francisation), including workplace learning, specialized terminology, and visual aids.
- **Support temporary status holders already present in Quebec**, specifically through employment assistance programs developed in collaboration with community-based organizations.
- **Expand advocacy services** by providing confidential and accessible advice in multiple languages for all individuals, regardless of their status.
- **Regularize or protect undocumented workers** and those with precarious status working on the margins of the industry, drawing inspiration from successful regularization initiatives such as those in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

### Access the full report:

[Les obstacles et facteurs de succès à l'intégration et au maintien en emploi des personnes immigrantes dans l'industrie de la construction – InterActions](#).

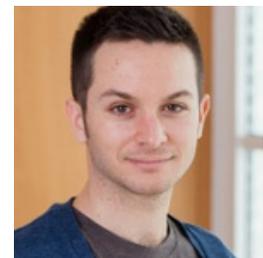
### More resources to explore:

**Blain, Marie-Jeanne (2023).** «L'inclusion des personnes immigrantes dans le secteur de la construction au Québec. Constats de la recherche», *Axe Magazine* [https://axtra.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AXE-Magazine\\_Automne-2023.pdf?utm\\_source=Cyberimpact&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=AXE-Magazine--Immigration-et-emploi#page=22.34](https://axtra.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AXE-Magazine_Automne-2023.pdf?utm_source=Cyberimpact&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AXE-Magazine--Immigration-et-emploi#page=22.34)

**Castracani, Lucio (2025).** «Le Programme des travailleurs étrangers temporaires au Québec. Les leçons du secteur agricole pour l'industrie de la construction.» *Possibles*, volume 49, 1, Spring 2025, p.74–82. <https://doi.org/10.62212/revuepossibles.v49i1.835>



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## MISHANDLING OF THE TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAM IN THE CANADIAN TRUCKING INDUSTRY

Émile Baril & Mariana Stefaniuk

Canada's long-haul trucking industry is currently undergoing significant changes. Economic uncertainty, the Trump administration's tariff policies, and inflation have slowed down the industry in recent years. A [slow economic recovery](#) is underway, with the OECD forecasting that growth will slow from 1.5% in 2024 to around 1% by 2026. Despite these trends, [demand for temporary foreign workers in trucking remains high](#). Historically, labor shortages have prompted employers to turn to the TFWP during periods of high demand for drivers. However, to offset income losses related to the economic slowdown, some transportation companies are abusing the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) to gain a competitive advantage. This means that they are using the program as a strategy to reduce their costs and gain a more favorable position than their competitors—often at the expense of migrants, who are forced to accept lower wages and more difficult working conditions than permanent residents. However, it should also be noted that several trucking companies operate in regions with a real labor shortage and depend on TFWP not as a competitive advantage, but for their [day-to-day operations](#).

***“Why are PTET workers continuing to grow in the trucking industry even though IRCC is removing trucking from the Express Entry program??”***

The [deregulation of the Canadian trucking industry](#) from 1980 to the present has fundamentally transformed its operational structure and continues to influence work practices today. Intended to stimulate competition, these policies aim to increase productivity and reduce costs and barriers for shippers. However, several truckers within the TFWP have sounded the alarm about [wage theft and unsafe working conditions](#).

This raises important questions: Why do TFWP workers continue to grow in the trucking industry? Is the TFWP being used as a competitive advantage in this industry, and if so, what are the consequences for truckers' working conditions?

### Working conditions and immigration requirements for TFWP truck drivers

An employer wishing to recruit under the TFWP must complete a “labor market impact assessment” (LMIA) form. The [LMIA, which costs \\$1,000](#), is a government authorization that allows a Canadian employer to hire a temporary foreign worker when no Canadian workers are available for the position. Despite this being illegal, some trucking companies take advantage of the situation to charge workers hoping to immigrate through this opportunity, [additional costs of up to \\$50,000](#). Many temporary foreign workers claim that they were sold a “Canadian dream.” **Originally designed to address labor shortages and ensure priority for Canadian workers, this system leaves many temporary foreign workers vulnerable to abuse.** In the trucking industry, high levels of competition between companies have led some to exploit these vulnerabilities and use the TFWP as a competitive advantage.



