SCANLON FOUNDATION
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

IMPROVING PALM

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme

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Cover image: *Dancers at the 2025 Kiribati National Day celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)*

CONTENTS

Introduction:
The Pacific family and the pain of the Aussie dollar.

Opening a media conference on the sidelines of the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum in Honiara Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared Australia "a proud member of the Pacific family".

Family is a frequently deployed metaphor in Australia's relations with Pacific nations. Indeed, the prime minister referred to the Pacific family three more times during the briefing and two journalists used the phrase when asking him questions. The inclusive imagery was undercut, though, when it emerged that only Australian reporters had been allowed into the room, leaving their Pacific colleagues stranded outside.

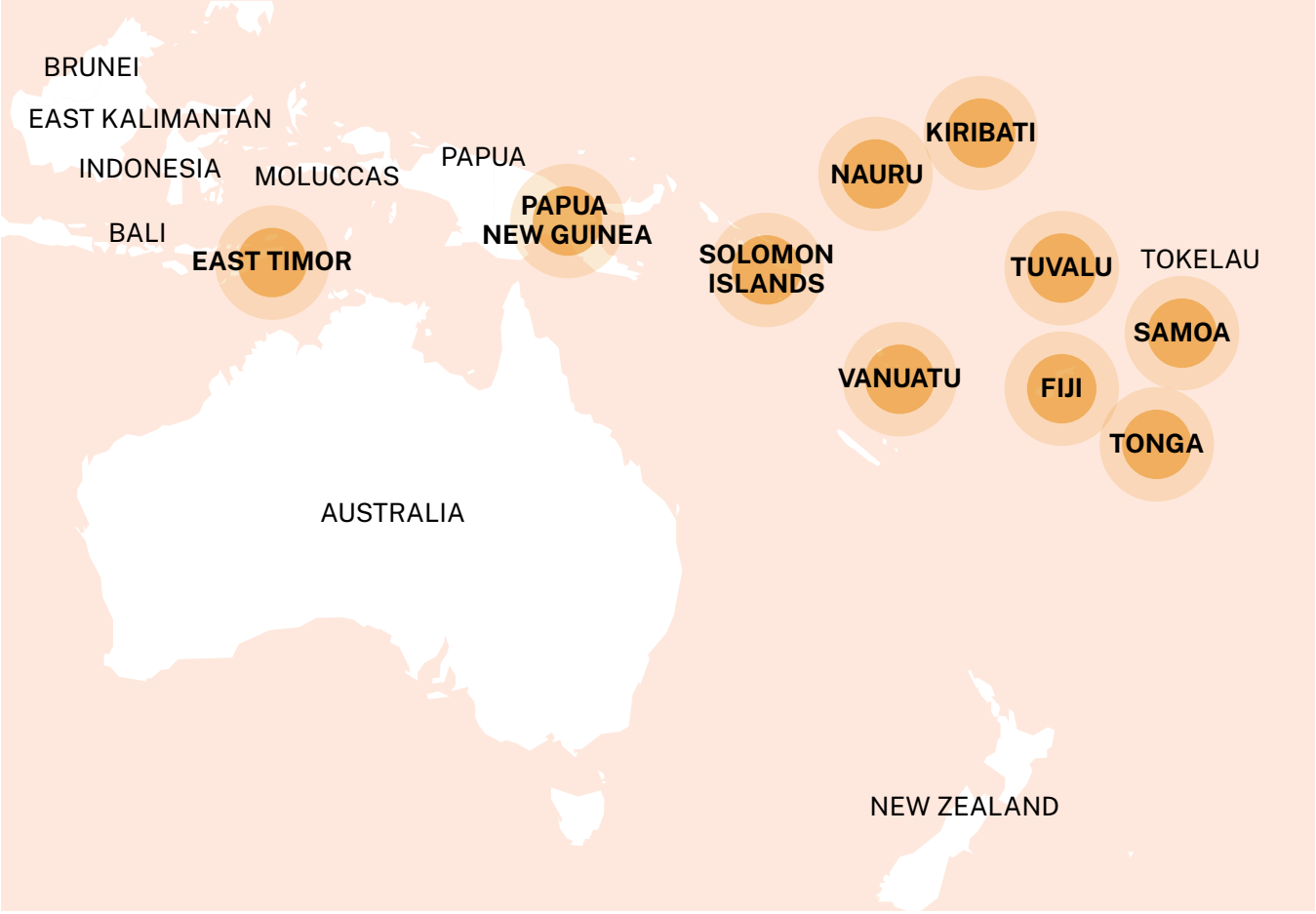
This reminds us that even within loving families, relations are far from equal. Parents use their authority to make decisions on behalf of their children. Older siblings can seek to control the behaviour of younger brothers and sisters. Wealthy family members don't always welcome visits from poor relatives.

Notions of Australia being part of a Pacific family have largely displaced an earlier description of the Pacific as "Australia's backyard". That phrase positions Australia at the centre and pushes Pacific nations to the periphery, treating Pacific peoples' lives and concerns as subordinate to Australian interests. When prime minister Scott Morrison referred to the Pacific as "our own backyard" before a visit in 2019, his Fijian counterpart, Frank Bainimarama was not impressed.[1] While most Australian politicians avoid such clumsy language, it is arguably a more honest reflection of hard political realities and power dynamics. And the backyard image still crops up in the media, mostly in reporting on defence matters.

There is history here. After World War I, Prime Minister Billy Hughes declared that Australia needed to make sure that "the great rampart of islands stretching around the northeast of Australia" would "be held by us or by some Power in whom we have absolute confidence".[2] At the time, he may have had German interests in New Guinea in mind. Later the focus was Japan. Today the concern is China. But, as Hamish McDonald observes in his book *Melanesia*, a pattern was set: "Australians showed interest in the Pacific mainly when others showed up."[3]

This is not the full picture, of course, nor the only continuity with the past. Before federation, the "South Seas" were also a primary source of indentured labour for the emerging plantation economy in Queensland. In the early days of the "blackbirding" era, workers were kidnapped or tricked into coming to Australia and the abuses of that time reverberate down the generations. Today, Pacific labour once again powers growth and profits in rural and regional Australia, but now workers are recruited under formal agreements between Australia and Pacific Island governments, paid the same as Australians and protected by local employment laws. The scheme is called PALM, short for Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, and it gives tens of thousands of people from nine Pacific nations and Timor-Leste the chance to work temporarily in Australia and earn Australian wages.

In November 2025 there were more than 32,000 PALM workers in Australia, with about 40 per cent of them based in Queensland. Just under 20 per cent worked in NSW, a similar share worked in Victoria, and the rest were scattered across the other states and territories. Two thirds of all PALM workers were employed by about 100 labour hire agencies; one third were directly employed by enterprises including farms, abattoirs and aged care homes.



PALM SCHEME COUNTRIES

The PALM scheme has two strands, with roughly equal numbers of participants in each. The first strand is “short term”, with Pacific Islanders coming to Australia for seasonal agricultural labour like fruit picking or vegetable harvesting. Their stay is limited to nine months in any one year, though they may return year after year, as many do. The second strand is “long term”, with workers staying for up to four years and working in industries that require a permanent labour force. Two thirds of these long-term PALM workers are employed in meat processing. The others mostly work in health services like aged care, or in tourism related jobs.

This narrative is primarily an analysis of the strengths and weakness of the PALM scheme, though I will refer to other forms of migration, including bilateral agreements that facilitate movement between Australia and its smaller neighbours in the Pacific. I also situate the PALM scheme within the broader context of Australia-Pacific relations, shaped as they are by colonial history, great power rivalry, demographic forces and climate change. The focus, though, is on PALM for four main reasons.

First, PALM represents the most significant change in migration between the Pacific and Australia in recent time.

Second, PALM is not only bringing increasing numbers of Pacific peoples to our shores, but it is bringing them from countries that have seen minimal migration to Australia since federation, despite their physical proximity — particularly the three Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Third, the PALM scheme is changing lives and communities, often for the better, in both the Pacific and Australia. For all its successes, though, the scheme is beset by significant challenges and deserves closer scrutiny.

Finally, the future success and growth of PALM are not guaranteed. Numbers in the scheme increased rapidly during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, but then plateaued and began declining slightly. After all border restrictions were lifted, some Australian employers shifted back to other, less regulated sources of labour, particularly backpackers who are once again coming to Australia in large numbers on working holiday visas. Several Pacific countries would like to see many more of their nationals engaged under the PALM scheme; others are concerned that the number going to Australia is creating workforce shortages at home.

I have some skin in the game regarding the PALM scheme. About two decades ago, at Swinburne University, I secured funding from the Australian Research Council to investigate the feasibility of a seasonal labour program for Pacific Islanders to work in horticulture. Our findings were picked up by a Senate inquiry and the World Bank and contributed to a growing debate about labour mobility between Australia and the Pacific. In 2008, that debate gave rise to a pilot program that laid the groundwork for today's PALM scheme.

I was moved to pursue the topic of Pacific labour migration by the fate of Tongan man Viliami Tanginoa, who was detained in the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre in December 2000 after he was caught without a visa at Tooleybuc on the NSW side of the Murray River.[4] At the time he was picking fruit, one of the ways that he had supported himself while living and working in Australia without authorisation for 17 years. On the morning Tanginoa was due to be flown back to Tonga, he climbed the basketball stanchion in the detention centre courtyard and refused to come down. Almost eight hours later, his plane to Tonga long departed, and having endured a thunderstorm and taunting by guards, Tanginoa fell, or jumped, to his death. There was plenty of blame to be shared at the subsequent inquest, but what struck me most were the larger circumstances that led to that tragic pass.

Tanginoa had come to Australia in search of work to support his family and he'd readily found employment with growers whose orchards needed labour. Australian rural and regional communities had jobs without workers, and Pacific Island nations had workers without jobs. It seemed ludicrous that there was no formal way to match those two needs. Instead, Pacific Islanders like Viliami Tanginoa worked unlawfully in Australia and lived in the shadows, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation. Along with many others before me, I reasoned that there must be a better way to arrange things, especially given the dominant role Australia plays in the Pacific family as the major source of development assistance and security guarantees. A seasonal labour scheme, I thought, could deliver wins for both Australian farmers and Pacific workers.

That is how Australia's Minister for Pacific Island Affairs, Pat Conroy, described the PALM scheme in 2023 — as "the ultimate win-win". He told the ABC that Australia benefited from having "labour shortages filled by some of our closest neighbours" while the workers picked up "much needed skills" and sent home, on average, $15,000 per year.[5] The minister might have added that the scheme also advances Australia's strategic interests, by providing a counter to China's wooing of Pacific nations with aid, loans, investment, training programs and construction projects. (The prime minister's "Pacific family" media conference at the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum was held at a sports venue gifted to Solomon Islands by China.) Pacific leaders might wish for more development assistance from Canberra and be frustrated by the government's tepid action on climate change, but well-paid jobs and the remittances that flow from them are things Australia offers that China does not.

Yet these material and strategic gains can come at a cost. The ABC report in which Pat Conroy describes PALM as the ultimate win-win catalogues the pain of separated families, strained relationships, loneliness and broken marriages. It notes that the scheme has been dogged by complaints of workers being abused, underpaid or housed in lousy, overpriced, overcrowded accommodation. Thousands of PALM workers have "disengaged" and left their designated employers, which puts them in breach of their visa conditions and can render them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and eventual detention as an unlawful immigrant — a precarious life not unlike that of Viliami Tanginoa.

Fijian Jioseta Vetaukula drew on his experience working in Australia to write a hit song, *ilavo ni Aussie ilavo Mosimosi*,[6] which can be translated as "The Aussie dollar is a painful dollar". He told the ABC this is slang Fijians use when working on Australian farms. "It's big money, out there, but it's tough work," he said. The song was one of the top five most played tracks on Fiji radio station Viti FM in 2023, an indication of how its sentiment resonated.[7] The song and its reception warn us that jobs and remittances are not enough to secure goodwill from Pacific peoples and their governments. Demand for PALM places far outstrips supply and most workers who come to Australia are keen to return for further

stints, so the scheme is highly valued. Still, if Pacific migrants on temporary visas are not respected and valued for their contribution, if they feel they are treated unfairly or taken advantage of, then the diplomatic benefits of the PALM scheme could be undermined.

This narrative aims to find ways to reduce the pain of earning the Aussie dollar, and to realise the vision of the PALM scheme more fully as a "win-win", despite the unequal power dynamics that characterise relations within the Pacific family. This is, though, a challenging task, since Australian employers will turn away from a scheme if it is too highly regulated, expensive or cumbersome. The future of PALM will not be secured by burying it under increasing layers of rules and reporting.

The writing draws on research conducted over six months that included visits to regional towns, interviews with PALM workers, approved PALM employers, trade union organisers, support staff engaged to assist PALM workers and locals who step in and volunteer help when needed. I have drawn on the expertise of people who know far more about the Pacific and employment in regional Australia than I do. My project is informed by government data, and by a growing body of academic and industry research on the PALM scheme.

In keeping with the idea of a narrative, I have strived to tell engaging stories based on personal experiences wherever possible and supplement these with relevant data and historical context. Some sections are more strongly narrative driven, others are more informational.

I begin by joining PALM workers at the Kiribati national day celebrations in Sydney and then explore the operations and history of the PALM scheme. In **Section 2** (Win-Win) I visit workplaces where the scheme is working well. This is followed by a contrasting experience in **Section 3** — a meeting with disgruntled meatworkers. This is a prompt to examine one of the most persistent critiques of the scheme — that in contrast with the idea of "labour mobility", workers are "Tied to the Job", undermining assertions that they enjoy "the same workplace rights and protections as Australian workers". There are a range of grievance procedures and support services to help PALM workers. Nevertheless, tying visas to specific employers increases the likelihood that they will quit when they experience workplace problems and become "Disengaged" (**Section 4**). Tax, superannuation and healthcare demonstrate other ways in which the rights and entitlements of PALM workers can differ from their Australian colleagues and these issues are canvassed in **Section 5**, "Equal, unequal and not always fair". **Section 6**, "Partnership, not aid", looks beyond economics — jobs filled, and wages earned — to consider other ways of evaluating the success of the PALM scheme, including workers' welfare and their engagement with local communities. This is followed in **Section 7** by an examination of the scheme's impacts in workers' home countries. The **final section** of the narrative, "Improving PALM", contrasts the PALM scheme with the indentured labour of South Sea Islanders in Queensland in the 19th Century. I argue that continuities and contrasts with the past can help us imagine a more successful PALM scheme and conclude with recommendations for reform.

It is not possible to fully investigate the complexity of the issues in the space available, and I take responsibility for my inevitable mistakes and omissions. Whatever its shortcomings, I hope this narrative contributes to the future wellbeing of the Pacific family.

SOME NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

The name "Pacific Australia Labour Mobility" suggests a cultural cohesion and geographic uniformity that contrasts with the complexity of the eleven nations (including Australia) that participate in the PALM scheme. Leaving aside Timor-Leste, which does not lie in the Pacific at all, the "Pacific Islands" are diverse in almost every aspect. Papua New Guinea, for example, has an estimated 11 million people (some think the true figure may be higher), while Tuvalu's population is less than 10,000. PNG is part of a vast archipelago extending into Indonesia, whereas the single island of Nauru has a land area about twice the size of Sydney airport. Tonga is a monarchy with a constitution dating from 1875 and its citizens have no doubt who leads their nation. In other Pacific countries, sections of the population would be hardly aware of the state. Economies vary greatly too: some depend predominantly on resource extraction, others on tourism or fishing. Some areas rely on income from development assistance or remittances, in others subsistence agriculture remains a central way of life. Countries may have been colonised by Britain, Australia, France, Germany or Japan.

The term "Pacific Islander" is inadequate for similar reasons. I explored the alternative of Pasifika, widely used in New Zealand/Aotearoa, and less frequently in Australia. The Victorian government, for example, includes the category Pasifika in profiles of the state's multicultural communities.[8] But Ema Vueti, President of the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland, advised me that this term is understood as a reference to Polynesians and Polynesian languages. "When there's an event, and Pasifika is used, it'll be an excellent event, but the Polynesians would predominate," she said.

Polynesia is one of the three geographic and cultural regions into which the Pacific is usually segmented, divisions which, though "often illusory" have "some basis in the history of colonisation".[9] Polynesia as its generally defined, stretches from New Zealand in the South up to Hawaii in the north and across to Easter Island in the east, and includes the PALM scheme countries of Tonga, Samoa and Tuvalu. Many of the languages of Polynesia share common words. Melanesia, which is closer to Australia, takes in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. It has 1100 different languages, including more than 800 in Papua New Guinea alone.[10] Further north, Micronesia, consists of small island chains including Kiribati and Nauru.

As much as possible, I have tried to describe people by their nationality: Ni-Vanuatu, Fijians, Solomon Islanders, I-Kiribati and so on. But when speaking generally about participants working in Australia, I have fallen back on more generic terms, like "Pacific Islanders", "Pacific peoples" or simply "PALM workers". This last one is problematic since it risks reducing the lives of people employed under the PALM scheme to one dimension, as if their identities are defined by their visa status. I was unable, however, to come up with a better alternative. I considered "PALM scheme participants", which, apart from being clumsy, fails to distinguish between employees and employers, who also participate in the scheme. Ema Vueti prefers the term "PALM employees" or "PALM staff" because this puts them on the same footing as their Australian colleagues and values their contribution equally. A counter view is that terms like "employee" and "staff" suggest a degree of commitment and stability in their engagement when the reality is often contingent and uncertain. As mentioned about two thirds of all PALM workers are engaged by labour hire firms. So, in most cases, the enterprises in which PALM workers are employed, are not their actual employers.

There are no neat fixes to these problems of language and terminology, and I can ask that you bear these considerations in mind while reading the narrative.

The PALM scheme has only formally been existence since 2022 after the amalgamation of two predecessor schemes, the Seasonal Workers Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme. When I used the term PALM this generally includes both its current and former iterations.

I have used pseudonyms when requested to do so by informants. In such cases, names are placed in quotation marks in the first instance (e.g., "Vanessa", "Pita").

ENDNOTES

1 Sally Round, "Australian PM heads out to Pacific 'backyard'", Radio NZ, 16 January 2019; SBS News, "Fiji PM says he had 'wonderful meeting' with Foreign Minister Penny Wong", 28 May 2022

2 Hamish McDonald *Melanesia: Travels in Black Oceania*, Black Inc. Melbourne, 2025 p.19

3 McDonald *Melanesia*, p.16

4 Peter Mares, "A death in the rain", originally published in the *Australian Financial Review*, 19 December 2003, republished *Inside Story*, 24 September 2010 **https://insidestory.org.au/a-death-in-the-rain/**

5 Lice Movono, Marian Kupu and Nick Sas, "Pacific Islander workers on Australian farms hit near-record numbers as their families feel the strain of 'painful dollar'", ABC News, 16 September 2023

6 **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7Ft3_yrgYg**

7 Iliana Biutu, "Au Taroga Lo tops the chart for Viti FM", Fiji Village, 23 December 2023

8 Victorian Government, "Pasifika community profile", n.d., **https://www.vic.gov.au/pasifika-community-profile#pasifika-community** accessed 26 September 2025

9 Kirstie Petrou and John Connell *Pacific Island Guestworkers in Australia: The New Blackbirds?*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023 p.9

10 McDonald *Melanesia* p.22

1.

Background to the PALM scheme

KIRIBATI NATIONAL DAY — THE DANCE OF STRENGTH

A choir singing and beating time on a table drum at the Kiribati National Day celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

At the centre of the choir a dozen men sit cross-legged around a hollow wooden box, reaching in to slap its flat top with open palms, pounding out a deep, urgent rhythm. Behind them, in concentric rings, men and women clap to the same beat. Most are wearing aqua hoodies or white T-shirts, adorned with a silhouette of palm trees and the Sydney harbour bridge set against a low sun in an orange sky. The text reads "46th I-Kiribati national day celebrations". Some members of the choir, though, are in traditional dress, ready for dancing. The men have long pandanus matts tied around their waists with thick cord, their heads are wreathed in garlands, and decorative sashes loop bandoleer-style across their bare chests. The women wear colourful headbands and necklaces too, and the fronds of their grass skirts spread out from the tight circle of the choir like diminishing ripples in a pond.

There are about sixty people in the choir, and their harmonies echo around the cavernous sports hall. In front of them, a woman and two men perform a traditional *Kaimatoa*, the dance of strength. As the music intensifies, exuberant men leap from the choir onto the wooden box, arousing cheers as they mark the rhythm with their feet.

Today, there is no basketball or futsal. Instead, the Youth and Recreation Centre in suburban Engadine in southern Sydney is adorned with balloons of blue, white, yellow and red, the colours of the Kiribati flag, which depicts a golden frigate bird flying over a rising sun above undulating lines of ocean. The rest of the hall is lined with trestle tables laden with soft drinks, where hundreds of people sit or stand to watch the performance.

This annual celebration began hours earlier with a prayer, an acknowledgement of country, and the Kiribati and Australian national anthems. Then the singing and dancing began. After the *Kaimatoa* there is plenty more to come. Many in the hall are preparing for their own chance to perform. To show their appreciation, senior members of the community sashay out onto the floor, spraying the dancers with mists of perfume and tucking cash into their waistbands.

A senior community member shows her appreciation of an I-Kiribati dancer by tucking cash into her costume (Peter Mares)

Feasting at the Kiribati National Day Celebration in Sydney, July 2025 (Peter Mares)

Later, there will be speeches, including one from me, since, unexpectedly, I've been designated a guest of honour, seated in the front row and crowned with a garland by a shy teenager. Towards evening, after a blessing, we tuck into an enormous feast – two whole roast suckling pigs, platters piled high with fried fish and chicken, delicate raw fish in coconut milk, enormous bowls of creamy potato salad, baked taro and breadfruit, fried rice, noodles and vegies in soya sauce, and a massive cake to celebrate the birth of the independent Republic of Kiribati in 1979.

Delegations have travelled from all over NSW to attend: from Griffith, Wagga Wagga, Finley, Goolgowi and Junee in the Riverina; from Singleton in the Hunter Valley; from the Central Coast and from Western Sydney. Some participants are long settled in Australia as permanent residents or citizens. Most, though, are members of a more recent wave of migrants, the 420 I-Kiribati working in NSW on temporary visas under the PALM scheme, an acronym for Pacific Australia Labour Mobility.

There are another 565 I-Kiribati working under the PALM scheme in Queensland, and hundreds more scattered across other states. Some do seasonal jobs in horticulture. The largest group, mostly men, work in meat processing; others, mostly women, are employed in aged care. In South Australia, scores of I-Kiribati fishermen meet the labour market needs of Port Lincoln's tuna industry.

Kiribati, with a population of about 130,000 people, stretches over an area of Pacific Ocean equal in size to Western Australia and South Australia combined. The capital, Tarawa, is roughly halfway between Brisbane and Hawaii. Farming is challenging in Kiribati because its land consists mostly of coral atolls with shallow, alkaline soils less than two metres above sea level. The exception is the phosphate rock of Banaba, or Ocean Island, which was mined through much of the 20th Century by the British Phosphate Commission, a consortium involving the British, Australian and New Zealand governments. In 1945, to make it easier to get at rich guano deposits and turn them into fertiliser, most of Banaba's population — about 1000 people — were re-settled on Rabi Island in Fiji.[1]

There are more than 1500 Kiribati citizens working in Australia under the PALM scheme. That might not seem a lot, but it equates to about one in 30 of the country's population aged 20 to 54. In an economy that relies heavily on fishing and remittances, including from its renowned seafarers, the role of PALM workers in the economy is significant.

