



SWP workers in Victoria (J. Naupa)

# The growing problem of absconding SWP workers

By Rochelle Bailey

As reported in the past couple of months, Australia is experiencing a shortage of seasonal workers. [Estimates of a 26,000 workforce shortfall](#) have been made. The shortage is leading to a situation where some farmers and/or labour hire contractors, who are not Approved Employers in Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), are luring SWP workers to leave their current employer and

work for them.

There is no doubt that since COVID-19 the number of absconders from the SWP has increased. Most SWP workers I've spoken to had no intention of absconding when they applied for the program. The majority have stated they left because of reduced hours of work from employers.

Some SWP workers in the Mildura region, for example, have complained about receiving as little as 10 hours work a week. This is only enough to cover their basics, such as accommodation, health insurance and food.

Being offered increased hours in a much warmer climate such as Queensland is appealing. Yet there is so much missing. Workers being lured to other employers are not informed in these advertisements about COVID-19 border restrictions and quarantine, nor do they mention that leaving an employer is a breach of an SWP worker's employment contract and visa conditions, and will make it highly unlikely that they will be able to participate in the SWP in the future.

Workers lured by rogue labour hire operators are not covered by the same protections that they are entitled to through an SWP Approved Employer. Employers operating outside the SWP do not have the same level of responsibilities and are not under the same scrutiny. This is concerning, especially given the [reputation of rogue labour hire companies](#) in providing less than satisfactory employment conditions and often lower wages.

Since COVID-19, SWP team leaders and Approved Employers have observed a noticeable increase in misinformation given to workers about their employment and visa conditions, such as who they can work for, taxation information etc. This advice is often provided by well-meaning community members who usually do not understand the terms and conditions of the SWP and visa restrictions.

This issue is of significant concern for SWP Approved Employers and labour

sending units in Pacific countries. Those workers who have let their visas lapse will follow any work opportunities they hear of, especially if they can be employed under the radar and undocumented. But they are in a vulnerable position.

It is also not fair to those Approved Employers who are doing the right thing. They have financed workers to come to Australia, spent time training them, and many have supported workers beyond their contractual obligations throughout the pandemic. Moreover, as Australia is about to head into its peak season, this leaves them short of employees.

With only a small number of workers coming in from overseas and few Australians taking up these positions despite [government incentives](#), we will likely see more SWP workers absconding to what they think are more attractive employment opportunities. The silver lining is the approach of the peak season, which will increase hours available with current Approved Employers and reduce the incentive to abscond.

Notwithstanding this, more needs to be done by all stakeholders including government, employers, and workers. In particular, awareness efforts need to be stepped up so that SWP workers and the broader diaspora understand what is at stake, so that workers are less likely to be taken advantage of. Unscrupulous operators are targeting the SWP workforce. More vigorous efforts to thwart their actions are essential.

## About the author/s

### **Rochelle Bailey**

Rochelle Bailey is a Research Fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU.