

**INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY  
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND  
REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES**

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I thank the Modern Slavery Committee for conducting the inquiry into Modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales.

In order to comply with the requirements of my second Working Holiday visa (subclass 417) in Australia, I was required to seek appropriate specified regional work for at least three months, and this work was to be completed while on the first Working Holiday visa.

While seeking and conducting this work, I experienced what I consider to be modern slavery, particularly in relation to the forced labor I endured.

I have developed this submission so that my experiences can be recorded, and also my identity, the geographic location, my employers, and particularly importantly, my fellow workers do not face incrimination.

I would appreciate the opportunity for the NSW Modern Slavery Committee to consider my submission in its deliberations related to its current inquiry into Modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales.

My submission has been developed in relation to my direct experience of forced labor while working as a backpacker at a blueberry farm near Coff's Harbour. This submission focuses on my time working on a blueberry farm in late 2024/early 2025. During this time, I believe that I was subject to deceptive recruitment, lived in an unhygienic, cramped accommodation with no cooling systems, was required to work for 10-11 hours a day, 7 days a week, and was chronically underpaid (I received just \$121 a week).

Signs of forced labor:

### **1. Abuse of vulnerability**

- I observed that workers at the farm were primarily non-native English speakers, making them more susceptible to exploitation due to language barriers and potential visa concerns.
- I was hired based on nothing more than my profile picture, and I believe this is because, based on my name, the employer thought that I did not

speak English. I've heard that this targeting is typical of other workers who mostly had only a rudimentary understanding of English. This lack of English proficiency was used as a tool to foster miscommunication and confusion and to render us as an easier target for exploitation.

- Workers were always concerned that if they made any complaints about the accommodation, work conditions, treatment, or many other matters, our visas could be cancelled, and we would/could be sent to detention.
- Most of the other workers I met had limited financial capacity to leave their employment – even for train tickets or accommodation elsewhere. I financially assisted several people who were "bleeding money" due to their inability to secure more income than they were paying out in accommodation and mandatory transport fees to be taken to worksites, indicating severe financial vulnerability among the workers.
- I saw our employers targeting migrant workers, assuming they would be easier to exploit.
- I was concerned for the safety and well-being of my fellow employees, especially those with limited English proficiency and financial insecurity.

## **2. Deception**

- The job advertisement misrepresented the working hours (advertised as 6-8 hours per day, five days per week) when we were regularly made to work 10-11 hours per day, seven days per week.
- The job was advertised online as being with a "premium employer" on a backpacker job board, which turned out to be entirely misleading.
- Upon arrival I was told I would be paid on a piece-rate and received significantly less than minimum wage, which I then had to pay compulsory deductions with.
- I was initially told I could make \$200-300 a day, which was not the reality. It was difficult to make this in one week despite working more than 40 hours, depending on picking speed.
- The accommodation costs and transportation fees that were to be deducted from my wages were not clearly stated in the initial advertisement.
- I was not informed about additional costs, such as transport fees, until my arrival and there was no alternative but to endure them.

## **3. Restriction of movement**

- The accommodation was located in a remote area from amenities, which was a ten-minute drive from the nearest town, making it difficult for workers to leave without a car.
- Transportation was controlled by the manager, and workers had to request access to vehicles and state their destination.
- It took a coworker two hours to get to town and back when walking.
- The work locations were in very remote areas, with some farms provided as coordinates rather than addresses, and once there, workers had no opportunity to leave except in the management-controlled transport.

#### **4. Isolation**

- The remote location of the accommodation and the control over transportation isolated all of us workers from not only the town but from other workers in different accommodations.
- The language barrier faced by many workers further contributed to our isolation.
- The lack of English fluency among the managers created communication barriers, increased the workers' sense of isolation, and promoted a lack of clear communication. This was especially evident as the farmers spoke Hindi while the managers spoke Mandarin, leading to a severe lack of communication, as neither was fluent in English.

#### **5. Physical and sexual violence**

- While no direct physical or sexual violence was witnessed, there were rumors of retaliation against workers who reported issues, including stories of people going missing, which created a chilling effect in raising complaints.
- A coworker went missing, and while it was deemed not to be "foul play" by police, the circumstances were suspicious, and to my knowledge, his whereabouts were never discovered. His father arrived from overseas to collect his belongings when he could not be found.

#### **6. Intimidation and threats**

- I was fired for raising concerns about the misrepresented working hours and encouraging other workers to leave work after eight hours working in the fields.
- I was told that farmers had complained about me, as I had made them feel uncomfortable because I was raising these questions.
- The rumors of retaliation against workers who reported issues, including reports of people going missing and a worker who did go missing and was

not, to my knowledge, ever found, created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

- One farmer was known for retaliating against workers, often verbally abusing them by saying that they were too stupid to pick berries due to their lack of English proficiency.

## **7. Retention of identity documents**

- This did not occur to me, but I do not know if this occurred to the other workers.

## **8. Withholding of wages**

- I was paid significantly less than the promised minimum wage, and even less after deductions for accommodation and transport.
- Pay slips did not include details of hours worked or days worked, which meant we workers had no way of proving we had worked the required timeframe as stipulated by our visa.
- The \$300 deposit that was demanded of me upon arrival was never returned (and not requested prior to arrival). Nor did most of the other workers.
- I was owed money for the work I did, based on the piece rate, but I did not receive my final pay.

## **9. Debt bondage**

- The high accommodation and transport costs, combined with low wages, created a cycle of debt for the workers, making it difficult for them to leave.
- I assisted others who were "bleeding money," suggesting they were trapped by financial constraints.
- The \$300 deposit required upon arrival, which was not mentioned in the ad, further contributes to potential debt bondage.

## **10. Abusive working and living conditions**

- The accommodation, consisting of two houses, was not fit for habitation. It was unhygienic, cramped, and infested with cockroaches.
- There was no cooling system in the second house which was attached to the main house, despite the severe summer heat.
- The bathroom in one of the houses had a broken door, trapping people inside. It could only be opened from the outside when locked.

- The flyscreens on all windows had holes in them, allowing insects to infest the property.
- Access to one working bathroom was limited and shared between up to twelve people.
- Workers were expected to work long hours without adequate breaks, including for lunch or bathroom use.
- Only one of the many farms we worked on had a porta-potty, and that was a 20-minute walk away.
- Some farms sprayed adjacent rows while workers were picking, risking our health.
- Drinks were rarely provided, and when they were, workers were expected to work even longer hours.
- Most days were worked under intense UV and high temperatures, which management did not provide proper sun cream, safety equipment or shade to deal with.
- One accommodation had a leaking air conditioning unit, and another had no air conditioning.
- The beds in one accommodation were described as children's bunk beds, and there were four people to a room.
- The beds were typical bed and base and split into two to sleep four people. People slept on a bed base used as a mattress.

## **11. Excessive overtime**

- Workers were regularly working 10-12+ hours a day, seven days a week, far exceeding the advertised 6-8 hours.
- Workers were required to stay until the farmer was satisfied or the designated berry bushes were picked, regardless of the time.

I provide this information as examples of my experience of enduring what could be considered forced labor in NSW as a temporary Migrant Worker.

It is my view that most people in New South Wales who eat this local fruit and vegetables grown here should understand before they buy it that it could have been produced through what is forced labor or slavery. If people were aware of this, I am not sure they would even consider buying it.