The impact on some of the other nine countries involved in the PALM scheme is even greater. In November 2025 there were 32,365 PALM workers in Australia. Vanuatu is the biggest source country, with 7115 workers, followed by Timor-Leste (5205), Fiji (5165), Solomon Islands (4840), Tonga (2990), Papua New Guinea (2650), Samoa (2550), Kiribati (1520), Tuvalu (285) and Nauru (40).[2] Many others work in New Zealand under its equivalent scheme, the RSE, or Recognised Seasonal Employer program.

The combined effects can be big: researcher Richard Curtain calculated that in 2023-24, about one in seven Tongans aged between 20 and 54 were working in either Australia or New Zealand. In Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Samoa, the ratio was about one in ten. Given that most PALM and RSE workers are men, the impact on the male workforce was more dramatic, with one in four Tongan men absent overseas, and more than one in six men absent from Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Samoa.[3] In Papua New Guinea, by contrast, with a population estimated at 11 million or more, the share of the workforce going to Australia is tiny and will remain so.

I-Kiribati dancers waiting to perform (Peter Mares)

Dancing at the Kiribati National Day Celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

That doesn't diminish the impact on village and family life when fit young men and women leave home for months and years and ageing parents must cope without the support of adult children. There is an emotional toll when wives and husbands are separated by a vast ocean, and when fathers and mothers cannot cradle their sons and daughters. The cash and goods PALM workers send home improve the material circumstances of relatives left behind but whether this is a fair exchange is hard to evaluate. Does a higher household income compensate for missing out on love and care, or for not watching your children grow up?

These are questions we'll pick up in **Section 7** of the narrative when looking at PALM's impacts on the communities and nations from which workers come. For now, it's sufficient to state that people from the Pacific, supported by their governments, are generally eager to take up the opportunities that PALM offers and return for repeat stints. The primary motivation may be earning an Australian wage, but there are other attractions too, like adventure, travel, acquiring new skills and, in some cases, the chance to escape cultural strictures and authority structures at home.

During months of research, I didn't come across anyone directly involved in PALM who thought the scheme was a bad idea. Plenty of people were critical, and many had suggestions for improvement, but no one thought the PALM scheme should be scrapped.

HOW PALM CAME TO BE

PALM has undergone various iterations and name changes since its inception as a small pilot program in 2008. As Kirstie Petrou and John Connell document in *Pacific Island Guestworkers in Australia*, decades of contestation preceded that first toe in the water.

In 1971, the year after Fiji won its independence, founding prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara suggested Canberra implement a Pacific guest worker scheme, while simultaneously criticising the White Australia policy.[4] Pacific leaders pressed the idea in subsequent years, and in 1984 a review of Australia's overseas aid program considered it for the small island states of Kiribati and Tuvalu because of their limited capacity to develop agriculture or industry.[5] The idea was discussed in government reviews and parliamentary inquiries in 1987 and 1989, but only gained traction in the early 2000s.

In 2003, a Senate Inquiry into Australia's relations with Pacific recommended piloting a seasonal workers program.[6] The government's response was brief and blunt: "Australia has traditionally not supported programs to bring low skilled seasonal workers to Australia".[7] Nevertheless, cross party support for the recommendation showed sentiment was shifting in response to diplomatic and domestic pressures.

Pacific Island leaders had stepped up their push for Australia to open its labour market. As well as anticipating the remittances that could flow, several were looking to address a "youth bulge". In some Pacific countries, youths aged between 15 and 24 made up close to a fifth of the population and high unemployment in this cohort was seen as a threat to stability.[8] Meanwhile, in Australia well-paid mining jobs were drawing labour away from rural industries and farmers were lobbying hard for access to overseas workers.

Economists were also promoting the potential of remittances — rather than aid — to supplement household incomes and foster development in small island states. One of those economists was Stephen Howes, Chief Economist at Australia's international development agency, AusAID. Howes joined AusAID in 2005 after working in Asia for the World Bank.

"For AusAID then, as for DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] now, the Pacific was such an important priority," he recalls. "And it was really the first time I'd focused on the Pacific myself."

Howes thought a lot of Pacific aid failed to promote development and migration could have a bigger impact. He's been an advocate for increased labour mobility ever since.

"In the Pacific, you've got more people than jobs, and in Australia you've got more jobs than people," says Howes, who is now a professor at the Australian National University and Director of its Development Policy Centre. "There's a natural complementarity there, and I think that's what drives migration at the economic level."

This reflects the perspective of renowned economist J.K. Galbraith who described migration as "the oldest action against poverty". Galbraith wondered at the perversity of resisting "so obvious a good". Migration, he reasoned, benefits the countries to which people move and reduces poverty in the countries from which they come.[9]

Australia's Coalition government disagreed. At the 2005 Pacific Islands Forum, when Pacific leaders again urged Prime Minister John Howard to open Australia's rural industries to seasonal labour, Howard responded by saying that Australia always preferred permanent settlement to guest work.

> ***"I think you either invite someone to come to your country to stay as a permanent citizen or you don't," he said.[10]***

The following year, Treasurer Peter Costello, rebuffed an approach by Pacific Finance Ministers in similar terms.

> ***"Australia has never been a guest worker country," he said. "We've never been a country where we bring you in and ship you out."***[11]

This was historically untrue. Queensland's sugar industry was built on the backs of South Sea Islanders brought in by colonial "blackbirders". They were shipped out again under the Pacific Labourers Act of 1901, one of the first Acts of parliament after federation. The continuities between that era and today will be discussed in **Section 8**.

Costello was wrong in a contemporary sense too. By 2006, immigration had shifted from a nation-building exercise based primarily on permanent settlement to a much more fluid exchange responsive to labour market needs in a globalised economy. Growing numbers of international students, skilled workers and working holiday makers flowed in and out of Australia on temporary visas.[12]

In 2007, yet another parliamentary inquiry into Australia's aid to the Pacific called for "an active and serious evaluation" of a seasonal labour program.[13] And while the government continued to resist Pacific entreaties, New Zealand responded, launching its own seasonal work program. By the time Kevin Rudd replaced John Howard as Australian prime minister in late 2007, New Zealand's RSE scheme had been up and running for seven months.

The next year, at the Pacific Islands Forum, Rudd followed New Zealand's lead, announcing the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme — a modest trial involving just Vanuatu, Tonga, Kiribati and PNG. Stays were limited to six months and numbers capped at 2500 workers over four-years. Participation fell far short of that and at the end of the pilot only 1,623 workers had come to Australia.[14] By this time, 7000 Pacific workers were already heading to New Zealand *every year* under the RSE.[15]

The Australian pilot was nevertheless deemed a success and formalised in 2012 as the Seasonal Worker Program, with more countries invited to join. Decades of rejecting "guest work", coupled with Australia's self-perception as a country of permanent settler migration, made circular migration from the Pacific seem both novel and unique. Dr Kirstie Petrou, from the UNSW Canberra, says it was neither.

"By about the early 2000s, most OECD countries had some form of guest worker scheme," she says.

The tomatoes grown in glasshouse in Ontario, Canada, are tended by seasonal workers from the Caribbean and Mexico. Germany's asparagus crop is cut and packed by citizens of Romania, and by temporary migrants from countries outside the EU, including Ukraine, Georgia and Uzbekistan. The English strawberries served each year at Wimbledon are mostly picked by women from Eastern Europe and beyond. In 2025, the UK made 45,000 short-term visas available to the horticultural sector and the poultry industry. The United States offers the H-2A agricultural visa, a contemporary version of the Bracero program that first brought workers in from Mexico during World War II.

The aspiration is that regulated circular migration can forestall unauthorised migration and limit the exploitation of undocumented workers, who cross borders without permission or work in breach of their visa conditions. That was my aim in researching the feasibility of Pacific seasonal labour two decades ago. The death of Viliami Tanginoa prompted me to seek an alternative to people living and working in the shadows, pushed to the margins and vulnerable to abuse.

Yet while the PALM scheme aspires to achieve world's best practice on seasonal migration, familiar problems persist.

"The kinds of issues that we're seeing in PALM are repeated across time and space," says Petrou, whose research focuses on the social impacts of Australia's Pacific labour mobility schemes. "Workplace rights, workers feeling isolated, lack of social integration, feeling like they are being treated as machines, as units of labour rather than as people."

"It does raise some really big questions around guest worker schemes as a whole. Are there certain things that are just problems of guest worker schemes or is it just that no one's cared enough to ever try and fix them?"

Again, this is a topic we'll return to in **Section 8**.

After 2012, Australia's Seasonal Worker Program grew slowly. In 2014-15, fewer than 3200 seasonal workers came to Australia, and most were from the Kingdom of Tonga.[16] The reasons were cultural and practical. First, unlike some Pacific countries, the practice of labour migration was already widespread and accepted in Tonga. Second, early uptake was facilitated by two labour hire firms run by Tongans settled in Australia.[17]

By 2017-18, the number of seasonal workers had grown to 8459, still not a huge number given that growers had been agitating for years about the difficulty of finding staff to pick their fruit and vegetables. Why didn't the horticultural sector embrace the scheme more enthusiastically? The main reason was growers' access to two alternative sources of cheaper, less regulated labour — undocumented workers and working holiday makers.[18]

ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF LABOUR – UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS AND BACKPACKERS

Since Australia has no land borders, few people enter without authorisation, which makes our context very different to the United States or Europe. Here, most undocumented workers fall into two categories: overstayers and people working in breach of their visa conditions.

Overstayers are people who enter the country lawfully but fail to leave when their visa expires. In June 2024, Home Affairs estimated that there are about 75,000 visa overstayers in Australia.[19]

People working in breach of their visa conditions can include tourists, whose visitor visas do not allow them to work at all, and international students who work more hours than permitted. (International students are restricted to 48 hours work per fortnight during term time.)

It is impossible to determine the extent of undocumented work in Australia and it appears to vary greatly between regions, but a 2019 report on the horticulture sector found a "structural reliance on undocumented migrant workers as a key source of labour".[20]

Backpackers visiting Australia on working holidays also play a vital role in regional labour markets. The visa program began in 1975 as reciprocal arrangement limited to Canada, the UK and Ireland. Japan joined in 1980, and in the decade from 1995, agreements were established with a further fifteen countries.[21] The stated purpose was cultural exchange: young travellers aged 18 to 30 were given the chance to "supplement their holiday experience" with short-term work or study over a 12-month stay.[22] Since 2005, though, the emphasis has shifted markedly from *holiday* to *work*, thanks to a fundamental change made by prime minister John Howard as an alternative to a seasonal labour scheme.

Instead of Pacific workers, Howard delivered backpackers to farmers, by creating an incentive for them to work in agriculture — if they did 88 days harvest work then they could qualify second working holiday visa.[23] "That scheme went through the roof," says ANU economist Stephen Howes. "All of a sudden, backpackers wanted to work on farms to get that additional year's visa."

The incentive was soon expanded. A year later, it was not only harvest work that qualified backpackers for a second visa but also plant and animal cultivation, tree farming and felling, fishing and pearling, mining and construction.[24] Initially, a working holiday maker could only remain with one employer for three months but that was soon doubled to six months.[25]

Since 2005, the scheme has grown to take in another 31 countries under a new Work *and* Holiday visa with slightly different conditions.[26] Further changes have made the scheme even more of a labour market program: a third 12-month visa was added, the range of eligible work expanded, and for certain countries, the 30-year age limit raised to 35 years. Working holiday makers are now central to the regional economy and before COVID-19 hit, filled the equivalent of 12,000 full-time jobs in agriculture.[27]

Any employer can hire backpackers, with no responsibility to help with their accommodation or travel costs, or to consider their welfare outside work. PALM employers, by contrast, must be approved by government and abide by a detailed deed of agreement. Among other things, the deed requires employers to organise on-arrival briefings, provide or arrange suitable accommodation and transport, and appoint staff to attend to workers' welfare. It is not surprising that many rural and regional employers find it easier employ backpackers or undocumented migrants than PALM workers.

Economist Stephen Howes says in the early years of the Seasonal Labour Program, the Labor government barely promoted the scheme to avoid antagonising trade unions. Few farmers knew about it, and since they had easy access to backpackers, few used it. But working holiday numbers fell after the global financial crisis eased in the northern hemisphere. "The global economy was doing better, so there were fewer backpackers," says Howes. Scandals about bad treatment also deterred some travellers from working in rural Australia. In response, Coalition governments tinkered with the seasonal labour program to make it more attractive.

In 2015 the cap on numbers was removed and employers were allowed to recoup a larger share of workers' travel costs.[28] The program was expanded beyond horticulture to include aquaculture, cane, cotton, cattle, sheep, grain, mixed farming and, in some locations, tourism.[29] In 2018, the length of stay was expanded from six to nine months. The program became better known and better regarded as farmers realised the extra expense and regulation were offset by the benefits of a more reliable workforce.

"They're not going to just work for a few weeks and then possibly move," says Howes. "Not only that, but they can come back a second year, and definitely the second year, third year, they're more productive."

More profound changes were afoot. In 2017 Australia announced that it was "stepping up", its engagement with the Pacific and "increasing opportunities for labour market mobility".[30] A new Pacific Labour Scheme allowed stays of up to three years (later extended to four). The focus shifted from seasonal work to industries with a constant demand for workers including health care, social assistance and hospitality.[31] The industry to benefit most from long-stay workers, though, turned out to be meat processing.[32]

In July 2018, only the microstates of Nauru, Kiribati and Tuvalu were involved in the Pacific Labour Scheme and numbers were capped at 3000 people.[33] This soon changed. By the end of 2019, scheme numbers were uncapped, and Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, East Timor, PNG, Fiji and Tonga joined, matching participation in the Seasonal Worker Program.

COVID-19 AND THE SHIFT FROM SHORT- TO LONG-TERM PALM

By early 2020, just before COVID-19 hit, the combined impact of the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme on regional employment remained small. There were only about 8000 Pacific workers in Australia. After borders closed, things changed fast. Most backpackers left Australia, and none arrived to replace them.

In a matter of months, the number of working holiday maker numbers fell from more than 140,000 to fewer than 50,000. Farmers were desperate for harvest labour and shortages threatened to leave crops unpicked, ramping up the cost of fresh foods and destroying export markets.

> ***"The thing that the COVID pandemic really demonstrated," says Kirstie Petrou, "is how reliant Australia is on temporary migrant labour for our food security."***

To keep rural industries afloat, the Morrison government used travel exemptions, special quarantine rules and charter flights to replace missing backpackers with workers from Pacific countries with no recorded COVID cases.[34] In August 2020, the first passenger planes brought seasonal workers from Vanuatu to harvest mangoes in the Northern Territory. While circular migration is "generally portrayed as Australia 'helping' the Pacific", the COVID-19 experience showed things in a different light — as a form of "reverse aid" for Australian employers.[35]

Two years into the pandemic, Pacific migration had become a mainstay of regional and rural employment. The number of workers had more than tripled to 26,000 and was still growing.

At this stage, the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme were run separately by different government departments — the former by the department of employment, the latter by the department of foreign affairs.[36] If employers wanted to use both schemes, they had to lodge two different applications, sign two different deeds, and engage with different departments with different IT platforms. In May 2022, the two schemes were merged to create PALM — Pacific Australia Labour Mobility. Initially DFAT, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, was the lead agency. This role was subsequently switched to DEWR, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

PALM appears more streamlined, but the intersecting lines of authority remain complex, with at least four departments having a stake. DEWR leads, DFAT takes primary responsibility for diplomatic and developmental matters, including pre-departure training, while Home Affairs issues visas and ensures workers leave Australia when their visas expire or get cancelled. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry also takes a close interest, reflecting the scheme's importance to rural industries.

All up, there are six ministers who might wish to have a say on PALM — the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Foreign Minister, the Minister for Pacific Island Affairs, the Minister for International Development, the Minister for Home Affairs, and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. One insider described attending PALM meetings involving about 25 people, a mix of public servants and ministerial advisers from numerous different agencies and offices. "If you want something to fail, give it to as many people as possible," he quipped. While not a serious assessment of the PALM scheme's prospects, the comment indicates the scale of the administrative challenge.

"It's always going to be messy," says Stephen Howes, Director of the ANU Development Policy Centre. He's sympathetic to the government because the program necessarily cuts across different departments.

"You know, they've tried having it managed by Department of Employment. They've tried having it managed by DFAT. And they've really tried outsourcing it as well. And none of those solutions is perfect."

Howes says it's remarkable how much government has invested in administering PALM, which shows the importance of the Pacific to Australia.

In September 2023, the number of workers in the PALM scheme peaked at almost 35,000. While numbers fluctuate monthly, the average in 2025 was closer to 31,000. A drop in seasonal worker numbers is to blame. These are down about 20 per cent from their peak because employers in seasonal industries can again draw on backpackers, a cheaper, less regulated labour force. In November 2025, there were more than 230,000 working holiday makers in Australia, 90,000 more than six years earlier, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of long-term PALM workers has remained relatively stable. So, more significant than the decline in overall PALM numbers, is the shift in the scheme's composition, from short- to long-term workers. In April 2022, around three quarters of all PALM workers were in Australia to do seasonal work, and just a quarter held long-term visas. Now, more than half are here on long-term visas.

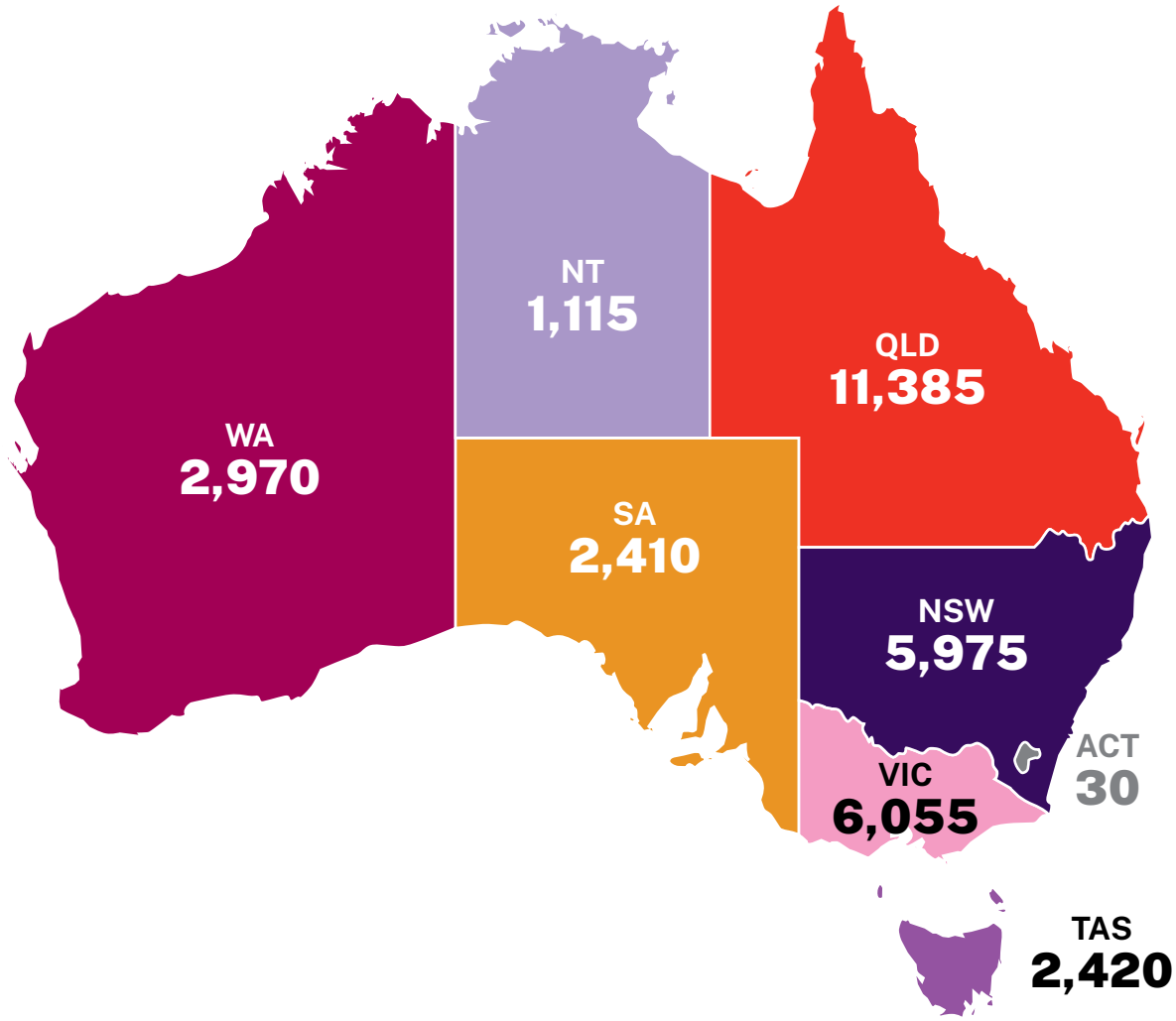
Eminent New Zealand geographer and emeritus professor Richard Bedford argues that the introduction of a four-year visa marked a profound change, with Australia opening "long-term, low-skilled and semi-skilled labour pathways for Pacific people" for the first time in more than a century. Bedford, who has been researching Pacific migration since the 1960s, worries that the shift to long-term visas could turn temporary work overseas into "a primary livelihood strategy" passed down in some families across generations. "While remittances are vital, this kind of dependency risks undermining local livelihoods in the long term," he warns.[37] If the trend from short-to long-term visas continues, the PALM scheme will be something much more akin to the traditional "guest worker" program that Australian leaders so long opposed.

The other shift has been in the make-up of the PALM workforce. In the early years, most workers came from countries in Polynesia and Micronesia, where labour migration is a long-established, culturally accepted practice. Now, workers increasingly come from Melanesia too, even though tradition ties Melanesian people strongly to their land.

"There is hesitation from people to leave home, because we're afraid we will lose our identity," says Natasha Turia from Papua New Guinea, who is researching migration for her PhD at the Australian National University. "Even though we are the largest country in the Pacific, and also closest to Australia, we still have the tiniest diaspora compared to Fiji or Tonga and Samoa."

Yet when veteran journalist Hamish McDonald travelled through Melanesia, revisiting places he'd been as a younger reporter, he was repeatedly asked about the prospect of work in Australia.[38]

PALM TODAY



PALM scheme workers by state and territory November 2025[39]

Australia had come a long way since 1971, when Fiji's Ratu Mara attacked its racist immigration policies. After decades of staunch resistance to temporary labour migration from the Pacific, successive governments have opened Australia's doors ever wider.

After a tentative start, a scheme limited to a few hundred seasonal workers in horticulture on strict six-month visas has become a central plank of regional employment involving tens of thousands of workers, with the majority able to stay up to four years, working across a range of industries, including agriculture, meat processing, tourism and age care.

Certain parameters have remained constant, though.

First, Pacific workers are still expected to go home when their visas expire. There is no intended pathway to permanent residency.

Second, workers are expected to come alone and leave their families behind, even when they will be away for years at a time. This may eventually change. In the 2022 election campaign, Labor said it would allow the families of long-term PALM workers to join them in Australia.[40] A pilot involving up to 200 families from five countries began in 2024 and a mid-term evaluation reported the pilot progressing well, despite some challenges.[41] The government, though, is yet to commit to extending family accompaniment to all long-term PALM workers as promised.