The result is a race to the bottom in terms of wages and working conditions for foreign workers. For example, as several truckers mentioned, in addition to sometimes charging drivers fees for LMIA support, the TFWP traps them in abusive working conditions with no possibility of leaving the company. Some truckers agree to work to repay these fees, under [difficult conditions](#) with long hours on the road, low wages, and trucks in poor condition. Another trucker we met described this arrangement as modern-day servitude. To repay these debts, workers are subject to exorbitant fees charged by their employers, in addition to a promise of immigration.

Nationally, the misuse of the TFWP has weakened the integrity of the labor market by lowering compensation and safety standards for all truck drivers. Some companies can offer transportation services at lower costs because many truckers with precarious immigration status are forced to drive at rates below the usual averages. The pay-per-mile system allows employers to lower wages by offering immigrant drivers, for example, \$0.10/km below the average wage. Industry stakeholders have expressed concerns that [employers are increasingly recruiting underqualified drivers](#) to operate trucks in poor condition, posing a serious threat to road safety. We have even seen [many truckers in the TFWP register as Driver Inc.](#), an illegal practice in which drivers register as businesses to avoid taxes. In a previous article, we proposed [four possible actions for the government](#) to take in response to the Driver Inc. phenomenon. In this section, we analyze possible solutions to abuses in the TFWP.

**“Do you know anyone who got their wage stolen?**

**-Yes, a lot of guys. They do this kind of stuff to the migrants, work permit guys who don't have permanent status. The guys are vulnerable.”**

## Provincial and federal (in)action

In 2024, Minister Boissonnault, responsible for employment and workforce development at the federal level, introduced [new measures to the TFWP](#) to combat abuse and fraud. Stricter regulations on employer eligibility, inspections in high-risk areas, and a potential increase in LMIA fees were proposed. The Government of Canada also partnered with the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) to raise public awareness through initiatives such as educating people in India about [the rules before coming to Canada](#). However, without targeted reform in sectors such as trucking, these efforts may not be enough to protect vulnerable workers and restore the integrity of the system.

Although efforts are being made to address this issue, they remain insufficient to ensure lasting improvements in working conditions. Furthermore, Trucking HR Canada points out that, although the unemployment rate for truck drivers remained stable in 2025, the total number of [unemployed drivers continued to increase](#) compared to 2024. This suggests a structural dependence on the TFWP and a lack of incentives to improve national training, fair wages, and working conditions.



The Carney government, elected in the spring of 2025, launched an [interdepartmental regulatory review](#) to improve efficiency, modernize regulations, and unlock Canada's full economic potential. It is implied that too many regulations are currently holding the country back, including interprovincial freight transportation. This reform must also address gaps in the LMIA system and improve labor protections in sectors such as trucking.

## Second section

However, as numerous field investigations have found, government inaction in the face of delinquency by trucking companies that hire through the TFWP may render regulatory modernization obsolete. If, as many suspect, [TFWP violations](#) are only the tip of the iceberg in the trucking industry, better enforcement of existing regulations must accompany an interdepartmental reform.

**For more details:**

Stefaniuk, M. et Baril, E. (2025). Four ways Ottawa can throttle 'Driver Inc.'  
<https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2025/08/driver-inc-trucker-exploitation/>

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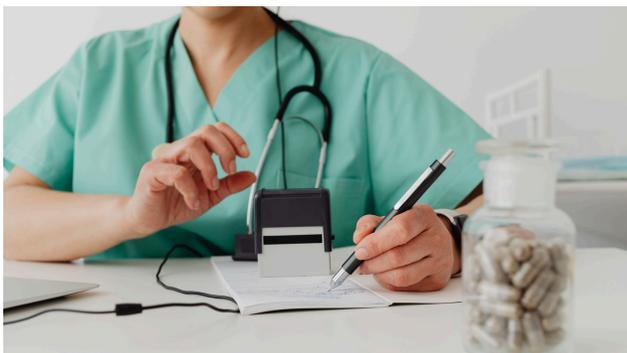


## TEMPORARY WORKERS IN THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR: AN URGENT RESPONSE, A LASTING UNEASE

Lucie Ngabusi Sapa

Quebec is facing a labor shortage in the healthcare sector that is rooted in long-standing structural dynamics. The increasing demand for care, linked notably to an aging population, as well as massive retirements, weakened the system long before the pandemic. The [debates surrounding the Dubé reform](#) illustrate these persistent tensions, both in terms of work organization and employment conditions within the public network.

