# Transcript – [How we treat migrant workers who put food on our tables](https://theconversation.com/how-we-treat-migrant-workers-who-put-food-on-our-tables-dont-call-me-resilient-ep-4-transcript-154630) (13.49 – 19.20mins)

## MSL:

We couldn’t feed Canadians without the labour of migrant workers. Many people think we’re talking about family farms with a few chickens and pigs and cows and three generations of farmers working hard out in the sun. That’s not the picture of industrial agriculture or factory farming that’s underway in Canada that produces most of the food that we eat. We’re looking at greenhouses that are 10 football fields in length. These are massive industrial operations and there are hundreds of workers working in these greenhouse operations. And so when we’re talking about the fact that we have an industry that requires a flexible workforce that is controllable and that is factored into the exponential profit that they realize year after year, because they know that the money, the expense spent on labour is manufactured as low. There have been billions of profits made through this industry on the backs of migrant workers who are unfree. They can’t change their employer, they can’t change their job site. And most workers are in Canada without a pathway to citizenship, without a pathway to permanent residency, without a pathway to status. So most workers are here in Canada working and paying taxes, paying into CPP, Canada pension plans, paying into EI, the employment insurance plan. They’re paying basic consumer taxes with everything they purchase. So they’re paying into Canada’s tax system and yet they have no pathway, virtually no pathway to citizenship.

## VS:

Why do you think that pathway is blocked? What do you think that is about?

## MSL:

You know, the restricted pathways to citizenship are designed. They’re designed to keep Canada looking the way it does and primarily keeping …. The majority of workers who come into Canada under the migrant worker program come from the Global South. Most of the workers are racialized workers, most workers come to do the jobs most Canadians don’t want to do. The 3D jobs: dirty, difficult and dangerous.

You could say that the picture of Canada as this rosy postcard of Canada as a country that invites diversity from people all over the world. And the doorways are open and the opportunity’s here - knock and we’ll invite you in. Well, the reality we know is that the front doors to Canada are blocked. There are long waiting lists and increasingly there are more and more onerous restrictions on immigration pathways to Canada. The back door is wide open for temporary migrant workers to do the essential work that industries need, but that back door ensures that you will remain permanently non-status. So you’re not here under a temporary foreign worker program as a temporary worker because your labour is only needed on a temporary basis.

## VS:

But that temporary basis could last for years and years, right? It’s not like — that person could actually be working here for decades.

## MSL:

Right, so the label of temporary is constructed. Migrant workers are not here on a temporary basis. The labour of migrant workers is required constantly. There is a chronic labour shortage in very specific industries. And instead of addressing the immigration backlog in the front doors, our federal government would prefer to use the migrant worker program as a convenient back door entry that addresses industry needs, ensures industry profits, but doesn’t address the critical labour shortage.

## VS:

When you talk about this being like a very challenging issue, how much of these attitudes and policies have to do with race, the fact that these are Black and brown bodies doing the work and the labour?

## MSL:

Oh, yes, this is a racist program, undoubtedly. Without a doubt. How is this program designed? I think we have to recognize the history of a program like this began with the settlement of Canada. The colonial history of Canada is very much aligned to and part of the creation of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. So, back from the 1800s, when Canada had to build railroads to connect towns dotted across the landscape, the people that they needed to build the railroads, the labour that was required, Canada set up a migrant worker program to bring in Chinese workers to do the work on the railways, Chinese workers who would do the work for less pay than white workers and do the most dangerous tracts of work using dynamite in the Rockies, for example. So the programs that were set up in the 1800s to bring Chinese workers in were designed to extract labour, but also to deter settlement. They were allowed on a certain period of time and then they were expected to go, never expected to settle.