Third, while the scheme aims to build positive relationships between PALM workers and their local communities, and to help workers settle into life in Australia, the mechanics of the program work against integration. Workers are denied access to Medicare and other social supports, for example. So, PALM workers who play rugby on the weekend risk injuries that could prevent them working, leaving them without an income and reliant on the goodwill of colleagues and community members.[42]

Fourth, while PALM workers are promised "the same rights and protections as Australian workers"[43], this pledge is not realised because PALM workers are tied to their approved employer. If an Australian worker faces abuse, underpayment, harassment or unsafe working conditions, they can look for another job and a better boss, whereas their Pacific colleagues have very few options to change workplaces under the PALM scheme.

Despite these constraints, the PALM scheme can still prove a win-win.

Dancers at the Kiribati National Day Celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

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2.

Win-Win

A TOUR OF THE TREE FACTORY

When I arranged to visit Mossmont Nurseries outside Griffith in the NSW Riverina, I pictured something like an expanded version of the garden centre at Bunnings. The reality is starkly different. In the words of Jonathan Moss, it's "a tree factory".

"We're growing anywhere between probably 600,000 trees in a quiet year to a million trees in a busy year," he says.

Moss is a sixth-generation owner of this family business, which has been around for 170 years. It grows bare-rooted trees — almonds, peaches, nectarines, plums, apricots and citrus — and sells them to orchards all over Australia.

"We're the beginning of the horticultural industry," he says.

I visit in winter, the busiest season for despatching trees to growers. In the fields, teams of seven or eight workers in Hi-Viz clothing trail behind chugging tractors. An angled blade carves through the red earth, up-ending long rows of closely grown saplings. The first workers shake clods of soil from the roots, the next crew bundles them together. After the bunches are heaved onto trailers to be carted off to the packing shed, the last workers pull up the snaking plastic tubing that has provided drip irrigation during the growing season.

At peak times, Mossmont needs between 90 and 100 staff and about two thirds of them are employed under the PALM scheme. Most are from Timor-Leste and Vanuatu, though there is one worker from Solomon Islands, and they come to Australia every year for a nine-month stint. Newer employees are on their third rotation; old hands, like Saturnino "Jonnie" Soares, have been returning for eight years, ever since Mossmont was first approved as an employer on the scheme.

PALM workers harvest bare rooted trees at Mossmont Nurseries near Griffith (Peter Mares)

East Timorese PALM worker Saturnino "Jonnie" Soares (Peter Mares)

Stanley Tamanoah from Tanna Island in Vanuatu is on his third placement at Mossmont Nurseries (Peter Mares)

"I'm very happy to join in the PALM scheme," says Soares. "I never feel like any problem happened to me, so everything is good."

The oldest son in his family, Soares uses his Australian earnings to support younger siblings. He's paying university fees for a sister to train as a health worker and for a brother studying electrical engineering. He's built one house in East Timor's Bobonaro district for his wife and son, a second for his parents, and a third to rent out for extra income. He also bought a truck for his family to hire out as a small business venture.

Moss has visited the Soares family and the families of other East Timorese staff employed at the tree factory, and shares photos of a new two-storey house, painted aqua blue and brick red, with deep tiled verandas. He says it's humbling to see such achievements and makes him proud to be a PALM scheme employer.

"I love the PALM Scheme," Moss says. He describes it as "pure aid". Rather than development dollars being depleted through administration and middlemen before trickling down to villagers, the earnings of PALM scheme workers go straight into the hands of people who use the money to benefit their families and communities.

During a break from harvesting bare rooted trees in the field, I chat to Stanley Tamanoah, a father of two from Vanuatu. Tall and softly spoken, he's wearing a black hoodie under a bright orange jacket. Tamanoah is on his third rotation at Mossmont, and says he wasn't formally employed on his home island of Tanna.

"Every day we do gardening," he says, "and sometimes we do other jobs, like, a transport driver, driving from our area to the small town and then back."

Tamanoah's father passed away when he was young, and he and his four siblings were raised by their mother. His brother and three younger sisters are still on Tanna, but his oldest sister is also abroad. She is in New Zealand under the RSE scheme, working in vineyards and apple orchards on the South Island.

Tamanoah says he can take home as much as $20,000 after nine months work at Mossmont, but he says not all his colleagues manage to save that much. "No, it depends on you how you spend your money," he says.

After last season, he bought a Landcruiser that a nephew uses to provide taxi services while he's away. He's also building a house.

> ***"We changed our village back home," he says. "We miss our family, but we have to sacrifice for a better living."***

Tamanoah was introduced to Mossmont by Jenelle Joseph, who set up a small charity called Tanna Projects after witnessing the devastation caused on the island by Cyclone Pam in 2016.[1]

"It was threadbare, no leaves on any trees," she says. "There was just nothing, no vegetation, everyone was in tents, and the roads were a mess."

Tanna Projects works with villages around the area of Loanialu, and Joseph says that the environment there remains challenging because of the active volcano Mount Yesur.

“Volcanoes have their own weather system and often the volcanic ash and the acid that comes from the volcano can pull a cloud over the area, so it can get quite cold,” Joseph says. “Unfortunately, it also blocks out the sun for the plants and the fruits and vegetables, so the photosynthesis can’t work, and the plants don’t grow.”

Tanna Projects develops water tanks and gardens, and provides extra food, clothes and blankets, particularly for the elderly and vulnerable. Jenelle Joseph says it’s not just PALM workers and their immediate families who gain from labour in Australia because the benefits flow through to the community too.

Gabriel “Gabi” Pama is from Isabel Province in Solomon Islands. It’s a crisp, sunny June day, and like most of his workmates, Pama shields his face under a peaked cap and dark sunglasses. Around his neck is a bandana to protect his nose and mouth from dust. He says working at Mossmont is “amazing” and has greatly improved his family’s life.

“I was really grateful,” he says. “We’re helping my sister’s children and my brother to pay the school fees and we build the house for my family and my parents as well. Then we send money for making a small business, like a small shop.”

Pama’s wife tends the shop alongside caring for their five children aged six to 14. Pama, who is irrepressibly cheerful, first came to Griffith in 2020, expecting to go home after nine months. Then COVID hit, borders closed, and his stay extended two years. He was worried about his family because even though he was sending money home, the pandemic interrupted regular ferry services and made it hard to get supplies to Santa Isabel, his home island.

“Lucky I have some family to help my family as well, like my Uncle and Auntie at the island,” he says.

Santa Isabel is long, narrow tropical island with a forest-covered mountain spine. Before coming to Australia, Pama lived all his life by the sea. Then COVID-19 locked him into the flat lands of the Riverina, with its baking summers and freezing winters, and he didn’t see the ocean for a year.

“So, yeah, it’s a little bit hard for me, this environment, but I managed to cope with it,” he says. He now speaks fondly of “life in the bush here, in Griffith”.

To add to his initial challenge, Pama was the sole Solomon Islander living and working with teams from East Timor and Vanuatu.

“But I managed to comfort myself and mingle with them and just have fun,” he says.

For the second time, Pama tells me he’s grateful for the opportunity that Mossmont and the PALM scheme provide. He appreciates the chance to send money home, but also to experience a different world. He hints that he would have liked to take his education in Solomon Islands further than circumstances allowed. Agriculture wasn’t entirely new to Pama because, like Stanley Tamanoah, he also worked a vegetable plot at home.

“But that is a small garden,” he says. “When I work here, this was a huge farm, so I was proud and learned a lot of different skills.”

Citrus is the only type of tree common to the nursery and Isabel, and Pama says he’s using what he’s learned at Mossmont to help his community cultivate more productive varieties.

Gabriel “Gabi” Pama is the sole PALM worker from Solomon Islands at Mossmont Nurseries (Peter Mares)

When I ask Pama what he does in Griffith during his time off, I'm surprised by his answer. After five or six days of hard physical work, Pama relaxes by going to the gym and lifting weights. "After that, we just go have a look in the shop, buy some stuff, and come cook, eat, and sleep. That's what I'm doing here," he laughs.

Like other PALM workers at Mossmont, Pama is looking forward to spending three months at home in Santa Isabel when the season ends. But it won't be a holiday. Apart from helping family, and work in the garden and the shop, he'll volunteer on community projects to improve the local school, hospital and church. "I have to involve myself with the community," he says.

Pama is 39. In 2026, he'll return to Griffith for another stint, and hopes to keep coming every year until he turns 50. Bringing back the same workers also makes sound business sense for Mossmont.

"That was the whole reason why I joined the program," says owner Jonathon Moss, "because I wanted to have reliable, skilled employees to continue working at my business, for as long as they choose to."

Before PALM, Moss relied on working holiday makers to meet seasonal labour needs. While he still uses backpackers to do little in between jobs and fill gaps, their motivations are different. "They're here to make the days within their scheme," he says, referring to the 88 days backpackers must work to secure a second 12-month visa. After completing that time, he said, few return.

"I don't blame them," says Moss. "They want to go to the beach and sit on the beach rather than cold old Griffith."

He often trained backpackers, only to have them decide they don't like the work and quit.

"And then you get another one, and you've got to retrain him, and then this would go on over and over and over again."

Since PALM workers are determined to transform the lives of their families, he says, they bring a much stronger work ethic. As an example, he cites rostering a Sunday shift to get orders out during a busy period. That morning, about a dozen backpackers called in sick, the result, Moss suspects, of a big night out. In contrast he tells me the story of a PALM worker who seriously injured his leg in a weekend soccer game and was back at work three days later, despite being in great pain.

Jonathan Moss of Mossmont Nurseries is a huge fan of the PALM scheme (Peter Mares)

"He was hanging onto the side of a tree while trying to cut branches off," says Moss. "I said, I think you've got to go to the doctors with me."

It turned out he had a broken tibia.

"If that happened to me and I broke my tibia, there's no way known that I'm coming to work," says Moss. "That dedication, got to be here, got to be here."

Approved employers under the PALM scheme have a duty to provide for the welfare of their overseas workers. It's a responsibility Moss takes seriously. If anyone is away for more than a day, he says, he calls in to check on them.

"One, they'll never complain that they're sick because they don't want to put you out. And two, when they are sick, they're like, death's door sick."

Moss calculates that if he had to revert to only using backpackers, then he'd need to boost Mossmont's staff by a third to maintain the same production. This is consistent with research by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, which compared the output of the Seasonal Worker Program (the forerunner of the PALM scheme) with that of working holiday makers over a three-year period. It found that seasonal workers were, on average, 20 per cent more productive.[2]

In the despatch shed, Jonathan Moss shows me how productivity gains are realised. It's a busy scene. A forklift shuttles around in the background, while workers unloading trees from the trailers call out "five" or "ten" to indicate how many saplings are in each bundle. Boots slop through muddy puddles, the result of constant hosing to keep the bare-roots moist until the trees are packed and sealed into large wooden crates lined with plastic. Backpackers do the paperwork, while PALM workers select and box the trees. Every now and again, one is discarded.

"There," says Moss pointing to a PALM worker. "He's spotted something that is not good, and he's just tossed it aside."

If he was just using backpackers, Moss says, the tree would have been shipped to a customer and generated a complaint.

Experienced PALM workers — one selecting, one packing — provide two sets of eyes to double check the quality of the trees. Meanwhile, Mossmont's most senior PALM employee, Jonnie Soares, oversees the whole process. The multiple layers of skill have made the business more efficient and improved quality.

"Once you have a skilled PALM worker, they will then train the next lot of skilled PALM workers," Moss says. "I have my staff that have been with me now for eight years, they've moved on to being in control of things like irrigation, or supervising roles. And they're the ones training up the next lot of PALM workers coming through."

> ***"I knew that the program would work for my business," says Moss. "And I knew that I wanted to keep these employees for a long period of time."***

I ask Moss why he can't find Australians to do the work. He says he tried, giving talks at local schools, for example, and engaging with the Clontarf Foundation that helps young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to find secure employment. He says his efforts failed because he cannot offer continuous employment over an entire year.

"An Australian person doesn't want to lose their job on a seasonal basis," he says. "And it kind of makes sense, doesn't it? If you've got twelve months' worth of expenses and nine months' worth of income, well, you've got to find temporary work for the other three months. It's not an ideal situation."

Mossmont's PALM employees, by contrast, make more money in nine months in Australia than they earn in years working for local wages, and they are happy to spend the other three months with their families and tending to affairs at home.

Horticulture is far from the only sector in regional Australia that struggles to find enough workers to meet its needs. Another is aged care.

PALM workers unload bare-rooted trees in the packing shed at Mossmont Nurseries (Peter Mares)

FINLEY REGIONAL CARE

Heading south from Griffith, you soon leave behind vineyards pruned for winter, citrus orchards dripping with fruit and roadside stalls selling oranges and mandarins. Long stretches of the Kidman and Newell highways run gun barrel straight through flat, dry country, and as I drive, I'm puzzled by fluffy white balls littering the roadside. Then I pass a road train and see its haul — great cylinders of raw cotton tightly wrapped in bright yellow plastic.

Farms in the southern Riverina draw on the Berriquin Irrigation Scheme that has supplied water to the region since 1939. Constructed to create jobs during the Great Depression, its "man-made" river runs more than 150km west from Lake Mulwala on the Murray. The canal's original purpose was to provide reliable water to people and stock in this drought-prone region. Today, it irrigates rice and cotton.

"Farms are getting bigger but the staffing on the farms is getting less because machinery has taken over," says Kylie Titlow. "So, you'll find the size of our communities are shrinking, the services available are shrinking."

According to the sign on the way into town, Finley has a population 1864 people. Kylie Titlow is operations manager at Finely Regional Care, a local not-for-profit that runs a 77-bed residential aged care facility, a retirement village, two medical centres, a pre-school, and delivers care at home to residents in an 80km radius. When Titlow joined in 2019, the service was suffering from a dire workforce shortage and struggling to find skilled staff.

"We had an ageing workforce as well, so people had worked here forever, it felt like, and they were coming to the end of their working careers."

Titlow says people were working ridiculous shifts and suffering burnout, so Finley Regional Care started to recruit overseas, and in 2020 brought in its first four carers from Kiribati for a three-year stay (later extended to four) under the Pacific Labour Scheme that would become part of PALM.

Siera, who asked that I only use her first name, was part of that first cohort and landed in Melbourne with just one cardigan.

"And oh, it was freezing!" she says.

I ask if she arrived in mid-winter. "No," she replies with a huge burst of laughter. "It was in March!"

After five years in the Riverina, the cold is one thing Siera is still not used to. It's a sunny day outside, and we're sitting in a heated office that feels almost tropical. But while Siera found the weather chilly, the welcome in Finley was warm, even though COVID-19 locked everyone down almost as soon as she arrived.

"We didn't even get a chance to go buy warmer clothes" says Siera. "One of the girls, she works here, realized that we are all sharing the same cardigan." Siera admitted to her new colleague that she was wrapping herself in a blanket to stay warm on the walk to work. Two days later, her new colleague dropped warm clothes off at her house.

"And then everyone at work heard about it, and they start bringing all their clothes to us, and now we've got a lot of clothes to wear. Heaps of them!"

There was other practical support, like helping Siera and her colleagues buy a car online. "Most people working in here are very friendly," she says. "You feel at home, working with them, because they look after us very well."

"She's my rock": Finley Regional Care operations Manager Kylie Titlow with I-Kiribati nurse Siera (Peter Mares)

Titlow says it was a big change to get overseas workers in Finley, a town where there was previously "no multiculturalism". There were some initial misunderstandings, though she and Siera laugh about them now. Being unfamiliar with Australian food, for example, Siera didn't know the difference between brown and white bread, which she soon discovered was an important distinction for some residents. And while she and her I-Kiribati colleagues eat lots of rice, they did not expect it to be served as dessert.

"We thought that was really, really funny, when they had a rice pudding one night and it got slopped on the plate with the savoury meal," laughs Kylie Titlow.

Titlow, though, felt bad for not giving the new staff a more thorough induction.

"They were just told to go and do things," she says. "You've just got to take it in your stride and go, 'whoops we didn't do that', and that's something I learnt after the first cohort came in."

When the next group of carers came onboard, Titlow included a lesson on setting the table with knives and forks, since people in Kiribati generally eat with a spoon and their hands. Siera's experience has greatly benefited Finley Regional Care and its two subsequent groups of carers from Kiribati.

"I already informed them about what to bring and what they need here," she says. "I always say to them, 'oh, you're so lucky, because you didn't even go through the hard process, because we're here, and know how to deal with things.'"

> ***"She's my rock," chimes Kylie Titlow. "I use her to settle everybody in."***

At home in Tarawa, Siera was a nurse with four years' experience, so she arrived in Finley over-qualified for her caring role. Later recruits from Kiribati lacked those skills and were trained on arrival.

"They completed their full Cert III Australian qualification here, supported on site, and did all their work placement here," explains Titlow. "So, they've got an Australian qualification now."

That was made possible under the PALM Aged Care Expansion Program, which has funded around 700 PALM scheme participants to graduate with a Certificate III in individual care since 2023.[3]

Finley Regional Care Operations Manager Kylie Titlow joins I-Kiribati staff in a traditional dance at the Kiribati National Day Celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

With the sponsorship of Finley Regional Care, Siera is now on the pathway to becoming a permanent resident of Australia via a 482 skills-in-demand visa. In Griffith she reconnected with Taateti, a friend since her school days in Kiribati, who had been coming to Australia as a seasonal worker for more than a decade. Recently they married, with Kylie Titlow standing in as family at the wedding, and Taateti now works at Finley Regional Care too.

Siera says they've decided to settle in Finley because Australia offers more opportunities and a better education for their children. But she misses family and saves up her holidays to go back to Kiribati once a year for four or five weeks. While she has some relatives scattered around Australia, it's hard to see them often.

"In Kiribati, where I live, it's only one hour from end to end [of the island] so you can go visit your family anytime you want."

Siera sends money home to support her parents, who are retired and living on a small pension.

"Oh, they love me when it's payday week!" she laughs. "And I'm like, yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll send you money, just go take it off from the ATM."

"They always say, 'Oh, thank you, we got a lot of food in the freezer, we don't have much before.'"

When she visits Kiribati, Siera can see the difference good nutrition has made to her parents' health. Most I-Kiribati of the same age stay home and don't go out much, she says, while her parents remain active.

For Siera, the only downsides of the PALM scheme have been homesickness and culture shock. "It's a good program, you get benefit from it," she says, "and even your family have benefit from it."

It would be hard to keep Finley Regional Care running without PALM scheme staff, says operations manager Kylie Titlow. She cautions that using the scheme involves a significant financial commitment and a lot of administration to satisfy the requirements of being an approved employer. "There is a lot of to and fro," she says, "but it's worth it in the end."

Mossmont Nurseries and Finley Regional Care show that the PALM scheme can be a win-win. It can fill labour market gaps and boost productivity by providing decent jobs at award wages in conditions where workers feel valued for their contributions. Returning workers retain skills, pass them on to new arrivals and ease the transition into Australian life. Remittances sent home to the Pacific build family homes, educate children and young adults, and establish small businesses. But as UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou points out, the quality of a PALM worker's experience in Australia "is very reliant on how good their employer is".

Not every employer will visit the families of staff in their homeland, as Jonathan Moss does, or learn a traditional dance and perform it with her I-Kiribati colleagues as Kylie Titlow did at the Kiribati national day celebrations. But it is reasonable to expect employers be attentive to staff welfare and address problems as they arise. Having a decent boss, decent working conditions and decent housing should not be a matter of luck. It would be good to be able to conclude that problems in the scheme arise from a few bad apples, rogue employers who give PALM a bad name. The reality is more complex.

PALM has great potential to be a win-win program. Workers and employers can both benefit at an individual level, as can Australia and sending countries at the national level. But along with considering how the benefits of PALM are shared, we also need to look at how the costs are distributed.

ENDNOTES

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3.

Tied to the job

FRUSTRATED EXPECTATIONS

The noodle bar is quiet when I arrive. It's Saturday and "Samuel" has promised to introduce me to a couple of Fijians employed at the local abattoir under the PALM scheme. I offer to buy them lunch, and shortly before midday, Samuel texts to ask if it's okay if another two PALM workers join us. "Great", I reply, thinking that I might now meet four workers, rather than two.

We take a table big enough to seat six but add extra chairs and tables when more workers arrive than expected. Soon we're spilling over onto the adjacent row of tables. In all, over a dozen PALM workers show up. Some are too shy — or perhaps too wary — to speak to me. Most, though, are eager to share stories and vent frustrations about their experiences at the meatworks.

"Wednesdays we've been told not to work," one says. "The contractor is asking us to apply for annual leave on those days. We don't want to."

It's winter, and the flow of livestock to be slaughtered has slowed, so for the past month they've been reduced to a four-day week, in apparent breach of a rule that requires long-term PALM workers to be offered "full time hours in every week of their placement". There is provision for workers to be stood down if they cannot be usefully employed for reasons beyond an employer's control.[1] Perhaps the stand down is within the rules, perhaps not. Either way, it's left the Fijian workers disgruntled.

In other seasons, when the abattoir is busy, workers get asked to do an extra shift on Saturdays. When this happens, they complain, they don't get paid the time-and-a-half hourly rate they believe they are entitled to.

One man tells me that if he gets injured on the job, he keeps working because he doesn't want to lose any pay. "I got kicked by a beef [steer], but I finished the day," he says. "You just keep working if you get hurt, to earn more money." Yet PALM workers are entitled to sick leave and workers compensation, so if an injury forces them to stop work, they should not lose pay.

Another worker tells me that they get called to work even when they are sick and have a medical certificate.

Most say their hourly rate has barely changed since they started in 2022, though they have become much more productive. All arrived untrained. After two months, once they were proficient at their jobs, management increased the number of cows, sheep and goats to be slaughtered daily. Yet the only time they noticed a significant rise in their take home pay was in July 2024, after the government's Stage 3 tax cuts kicked in. There have been small increments in the award rate since the workers started, but most say they still earn less than $25 an hour. That suggests they are being employed at or below level three of the Meat Industry Award, though some of the work they describe seems to be at a higher grade.[2]

"I work on the kill floor, the most hard job there," says one.

"The pay doesn't meet the work we do," says another. "We know all the jobs."

A third man tells me that they are training new recruits from China. "We're teaching them. They don't speak English."

"They're doing the easy jobs, we're doing the hard jobs," someone else adds.

Only one worker says he's paid at a higher award rate as a boner and earns about $27 an hour.

Samuel is originally from Fiji too, though he's now a permanent resident of Australia. He was once employed at the same meatworks, so when a bunch of Fijians turned up in early 2022, he reached out make them feel welcome. Two contingents, about 45 people in all, came to work at the abattoir, expecting to stay four years on long-term PALM visas. Fewer than half of them still work there.

Some have gone home to Fiji, the workers tell me, while others remain in Australia but have left the abattoir to work elsewhere, in breach of their visa conditions. Some were sacked for not turning up, for coming late, for being drunk at work or for not performing to the expected level. The workers acknowledge that some terminations may have been warranted, but say they came without warning, and they feel many workers should have been given a second chance. One colleague, for example, was dismissed for failing to connect his safety harness while working at height. There was no accident or injury, but he was sacked anyway.