In this context, the use of temporary foreign workers has emerged as a rapid response to ensure service continuity, particularly in orderly positions (PABs, for its initials in French). This trend, observed in Quebec, is also part of a broader dynamic [across Canada](#). While these workers now play a central role in the daily operation of the healthcare system, they remain confined to temporary migratory and professional statuses.



This situation highlights a structural paradox within the Quebec healthcare system: long-term needs are being met by a workforce whose presence is, by definition, transitory. How can a system rely so consistently on a temporary workforce to address needs that are, themselves, permanent? The reflection proposed in this text is built upon this very tension.

### Temporary workers: filling the gap, bearing the burden of precariousness

The arrival of temporary migrant workers in healthcare settings primarily responds to an urgent labour shortage. Many have previous professional experience, sometimes with health training acquired abroad, and contribute significantly to the functioning of institutions. The implementation of accelerated training programs to recruit large numbers of PABs during the pandemic, particularly in residential and long-term care centers (CHSLDs), illustrates this search for quick solutions to fill vacant positions.

However, this organizational response comes with significant constraints for those affected. Whether tied to a specific employer or subject to conditions that restrict professional mobility, this status severely limits access to employment and career paths. In the health sector, the use of employment agencies and independent workers is now regulated by the [Act to limit the use of employment agencies and independent workers in the health and social services sector](#) and by the [Regulation respecting personnel placement agencies and recruitment agencies for temporary foreign workers](#). These measures aim to regulate recruitment practices, while confirming the existence of a separate legal framework for this workforce.

In this context, dependence on certain employers or intermediaries can be accentuated, particularly when the right to work is closely linked to a specific organization. In situations of scarcity, this configuration sometimes limits the ability to change jobs or report difficult working conditions, even when rights are known.

***“Temporary status creates a space where appreciation for work and institutional invisibility coexist.”***

## Third section

This precariousness is therefore not solely a matter of individual situations but is part of institutional mechanisms designed to meet structural needs. It influences career choices, working relationships, and the room for maneuver in situations deemed unfair.

These constraints are also part of the institutional mechanisms put in place to respond to labor shortages. The [pilot project](#) coordinated in Quebec City by the community organization [Libre Emploi](#), which aims to integrate asylum seekers into the health and social services network, is an illustration of this. Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and set to continue until 2023, this initiative aimed to respond quickly to staffing needs by facilitating asylum seekers' access to jobs in the network, particularly as PABs.

While it enabled certain individuals to work legally and contribute to maintaining services, this project was part of a temporary administrative and statutory framework. Eligibility requirements, time constraints, and the lack of clear prospects for stabilization of limited opportunities for sustainable integration, both in terms of migration and employment. The findings from this pilot project show that, despite the important role these workers play, the mechanisms put in place still struggle to consistently support long-term socio-professional integration.

Thus, despite their daily commitment and their indispensable role in the network, the work of asylum seekers integrated through these mechanisms does not always translate into lasting social, organizational, or legal recognition.

### Demanding working conditions that highlight broader issues

Healthcare settings are characterized by high physical and emotional demands, as well as a pace of work that is often difficult to sustain. For temporary migrant workers, these professional constraints are compounded by the challenges of migration, including administrative uncertainty, family separation, and financial responsibilities.

Recent work on temporary migrant PABs, notably that of Hyppolite and colleagues (2025), shows that these individuals frequently work in contexts marked by high work pressure, high expectations regarding availability, and unstable employment conditions.

These conditions contribute to fragile career paths and limited staff retention, both among migrant workers and the sector's workforce. Although rapid training and accelerated entry into employment meet immediate needs, [they are not enough to compensate](#) for the heavy workload, the low status of certain jobs, and the limited prospects for stability or advancement.

In this context, persistent difficulties in attracting and retaining staff contribute to maintaining a structural dependence on temporary solutions, including the use of temporary migrant workers. Thus, working conditions are not only an individual or organizational issue but also a key factor in reproducing a model in which the permanent needs of the healthcare system are met through transitional measures.



