

Exploitation of migrant labour in the UK Seasonal Agriculture Workers' Scheme

A new case of migrant labour exploitation in the UK agricultural sector has been brought to our attention by The Guardian in recent weeks. UK agricultural production relies heavily upon migrant labour. It is essential that all workers, no matter their country of origin, are protected by UK employment law and are not subject to recruitment fees or other exploitative practices.

This is not the first report of migrant labour exploitation in UK agriculture this year. Instances of the use of recruitment fees by agricultural employers have affected workers coming from [Nepal](#) and Indonesia in 2022.

Historically, most migrant workers in UK agriculture have come from the European Union or neighbouring countries. The current Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), established by the UK Government, has primarily recruited workers from non-EU countries. In 2021 most workers came from Ukraine. However, the current war in Ukraine has meant a substantial reduction in Ukrainian agricultural labour. As a result, recruitment agencies are seeking workers from further afield with Central and East Asia featuring prominently. The [UK Anti-slavery Commissioner](#) has highlighted the increased risk of exploitation and unethical recruitment for migrant workers travelling longer distances. As new migratory paths take hold, these uncharted waters, left unmonitored or without the appropriate support structures, can make exploitation of migrant workers all too common.

Workers in UK agriculture are vulnerable due to the prevalent use of third-party recruitment agencies and a historically informal work force. This combined with risks associated with temporary migration visas, and with a lack of due diligence in workers' countries of origin, are likely to exacerbate the situation. Recent reports of migrant labour exploitation in this sector suggests systemic issues within UK's employment scheme may be at play.

No one coming to the UK to work on the SAWS scheme or otherwise, should be expected to pay recruitment fees or any other costs that in effect mean that they are exploited. It is important that any workers exploited in this way are reimbursed in full and any businesses who have benefited from this exploitation are involved in remediation.

ETI condemns the use of recruitment fees and encourages business and government to conduct the appropriate due diligence to ensure these exploitative practices have no place in their supply chain. Where risks of exploitative recruitment fees are present, government and business should mitigate these and remediate any adverse impacts to workers that occur.

There are existing protocols such as the [Dhaka Principles](#) that have been developed with business to prevent this sort of exploitation. These should be adopted and promoted by the UK Government.

As workers are recruited from further afield, including areas with well documented histories of migrant labour exploitation, it is important that the Government and all who work with this scheme undertake greater due diligence to ensure that UK agriculture offers secure, decent, safe, and fair employment to migrant workers.

“No one coming to the UK to work should be expected to pay recruitment fees or any other costs that in effect mean that they are exploited. The government and those businesses involved should adopt and implement the Dhaka Principles on migrant workers to eliminate these practices”

Peter McAllister, Executive Director, ETI