The costs of the Fijians' airfares and visas were recouped from their wages during their first three months at the abattoir. One says that after paying for accommodation he was left with less than $200 a week to cover all his other expenses and had no money to send home. Initially, the Fijians were housed in dormitories on a highway outside town and charged $180 a week to share rooms, plus extra for transport to and from work. Most have since found cheaper, better places in the private rental market.

The workers' central grievance is that conditions in Australia have not lived up to what they believe they were promised when they were recruited.

> ***"It's different to what they told us before we came," says one. "The work is much harder, and the cost of living is much higher."***

"Our contract has not been honoured," says another. They say they expected to be trained as skilled workers, and then sponsored to stay in Australia. Whether such promises were made, or arose from a misunderstanding, is impossible to judge, but the Fijians feel let down and ill-treated.

> ***"They speak to us not respectfully," says one.***

> ***"If you read the bible about Moses bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, it's like that," says another. "They treat us like slaves."***

The Fijians are not directly employed by the meatworks, but via a labour hire firm, and "Bob" thinks this is where many of the problems lie.

> ***"The labour hire company gets paid more than their share," he says. "They are the greedy ones taking your money."***

I meet Bob separately from the other Fijians. He too arrived under the PALM scheme to work at the abattoir but is now trying to transition onto a student visa to train as a nurse. He's been encouraged to do so by the local health service, which struggles to attract qualified staff. Bob caught their eye while volunteering at the local aged care home. During outings he would help people get on and off the bus, and at other times he would sit and chat with residents, especially those with Pacific Islander heritage.

"Give them a smile, brighten someone's day," he says. "That's how we were brought up. When you see older people, you treat them as if they were your Mum and Dad, or your grandparents."

Bob also volunteers with the district fire service (as do two other PALM workers who I met over lunch in the noodle bar).

"Volunteering was part of my life in Fiji," he says, adding that there it was mostly organised through the church.

Bob has four brothers and a sister. As the eldest, he had to shoulder family responsibilities when he was still in school because their father was bed-ridden for five years with diabetes and died from the complications. One of his brothers, who also has diabetes, is in a wheelchair, and his blind sister has severe autism and needs constant care. When Bob got his Australian tax return, he used the money to renovate the family home to bring the bathroom inside to make life for his siblings easier.

In Fiji, Bob trained as a welder, but only earned about F$36 a day (A$24.00), so he switched to driving taxis, where he could make almost double that. When he got the chance to come to Australia for four years, he jumped at it. Bob's mother passed away eight months after he arrived, but he didn't go home. In fact, he says he hasn't been back to Fiji once, so as not to spend precious money on airfares.

"I can decide to enjoy now and struggle later or struggle now and enjoy later," says Bob philosophically, though he also admits to feeling that he's missing out as he watches his younger brothers marry and have children.

"I am the main bread winner for the family," he says. "It was not my choice, but it is what it is."

I don't have the opportunity to delve so deeply into the lives of the workers who I meet in the noodle bar, but I get a sense that they also shoulder weighty responsibilities.

"Paul", who plays rugby with a local team, tells me he takes home about $800 a week and sends $200 to family in Fiji, though he is not yet married. "Ollie", who has three children, sends home $280 a week, and says the money feeds his family and pays school fees. "The cost of living is very high in Fiji," he adds. "Tomasi" manages to send $360 every week. One week it goes to his wife and kids and the next to his parents and brother to help support his nieces and nephews. "Peni" has seven children at home. To make ends meet he takes on casual work outside his Monday to Friday shifts at the abattoir. This is risky because it breaches his visa conditions.

Despite three and a half years' experience at the meatworks, these PALM workers lack formal qualifications. And that worries them since their time in Australia is coming to an end and they'll soon be going back to Fiji. After six months at home, they can apply for another four-year PALM visa, and despite their gripes about the abattoir, all of them want to return to Australia. But they fear having to start again as entry level meat workers despite having the skills and experience to work at higher pay grades.

After our meeting in the noodle bar, Samuel rings me to ask if there's any way for the workers to get their skills recognised before they go home. He suggests a Certificate III in meat processing. When I inquire with the Department of Workplace Relations, I'm advised that employers can help workers get recognition of prior learning through a registered training organisation and apply to recover some costs through the PALM scheme's skills development program.

Yet this is a distant possibility for the workers I meet because they are not directly employed by the abattoir. Their contract is with the labour hire agency. What's more, I'm told that these two firms have fallen out, and the meatworks has not renewed the agency's agreement. Besides, neither business has an incentive to pay for skills recognition for workers who are close to the end of their contracts and will soon leave Australia. And if the departing Fijians are replaced with a new intake of overseas workers, chances are they could be backpackers rather than PALM workers.

A LABOUR MOBILITY SCHEME THAT LACKS MOBILITY

In November 2025 there were more than 11,000 PALM workers employed in meat processing in Australia, making up almost a quarter of the industry's labour force.[3]

Unfortunately, the experiences of the Fijians I met are not unique. The AIMEU, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union, says it's identified cases of PALM workers suffering poor-quality accommodation, excessive rents, demands to work when they are sick or injured, and threats of deportation to intimidate them from voicing concerns.

The union told a parliamentary inquiry that it had exposed labour hire operators paying PALM workers less than local employees and sometimes less than the award rate. It said recent reforms requiring pay parity had improved conditions for PALM workers, but, in response, the industry is turning back to working holiday makers who have far fewer protections.[4]

Rather than employers using the PALM scheme and the working holiday program, the union would prefer migrant workers were recruited under a labour agreement — an industry-specific deal that enables employers to sponsor overseas workers to fill skills gaps. Under the meat industry labour agreement, workers are guaranteed a minimum wage of close to $70,000 a year, about 40 per cent more than the Fijian PALM workers were earning. Plus, they can possibly transition to permanent residence. But they need a Certificate III in meat processing and must pass an English test to prove that they handle basic communications.[5]

Most long-term PALM workers are employed in meat processing. Reproduced by permission of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – Library Sales Kim Honan © 2021 ABC

Under a labour agreement, workers are still tied to their approved employer, but have greater flexibility to change jobs, at least in theory. They can seek out an alternative sponsor, and, if they quit, they have 180 days to find a new position before their visas expire. PALM workers lack these options, and the union says this makes them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Matt Journeaux, federal secretary of the AIMEU, says tying PALM visas to specific employers creates a power imbalance.

> ***"Workers are often too afraid to raise concerns around safety, housing, wages and conditions, knowing the right to stay in Australia could be withdrawn at any time if the employer chooses to do so."[6]***

There is an irony in the name PALM: although it's a labour *mobility* scheme, it effectively restricts movement. Workers move from the Pacific to Australia but have almost zero mobility in the labour market after they get here. Instead, they are bound to their approved employers for the duration of their stay, whether that be nine months or four years.

The result is that some PALM workers put up with conditions that Australians could walk away from. "At the end of the day, it's a human right to be able to leave a workplace that is not right for you," says UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou. "And we're saying that these workers can't do it."

The government's pledge that PALM workers enjoy "the same rights and protections as Australian workers" is not fulfilled, because if PALM workers leave a rotten job, they also lose their right to stay in Australia. Even though the PALM scheme builds in extra supports and protections (see **Section 4**), problems persist, and a strong body of research supports the view that tied visas render workers vulnerable to abuse.

The expert panel commissioned to review Australia's migration system in 2023 concluded:

> ***"Restrictions on a visa holder's ability to change employers and dependence on an employer's continued support to access the Australian labour market ... limit a migrant worker's capacity to resist, report or leave exploitive situations."***[7]

The NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner agrees:

> ***"The ILO, and numerous scholars argue that on economic, as well as ethical, grounds the practice of tied employment (employer-sponsored visas) should be avoided because it promotes exploitation, depresses wages and performs the role of a quasi-'subsidy' to particular employers, occupations or sectors."***[8]

There is a live debate about whether PALM workers should be able to change employers more easily. Sometimes this is referred to as "portability", though this is a slightly confusing term. "Portability" can be a euphemism for "tradability", an arrangement under which approved employers can share workers if those workers give written informed consent.[9]

Some of the Ni Vanuatu employees who I met at Mossmont Nurseries in Griffith, for example, were "on loan" from another approved employer, a stone-fruit grower, whose picking and pruning had ended. Supplying the workers to Mossmont ensured that they were fully employed for the entire duration of their nine-month visas. Similarly, during a quiet period, Mossmont "lent" some of its East Timorese employees to a melon grower in the Northern Territory. Such arrangements can work out well for everyone and ensure that labour is more efficiently allocated. In government consultations in 2022, agricultural employers strongly supported portability "to ensure workers have sufficient work and employers have access to a sufficient number of workers to account for differing seasonal crop harvesting."[10]

The more contentious question is whether *workers* should have a greater say over where they are employed. In government-speak, this is called "worker-initiated portability". Currently it is extremely difficult for workers to initiate a transfer to a different employer, even with official help. All governments participating in the PALM scheme employ Country Liaison Officers to support their nationals in Australia. One CLO told me about a woman working in Griffith whose husband was employed in Rockhampton. He was trying, without success, to arrange a transfer between employers so that they could live together.

Jonathan Cook, national organiser for the Australian Workers Union, says current arrangements "give way too much power to the employer". Cook supported a group of horticultural workers who went home after their first nine-month stint in Australia on the understanding that they would return to the same business the following season. When they weren't asked back, they found a different firm willing to take them instead. The first employer, though, refused to sign off on their transfer.

Cook says seasonal PALM workers don't speak out for fear employers will say, "well, if you don't like it, I won't bring you back next season."

"You really are beholden to your sponsor to facilitate that process of transfer," says Ken Dachi from Welcoming Australia. We meet in Leeton in the Riverina, where Dachi leads the Welcoming Workplaces initiative and collaborates with local government, community groups and employers to support PALM workers. While the process of changing jobs looks seamless on paper, he says, it's actually very difficult and generates a lot of confusion. He agrees that greater mobility for PALM workers is needed and could help address other problems in the scheme.

AWU organiser Jonathan Cook argues that if PALM workers could change jobs more easily, this would drive improvements in employer behaviour. He thinks it would also boost productivity by allowing workers to move to better paid positions where their skills are more effectively used.

Independent studies support the push for PALM workers to have greater mobility in the Australian labour market.

A survey conducted by the Australian National University and the World Bank asked PALM workers to rate their experiences in Australia on a scale from one-to-ten. The average score was 8.5. Most respondents were very satisfied with their jobs, wages and housing. Yet more than one in four said they would prefer to work for a different employer, and the researchers recommended making it easier for them to do so.[11]

A much smaller survey by the Migrant Justice Institute found that 97 per cent of PALM workers wanted to return to Australia, suggesting that they prized the opportunity to work here. But two thirds reported that they would change to a different employer if allowed. Dominant motivations for wanting to change employers were to be treated better and for safety reasons. As the researchers note, workers' desire to continue participating in PALM does not necessarily reflect strong satisfaction with past experiences. They called for "supported portability" so that PALM workers can move between approved employers.[12]

The Grattan Institute is emphatic: PALM workers should be able to change employers more easily "to reduce the risk of exploitation".[13] The government's labour market advisory body, Jobs and Skills Australia, recommended trialling worker-initiated mobility for experienced PALM workers as a first step.[14]

If PALM is to live up to its name, then workers' need greater mobility within the Australian labour market. The challenge lies in working out how to facilitate the right to change jobs without deterring employers from using the scheme, since employers may be reluctant to recruit Pacific workers if there is no guarantee they will stay with their business. But the status quo of tied visas is fraught with risks too. Denied the right to change employers, some PALM workers abandon the scheme and take jobs outside it, even though this breaches their visa conditions. This is sometimes referred to as "absconding", though the preferred term is "disengaging".

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4.

Disengaged

PALM AND PROTECTION

I chat with "Vanessa" and her partner "Pita" in the back of a church hall in regional Victoria. Vanessa is from Solomon Islands, Pita from Vanuatu, and they have three-year-old Australian-born daughter. She's healthy now but spent the first six weeks of her life in hospitals. Vanessa and Pita came to Australia on the PALM scheme and met picking blueberries on the NSW mid-north coast. They were working for a labour hire contractor and found the conditions intolerable.

"We were paying $180 a week each to share caravans," says Vanessa, "and it was very, very cold".

After deductions for rent, airfares and transport to and from farms, she says, they were barely making any money.

"If we stayed with the program, we couldn't do anything back home, like helping families, helping brothers and sisters with school fees."

The blueberry business is booming around Grafton and Coffs Harbour, and targeted inspections by the Fair Work Ombudsman have identified the region as a horticultural hot spot for breaches of workplace laws, with labour hire firms the worst offenders.[1]

When Vanessa fell pregnant, she knew that she could not stay on the PALM scheme to have her baby. PALM workers don't qualify for Medicare or parental leave, and antenatal care, perinatal care and birthing are not covered by their private health insurance in the first 12 months. But nor did she want to go home to Solomon Islands and separate from Pita. Vanessa says they heard that if they could pull together enough money, then they would be able to pay a migration agent or a lawyer to help them stay in Australia permanently.*

So, they quit blueberry picking and set out to look for better paid jobs, joining the ranks of PALM workers who have disengaged. (This is sometimes referred to as "absconding".)

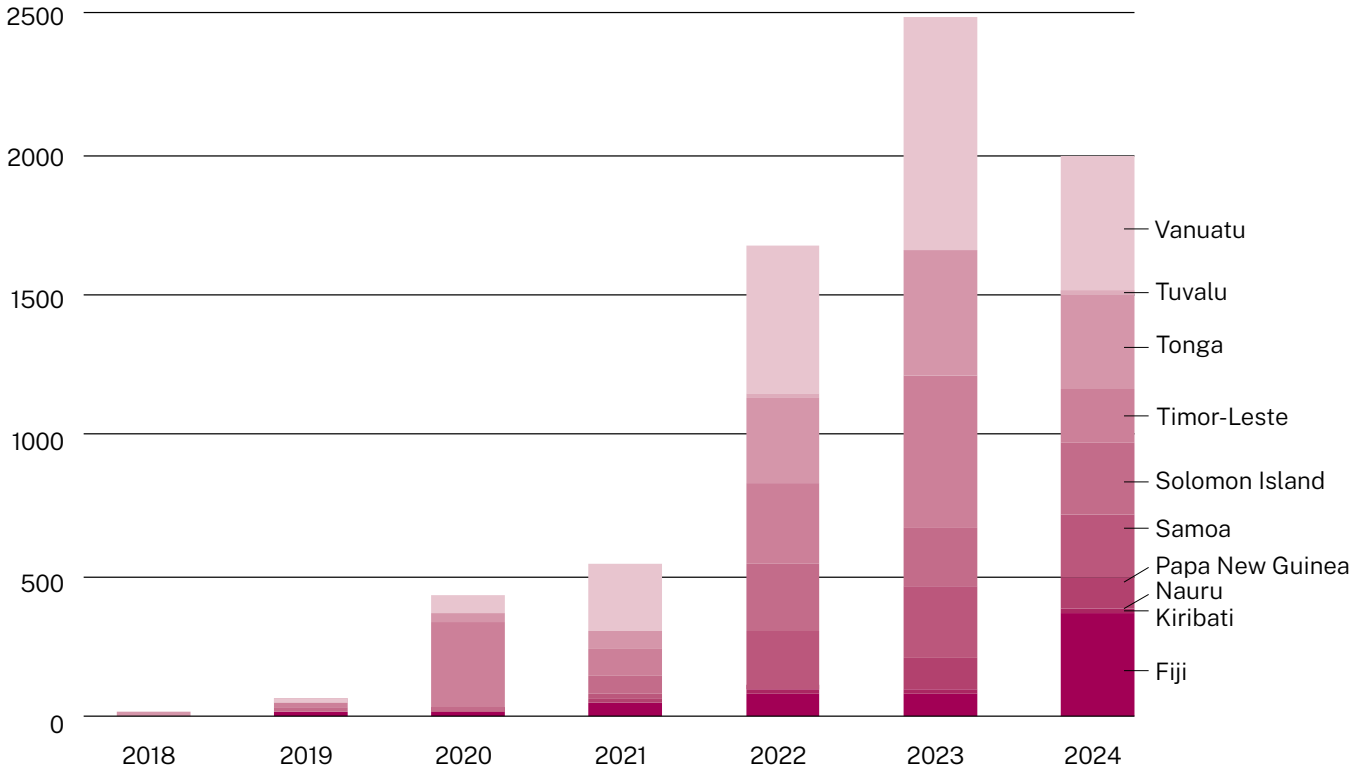
There are no official figures on the number of PALM workers who have disengaged, but a rough proxy can be found in the number who end up seeking protection as refugees.

Home Affairs data shows that about 7500 former PALM workers sought protection between mid-2017 and March 2025.† There were, though, barely any protection visas lodged before the pandemic hit in 2020. In that year, numbers jumped suddenly to more than 400, and then climbed higher, peaking at almost 2500 applications in 2023, before falling again in 2024 (see chart). About two thirds of the applications were lodged by workers from three countries — Vanuatu (30 per cent), Timor-Leste (20 per cent) and Tonga (17 per cent), with Solomon Islands, Fiji and Samoa accounting for about 10 per cent each.[2]

* I spoke to many PALM scheme workers who had been approached about similar scams, with the amount required usually set at $20,000.

† The data covers applicants who initially came to Australia on the subclass 403 visa issued under PALM and its predecessors, the Seasonal Work Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme. Workers don't necessarily lodge protection applications in the same year they disengage since they may also spend time living in Australia in breach of their PALM visa conditions

Protection visa applications by people who initially held a PALM visa



The data covers applicants who initially came to Australia on the subclass 403 visa issued under PALM and its predecessors, the Seasonal Work Program and the Pacific Labour Sceme.

Source: **Home Affairs** | *Created with* **datawrapper**

The rise in protection visa applications does not appear to correlate with political developments in Pacific countries or Timor-Leste that may have made PALM workers more fearful of returning home. It does, however, correlate with a rise in the systematic abuse of the protection system, not so much by PALM workers, as by dodgy labour contractors and migration advisors bringing people to Australia on visitor visas, mostly from countries in Asia.[3]

This is how such scams generally operate. With the connivance or inducement of local agents, people arrive in Australia as tourists and then apply for protection as refugees. While their cases are assessed — a process that can take years — they are granted bridging visas, which usually come with work rights and access to Medicare. The number of PALM workers applying for protection is tiny compared to this larger problem.

The Albanese government has sought to counter this racket by speeding up decision making. In 2023, it invested an extra $160 million to restore integrity to Australia's refugee protection system.[4] About a third of the money went to increasing staff numbers at Home Affairs to enable "real-time priority processing". As a result, the department makes decisions eight times faster than before.[5] The aim is to swiftly reject people who do not fear persecution and are seeking to extend their stay in Australia for other reasons. Rapidly weeding out weak claims undercuts the business model of using bridging visas to remain lawfully in Australia and work.

The problem, though, reappears at the next stage when departmental decisions are reviewed. Here, too, the federal government acted. It abolished the politicised and overloaded Administrative Appeals Tribunal and replaced it with a new Administrative Review Tribunal. Extra resources were allocated to protection matters and applicants were offered free legal advice, in the hope of forestalling unwarranted claims. These measures tipped the scales a little, with the asylum backlog falling from previous peaks, but the tribunal is only funded to finalise about 60,000 cases this financial year and has more than 100,000 matters on hand. (Protection is just one area of jurisdiction.) As a result, the tribunal can't manage its caseload in a timely manner.[6]

As of 31 July 2025, there were about 27,000 refugee status determinations awaiting an initial decision by Home Affairs and a further 42,000 active cases at the tribunal. The biggest backlogs involved applicants from China, India, Malaysia and Vietnam and the median time to finalise a decision at the Tribunal was 175 weeks.[7]

Such long delays enable people to live lawfully in Australia for extended periods even if they lack strong claims to protection as refugees.

People who seek protection in Australia are issued with a bridging visa. Different types of bridging visas come with different conditions attached. A Home Affairs spokesperson told me that if a person lodges a protection application while their previous visa remains valid, then they will generally be granted a bridging visa with work rights and access to Medicare while their claim is considered.

If a person lodges a protection visa after their visa has expired, they generally won't get work rights or Medicare, though they can apply for work rights if they suffer financial hardship.

For disengaged PALM workers, a protection application may be an attractive option. If they apply before leaving the PALM scheme, then they will be able to work for any employer, anywhere in Australia, rather than be tied to one boss, in one industry, in one region. In Griffith, for example, I was told that disengaged PALM workers on bridging visas were earning $60 an hour working night shifts processing chickens — more than double what they were earning in horticultural jobs. What is more, they will gain access to Medicare, rather than paying private health insurance premiums of at least $60 a month. Even if they leave the PALM scheme first and apply for protection after their PALM visa has lapsed, they may still be able to gain work rights.

Yet the idea that PALM workers deliberately manipulate the system suggests a degree of foresight and calculation that does not match messy realities. Anecdotal evidence suggests PALM workers leave the scheme for a variety of reasons. Many don't understand what visa they are applying for and put their faith in the false promises of predatory migration agents.

As a result, the circumstances of disengaged PALM workers vary greatly. Those on bridging visas with work rights are arguably better off than before, while those without are vulnerable to terrible exploitation. Similarly, Medicare improves their access to healthcare in the event of illness or injury, but without it they are at heightened risk because their private insurance lapses when they leave PALM.

Disengaged workers are also prey to scammers.

"They're vulnerable to the fake contractor and the fake loan shark," says Kristen Johns, Australian Workers Union organiser for the Riverina and Darling area. In 2024, she says, a group of disengaged workers left Griffith for Gladstone after a scammer there promised them $20,000. Some quit full-time jobs with reasonable employers. After discovering the scam, part of the group managed to return to the Riverina, while others were stuck in Queensland.

Some disengaged workers have not applied for protection and have no lawful status. Once they are removed from Australia, they will be barred from returning. It's rational for them to avoid detection for as long as possible and live and work below the radar to amass some savings (which was probably the motivation for joining the PALM scheme in the first place).

Media reports on the exploitation of Pacific workers often fail to distinguish between abuses occurring within the PALM scheme and abuses of disengaged workers. This can unfairly sully the reputation of PALM and approved employers.

Statistically speaking, most PALM workers are likely to have their asylum claims denied when they are found not to fear harm in their homelands. Home Affairs data shows that final decisions were made on around 2000 protection applications lodged by nationals from Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu in the first nine months of 2025. Only 74 people were granted protection, a grant rate of less than 4 per cent. Applications from Papua New Guinea present a different story. In 242 final decisions over the same period, protection visas were granted to 121 PNG nationals, a grant rate of 50 per cent. In other words, in all the PNG cases finalised, one in two applicants were found to need Australia's protection.[8] (These statistics include all protection decisions involving nationals of these countries, not just PALM workers.)

A Fijian PALM worker picking berries in Coffs Harbour (Diwan Shankar)

Some of the disengaged workers I met harboured fears for their safety at home. Vanessa, for example, is afraid of her family's retribution for falling pregnant to a man from another country and having a child out of wedlock. She has applied for a protection visa and is now doing laundry and catering work in an aged care home. She says she likes working with elderly people and wants to study for a certificate in aged care.

"Mel" is in a similar situation. She came from Solomon Islands to Queensland to pick berries. After Mel fell pregnant, the father of her baby deserted her, and she lost her job. She ended up in the Riverina, living in a cockroach infested house with ten people, and sleeping with her child on a mattress on the floor. She is estranged from her family, who have threatened her with violence for having a child without being married. With the support of local volunteers, Mel lodged an application for protection. She is now on a bridging visa while her case is assessed and has a steady job and better housing.