### Towards consistency between needs, fairness, and recognition

Temporary workers make an indispensable contribution to maintaining healthcare in Quebec. However, fully recognizing their role requires going beyond emergency responses. Relying on temporary workers in the long term to meet permanent needs raises major issues of fairness, consistency in public policy, and recognition of work.

Improving employment conditions, facilitating the stabilization of migration, and promoting the healthcare professions appear to be essential levers for moving away from a logic of transitional solutions. Responding to labor shortages requires sustainable solutions that truly consider the experiences and aspirations of those who support the most vulnerable people daily.



**More resources to explore:**

**Blain, M.-J., Haydary, M., Lechaume, A., Nakache, D., Sanhueza Morales, T., Subayi, M., & Martin Heredia, D. (2025).** Expériences d'accès aux services et à l'accompagnement juridiques de personnes migrantes à statut précaire et sans statut au Québec. Rapport de recherche.

**Lu, Y., & Hou, F. (2025).** Travailleurs étrangers temporaires dans le secteur des soins de santé : caractéristiques, transition vers la résidence permanente et maintien en emploi dans l'industrie. Rapports économiques et sociaux, Statistique Canada. [En ligne] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2025008/article/00002-fra.htm>

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Report by ÉRIQA members:

Hyppolite, S.-R., Philibert, L., Bélanger, D., Tapia, C. J., Lechaume, A., & Ngabusi Sapa, L. (2025). **Entre louanges et abus. Les personnes préposées aux bénéficiaires migrantes temporaires : entre louanges et abus. Pratiques de recrutement, conditions d'emploi et de travail de personnes migrantes temporaires œuvrant comme préposées aux bénéficiaires dans la région de la Capitale-Nationale.** Report from the Health sector of the PARTEMP project led by Danièle Bélanger. <https://dynamiques-migratoires.chaire.ulaval.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Rapport-Partemp-04-sante-S-RH-FINAL-web.pdf>

## EMERGENCY EXIT OR CUL-DE-SAC? AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACTS OF THE OPEN WORK PERMIT FOR VULNERABLE WORKERS IN CANADA

Danièle Bélanger (with Myriam Ouellet, Chenour Oechslin, Geneviève Fournier, Guillermo Candiz, Amanda Aziz, Véronique Tessier)

For several years, Canada has been welcoming a growing number of temporary foreign workers (TFWs), many of whom are tied to an employer through a closed work permit. This system, intended to meet economic needs, creates conditions conducive to vulnerability and exploitation. In 2019, the federal government introduced the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers (VWOWP), presented as a protective measure for people who are victims of violence or at risk of violence in their workplace. This program was intended to offer an “escape route” for workers caught in abusive situations. **However, what is the reality?**

Our [research](#), based on 47 interviews conducted in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia in 2024, explored the impacts of this program on the migratory, professional, and personal journeys of workers who attempted to take advantage of it. This contribution shows why, **while the VWOWP represents an important recognition of the abuses associated with closed permits, it remains a partial and fragile solution.**

### Context and challenges

In Canada, temporary immigration now exceeds permanent immigration. In the first quarter of 2024, more than [1.7 million people](#) held work permits, of which a significant proportion were closed permits. This type of permit, which ties the worker to a specific employer, drastically limits job mobility and the ability to report abuse. Workers fear losing their legal status, having their permits not renewed, or even being deported. This “deportability” makes migrant workers docile and exploitable. The risks are amplified by factors such as geographic isolation, dependence on employer-provided housing, language barriers, and lack of knowledge of their rights.

Faced with growing criticism, the government introduced mitigation measures, including the VWOWP. This permit, valid for up to 12 months, allows workers who are victims of violence to leave their employer and look for another job. In theory, this is a major step forward. In practice, **our analysis has revealed profound contradictions between the program's objectives and its actual effects.**



### Major abuses and a delayed decision

Participants' accounts show that the decision to leave an abusive employer is the result of accumulated violence: **dangerous working conditions, excessive hours, unpaid wages, threats, psychological harassment, unsanitary housing, obstacles to accessing healthcare, and administrative fraud.** These abuses are part of an asymmetrical power relationship in which the employer, who holds the closed permit, exercises almost total control over the worker's life.

