

Why the Catholic Archbishop of Fiji is wrong to condemn seasonal work



Archbishop Peter Loy Chong

Photo Credit: [Archdiocese of Suva/Facebook](#)

by Richard Curtain

12 October 2023

In a recent [Fiji Times opinion piece](#) ‘The dark side of seasonal work’ (16 September 2023), the Catholic Archbishop of Fiji, Peter Loy Chong, made a number of general, emotive and false claims about seasonal workers. The claims, though false, are loaded with deep historical meaning for Fijians, in particular that workers are being treated as “slaves” and “forced labour” in Australia.

Statements made in the article about the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme are completely false. These include the claims that “PALM is a form of human trafficking and forced labour”, that “Labour agencies milk their money from the hard labour of seasonal workers” and that “... very little attention is given to the welfare and the rights of the seasonal workers”.

In fact, PALM has a strong focus on the welfare of the workers. The scheme is highly regulated and closely monitored by a range of agencies and organisations. These include Australian government agencies, liaison officers of the sending countries, Australian unions, NGOs and local communities.

When a complaint is put forward by a Fijian worker in Australia, before automatically considering this as evidence against PALM, the question must be asked whether the worker involved is in the PALM scheme. Many Fijian PALM workers have absconded. Between January 2020 and June 2023, 1,654 Fijians applied for asylum. Many of these are PALM workers, now working with a protection bridging visa, often with unrestricted work rights, but without any of the PALM protections. Also, some Fijians enter Australia on a tourist visa and then work illegally. In the year to the end of June 2023, 19,751 visitor visas were granted to Fijian citizens.

The Archbishop’s article makes the claim that seasonal workers are required to surrender their passports. I have heard of this practice once during the closure of borders, involving a group of *former* Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) workers. It was carried out by illegal labour contractors who enticed seasonal workers to

abscond and who then wanted to control and exploit them.

Not all PALM workers are well treated, but most are, which is why most seasonal workers decide to return each season. [Analysis of return worker rates](#) (not specific to Fiji) shows that first-time workers have a 60% probability of returning a second time and second-time workers have a 70% probability of returning a third time.

[According to the Australian government](#) in a submission to a parliamentary inquiry, overall, up to three out of four SWP workers (74%) return the next year.

The level of seasonal worker satisfaction is high, as [shown by a 2021 World Bank survey](#) based on a representative sample of workers:

When asked how satisfied they were with the schemes on a scale of 1, “not satisfied at all”, to 10, “extremely satisfied”, the average score was 8.0 among PLS [Pacific Labour Scheme] workers, 7.8 among Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) workers, and 8.2 among RSE [Recognised Seasonal Employers] workers. This high level of satisfaction was similar to findings from an earlier World Bank survey of SWP workers, with no clear pattern of changes.

The Archbishop cites in his article a Vatican document ‘Pastoral Orientations on Human Trafficking’. The main thrust of this guidance to Catholics is that migration is a high-risk strategy that should be avoided at all costs. It fails to acknowledge that migration for work overseas through regulated pathways is an important strategy for many from poor countries to escape poverty.

This highly paternalistic mindset is also evident in the Archbishop’s article. Workers are seen as powerless to respond to their situation. But workers are not cattle, being directed by a whip to do this or that – they are able to assess their working conditions and decide whether to return to work in Australia or not.

Migration for workers without formally recognised skills via a regulated program such as PALM does involve a trade-off in terms of their rights compared with Australian workers. Being tied to one employer as a condition of employment is not in itself forced labour, as the worker has freely accepted this requirement. However, it may make the worker vulnerable to exploitation. That is why so much regulation has been put in place to monitor PALM employers and workers. Employers have to be pre-approved, and can lose their PALM licence at any time. Accommodation has to be pre-approved. All incidents involving PALM workers have to be reported to the government agency administering the program. Unions and community groups have access to PALM workers. And so on.

Managing the labour mobility of workers without recognised skills is a complex business. Using highly emotive words such as “slavery” and “forced labour” is not

DEVPOLICYBLOG

helpful to the workers involved, those providing the jobs, or to officials managing compliance requirements. The Catholic Church in Australia and Fiji should be involved with PALM, and as a critic when needed, but not on the basis of unsubstantiated claims.

Author/s:

Richard Curtain

Dr Richard Curtain is a research associate, and a former research fellow, with the Development Policy Centre. He is an expert on Pacific labour markets and migration.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/why-the-catholic-archbishop-of-fiji-is-wrong-20231012/>