Marcia, another disengaged PALM worker, comes from the Papua New Guinea Highlands. She spent three years working for a large vegetable grower in South Australia and says while the work was hard, she was well treated by the company, provided with reasonably priced housing and promoted to team leader. When her contract ended, Marcia chose not to return to PNG.

"Pacific Island people are jealous," she told me. "My boyfriend used to beat me and broke my teeth, that's why I don't want to go back. I don't feel safe to go back." Marcia has married an Australian and applied for a partner visa.

POOR ADVICE AND DISENGAGEMENT

The Department of Home Affairs is active on social media warning PALM workers that the penalties for giving false information in refugee applications "include large fines, jail time of up to 10 years, or both."

Other posts warn that an unsuccessful application "will stay on your immigration record for life" and "make it harder for you and your family to ever return to Australia".[9] Vanessa, Mel and Marcia had legitimate fears, but PALM workers with no concern about returning home may still be drawn to seeking asylum, especially if, like Vanessa and Pita, they've been treated unfairly.

The Fijian meatworkers I met over lunch in the noodle bar were looking to extend their time in Australia and asked me about protection visas. I told them that refugee status was reserved for people who fear persecution in their homelands, and they should not apply for any other reason. But dodgy migration agents, opportunistic employers and Australian-based relatives may give them different advice. Some of their dissatisfied colleagues had already quit the meat works to seek better jobs with the encouragement of family elsewhere in Australia.

To PALM consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu this is a familiar story.

"They ring their uncle, because he's lived in Australia for sixteen years," he says. "And then he'll say to them, oh, just come and work in construction up here, you can get $35 an hour, you'll earn more money."

Originally from Bairnsdale in East Gippsland, Koroisamanunu is a Fijian Australian who now advises PALM scheme employers. He is also on the board of the NSW Council for Pacific Communities but spoke to me in a personal capacity. Koroisamanunu says workers often follow family advice because deference to elders is deeply embedded in Pacific cultures. This was brought home to him when he participated in a village meeting in Fiji as a young man.

"I spoke up at the age of twenty-four or something, and everyone was looking at me, like, who are you to start talking?"

They had asked if anyone had an opinion, he says, but they didn't mean anyone, they meant anyone old. "You don't get to have an opinion until you're forty or fifty," he laughs.

Social justice advocate Dr Mark Zirnsak from the Uniting Church‡ has also come across family and members of the local diaspora encouraging PALM workers to disengage and stay after their visas expire: "They will say, 'Just stay on and keep working in Australia and the chance that Australian border force will eventually catch up with you is pretty low'".

But Ema Vueti from Pacific Islands Council Queensland says PALM workers only seek advice from family or the diaspora after they experience problems at work. She says that workers start from a position of respect and trust towards their employers. "PALM participants don't willingly walk away if the employers are ethical and look after their employees," she says.

‡ The Victorian and Tasmanian Synod of the United Church in Australia is a contractor under the PALM scheme's Community Connections program to provide services that help build positive relationships between PALM scheme workers and their local communities, but Dr Zirnsak spoke to me in his capacity as a social justice advocate drawing on his long involvement with Pacific workers.

INSUFFICIENT WORK AND DISENGAGEMENT

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, disengagement was alarmingly high at 10 per cent. By last financial year it had fallen to just 3 per cent. In other words, in 2020-21, ten in a hundred PALM workers were abandoning the scheme, but in 2024-25 only three in a hundred left. What changed?

Zirnsak says it was easy to identify the drivers of large-scale disengagement during the pandemic, when a lot of PALM workers got stuck in Australia.

"We had a whole lot of workers who'd come here, who were supposed to go back home, and then their own governments, for very good health reasons, decided to close the borders and said we're not taking back our own citizens," he says.

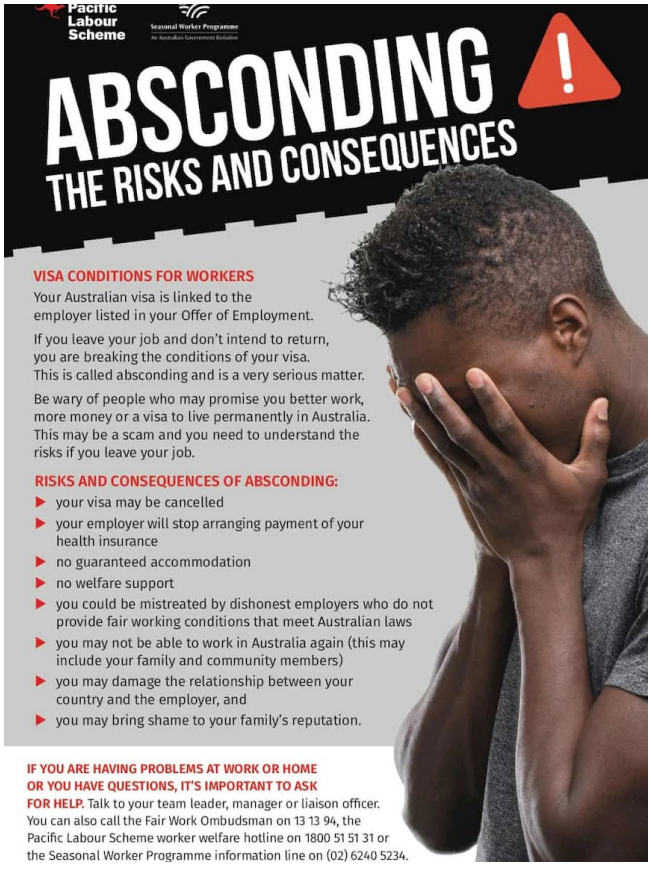
Workers were tied to employers who had no work to offer them, which meant they had no income and were destitute, says Zirnsak. "So, a whole stack of those people disengaged and left the scheme and looked for work elsewhere to support themselves, which absolutely made sense."

The Australian Workers Union says earlier in the PALM scheme some horticultural employers were also "labour banking" by bringing in too many workers at the start of the season. They would recruit enough staff to cover intense picking periods, but that meant there was not enough work to keep everyone employed either side of the harvest peak.[10]

Weather events can also leave farm workers without an income, such as when storms or heavy rain make it impossible to work.

The government has addressed underemployment and insufficient income with new rules that require employers to provide at least 30 hours a week of paid work averaged over a month. If fewer than 20 hours of work are available in any week, employers must also pay workers' accommodation and transport costs. They must now ensure too, that workers take home at least $200 a week after deductions for things like airfares, transport and accommodation.[11]

A change in the horticultural award also improved conditions for seasonal PALM workers. In April 2022, the Australian Workers' Union secured a Fair Work Commission ruling that guarantees a minimum wage for picking or pruning.[12] Previously workers could be paid by output rather than time, which made it harder to earn a decent income, especially early or late in the harvest, or in poorly tended orchards. Employers can still offer piece rates as an incentive to work faster, but every worker must now receive the minimum hourly rate, no matter how much they pick or prune.



A 2021 government poster to deter "absconding" by Pacific workers

FLAWED GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

Disrespect, abuse, dangerous workplaces, underpayment and excessive deductions still drive disengagement, though. And while there are mechanisms that are supposed to enable workers to resolve problems, they are not straightforward.

To address payment issues workers must go to the Fair Work Ombudsman, for bullying or unfair dismissal it's the Fair Work Commission, while workplace safety is regulated at state level. The system is complex to navigate for Australians, let alone temporary migrants with limited English.

> ***"They are allowed to nominate somebody to help them," says Tarek Koroisamanunu, "but they have to have that somebody in the first place."***

In the six years to 2025, the Fair Work Ombudsman commenced 288 investigations into approved employers, recovering more than $807,000 for 2000 workers and issuing more than 80 compliance and infringement notices.[13] Some employers have been prosecuted and fined for breaches of workplace laws, but this generally only happens when workers are union members.[14]

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) must approve employers before they can join the PALM scheme, which is supposed to screen out bad apples, and it can revoke approved status for non-compliance. DEWR regards this as a measure of last resort and has used it once in the past two years. DEWR also offers support to PALM workers through a 24-hour 1800-number and an online grievance form.[15] In an average month the support line receives about 240 calls, and 161 grievances were lodged in 2024-25.

"I don't want to put down DEWR," says Koroisamanunu, "because I know that they're doing the best that they can, but the best that they can is not really adequate."

He says the staff who answer support line calls usually only speak English, though DEWR is reportedly working to employ more staff of Pacific heritage and add extra interpreting services. Written grievances must fit a complicated bureaucratic template.

> ***"The grievance procedure and the grievance line only work for people like me, grieving on behalf of other people," he laughs. "If I find the system difficult and annoying, what possible chance does a Pacific Islander that's speaking English as a second or third language have?"***

Latileta Gaga is a national organizer at Australian Workers Union originally from Fiji. She says the DEWR grievance mechanisms are slow and ineffective. When we met at the AWU Sydney offices, Gaga was supporting a PALM worker who had raised an issue through official channels but heard nothing back. She was trying to convince him to be patient and not to disengage and move interstate to join family who had lined up another job.

"The reason for disengagement is because of the lack of enforcement and obviously the lack of turnaround time in terms of dealing with grievances," she says.

Kristen Johns, the AWU's Griffith-based organiser, says in her experience PALM workers are unlikely to speak candidly over the phone to someone they don't know. Even face-to-face, she says, Pacific workers are reluctant to open up to an Australian they have never met before.

> ***"You can walk into a room of men ... and they won't say a word," she says. "You'll talk to them, ask them if everything's okay, and you'll have a big smile on their face and nod their head. And then six months later, you might find out that someone in that room had two busted ribs or whatever and they didn't even tell you."***

Johns says face-to-face conversations and phone calls don't get far unless there is an existing relationship. After she's shared a few laughs and established rapport with a worker, she says, they are more likely to talk about their concerns. Rather than a grievance phone line, Johns suggests an indirect approach, like an app. That would have the advantage of enabling workers to pinpoint their location, since labour hire agencies move horticultural workers frequently and they don't always know where they are. Johns identifies two other factors that prevent the grievance line working well.

> ***"PALM workers don't want to complain," she says. "And they're scared to complain."***

Ema Vueti from the Pacific Islands Council Queensland says PALM workers fear being sacked for speaking out — and not without reason. When complaints lead to investigations and the whistle blower is identified, she says, some employers may exact retribution. "After a few weeks the worker is calling us either from the airport or from somewhere, saying, 'hey, I've just been terminated'".

Diwan Shankar is a Country Liaison officer employed by the Fiji government to support Fijian PALM workers in Australia. He's also had cases of sacked workers taken straight to the airport before they could seek redress from the Fair Work Commission. "They don't want to give them the chance," says Shankar. "That's the kind of threat they do. In the middle of the night, I'll come pick you up, take you to the airport."

OTHER DRIVERS OF DISENGAGEMENT

Workers who are legitimately dismissed or charged with criminal offences might also disappear into the Australian community to avoid the shame of being sent home early.

Fiji is a small place, says Shankar, and when a worker is sent home, word goes around quickly, and stigma follows.

"Those who have done well have built their houses and all that, bought the cars, they're happy," he says. "But those who leave halfway through, midstream, they are hurt."

Kaia Vagi Oda Toua says workers who get sacked feel like they've failed their families. Toua, who migrated from Port Moresby more than three decades ago, provides volunteer support to PALM workers from Papua New Guinea. She says workers at risk of being sent home might disengage because they don't want to face the disappointment of their families and worry about what people will say behind their backs.

Toua tells me about worker in Adelaide who ended up sleeping in parks after he was sacked for having an accident in a company car. One night he sent Toua a video. "It was him saying goodbye to his family," she says. She thought he was going to end up dying on the streets. Toua managed to track the man down, bring him home and feed him. "He was not all there," she says. "His stomach was nearly to his back. He hadn't eaten for nearly two weeks." He was jumpy, thinking someone was trying to hurt him. Toua contacted his family and arranged for him to travel home to Papua New Guinea, where he had a child he'd never met, who was born after he left for Australia.

> ***"His family were so relieved that they actually found him alive," says Toua.***

Workers may also leave the scheme due to irreconcilable conflict with workplace colleagues or housemates in overcrowded living quarters. Women, who make up about one in five PALM workers, may disengage if they fall pregnant, or because they are subjected to domestic violence, sexual assault or harassment.

> ***Often women choose to leave the town, or the surrounding areas, to go elsewhere, because it's traumatic for them to remain in the same place with the perpetrator," says Kirrilly Salvestro, Deputy CEO of Linking Communities Network in Griffith, the specialist domestic violence service for the Western Murrumbidgee region.***

Her service will support women to go to the police to take out apprehended violence orders and ideally in such cases the perpetrator would be forced to find somewhere else to live or work. But Salvestro says that rarely happens.

"Often, the employer will see a woman as a troublemaker, and not have them back on site. A lot of employers then make the woman leave the property and leave the employment."

ACCOMMODATION

Unacceptable and overpriced housing is another driver of disengagement.

When I first spoke to Country Liaison Officer Diwan Shankar on the phone, he was on his way to Emerald in Queensland to address the complaints of 32 newly arrived workers. When we met in Southwest Sydney a few weeks later, he described what he found there.

"All 32 wanted to run away," he says. "There's four in a room. Two bunk beds each [room] and they pay $211 each person per week. $844 for one week, for one room. You can get a house for that!"

"There's not many toilets," he says "You have to line up for it. If somebody gets diarrhoea, everybody gets diarrhoea."

"Plus, when they're put into one cramped room, four people in one room, there's no privacy to talk to their families and wives and children," says Shankar. This undermines the workers' mental health if they are missing family and the tight-knit community of village life while struggling to adapt to a new job, new culture and the isolation of remote Australia.

> ***"We've had cases whereby members have to walk out on the road in the middle of the night to speak to their families," says union organiser Latileta Gaga. She says workers should be able to contact their families without others eavesdropping.***

Shankar describes visiting a remote site where there were holes in the floor, a contaminated water supply and only one operational bathroom in housing that accommodated both men and women. He says workers who spoke up were victimised.

"In fact, six of them ran away from there," says Shankar.

Overcrowded PALM worker accommodation in Queensland's Lockyer Valley Region (anonymous)

Despite being an official employee of the Fiji government, Shankar's attempt to resolve the issue was cut short. He was talking with the Fijian workers over a bowl of kava when an overseer walked in, asked what he was doing and told him to get out.

A study for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute concluded that migrant workers in employer-provided accommodation were the most likely to suffer expensive and inappropriate housing, but the least likely to complain. It found a notable reliance on the use of shipping containers, caravans and bunk beds (some designed for children). Conditions for long-term workers staying four years were no different from those of short-term workers staying a few months.

PALM scheme regulations require affordable, safe accommodation that is reasonably close to the workplace at a comparable cost to local rents. DEWR must approve every accommodation plan, but this appears to be largely a desktop exercise and the AHURI report found monitoring was poor.[16]

"I mean, a photo doesn't tell the whole story, right?" says Tarek Koroisamanunu. "I can take a photo from one corner, and I can miss the hole in the wall from where I'm standing."

AWU national organisers Latileta Gaga and Jonathan Cook (Peter Mares)

Jonathan Cook from the Australian Workers Union says DEWR lacks the resources to inspect accommodation and the approval exercise is largely tick and flick. He sees historical echoes with shearers' disputes in the wool industry. "What we ended up with in the Pastoral Award is we have shearing quarters, we have cooks, we have the infrastructure required for that transient workforce to be there for a short time and to be housed," he says.

Cook also draws a comparison with the resources industry, saying miners would riot if they were expected to pay $150 a week to live in the same conditions as PALM workers.

"The horticulture industry doesn't make the profits that the mining or offshore oil and gas industry makes, so we're reasonable about that," he says. "But one of the solutions should be, or must be, that farmers have to carry some of the cost."

Some employers do this. Rock Ridge Farm in the Queensland Tablelands built a "Pacific village" to house 130 seasonal workers during their nine-month contracts. There are only two people per bedroom, and the development includes a commercial kitchen that accommodates 80 people at a time, a large laundry, a recreation area and an outdoor pool.[17]

Ema Vueti from the Pacific Islands Council Queensland says she's visited places where she'd happily holiday with her family. More ethical employers, she says, invest for the long term, and include facilities like gyms, because they want their workers to be healthy and happy. Tarek Koroisamanunu recalls a 41-year-old PALM worker asking how many others would be sharing his room. When the worker realised that he'd have it to himself, he teared up. "He's like, this is bigger than my house," says Koroisamanunu. He says some approved employers provide amazing accommodation and don't charge any rent, while others act like greedy property developers.

Sometimes, what looks like a housing problem can be a cultural preference. Some well-meaning Australians complained that a group of PALM workers had a large lounge room with no couches. But they preferred to sit on the floor and wanted to keep the room largely empty so they could use it for weekend church services. Kylie Titlow from Finley Regional Care provided beds as required under DEWR rules but her I-Kiribati staff to say they preferred to sleep on mattresses on the floor.

TIMELY INTERVENTION

In some respects, Diwan Shankar and Tarek Koroisamanunu are on opposite sides of the fence. In a former life, Shankar was a trade union leader in Fiji, whereas Koroisamanunu used to work for a major Australian labour hire agency employing seasonal workers from the Pacific.

When it comes to the PALM scheme though, there is much they agree on. Shankar says most employers are good and the scheme offers great benefits to Pacific Islanders and their governments. Koroisamanunu describes the program as excellent and says the income that flows back to the Pacific improves lives for generations.

"There's people going on to higher education, they're getting degrees and qualifications," he says, "and that whole families changed forever, because now the next generation will be supported by somebody who's actually earning a proper liveable wage."

Both men think disengagement can usually be avoided with timely mediation to work through misunderstandings between workers and employers.

"We've seen the numbers come down now because we go and talk to them, and we try and sort out the issues," says Shankar.

Koroisamanunu says the biggest driver of disengagement is a lack of communication.

"The workers get in their mind that they've got a problem. And sometimes they do have a genuine problem, and sometimes they're being ridiculous. Either way, they don't then know how to communicate that problem."

> ***"Unless you've got somebody helping them with their problems and with their concerns, then they make it up as best they can, and that's where everything goes awry. Half of the time, they wouldn't have disengaged if somebody had stepped in in the middle of that situation."***

The other thing that Koroisamanunu and Shankar have in common is that they are both overloaded trying to help. Koroisamanunu is based in Goulburn in NSW, and his day job is running a consultancy advising PALM scheme employers, but much of his time is spent as a volunteer helping PALM workers solve problems.

"I've had workers travel from as far as Adelaide, and as far as Rockhampton, to knock on my door and ask for help," he says. "I've had workers ring me from Western Australia and say, 'I need help with this'".

Matters could be as simple as explaining how to convert a Fijian driver's licence into an Australian one, or as complex as acting as an interpreter and de facto advocate before a judge. Koroisamanunu tells me about a PALM worker who had a duty solicitor assigned to the case at the last minute and was disqualified from driving for four years. Koroisamanunu, who is not a lawyer, helped lodge an appeal in the County Court and asked for leave to support the worker in court. After a five-minute hearing, the license suspension was reduced to three months. Koroisamanunu says the problem was a lack of understanding on all sides.

> ***"If you consider the amount of work that I do, filling in some of those gaps, it's more than a full-time job," he says.***

Shankar does have a full-time job, but he's stretched very thin. He is one of three Fijian CLOs in Australia (soon to be four) and his remit extends to around 3000 Fijians employed in horticulture, aged care, the meat industry and hospitality, scattered across often remote parts of NSW, Queensland, the NT and the ACT.

PULL OR PUSH?

In June 2025, senior Australian official Jan Hutton told a meeting in Fiji that while PALM workers disengaged due to ill-treatment in "some cases", more often it was because "unscrupulous operators" fed them "disinformation that there were better opportunities ... to find employment somewhere else."[18]

Hutton, who leads work on the PALM scheme for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, based her statement on the results of a major study commissioned by the government. But the government has refused to make those findings public so the evidence cannot be interrogated.[19]

The causes of disengagement are hotly debated. In the view of economist Stephen Howes from the ANU's Development Policy Centre, disengagement is primarily driven by pull factors such as offers of higher pay outside the scheme or the greater flexibility of the bridging visas that can be obtained by seeking protection as a refugee.[20] The counter view emphasises push factors. It argues that the main factors driving PALM workers to leave scheme are inadequate income, unreasonable deductions, wage theft and unfair treatment.[21]

Of course, pull and push factors can operate simultaneously: workers may be driven out because they don't earn enough, and simultaneously attracted by the lure of better pay elsewhere. But disengagement has fallen sharply since the government changed the PALM scheme rules. Far fewer workers are leaving the scheme now they are guaranteed at least 120 hours work a month, a threshold level of take-home pay after deductions and a minimum hourly horticultural wage rather than piece rates. This suggests push factors outweigh pull factors in shaping workers' decisions.

This is Diwan Shankar's view. He acknowledges that people will entice workers with promises of more pay for lighter work, or with scam visa deals, but says most workers leave due to poor conditions and bad treatment.

"The fact is that these people are genuinely fed up. That's when they ran away."

> ***"I keep saying that you get the employee that you deserve. The truth is if you're good, you'll get a good one. If you're bad, you're going to get a hiding."***

Tarek Koroisamanunu expresses a similar view. Companies that care for their workers have far fewer problems than those that don't.

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5.

Equal, unequal and not always fair

TAX AND SUPERANNUATION

A fundamental principle of the PALM scheme is that Pacific workers enjoy the same rights and protections as their Australian colleagues.

As discussed, this principle is not realised in practice because PALM workers are tied to their employers by their visas, and they lack the same freedom as Australians to change jobs. But there are inconsistencies in other domains, notably, tax, superannuation and healthcare. While not "rights and protections" in the narrow sense of industrial relations, they also raise questions of fairness and equal treatment.

Long-term PALM workers who stay in Australia for four years are regarded as residents for tax purposes. This means they pay the same rates of tax as Australians: they qualify for the tax-free threshold of $18,200, are taxed on earnings above that amount at the relevant marginal rate and can claim legitimate work expenses as deductions.

Short-term PALM workers, who stay nine months at a time, are classified as non-residents for tax purposes, and treated differently, even if they return to Australia year after year. As non-residents, they do not qualify for the tax-free threshold, but instead pay a flat 15 per cent tax on all their earnings.

In a minority of cases this could leave them worse off. If a seasonal worker only worked 38 hours per week for nine months at the basic horticultural wage, they would pay more tax than a resident. But since PALM workers are trying to earn as much as possible in a season, most do a lot more than 38 hours a week which pushes them into a higher tax bracket. So, the flat 15 cents in the dollar rate leaves them better off.

Dancers at the Kiribati National Day celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

"They're working very long hours, they're doing 12-hour days and working weekends," says Connie Vitale, who leads Western Sydney University's tax clinic that provides free advice to PALM workers.* "Based on that, they're actually paying less than what the resident taxpayer in Australia would be paying."

Vitale says confusion sets in though, when short-term PALM workers are encouraged to complete a tax return, perhaps by a well-meaning friend, employer or advisor who thinks they may be eligible for a refund. Instead, PALM workers may find themselves facing a tax bill.

"They're not supposed to be doing tax returns," says Vitale. "Part of their visa conditions, is 'do not complete a tax return'."