Fear of reprisals, economic dependence, and ignorance of their rights explain why workers endure these abuses for months or even years. Many are in debt and fear they will not be able to repay their loans if they lose their jobs. Others are unaware of the VWOWP or mistakenly believe that they have no recourse. This lack of awareness is perpetuated by employers and recruiters who spread misinformation to maintain their control.

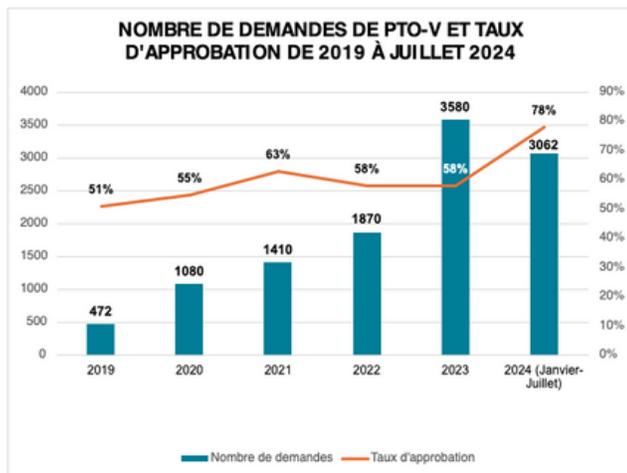


Figure 1: “Number of PTOTV applications and approval rates from 2019 to July 2024”. Produced by the authors.

### Lack of familiarity and accessibility to the program

One of the major findings of this research is the lack of awareness about the VWOWP program. Most participants discovered the program by chance, often through a community organization they encountered after leaving their job. For some, this discovery came too late, after their closed permit had expired, rendering them ineligible.

Even when they are familiar with the program, workers face considerable obstacles. The application process, which appears simple on the surface, requires administrative and legal expertise. Applicants must demonstrate, through “objective and credible” evidence, that they have suffered or are at risk of suffering violence. But how can one provide evidence of abuse when they had to flee abruptly and when the abuse is psychological? This requirement ignores the reality of workers, for whom documenting violence can be dangerous and unfeasible.

**“But how can one provide evidence of abuse when they had to flee abruptly and when the abuse is psychological?”**

The testimonies also reveal inconsistencies in the assessment of applications. Some refusals appear to be linked to a restrictive interpretation of the criteria, prioritizing cases of physical violence over other forms of abuse. [The refusal rate is around 50%](#), which discourages many workers from applying.

**“This situation illustrates a paradox: a program intended to protect the most vulnerable exposes them to new forms of exploitation.”**

### Dependence on third parties and increased risks

Given the complexity of the process, most workers turned to third parties to prepare their applications: community organizations, unions, and immigration consultants. While some received competent assistance, others fell victim to fraud. Dishonest consultants charged exorbitant fees to submit incomplete applications, exacerbating the workers' financial insecurity. This situation illustrates a paradox: a program intended to protect the most vulnerable exposes them to new forms of exploitation.

### After the application: a path fraught with obstacles

Obtaining the VWOWP does not mark the end of the difficulties. Two periods of uncertainty structure the post-application process: (1) waiting for the response and (2) the period following the granting of the permit.

During the wait, which can last from one to five months, workers deprived of income exhaust their savings, go into debt, or turn to undeclared work to survive. Those who were housed by their employer find themselves homeless and dependent on community organizations or their personal network. Some sleep in emergency shelters in precarious conditions, or even on the street.

Once the VWOWP is obtained, precariousness persists. Finding a job is difficult: a lack of trust from employers, a lack of a network, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with job search tools. The jobs that are available are often temporary, underpaid, and low-skilled, which compromises plans for permanent residence. The short duration of the VWOWP adds to the pressure: workers must quickly find an employer willing to undertake an LMIA process to obtain a new closed permit. This return to a closed permit is experienced as a “prison” by many workers, traumatized by their past experiences.

### Multiple and persistent vulnerabilities

Beyond employment and housing issues, psychological distress is omnipresent. Workers must relive their traumas to prove abuse, then face uncertainty about their immigration status and future. Some report suicidal thoughts. A few choose to return to their country of origin to preserve their mental health, despite their debts and the failure of their migration project.