Superannuation is a more problematic issue for PALM workers. Like Australians, PALM workers are eligible for superannuation contributions and over four years could amass more than $15,000 in their accounts.[1] Yet, since they won't retire here, the only way to access these savings is to withdraw them as a Departing Australia Superannuation Payment or DASP.

Organising a DASP is a complicated process that must be completed overseas, where there is little prospect of PALM workers getting help from someone who understands the Australian superannuation system. PALM workers must have an active Australian bank account, complete an online form in English, provide certified identity documents and evidence that they no longer hold an Australian visa.[2]

The upshot, according to the Australian Workers Union and the peak employer body, Approved Employers of Australia, is that thousands of Pacific and Timorese workers are denied their superannuation entitlements.[3] According to a World Bank calculation about one third of seasonal workers' combined retirement savings was unclaimed in 2017, amounting to $11.4 million.[4] Given the growth of the PALM scheme since then, the sum of unclaimed super now sitting in Treasury coffers could be considerably larger.

With support and advice from tax clinics PALM workers can put the process of claiming their super in train before leaving Australia. When they finally get their money, though, they'll find the Australian government has claimed a big chunk of it in tax. DASP payments to PALM workers are taxed at 35 per cent, which means they lose half their total savings, since, like everyone else, they've already paid a 15 per cent tax on their contributions. As a result, low-income workers from the Pacific are taxed more heavily than Australia's highest income earners, who pay a marginal tax rate of 45 cents in the dollar.

When Australians leave the workforce and access their super, payments are tax free. The rationale for the high tax on PALM workers' superannuation is that they are accessing their savings early, rather than waiting until they retire.

"So, they're not entitled to tax concessions on the superannuation that they have," says Rob Whait, who manages the tax clinic program at the University of South Australia.

Yet it is government visa rules, not workers' choices, that force them to withdraw their super early. Whait sees no logic in setting the tax rate at 35 per cent and says this is an arbitrary levy set by parliament.

> ***"There doesn't seem to be any consistent justification for why that's so high," he says. "The 35 per cent plus the 15 per cent contributions tax means they're getting taxed at 50 per cent. When it comes to PALM workers, you've got people who are on quite a low income. That's disproportionate, that's wrong."***

* Tax clinics are a government funded initiative, with students giving advice under professional supervision.

In a joint paper, Whait and Vitale investigated three alternatives to current policy.[5]

Option one would allow departing workers to transfer their Australian superannuation into an equivalent fund in their home country. All PALM countries except Timor-Leste have provident funds for retirement savings. A similar arrangement is already in place for New Zealanders leaving Australia, who can roll eligible funds into KiwiSaver accounts under the Trans-Tasman Retirement Savings Portability Scheme.[6]

Option two would allow PALM workers to receive wages in lieu of superannuation payments (though this would treat them differently to Australians).

Option three is to pay PALM workers' superannuation entitlements directly into eligible pension funds in their homelands.

While PALM workers may prefer the second option — immediate extra income instead of deferred savings — Whait and Vitale argue that the third option is the most acceptable approach and the right thing to do since it treats Australians and PALM workers equally.

A fourth alternative would be to revise the tax on PALM workers' early superannuation withdrawals down to zero. There is a precedent for legislating different DASP tax rates for different visa holders. Working Holiday Makers, for example, pay a 65 per cent tax.[7] In 2016 the government tried to increase this backpacker tax to 95 per cent.[8]

If the government reduced PALM workers' DASP tax to zero it would lose revenue — my rough estimate suggests the annual cost would be at least $50 million.[9] While this is a considerable sum, all this money would flow instead to PALM workers' home communities, satisfying the PALM scheme's central aim of supporting economic growth and development.

HEALTHCARE AND MEDICARE

In the five years from 1 July 2020, 77 PALM workers died in Australia.[10] Abul Rizvi, a former deputy secretary in the immigration department, declares the death rate "staggering".[11]

Each death represents a personal and family tragedy. Yet when compared to the number of deaths amongst Australians in the same age group, the number of PALM workers who have died in Australia appears unremarkable.[12]

Last financial year, fatalities were 60 per cent lower than two years earlier, falling from 29 deaths to 12, and only one death in the last five years was found to be work-related. In 2022, a Tongan man was killed in an abattoir accident in Western Australia. The company was prosecuted for "failing to provide a safe work environment and causing death of a worker" and fined $785,000. The union criticised the penalty as "very small".[13]

Traffic accidents accounted for about a third of all PALM fatalities over the past five years. To address this, DEWR set up a safe driving hub to help workers obtain an Australian licence and learn road rules and safe driving techniques.[14]

Medical problems are the other significant cause of deaths, and PALM workers may arrive in Australia with severe but undiagnosed complaints. If they fail to seek timely advice, health problems can escalate quickly, but workers are reluctant to visit a GP because of the cost.

PALM workers are not eligible for Medicare and must pay for private health cover. Basic policies start at around $60 per month, have an excess of at least $500 and exclude GP visits and the cost of prescriptions. Temporary visa holders do not benefit from subsidies under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Pre-existing illnesses and pregnancy are not generally covered in the first 12 months.

The official advice to PALM workers is that they may need to pay "large up-front fees" for hospital visits except in emergencies and then claim these costs back. Radiology may also require upfront payment.[15] Since workers send the bulk of their wages home, few have the money on hand to pay such charges. The result, says a senior medical professional from a state health service, is that PALM workers put off seeking care until they are very, very sick.

"They pay a lot of money for insurance that they are fearful to use," says "Dr. Smith" who requested anonymity in order to speak freely. Since workers are so focussed on earning money to support their families, they are reluctant to spend their wages on medical appointments.

Dr. Smith commends private health insurers for providing some good information in relevant languages but points out that claiming on insurance is not simple, and PALM workers may lack the language skills or internet access to lodge online claims. Private health is a piecemeal and unfair, the doctor argues, and PALM workers should be eligible for Medicare.

The PALM scheme uses social media to improve road safety (Australian Government)

> ***"It is the most reasonable thing to do to enable a healthy, reliable workforce. Even if they have to wait in an Emergency Department, they are going to present earlier and be less likely to require complex ongoing treatment. If we want a workforce that is well, it's sensible to help them look after their health."***

Access to Medicare would reduce the administrative burden on employers, who must ensure that workers maintain private their health insurance, and often organise it and deduct premiums from their pay. Access to Medicare would also put PALM workers on an equal footing with their Australian counterparts, adding greater substance to the claim that they enjoy the same rights and protections.

It would also have significant public health benefits, since some PALM workers come to Australia with complex health issues that are not picked up in pre-departure screenings. Citizens of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, for example, have much higher rates sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne diseases than Australians, including chronic Hepatitis B, HIV, TB and syphilis.[16] Fiji has seen a recent surge in HIV infections due to a spike in injecting methamphetamines.[17]

The Australian government provides anti-retroviral treatments for anyone in Australia who is HIV positive, regardless of whether they have a Medicare card. Dr. Smith says this is good policy but first requires people to come forward and to get a diagnosis. Public health messaging around HIV in Australia is focussed on men who have sex with men and so is poorly targeted for Pacific populations. In PNG, for example, HIV transmission is mostly between heterosexual partners.

Dr. Smith says the risk of PALM workers transmitting HIV and other diseases to the wider population is relatively low, but there is a higher risk of transmission between PALM workers, risks that are heightened when PALM workers delay seeking care.

“If people come forward, they can be treated and managed, minimising harm and reducing public health risk,” says Dr Smith, whose main concern is for people carrying diseases they are not aware of who can become very ill without timely care.

> ***“It’s harrowing to realise how vulnerable so many people are,” says the doctor. “Women who are pregnant are presenting very late in pregnancy with syphilis that has not been treated. They have very little access to reproductive health care and are presenting so late that they have pelvic abscesses and sepsis and need two weeks in ICU.”***

Stephen Howes, director the ANU’s Development Policy Centre, agrees that Medicare should be extended to PALM workers and suggests this could be seen as part of the scheme’s aim of promoting development and wellbeing in the Pacific.

“We’re directly benefiting individuals who need help, so I think that’s a good thing for government to spend money on,” Howes says.

Dr Smith also identifies a pressing need for comprehensive, culturally appropriate reproductive and sexual health advice for PALM workers. One example of what is possible was a wellness weekend in Mareeba, Queensland in 2024. More than 370 Pacific Islanders participated in an event designed to provide education on sexual and reproductive health in a fun, welcoming and culturally safe environment. But such events are the result of determined efforts by local service providers and employers, rather than being built into the scheme.[18]

In her in-depth report, ***It’s not illegal to be pregnant***, researcher Lindy Kanan argues that the PALM scheme needs to re-think its approach to pregnancy.[19]

Kanan takes issue with the government’s claim that PALM workers “have the same rights and protections as Australian workers”, pointing out that PALM workers, unlike their Australian counterparts, cannot receive government funded paid parental leave. While Australian workers can access safe, free maternity services through Medicare, PALM workers cannot. Kanan notes that the PALM scheme aims to promote gender equality and social inclusion in Pacific countries, yet this approach is lacking when workers are in Australia.

In her interviewees, Kanan found that PALM workers often express ‘shame’ about being pregnant and worry about the implications for their current and future employment. Pregnant workers fear being fired and sent home, and possibly blacklisted for future work by their national government. This makes it unlikely that they will turn to their country liaison officer for support. As a result, women commonly hide pregnancies and don’t get regular ante-natal checks. Kanan came across cases where employers only found out about pregnancies after women had gone into labour, sometimes at work.

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6.

Partnership, not aid

MORE THAN MONEY

It's an overcast June afternoon and the floodlights are on at the Bon Thomas Reserve in Melbourne's western suburbs. In light rain, the Shepparton Bulls are playing the Brimbank Bucks. It's third versus second in the Victorian rugby championship league, with a small but passionate crowd watching a tough, tight game.

"Legs! Legs!" come the shouts as a Bulls player goes in for a tackle. "Push! Push!" as the sides hunker down for a scrum. "Reset! Reset!" after a turnover. Other calls are in Polynesian languages I don't understand. Most players on both teams are of Pacific heritage, and around half Shepp Bulls first eleven are PALM workers from Samoa, Fiji and Tonga.

"Shepp Bulls have given them something to look forward to during the week after long days of work and then on the weekend they are excited to go and play," club manager Mellisa Silaga tells "That Pacific Sports Show" on ABC TV.[1] The story captures the Bulls' coach telling his players to mind their language because the pastor has come to watch the game. Before running onto the field, they bow their heads in collective prayer. Afterwards, they raise their voices in collective song.

> ***"I really miss my country. I miss food, my friends, especially my parents and my siblings," Danny Patea from Samoa tells the ABC. "This club, it's my second family."***

> ***"We share things. We talk about things," says Fijian abattoir worker Kitione Seruisavou. "We solve our problems together, playing with the Shepparton Bulls team."***

The Shepparton Bulls play the Brimbank Bucks (Peter Mares)

Late in the game at Brimbank, only one point separates the teams until a last-minute try confirms the Bulls victory. At the end of the season, the Bulls lift the Championship trophy for the third year in a row. This is a story being played out all over Australia — sporting clubs in regional towns rejuvenated by PALM workers.

"They've saved a lot of rugby teams," says PALM scheme consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu. "There are clubs that reopened because the Islanders moved to town."

Koroisamanunu is vice president of the Taralga Rugby Club in the NSW Southern Tablelands and says the team is "nearly one hundred per cent Pacific Islander."

In South Australia's renowned winegrowing district, the Barossa Valley, the Rams rugby club has about 45 players from the Pacific, mostly Fijians, with a sprinkling of Tongans and Samoans. PALM workers make up about 60 per cent of the senior men's side, and there are PALM workers in the women's team too. President Fraser Vivien says PALM workers have made a huge difference to the Barossa Rams. Beyond helping to win games, they are changing the culture of the club for the better.

"They've been an absolute breath of fresh air and exciting part of the club," he says. "From the style of play to their general calmness off the field. Kava ceremonies, showing a lot of respect for seniors in their community and their club … it really does make a huge difference to the way things get done."

Cricket in Stanthorpe in Queensland's Southern Downs has been enlivened by an influx of players from Vanuatu, including at one stage, seven members of the national women's team. Valenta Langiatu thought working overseas to support her family would end her sporting career but in Stanthorpe she took the field for the local men's side and hit the winning runs in the grand final.[2] Labour hire company Icomply supported Vanuatu's national players to take leave from their horticultural jobs to compete in the T20 quarter finals in Abu Dhabi.[3]

PALM workers also set up their own mixed team, called Vanthorpe, to compete in the local T20 competition and finished the 2024 season undefeated. The final was played soon after an earthquake killed 14 people in Port Vila, including PALM worker Valerie Kalkoa, a single mother who had just returned home. The team donated its $1000 prize money to support her son, and residents and businesses donated thousands more for earthquake victims.[4]

Most analyses of the PALM scheme focus on the benefits flowing back to Pacific nations, especially the remittances that workers send home to their families. But the program is changing Australian communities too, and not just through sport.

A Uniting Church minister told Tarek Koroisamanunu that only a handful of parishioners used to attend her services, but now 25 or 30 locals turn up on Sundays. As PALM workers swell the congregation, their presence attracts more locals too.

"Churches have seen a massive influx," Koroisamanunu says. "It's like going to a concert, right? Because all of them can sing."

Ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers in Goolwa, South Australia, formed a string band that started playing at a local church and was soon offered a regular gig at a tourist market in Victor Harbor.[5] PALM dance troupes and choirs appear at annual shows and festivals and perform in nursing homes. PALM workers volunteer with state emergency services[6] and country fire brigades[7] and were quick to fill sandbags and carry people to safety when floods hit towns like Shepparton, Nangiloc and Lismore.[8] In Brisbane, PALM workers spend their weekends cooking meals to be handed out to people sleeping rough.[9]

Then there are the benefits that PALM workers bring to local economies — not just filling crucial jobs but also supporting local businesses. The fish and chip shop in Rutherglen in Victoria's northeast was on the point of shutting before Koroisamanunu brought 120 Pacific Islanders to the town. The owner told him their custom had saved her business. Many grocery stores in regional towns now advertise "Islander Food".

Players and spectators at the T20 cricket final in Stanthorpe honour PALM worker Valerie Kalkoa who died in the Pt Vila earthquake in December 2024. (Golden Lab Creative)

IS PALM AID?

The value of the remittances generated by the PALM scheme is well documented. On average, workers send home $1500 a month for an estimated total of $450 million in 2024-25.

A summary of Australia's 2025-25 official development assistance budget notes that PALM workers' remittances "come on top of Australia's ODA flows", which suggests they are somehow equivalent.[10] The scheme is often framed as supporting economic development in the Pacific and East Timor, and some Australians I spoke to during my research referred to it as an "aid program".

The Department of Foreign Affairs advised me that around $154 million in PALM scheme spending was categorised as official development assistance over the four years to 30 June 2025. Last financial the amount was $53 million, which is less than three per cent of Australia's ODA to the Pacific. ODA funding supported the recruitment, preparation, mobilisation and reintegration of workers, the development of recruitment databases and paid for technical expertise on monitoring, evaluation, gender equality, disability, social inclusion, and gender-based violence. DFAT also provides ODA funding to the ANU and World bank to conduct the Pacific Labour Mobility Survey and for PALM projects carried out by International Organization for Migration.

It may be reasonable to count some PALM related spending as official development assistance, but we should be wary of perceptions that the PALM scheme is a primarily an "aid" program. Admittedly, the scheme is not available to the citizens of other developing countries, so Pacific nations and Timor-Leste get preferential treatment, but PALM is not a favour that Australia bestows on Pacific nations since benefits flow both ways. There are national interest considerations too, given Australia's strategic rivalry with China.

Shops in regional towns are now catering to Pacific Island tastes (Peter Mares)

> ***"Yes, they're sending money back home, but it's nowhere near as much as is being put into the Australian economy," says Pacific researcher Dr Kirstie Petrou from UNSW Canberra. "I think it's much better conceptualized as we're helping each other rather than Australia is helping the Pacific."***

Government modelling shows that the PALM scheme "makes a significant contribution to Australia's economy". Between July 2018 and October 2022, PALM workers helped generate almost $1 billion in industry value, the vast bulk of it in regional Australia. This included $289 million in profits for 250 approved employers. Workers spent $137 million on goods and services and $74 million on rent, made $6 million worth of donations to local communities and paid $71 million in taxes.[11] DFAT was unable to provide more recent data, but given that the scheme is now larger, it is likely that the benefits to Australia are now greater too. This will be tested by a new study on the PALM scheme's economic contribution due to be completed in 2026.[12]

The considerable benefits that PALM workers generate for Australia raise an important question: do we, as a nation, adequately support them in return?

SUPPORT FOR PALM WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

The obligations of approved employers are laid out in mind-numbing detail in the PALM scheme guidelines.[13] Welfare must be embedded into employers' systems and practices through a "welfare and wellbeing plan" that shows, among other things, how employers will make sure workers can join in community activities such as sport and religious services, drive safely on local roads and receive appropriate sexual health advice.

Employers must appoint one "welfare and wellbeing officer" with demonstrated cultural competency for every 120 employees. Those welfare officers must meet workers face-to-face every fortnight and help PALM employees with problems, including access to healthcare. Workers must be able to reach "appropriately trained personnel" on a 24-hour emergency number. The guidelines appear comprehensive, but as with approved accommodation plans, the quality of implementation varies greatly.

Industry consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu says he was a massive advocate for appointing welfare managers in the workplace, but it less happy with how this panned out. Smaller companies, he says generally told an existing employee, "Congratulations, you're now the welfare person." In some workplaces, though, he says welfare officers do an outstanding job.

Under a three-year $12.2 million contract won by the Salvation Army, the PALM scheme also funds Community Connections, a program delivered in partnership with New South Wales Council for Pacific Communities, the Pacific Island Council of Queensland and the Uniting Church of Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania).[14] While the brief includes providing ad hoc relief and pastoral support to PALM workers during natural disasters or critical incidents, Community Connections' main purpose is not welfare but networking and coordination of diaspora support. The program aims to "build positive relationships between PALM scheme workers and their local communities, helping workers settle into life and work in Australia".[15] Ema Vueti, President of the Pacific Island Council of Queensland says it helps workers and employers tap into local services and community support.

Direct support for individual PALM workers is provided by Country Liaison Officers appointed by participating governments. But 17 CLOs and two labour attaches struggle to meet the needs of more than 30,000 PALM workers scattered across Australia's six states and two territories, often in remote locations. Not all CLOs are full time. Kaibwa Eritai, for example, the Griffith-based CLO for I-Kiribati workers in NSW, is paid ten hours per week. Yet it takes him two hours to drive to Wagga Wagga where about 100 I-Kiribati meat workers are employed, and another 90 minutes to reach I-Kiribati aged care workers in Albury.

When Eritai invites me to dinner at an Italian restaurant in Griffith, I get the impression that he does a lot of unpaid overtime, and that his wife, a full-time health professional, provides voluntary backup, especially in cases involving women.

Eritai's responsibilities are wide-ranging, complex, time-consuming and, at times, emotionally taxing. When we met, he was supporting an I-Kiribati worker who was dismissed by his employer after being injured in a car accident. The man could not work for six months and needed to stay in Australia to continue his treatment. His medical costs and lost income were reimbursed by third party insurance, but because he was no longer employed, his PALM visa was about to lapse. The worker was depressed and wanted to go home to see his family. But if he went home, then he wouldn't be allowed back to Australia.

Country Liaison Officer Diwan Shankar (bottom right) joins PALM workers supporting the Fijian rugby team at a match in Newcastle (Diwan Shankar)

"Marital infidelity, that's my big headache," says Eritai. While extramarital affairs might be seen as a private matter, responsibility to family is a key value in Kiribati, and Eritai feels a duty to get involved. "I tell them they must choose," he says "Either you are with your partner back home or with your partner here. You can't have both."

Attending church is another national value that Eritai seeks to uphold among I-Kiribati PALM workers in Australia. But they complained that local services were boring, and they fell asleep during English-language sermons that were hard to follow. So, Eritai organised a monthly service in the I-Kiribati language that people travel from far and wide to attend.

The most challenging task that CLOs face is dealing with worker deaths. When 41-year-old Tuota Kirition died of unknown causes at an abattoir in Wagga Wagga, Eritai not only had to organise the practical details of contacting her family and repatriating her body, but also respond to the grief of a tight-knit I-Kiribati community.

Kaminieli Varo, 32, from Fiji drowned in November 2024 while swimming in the Murrumbidgee River. Varo had left the PALM scheme and was doing casual jobs but lived with other Fijians who were still engaged on the program. When Varo died, his colleagues were distraught.

> ***"They're grieving and they're still working every day" says Fiji CLO Diwan Shankar. "It's not like in the Fijian system. The village will all stop by, all grieve together."***

Varo had been planning to return to Fiji before Christmas and Shankar helped to pack up his possessions to send to his family.

> ***"My hardest day in this work," he says. "Real hard. When I saw his children's toys, which he was going to take to his children in December."***

The 30,000 PALM workers scattered across regional and remote Australia come from ten different countries with diverse cultures, traditions and languages. Some PALM workers have left professional jobs in urban areas; others, come from tiny villages and have never previously worked in the formal economy. While sending governments are concerned for the welfare of their workers, they also want to protect their national reputation as a source of reliable labour, and approaches to advocating for workers vary.

Some CLOs see their primary task as protecting workers' welfare and defending their interests. Others act more as disciplinarians, warning workers not to cause trouble or embarrass their country. Research by the Migrant Justice Institute suggests that workers fear that raising grievances with their CLO in case their government casts them as troublemakers and decides not to recruit them, their relatives or fellow villagers for PALM in future.[16]

Even with earnest endeavours and good intentions, the mechanisms set up to support PALM workers around Australia remain patchy. Local communities often step up to fill in the gaps.

COMMUNITIES STEPPING IN

I met Kitione Waqanisau in early May 2025, about a month after his injury. Waqanisau had been away from his wife and four children for 18 months, labouring at an abattoir in the Adelaide Hills. At the start of his second winter in Australia, he decided to join his workmates to play with the Barossa Rams.

"In Fiji, we play rugby," he says. "Last year, some of the boys were playing there, and this year, I just started. My debut game, I broke my leg."

For more than two months, Waqanisau had to spend every weekday home alone — leg up, crutches at the ready — while his five Fijian housemates were at work.

"I just stay in the room and watch a movie. Then sleep, wake up, check in with the kids, and make my food and go back to bed. Every day I call them. If not, they will call me."

Waqanisau and five colleagues share a well-appointed, brand-new house with four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Two men share the master bedroom, one sleeps in the lounge and the others have their own room. The rent is $112 a week each, but after his personal leave was used up, Waqanisau had no income.

PALM workers are advised to set aside money for eventualities like this, but that flies in the face of realities, given that most send home as much of their wage as possible. Waqanisau, for example, was remitting $400 a week. While his medical bills were covered by insurance, he had to rely on the generosity of others to stay housed and fed. The Barossa Rams set up a GoFundMe page and auctioned wines at matches to raise money for Waqanisau and his family, one example of how communities all over Australia voluntarily support PALM workers.

Paul Maytom AM, former Mayor of Leeton Shire in NSW, knows what it's like to labour all day picking fruit. He moved to the Riverina from Newcastle in 1967 at the age of 18.

"I heard you can make money putting a bag around your shoulders and picking fruit, so that's why I came to Leeton," he says.

I asked him why so few Australians do harvest work now.

> ***"It's a misguided belief out there when people are saying that the Australians are too lazy to pick fruit," he answers. "People have to have a secure job. And picking fruit is not a secure job."***

For almost two decades, Maytom combined harvest labour with night shifts, first at the cannery, and later at the rice mill, where he rose from labourer to manager. He stopped picking fruit in 1987 after he was elected to Council and no longer had the time. Maytom was a Councillor for more than three decades and Mayor for 16 years.

Maytom says he comes from a family "rich in love but not in money" and feels a duty to help those in need. In the early 2000s, refugees and asylum seekers, many from Afghanistan, were turning up in Leeton looking for work. Together with others, he set up the Leeton Multicultural Support Group to offer support and local connections.

These days, Maytom and the Multicultural Support Group help PALM workers, some still engaged, others disengaged. Some approved employers disparage people like Maytom as do-gooders. They say their support gives workers an incentive to leave their jobs. While the former Mayor acknowledges that disengaged workers may be drawn to Leeton, he says that's because they are already in trouble and need help.

"They hear about Leeton. They hear that they might have some friends here," he says. "Which is good, because if they've got nowhere to go, and they can find a friendly town to go to, with an opportunity of getting some work, we are there."

Maytom says one group came to Leeton after packing mangoes 35 days straight from 4am until 8pm. The women who complained about excessive hours were told they would be put on a plane home if they took the issue further.

> ***"I don't like to see systems set up where people are too frightened to seek help, because they're frightened of the system," he says. "That's where we come in."***

Maytom says most of the disengaged workers he helps don't have work rights, Medicare or health insurance. They are paid cash, have no sick leave and are unlikely to receive compensation if they get injured. They are contributing to the economy and filling labour market gaps, so a Trump-style crackdown would leave local industry and farms short-staffed. Maytom would like to see a program to bring disengaged workers back into the fold, regularise their visa status and be legalise their employment, or, where appropriate, assist them to return home.

There are precedents. Between 1978 and 1980, with bipartisan support, the Whitlam and Fraser governments implemented three amnesties to open a pathway to legality for undocumented migrants.[17] About a decade ago, the Victorian Farmers Federation called for an amnesty so undocumented agricultural workers could become lawful. Agriculture ministers in Victoria and WA seized on the idea in 2020, when Covid closed the borders and harvest labour was in short supply. The Morrison government considered an amnesty but didn't act.[18]

A 45-minute drive away in Griffith, as President of the Multicultural Council, Carmel La Rocca also supports disengaged PALM workers, helping them to find housing or jobs or emergency assistance through the Red Cross. She says disengaged workers first turned up in Griffith during the COVID pandemic, and word of mouth led others to follow. "The whole real concept of a PALM scheme is a great idea," she says. "It's about managing it to the level that it's intended, so that the workers are treated properly, all the entitlements are proper, that they get pastoral care support."

"PALM really need to pull their socks up," says Kaia Vagi Oda Toua, who migrated from Papua New Guinea in 1991. When PALM workers started arriving in Adelaide, Toua and her "Wantoks" realised they needed help to find their feet. (Wantok or "one talk" is a Tok Pisin word referring to people who share one of PNG's 800-plus languages.) Fifteen women banded together to set up the Motu Koita and Wantoks Association South Australia, a name referring to the Motu and Koita languages of the Port Moresby area.

"When there was an influx of PALM workers into South Australia in 2022, most were from the Pt Moresby area," explains Naomi Geua Boe, the association's President. But she stresses that they help Wantoks from other parts of the country too. The first step is to provide "care packages" containing necessities like warm clothes, soap, shampoo, deodorant, laundry liquid and toilet paper. They deliver the packages to newly arrived workers around the state, including Bordertown near the South Australian border, Port Wakefield north of Adelaide, and Parilla in the Murray Mallee.

> ***It makes them feel at home when they see our people all together speaking the same language," says Geua Boe.***

"We wanted to be the ones that can explain things properly, like about their payslip, or their tax returns, or anything that was important to them during their stay here in Australia," says Toua. "When they arrive, it's the excitement of a new environment, right? The excitement stopped when they looked at their first pay packet with every deduction that was there. That was the first question to us. 'How did this happen?'"

Deductions are explained to PALM workers in pre-departure and post-arrival briefings, but they are taking in a huge amount of information all at once, and much of it doesn't stick.

"Are they paying attention in the pre-departure briefing?" asks PALM employer consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu. "Probably not a lot, because they're so excited they're coming to Australia." There is an arrival briefing in Australia too, which includes details about banking, superannuation, tax, payslips, deductions and trade unions, as well as workplace inductions and the use of equipment. Those employed in the meat industry must also get Q-fever vaccinations.

"We do all of this in one week, and we expect them to retain the information for everything?" says Koroisamanunu. "We're kidding ourselves."

Plus, he says, for cultural reasons most Pacific Islanders are unlikely to question an authority figure like a teacher, even when they don't understand something.

"You don't want the person to think that their training is inadequate, so you just say yes. And then afterwards, they'll look at each other and go, hey, did you understand that? No, I didn't understand. And they'll all whisper to each other."

Koroisamanunu sat through a training session where meat workers were being taught about sanitising knives. After the instructor had used the word seven times, Koroisamanunu interrupted and asked whether anyone could tell him what sanitising meant. No one could. Another example is workers being told to get a doctor's certificate if they are too ill to work. "They don't even know what a doctor's certificate is," says Koroisamanunu. "In Fiji they call it a sick sheet. In other countries, they don't even have to have them."

Many PALM workers have never previously been in formal paid work. The learning curve is huge, as is the enormity of the culture shock. An interview on ABC Pacific gives an indication of what workers are coping with.[19]

"The first week, I was crying, to be honest, because I miss home," says Meliah.

Her experience as an office worker in Fiji was no preparation for the intensity and danger of a meatworks — Meliah called it a factory — processing 6000 sheep per day.

"So, you can tell how fast the work was," she said in the interview. "And we work with chains and machines and the knife."

Meliah lost more than 10kg in her first month in Australia, due to the pressure of work and the stress of being away from home.

"I was missing home, I was missing my kids, I was missing Fiji, the lifestyle. I was not used to the food, I was not used to the environment, because it was really cold. And I just had my phone with me. That was the only way. I just have to call back home every minute. Most of us, whenever we finish work, we're just in our room with our phones and we're connecting back to our families."

Kaia Toua says loneliness is the hardest thing for newly arrived workers, and the Motu Koita and Wantoks Association SA helps them to get through it with social events and practical activities. Naomi Geua Boe says they take workers on bus rides to understand Adelaide's public transport network, hold dinners at family homes, and organise sporting events. In 2023, they set up a rugby league team, called the Tura Brothers (Tura means "friend") which won NRLSA's Harmony Cup competition. Workers would drive up to three hours to play games in Adelaide and Moitu Koita and Wantoks SA would come along to support the team and provide food.

In 2023, the association joined with the Red Cross to run a mental health and wellbeing program for PALM workers, with $10,000 in funding from Blackwood Rotary Club. The workers have requested follow-up programs on drug and alcohol awareness, gambling and budgeting, but the small organisation can't do it without more financial support says Naomi Geua Boe.

Kitione Waqanisau recovered from his broken leg and went back to work. The Barossa Rams fund raising efforts on his behalf are an example of the PALM scheme at its best — not a mere transaction but personal connection. The scheme is more than a wage earnt, a job filled, or a diplomatic point scored. It fosters cultural exchange and people caring for one another. The work done by the women of Motu Koita and Wantoks Association SA is replicated in other diaspora communities around the country. But volunteers should not be left to pick up all the pieces when things go wrong, and they are no replacement for universal public services like Medicare. Workers who live in Australia for months and years at a time, contribute to the economy and pay tax, should be able to call on government support too, regardless of their visa status.

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7.

Impacts in the Pacific

THE POWER OF REMITTANCES

In August 2024, Devid John Suma returned to South Santo in Vanuatu after three years working in Australia. He invested all his savings — more than $31,000 — in a gravity-fed system to deliver clean drinking water to his remote village.

Built with community labour, a kilometre of pipes, a storage tank and four taps serve seven households that previously relied on water from rivers and streams — sources that could be contaminated after heavy rain. Suma is now back working at a Victorian abattoir on another long-term PALM contract and saving to build similar systems for nearby communities.[1]

PALM workers are contributing some of their Australian dollars to upgrade a feeder road that links more than 800 people to schools, health clinics and markets in Malaita Province in Solomon Islands.

"More than ten of our community members are currently working in Australia under the Labour Mobility Scheme," David Alufo'oa from the project committee told the Solomon Star. "Even though they are far away, they continue to support us because this road directly serves their families and communities."[2]

These stories show how the benefits of an Australian wage can spread well beyond individual PALM workers and their immediate families. In a large-scale survey involving three sending countries, around half of Tongan households reported receiving remittances from someone outside their households, as did about one in four households in Vanuatu, and one in ten in Kiribati.[3]

Another way to measure of the significance of labour mobility schemes to Pacific economies is to compare the jobs they create with public sector jobs, since in many Pacific nations, government is usually the largest employer. By 2022, the number of people employed by PALM in Australia and the RSE scheme in New Zealand was roughly equal to the number of people by governments in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

Devid Suma at work in Australia (Bruce Tamata, Vanuatu Daily Post)

Devid Suma with elderly members of his community and their new water tap. (Bruce Tamata, Vanuatu Daily Post)

After stints as a seasonal worker Jamieson Kalpilelu set up a guest house on Pele Island in Vanuatu. (DarrenJamesPhotography.com)

> ***Put crudely, for Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, introducing these temporary work schemes has been akin to doubling the number of government employees," write Stephen Howes and colleagues from the ANU's Development Policy Centre. "That's huge."[4]***

Most workers I spoke to were clear about why they sent money home. First, to support their families with daily living expenses — not only partners and children, but parents and siblings too. Spending on education was the next priority — again, not only for their own children, but also for siblings, nieces and nephews. Third on the list was improved housing and fourth was investing in a small enterprise, like buying a truck or taxi, or setting up a shop.

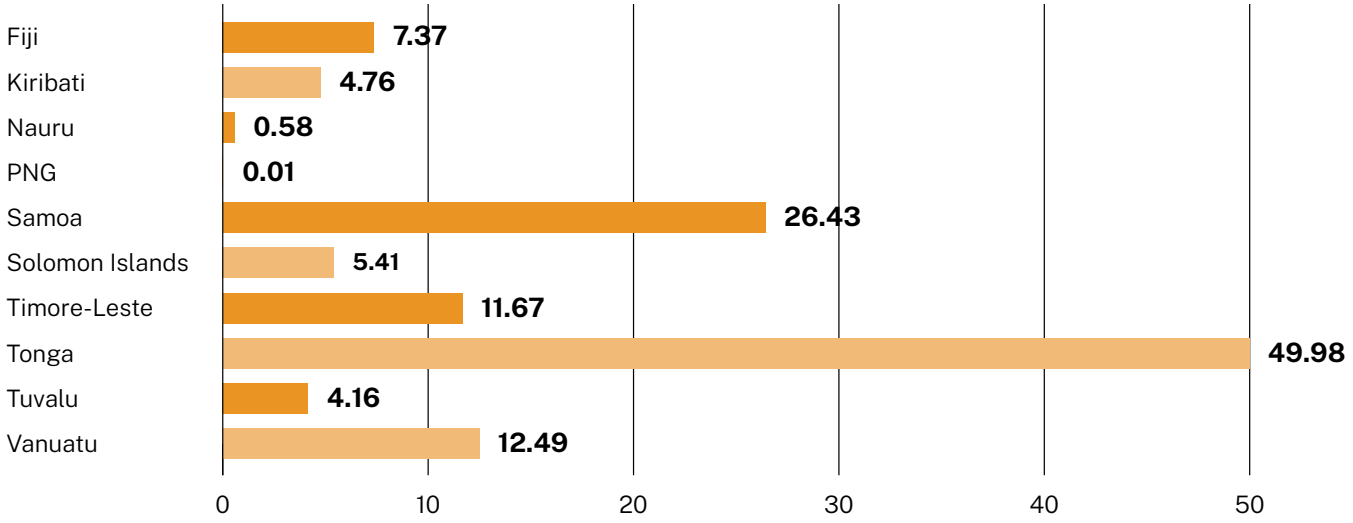
The Pacific Labour Mobility Survey conducted by the Australian National University and the World Bank largely backs my anecdotal assessment, though it puts other concerns ahead of starting a business such as spending on durable goods, livestock or health care, saving and repaying loans. Donating to church also features, though the figures for Tonga skew the results — more than half of Tongan respondents reported using remittances to donate to the church, compared to less than 2 per cent of Ni-Vanuatu and I-Kiribati.[5] Not captured in the survey, but related by workers, are ad hoc responses to individual or community need — money sent home to help pay for a funeral, for example, or to assist after a natural disaster.

In many Pacific economies, remittances account for a significant share of GDP (see chart) and have large scale economic and financial impacts. By boosting spending on local goods and services, remittances generate economic activity and lift government revenues.[6]

This is sometimes criticised as creating an economy reliant on migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy — a so-called MIRAB economy — rather than one that generates local sources of prosperity. Smaller island states with limited land scattered across vast oceans, may always need international development assistance and remittances from migrant workers to sustain them. For larger countries, richer in resources, the aspiration is for migration to help jump start development, generating the funds and skills needed to build flourishing domestic enterprises.

Australia frames labour mobility under the PALM scheme as doing both these things — fostering economic development and "providing jobs for Pacific and Timor-Leste workers and enabling them to develop skills, earn income and support their families and communities back home".[7]

Remittances as a share of GDP 2024



Data for Nauru, Tonga and Tuvalu is from 2023

Source: **World Bank** | *Created with* **datawrapper**

In addition to sending money, PALM workers also send home goods. These can be capital items that have the potential to generate a return such as tractors, cars, outboard motors and solar panels, or smaller necessities such as clothes, cooking utensils and schoolbooks. While their dollar value is harder to calculate than transfers of money, researcher Rochelle Bailey estimates that workers spend between $500 and $1,000 every year on "material remittances". Even at the conservative end this would equate to more than $15 million in annual value from the PALM scheme.[8]

Alongside their financial worth, material remittances may be used to maintain relationships or meet reciprocal obligations, but they can also provoke jealousies and tensions. On Ambrym in Vanuatu, for example, Bailey found that migrants with newly acquired goods are more likely to lock their doors, which rarely happened in the past. She attributes the change to increasing inequality.[9]

Remittances are important to Pacific countries like Tuvalu (istock/Dmitry Malov)

FAST AND SLOW MONEY

For UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou this raises fundamental questions about how to evaluate the impacts of the PALM scheme in home countries. The benefits, she says, are primarily conceptualised in economic terms — how much money is coming in and what it is being used for — but she is wary of Western measures of success that don't necessarily play out in the Pacific.

Petrou gives the example of private savings, an individual practice that can sit in tension with the communal values of many Pacific cultures.

> ***"If people found out that someone had a lot of money that they were trying to save for themselves, they'd be teased," Petrou says, "and all this social pressure would be put on them to invest in the community."***

In many Pacific communities, people use money to invest in relationships. Petrou gives the example of returned workers setting up stores that run aground because they are obliged to let family members buy on credit. She's met people in Vanuatu who've had this experience and written their losses off as "just money", saying family is way more important.

With colleague John Connell, Petrou notes how the "fast money" of wages can push aside the "slow money" of agricultural work.[10] ANU sociologist and political economist Matt Withers says most evaluations of the PALM scheme accord little value to the unpaid work migrants were engaged in before they left home, which might include family care, gardening, environmental management, communal projects and customary labour.

Temporary migrant labour schemes like PALM draw subsistence communities into the orbit of capitalist development, and for Withers this raises deeper philosophical questions. Is it an improvement for families to become more dependent on wage labour at the expense of traditional practices? While the old ways may not move the dial on GDP, they are forms of communal life that have continued across generations. Labour migration unsettles these patterns, not least by upending intimate caring relationships, between parents and children, and between partners.

FAMILY SEPARATION

For his research, Withers has conducted around 150 in-depth interviews with migrant workers, family members, and government representatives around the Pacific, and he says the difficulties caused by family separation often come up.

Withers started looking into the PALM scheme after researching the experiences of Sri Lankan migrants in the Gulf States. While individual contracts generally span just a few years he says they soon become path dependent. Employers want the same workers to return, and families come to rely on the remittances of their absent member. A three-year absence becomes six years, then nine and then twelve.

He spoke to one woman who had been domestic worker in the Gulf for more than 25 years and effectively lost connection with her family in Sri Lanka. He's concerned the PALM scheme could replicate such situations, with a four-year contract extending to eight years, then twelve and so on, until workers are estranged from their families and communities.

> ***"I think we need to aspire to a livelihood that doesn't entail that degree of separation, knowing the kinds of harm that can cause," he says.***

Wither's concerns highlight a fundamental shift in the PALM scheme since its inception. (He calls it an aberration.) The scheme began in 2012 as the Seasonal Worker Program, in which temporary migrants spent no more than six months in Australia and the rest of the year at home. For pragmatic reasons, this became up to nine-months in Australia and three-months at home. This is now known as the "short-term" PALM stream. In 2018, the "long-term" stream was added — then called the Pacific Labour Scheme — with workers initially staying for three-years, now four.

Over time, the balance within PALM has shifted from the short-to the long-term stream. Increasingly Pacific workers are recruited to fill permanent gaps in the Australian labour market rather than plug seasonal holes. As in Sri Lanka, it's possible for workers to return for a second, third or fourth long-term stint, permanently dividing families.

Yet, despite concerns about family separation, Pacific peoples are queueing up to come to Australia to work, and an overwhelming majority are keen to return for repeat stints. In the view of economist Stephen Howes, director of the ANU's Development Policy Centre, Pacific peoples can decide for themselves whether the gains outweigh the pains involved in working away from home. It is their choice to make.

Nor is the evidence on family separation all negative. The extensive ANU/World Bank Pacific Labour Mobility Survey found participation generally strengthens family relationships. About four in five temporary migrant workers reported improved bonds with their children, and two-thirds reported improved marital ties. This was largely put down to improved economic circumstances reducing arguments, "especially where money stress was previously a source of conflict".

The research found that labour schemes empower women and shift gender norms — not just when women work overseas, but also when they stay at home and perform roles usually reserved for men. Better communication, understanding, and respect among family members also play a role in improved family relationships.[11]

The survey sample, though, is biased towards short-term workers since three-quarters of the observations involved participants in Australia's Seasonal Worker Program and its New Zealand equivalent. Only one quarter were from the long-term Pacific Labour Program, which was relatively new when the survey was conducted in 2022.[12] The Pacific Labour Mobility Survey is a longitudinal study, so future waves of the survey will provide additional data.

The findings of the quantitative ANU/World Bank survey sit in tension with qualitative research that reports problems like loneliness, infidelity, strained relationships and behavioural challenges in children.[13] Rather than using a questionnaire to seek information about personal issues, qualitative studies often involve *Talanoa*, a term used in many parts of the Pacific to describe a face-to-face, story-based dialogue. This approach is known as *Tok Stori* in Solomon Islands and *Storian* in Vanuatu.[14]

An initial study for UNICEF of children left behind in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu found evidence of family breakdowns and extramarital affairs due to prolonged absences. The trade-offs families make were expressed by a Samoan mother whose husband had been working overseas for three years:

> ***"I may look fine and strong on the outside, but inside I'm weak. I feel weak from missing my husband for a long time and raising five children alone. As you all know, women also have feelings and needs that need to be fulfilled. I pray to God to help calm those feelings when they become overwhelming. … If he comes back, we wouldn't be able to afford their school expenses. I told him we don't have anyone else to depend on, he's the only one working, so he stayed back in Australia."***[15]

In communities with "hardly any remaining men" women felt overburdened. Grandparents, older siblings and extended family members picked up extra responsibilities. Grandparents were exhausted and children missed school, with teachers reporting a decrease in numeracy and literacy. One student commented that seeing unskilled migrants earn more overseas than skilled community members at home was demotivating. Education lost value in their eyes, and they planned to pick fruit in Australia or New Zealand rather than continue at school. This is exacerbated when teachers quit their posts because they earn so much more doing unskilled work overseas.[16]

In theory, the Australian government has committed to addressing family separation by allowing partners and children to join long-term PALM workers in Australia. This was a promise Labor made before winning the 2022 federal election, though for now the only tangible result is a small pilot program.[17]

By July 2025, 145 families from five countries had arrived under the pilot. Partners can work or study and they can apply for family tax benefits and childcare subsidies. Accompanying family members are also eligible for Medicare, though the original PALM worker is not.

A mid-term evaluation found the pilot was achieving expected outcomes with pre-departure briefings preparing families well for life in Australia. Most PALM employers were meeting or exceeding their obligations, though participation in the pilot was restricted to approved employers that already had a good record.

One unintended outcome was the high number of cases in which only the spouse came to Australia and children were left at home. Parents made this decision due to practical considerations such as the high cost of living in Australia, a preference not to disrupt schooling or the partner wanting to secure a job and suitable accommodation before bringing children. [18]

The pilot is set to run until 2027, so it could be years before the government decides whether to offer family accompaniment to all long-term PALM workers. Even if it does, some parents may decide to leave their children behind so they can maximise their earnings and savings in Australia. If this is the case, family separation will persist, but in a different form.

WHY A FOUR-YEAR VISA?

For seasonal work, where year-round work is not available, it makes sense to limit visas to a maximum of nine months. But why is the long-term PALM visa set at four-years, rather than, say, three, five or six? Is there a logic to the duration, or as migration expert Alan Manning argues, is it artificial, determined by how long governments think it desirable to let migrants stay?[19]

Manning is a Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and former chair of the British government's Migration Advisory Committee. He sees long-term temporary visas as a mechanism for host countries to fill "dirty, dangerous and demeaning" jobs while avoiding the commitments that come with permanent residence and citizenship. He says the consequences are always problematic.

> ***"Put bluntly, poor pay and conditions is a feature, not a bug, of many work visas for lower-skilled migrants," he writes in Why Immigration Policy is Hard. "While good visa design can take the edge off the worst abuses, those who want high levels of migration into these jobs and for the migrants to be treated as well as the locals probably can't have both."[20]***

Manning says large-scale temporary labour programmes create migrant populations who are poorer than most locals, and who can't fully integrate because they have no opportunity to stay.[21]

A Ni-Vanuatu PALM worker harvests bare-rooted trees at Mossmont Nurseries near Griffith (Peter Mares)

So why not fill permanent low-paid jobs with permanent migrants? The answer, says Manning, is that permanent migrants would not stick around. Like locals, they would quit dirty, dangerous jobs and seek better work elsewhere, negating the reason for recruiting them in the first place.[22]

This goes to a debate about the trade-off between migrant workers' rights and their access to jobs in high-wage economies. Scholar Martin Ruhs argues that temporary migrant workers knowingly give up certain rights in exchange for access to better paid jobs. In an ideal world, such a trade-off would be unnecessary: either workers would enjoy the same wages and conditions at home or host nations would treat them as citizens. But Ruhs says the realities of global inequality make such trade-offs inevitable and ethical.[23]

Manning takes a different view. If a firm was struggling to sell its products, he says, we'd expect it to lower prices or lift quality, rather than demand a government handout. Equally, he thinks that if a firm struggles to fill jobs locally, it should not expect government to bail it out with migrant workers:

"The only solution to these shortages is to improve pay and conditions; if the sector cannot do this, it probably should be a smaller part of our economy."[24]

This is a big call. In Australia, it could lead to the shutdown of significant rural industries.