These trajectories reveal a cycle of abuse and precariousness that the VWOWP, far from breaking, seems to prolong. The program offers theoretical freedom, but without institutional support for professional reintegration, housing, and mental health, this freedom remains an illusion.



### Recommendations from participants in our research

- Systematically **inform migrant workers upon their arrival in Canada** about their rights and the VWOWP through multilingual sessions and regular campaigns.
- **Facilitate access to the program:** extend the duration of the VWOWP, make it renewable, reduce processing times, ease the burden of proof, and establish a mechanism for rapid review of refusals.
- **Guarantee social rights:** access to health insurance, unemployment insurance, and social assistance for victims of violence upon request, while their application is pending, and once their permit has been granted.
- **Provide essential services:** psychological support, housing assistance, and job search assistance.
- **Strengthen government accountability:** frequent and unannounced inspections, systematic sanctions against employers who violate the law, and follow-up on complaints. Ensure follow-up for individuals who have left their employer and had their open permit application denied.
- **Support community organizations:** increased funding for legal, administrative, and residential support.
- **Address the cause:** abolish closed permits and grant open permits upon arrival to break the power dynamic that enables exploitation.

### Conclusion

The VWOWP represents an important acknowledgment of the abuses associated with closed permits, but it remains a partial and fragile solution. In the absence of structural reforms, it merely shifts workers' vulnerability without reducing it. To ensure that the “emergency exit” promised by the program does not become a cul-de-sac, Canadian migration policies must be thoroughly rethought. This means guaranteeing job mobility, ensuring real access to social rights, and recognizing the essential contribution of migrant workers to the Canadian economy and society.

If temporary worker programs are to continue, it is important to develop a **comprehensive protection regime** that includes measures to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights and labor of all workers, without them having to fear reprisals, such as non-renewal (for seasonal workers) or dismissal. Without these changes, Canada will continue to benefit from an indispensable workforce, but at the cost of injustice, abuse, and disregard for fundamental and labor rights.

### The PARTEMP Project: Partnership for Temporary Migrant Workers

Between 2020 and 2025, a team of researchers and community organizations in the greater Quebec City area examined the situation of temporary workers in four employment sectors: manufacturing, hospitality and catering, health care, and agriculture. The research presented in this article is part of this project. Research reports on each of these employment sectors are available online. Adèle Garnier, a member of ÉRIQA, was a co-researcher on the project. Several students contributed to the work of this SSHRC-funded partnership project.

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#### Access the full report:

[Bélanger, D., Ouellet, M., Oechslin, C., Fournier, C., Candiz, C., Aziz, A., & Tessier, V. \(nov. 2024\). Sortie de secours ou cul-de-sac? Rapport de la chaire de recherche du Canada sur les dynamiques migratoires mondiales. ISBN 978-2-925526-04-9](#)

#### More ressources to explore:

Aziz, A. (2022). A promise of protection ? An assessment of IRDD decision-making under the Vulnerable Worker Open Work Permit program, . Migrant worker center et The Law Foundation of British Columbia. <https://mwcbbc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/A-Promise-of-Protection-An-assessment-of-IRCC-decision-making-under-the-VWOWP-program.pdf>

Depatie-Pelletier, E., Deegan, H., & Berze, K. (2022). Band-Aid on a Bullet Wound—Canada’s Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers Policy. *Laws*, 11(3), 36. <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-471X/11/3/36>

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Nakache, D., Purkey, A., Anderson, M., Tanotra, R., Soennecken, D., Sagay, C., Hajjar, O., Yousuf, B., & Crépeau, F. (2022). Migrant Vulnerability in the Canadian Protection System: The View of Migrants, Public Servants and on-the ground Practitioners. *VULNER Research Report 2*. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.7330123>

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**ÉRIQA**. (2026). *Behind the permits: trajectories and vulnerabilities of temporary foreign workers in Quebec*. ERIQA Issue Briefs: N° 4. February 2026.

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[L'Équipe de recherche sur l'immigration au Québec et ailleurs \(ÉRIQA\)](#) is an inter-university research team composed of 11 researchers, funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ). ERIQA promotes structured dialogue between global realities and those of Quebec through comparative analyses and case studies that focus on migrant policies and experiences.