BRAIN DRAIN AND BRAWN DRAIN

It's not just Pacific police officers, teachers and nurses who are enticed by higher wages to come to Australia under the PALM scheme. Labour mobility is also depleting Pacific economies of electricians, carpenters, hospitality workers, sailors and drivers. People who speak English and have the soft skills to work with customers are attractive to Australian employers, even though PALM is meant to focus on recruiting lower-skilled and unemployed workers — at least as far as sending countries are concerned.

"For us in the land transport sector, our biggest challenge is finding good, reliable drivers, as a lot of them have travelled overseas for seasonal work," says Rebecca Bogiri, who runs a bus company in Port Vila and served on the board of the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce. She told Radio Australia that workers often leave without giving any notice.[25]

"Before we look at prioritizing the labour and skills gaps of other countries, we must ensure that local enterprises and industries are adequately taken care of," says Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation CEO Edward Bernard. "Our businesses cannot find local skilled workers and we are bringing in foreign workers, and our labour market is extremely distorted."[26]

Even rugby is impacted. A village in Samoa says it hasn't been able to field a team since 2020, because there are not enough players.[27]

In 2022, three scholars from Massey University in New Zealand cautioned that a "mass exodus" of crucial workers was undermining development prospects in Pacific nations.[28] Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka warned an international conference that Pacific Island nations are the custodians of almost a fifth of the world's oceans yet struggle to retain the expertise needed to respond to climate change. "Our workers move across the region and the world, sending home vital remittances that fuel local development," he said. "But the loss of skilled labour — the brain drain — leaves our own systems more vulnerable, just when they need strengthening."[29]

Fiji's employment minister Agni Deo Singh accuses Australia and New Zealand of "poaching" skilled workers and argues they should help pay for training in return.[30]

The greatest concerns are about health workers. Australia has a ratio of 128 nurses per 10,000 people, whereas the average density of nurses in Pacific Island countries is less than ten per 10,000, and in PNG it's just five.[31] Yet higher wages entice nurses to leave Pacific clinics to take up lower-qualified roles in Australia, such as aged care assistants. The result, according to an Australian-based health professional, is that inexperienced nurses in the Pacific are being advanced to senior positions and retired staff are called back in to provide supervision and guidance. Since 2023, Fiji has lifted the retirement age for expert positions from 55 to 62 to try to fill gaps left by younger professionals moving overseas.[32]

The loss of brains and brawn to the PALM scheme is controversial, acknowledges ANU economist Stephen Howes, who is a supporter of labour migration. This is especially true in the three biggest sending countries of Vanuatu, Tonga and Samoa. In response, all three have developed new labour mobility strategies, but only Samoa has put a cap on the number of workers going, which is roughly double the current number of participants. "It's a symbolic cap, it's not a binding cap," says Howes.

It's difficult for sending governments to wind it back labour migration because it's so popular, and some countries still hope to dramatically grow the number people working in Australia. Papua New Guinea, for example, has fewer than 3000 workers in Australia and wants to boost this to 15,000.

Howes suggests three strategies for managing brain drain. One is to focus selection on low-skilled rural workers, who really need these jobs and who aren't already engaged in the formal economy. This is not as easy as it sounds.

"At the end of the day, employers have to be able to choose the workers they want," he says, "because if you force workers onto employers, then they'll go to another country, where they can choose."

Howes' colleague Richard Curtain says sending countries need to broaden geographical selection and not take too many workers from one location. Employers tend to over-recruit from the same small pool because they want trusted workers to return and they ask them to recommend reliable friends and relatives. Curtain suggests working with village leaders to limit the number of workers who can be recruited from one place.[33]

A second approach, says Howes, is education. "If we're losing skilled workers, how do we educate? How do we replace them?". One of the counter arguments to concerns about brain drain is that migration creates a powerful incentive to engage in training and education, helping to generate a brain gain. Alan Manning cites a study that shows that for every nurse who leaves the Philippines to work overseas, around ten new nurses are licensed. [34] Such compensatory levels of education and training may be harder to achieve in small Pacific nations.

Training and education can also draw people, especially women, into roles from which they were previously excluded. Tofa Ramsay Shipping runs inter-island passenger and cargo services in Tonga. When male ferry captains and fork-lift operators began taking up jobs overseas, the firm trained female staff to replace them.[35]

Howes' third strategy is for Pacific nations to take in migrants to fill the labour market gaps left by nationals going overseas. This is already happening. Thousands of Bangladeshis now work in the construction, hospitality and sugar industries in Fiji, for example. As with PALM in Australia, there are reports of exploitation and inadequate housing. Fiji is also grappling with the problem of workers who fail to leave when their visas expire.[36]

Despite such problems, Howes argues chain migration is generally a good thing. When incoming migrants fill the gaps left by PALM workers there are winners all round. He is not concerned about cultural loss, because Pacific Islanders retain close links to their homelands. And he says these are choices for Pacific Islanders to make.

> ***"That's how I view migration, you're giving people the opportunity, let them decide."***

Natasha Turia who is researching migration for her PhD at the Australian National University takes a similar view. Turia comes from Papua New Guinea but describes herself as "almost half Australian".

> ***"Just because someone leaves Papua New Guinea, or their country of origin doesn't make them any less of a nation builder to those who are left behind," she says. "In fact, they're a brain gain for the nation because they've been exposed to another way of life. They're going to absorb all of these new values, cultures, and they should be able to add value back into the country that you came from."***

UNFULFILLED PROMISES: SKILLS TRANSFER AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

There is limited evidence that returning PALM workers transform their domestic economies by transferring skills or establishing significant businesses.

Clear Horizon Consulting evaluated the Pacific Labour Facility — a mechanism to support the PALM scheme.

It cited an example of ni-Vanuatu workers using knowledge gained in Australia to increase productivity and profitability in the local banana industry. Overall, though Clear Horizon found "limited enterprise development by returning workers". It noted that some of the skills workers brought back were not relevant in their home countries.[37] Most long-term PALM workers are employed in meat processing, but there are few commercial abattoirs in the Pacific. Much orchard and vineyard work is not useful either, since grapes and stone fruits don't grow in the Pacific.

"It's one of the big promises of the scheme that people will go overseas, they'll learn useful things, and they'll come back and use them in their home economy," says UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou. "If you look at the research on whether these skills transfers occur, in general they don't."

Petrou says the soft skills workers bring back, like efficient time management or improved English, can help them get better-paid jobs in service industries like tourism, but she's seen little evidence of far-reaching change in rural areas.

"They might be setting up small stores, that's probably the extent of it, but they're certainly not going home and setting up aged care facilities commercial-scale abattoirs, or whatever it is they were working on in Australia."

Matt Withers from the ANU thinks the PALM scheme could do more to foster the development of relevant skills and gives the example of building up the infrastructure of care, such as hospitals, aged care and early childhood education.

"You then create some infrastructural capacity to both train workers employed in care positions in Australia, but also to absorb returning workers so that they can find work in these kinds of industries," he says. "While I'm sceptical of the remittance investment narrative, I do think there could be a way to coordinate Australia's aid program, to really bolster what it's trying to achieve through the PALM scheme."

This would mean taking a decisive stance in the ongoing ambiguity over the scheme's core purpose — is it primary aim to promote development or to meet Australia's labour market needs?

> ***"On one hand, the scheme is a domestic employment program with the goal of filling specified unskilled and semi-skilled labour shortages ultimately for the benefit of the Australian economy. On the other hand, the scheme is a development program with the goal of contributing to family and community wellbeing in labour sending countries through worker remittances."***[38]

As the consultancy Clear Horizon argues, these two aims — meeting Australia's labour market needs and developing Pacific economics — do not always line up neatly. Putting the emphasis on one can have repercussions for the other.

To the two aims identified above, we could add a third — advancing Australia's strategic interests — given that "wider geopolitics demands that the Australian Government position itself as a 'partner of choice' in the region."[39]

THE PALM SCHEME, VISAS AND GEOPOLITICS

The original drivers of the PALM scheme were labour shortages in Australia and pressure from Pacific governments to admit their workers. Now there's the added impetus of rivalry with China. This is driving a rise in Pacific migration that goes beyond PALM.

The Pacific Engagement Visa is a lottery system that enables up to 3000 people aged 18 to 45 from ten Pacific countries and Timor-Leste to migrate permanently to Australia if they can find a job. More than 56,000 people registered for the first ballot in 2024-25 and by July 2025, around 1200 visas had been granted.[40]

Separately, Australia and Tuvalu signed the Falepili Union under which 280 Tuvaluans can migrate annually if their names are drawn in a random ballot. Unlike the PEV, there are no age or disability restrictions, and Tuvaluans don't need to find a job to get a visa. In 2025, more than 8000 Tuvaluans — about four in five citizens — threw their names in the hat for the first draw.

In part, the Falepili Union is a response to climate change, which poses an urgent threat to Tuvalu's low-lying coral atolls. But it is also a security deal, in which Tuvalu and Australia "will mutually agree any new third-party engagement on defence and security-related matters in Tuvalu".[41] This is diplomatic speak for denying China a military presence there.

Australia has signed treaties that contain similar security clauses with Nauru and Papua New Guinea, and is seeking to do so with other countries, including Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu.[42] Migration comes up as an issue in these negotiations, because it is something Australia offers that China does not.

Security is not the only lens through which to view Australia-Pacific relations, according to one of Australia's most experienced diplomats. James Batley is a distinguished Policy Fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University and for thirty years held postings around the Pacific, including serving as head of mission in Solomon Islands and Fiji.

He points out that Australia benefits from close Pacific ties in international forums. One example is Canberra's push to regain a seat on the UN Security Council. Batley says there is a broad view, shared by the public and the political class, that Australia should help when there are natural disasters in the Pacific. Close to half of Australia's aid program is devoted to the Pacific and the amount has been rising both proportionally and in dollar terms. Surveys suggest Australians feel more positively about migration from the Pacific than from other regions.[43] But Batley identifies a tension between being a partner and a leader in the Pacific, evident in the rhetoric of Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

"She's very strong on this idea we will listen, we're listening to the Pacific, and that's being the partner," he says. "But she also and she's on record in speeches as saying we want to shape our region and that's being a leader."

This reflects the power imbalance embedded in Australia's relations with the Pacific nations. Despite talk of "family" and partnership, Australia cannot credibly claim to be "just another Pacific Island country", says Batley. "Australia just looms so large in the region; it exercises this kind of gravitational pull."

The power imbalance is evident in climate policy, where Canberra declines to partner with Pacific governments in demanding much stronger action, and leadership is focused more on managing expectations than on reducing the Australia's exports of coal and gas.

The imbalance is also evident in the movement of people across borders. While Australians can get a visa on arrival in most PALM countries (Papua New Guinea and Nauru are exceptions), no Pacific country is accorded reciprocal treatment. Nor is any Pacific nation included on the list of countries eligible for an electronic travel authority — a $20 e-visa that can be arranged instantly online. Instead, they must pay $200 or more for a visitor visa that can be slow to process.

Entering Australia is "just too damn hard" and "borderline discriminatory" for Papuan New Guineans, says PhD candidate Natasha Turia.

> ***"It is extremely difficult for us to get a tourist visa, let alone a business visa to come in on a temporary stay."***

Canberra's view is that Pacific nations' border regimes lack sufficient integrity for Australia to relax entry requirements. To this end, a clause in the Falepili Union treaty requires Tuvalu "to ensure its immigration, passport, citizenship and border controls are robust and meet international standards for integrity and security".

Australian concerns are illustrated by so-called golden passport schemes, under which some Pacific countries effectively sell citizenship to foreigners, including, potentially, international criminals. Vanuatu is a case in point — it sold a golden passport to Andrew Tate in 2022, the same year the self-described misogynist was arrested for rape and human trafficking in Romania.[44]

When Australia hoped to address Vanuatu's golden passport scheme in a new bilateral treaty, Prime Minister Jotham Napat upped the ante by demanding that the "Nakamal Agreement" also include visa-free entry to Australia for Ni-Vanuatu.[45] While this was more rhetorical flourish than serious negotiating tactic, restrictive Australian border controls are a constant gripe of Pacific governments.

Australia's stance on border security is inconsistent. On the one hand, it is urging Pacific nations not to sell visas or passports to the highest bidders, on the other, it used its financial muscle to buy entry to Nauru for people that it deemed undesirable.[46]

In August 2025, Australia struck a deal with Nauru to "resettle" the so-called "NZYQ cohort" on thirty-year visas. These are people who came to Australia as asylum seekers but were detained indefinitely and had their visas cancelled on character grounds, some after committing serious crimes. When the High Court forced the release of the NZYQ cohort from detention, they became a domestic political problem. Australia outsourced the problem to Nauru in a deal potentially worth billions of dollars.[47]

James Batley says the tensions arising from the power imbalance between Australia and the Pacific can never be resolved. But he says if you were looking for a grand strategy in Australia's relations with the region, the dominant theme is integration — integrating security arrangements and integrating economies.

"It's the right strategy because it addresses some of the binding constraints of some Pacific Island countries that otherwise are trapped in underdevelopment," he says. "They really need some sort of metropolitan connection to grow their economies and to raise living standards."

Integrating economies implies integrating labour markets and greater mobility across borders. The prime ministers of Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have all advocated freer movement between Australia and the Pacific, as has the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum.

"I'd like to see that kind of that freer movement embraced as a vision," says Stephen Howes, director of ANU's Development Policy Centre. But, he says, much has already changed.

"It's been a revolution, I would say, over the last two decades."

PALM has been at the centre of that revolution, and Howes, for one, would like to see the scheme grow significantly larger. But the future of PALM is uncertain.

Overall numbers are down about ten per cent on the peak in 2023, and the balance of the program is shifting. Fewer Pacific workers are employed in short-term jobs in horticulture as growers revert to meeting their seasonal needs with a cheaper, less regulated source of labour — backpackers. But more PALM workers are staying long-term and filling permanent jobs, especially in meat processing. This marks a fundamental change in the conception of PALM and takes it much closer to being a European-style guest worker scheme.

PALM remains dogged by reports of worker exploitation and poor conditions, though the steep drop in the number of workers disengaging from the scheme suggests reforms since 2022 have significantly helped to address these problems.

But for PALM to grow and flourish, and fulfill its potential as a win-win program, further change is needed.

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8.

Improving PALM

NOT THE NEW BLACKBIRDS

Australian South Sea Islanders setting up irrigation channels in Queensland cane fields, Bingera, ca. 1905 C.F. Skyring, State Library of Queensland

In 1847, banker and grazier Benjamin Boyd imported almost 200 Ni-Vanuatu men to New South Wales as indentured labourers. As documented by historian Tracey Banivanua Mar, this first attempt to deploy Pacific workers ended badly, with the ill-treated Ni Vanuatu walking off Boyd's pastoral leases and attempting to make their way home, often with tragic consequences.

In the NSW parliament the scheme was criticised as an incipient slave trade, the colonial government refused to give it legal backing and Boyd went broke. Yet, writes Banivanua Mar, Boyd's "experiment" was a precursor to the commodification of Islanders' bodies that would be "explicitly legalised, quantified and regulated as an industry" just two decades later.[1]

Robert Towns kicked off the "blackbirding"* era proper in 1863, commissioning Captain Grueber to sail the schooner *Don Juan* to islands in Melanesia to secure "a useful class of men, lads and active boys" to work his cotton plantation on the Logan River southwest of Brisbane.[2] Towns, who gave his name to Townsville, was hoping to cash in on cotton shortages caused by the American Civil War but knew his incipient enterprise would fail if he had to pay European wages.[3]

It was sugar, rather than cotton, that eventually grew profitable on the cheap labour of South Sea Islanders, as their descendants call themselves today. Between 1863 and 1904, around 50,000 were brought to Queensland from more than eighty islands that are now parts of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati and Tuvalu. They suffered very high death rates on arrival, with government records suggesting that more than a quarter died. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, bronchitis, pleurisy, dysentery, measles and chicken pox were the major killers.[4]

In the first decade of the trade most South Sea Islanders were "blackbirded" — either kidnapped or deceived into boarding ships — and government attempts to regulate the trade and their treatment on plantations were often insufficient and ineffective.[5] Over time, though, an increasing number of workers decided to stay in Queensland after their indenture ended, while others came back for repeat engagements, suggesting these "time-expired" labourers and "re-enlisters" chose to work in Australia.

Media reporting and critical scholarship sometimes compare the problems with the PALM scheme to the injustices of blackbirding, but it is too simplistic to cast Pacific labour mobility today as the reincarnation of colonial practices.

PALM is based on agreements between sovereign nations, with the stated objective that PALM workers and their communities should benefit. Workers are not coerced or deceived into coming to Australia, and the law requires that they are employed on the same terms as locals. In that sense, PALM is neither forced labour nor cheap labour. Additional supports are built into the program, workers can join trade unions, they are encouraged to engage with local communities and contemporary technologies enable them to maintain frequent contact with home.

Still, there are significant parallels, even continuities, between the colonial era and today. UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou points out that PALM workers come from many of the same countries as the South Sea Islanders, are mostly men as were the South Sea Islanders, and like them, mostly work in rural industries.

"In both eras, it was intended that migration would be circular, so people would come here, work a contract, and return home," she says.

A blunter way to say this is that Australia did not want Pacific Islanders to settle, then or now. One of the acts of Australia's new parliament after federation in 1901 was for the purpose of removing South Sea Islanders from the country. Today, Pacific Islanders coming under the PALM scheme are welcomed as temporary workers, not future citizens.

This temporary approach to Pacific migration is being eroded. Australia's push to integrate with region finds practical expression in new permanent visa categories. The Falepili Union offers 280 places to citizens of Tuvalu annually, and the Pacific Enterprise Visa offers another 3000 places to nationals of ten other Pacific countries. The Australian government hopes these permanent residents will move freely between Australia and their home countries, delivering dividends for the region and linking us more closely together.[6] For now, though, the PALM scheme offers no intentional path to permanent residency.

In his initial commission to Captain Greuber, Robert Towns promised that South Sea Islanders would "have every protection equal to Europeans in Queensland" a promise that was never going to be fulfilled.[7] Europeans could walk away from their jobs, whereas South Sea Islanders were indentured to their employers. Today PALM visa conditions also tie workers to specific enterprises and labour hire firms.

* The term "blackbirding" appears to derive from the term "blackbird catching", which an 1864 dictionary of slang records as a euphemism for the maritime slave trade.

There are parallels too, in the unforeseen consequences of circular migration. The blackbirding era profoundly changed both Australia and the Melanesian societies from which workers came. South Sea Islanders' labour built the sugar industry and their lives, and the lives of their descendants, are woven into the fabric of Queensland so that the injustices of the past reverberate in the present. Today, PALM workers are sustaining rural industries and changing regional communities all around Australia, in workplaces, shops, sporting arenas, churches and more.

When South Sea Islanders left their homelands in the 19th Century — voluntarily or under coercion — this had a big impact on their communities. Reverend Joseph Copeland, a missionary on what is now Futuna Island in Vanuatu, wrote that the traffic in labour disorganised society:

"Husbands are left without their wives; more frequently wives are left without their husbands; children without their fathers, parents without their children."[8]

Despite instant communications, similar upheavals are evident in today's version of labour mobility.

When South Sea Islanders went home, they brought change with them. They took back not just savings, but new attitudes to work and money, new beliefs like Christianity, and new technologies like rifles. All these things had deep and lasting impacts on traditional societies, not least by destabilising established hierarchies. This applies today too: the domestic reverberations from working in Australia will be profound and are likely to both positive and negative. One effect may be to empower women; another may be to increase inequality or induce a new dependence on labour migration and remittances that permanently divides families.

In his 1973 book *Passage, Port and Plantation*, Peter Corris reflected on the transformations of the blackbirding era that could apply to PALM, pointing out that labour migration brings change on three levels: to the societies from which migrants come and to which they return, to the habits and outlooks of migrants themselves, and to the people among whom they work while overseas.[9] In the same passage, Corris pointed out that the "choice" to migrate for work is shaped by other forces, including inequality:

"Labour migrants may be attracted to the work-places, but they are also driven there by pressures from within their own societies, usually unsatisfied needs and aspirations. And the migrant labourer is without honour where he works, for his function is to do what the people there will not do."[10]

Again, Corris's remark could apply to the PALM scheme. Workers are not forced to leave their homes, but unsatisfied needs are a powerful driver. And they largely perform work that Australians shun. In the colonial era, Europeans were considered unsuitable to labour in the tropical heat of the cane fields, work only fit for darker-skin men. Even without such prejudices, the industry would have been unprofitable at local wage rates. Today, PALM workers are guaranteed local wages, but those local wages are insufficient to attract local workers. The result is that industries like horticulture and meat processing are largely the preserve of temporary migrants — PALM workers, backpackers and students.

We are at risk of creating a new class — permanently temporary migrant workers from lower-wage countries clustered in often dirty, dangerous, difficult and sometimes demeaning jobs. Sushil Suresh sees this as a manifestation of Australia's "racial caste system" that concentrates non-Europeans in low-status sectors of the economy.[11]

Individuals may be here for extended periods on a series of temporary visas, or they may be periodically swapped out, as one cohort of workers is replaced by another when visas expire. Yet the result is the same: the creation of a class of people — temporary visa holders — who are denied the benefits of permanent residence or citizenship. Despite contributing to the economy and paying tax, they have no access to services like health care and social security. What is more, they suffer a democratic deficit because they lack political voice and representation.

The more the labour force is segmented in this way, the less likely it is that conditions in these low-wage sectors will improve. As British migration expert Alan Manning warns, exploitation worsens in these lower-skilled sectors because migrants "are less likely to work alongside locals":[12]

> ***"There is a risk of ending up in a downward spiral where lower market wages lead to lower prevailing wages, which in turn lead to lower market wages (because so many of the workers are migrants on prevailing wages), and so on."[13]***

Australia's award system puts a floor under wages, but Manning thinks pay should be anchored at the level *required to recruit locals into an industry* — which would often be significantly above Australia's minimum wage rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None of these challenges and comparisons with the past lead to the conclusion that we should abandon the PALM scheme, which is highly valued by Pacific workers and brings a range of significant benefits to participating nations, including Australia. But we should also heed the sentiment of the hit-song by Fijian PALM worker Jioseta Vetaukula that the Aussie dollar can be a painful dollar.[14]

As the Pacific family's most powerful member, the onus is on Australia to improve PALM workers' experiences. And while PALM does not replicate the abuses of indentured South Sea Islanders in the colonial era, an awareness of that history can help ensure that the future of labour migration from the Pacific is *even more different* to the past than it is already.

To this end, I recommend a series of reforms.

Tamoaieta Teetau on Abaiang, a remote island in Kiribati. After several visits to Australia for farm work she and her husband set up the only general store on their island. (DarrenJamesPhotography.com)

RECOMMENDATION 1:
THE RIGHT TO CHANGE JOBS

The most profound and urgent change is to give workers greater flexibility to change jobs and remove the whiff on indenture that clings to the PALM scheme. If workers had mobility in the Australian labour market, poor employers would be forced to lift their standards or lose staff. Labour market mobility would give workers less incentive to disengage from the PALM scheme because they would have other choices when they suffer abuse.

Increased mobility in the domestic labour market would come at no cost to the Australian government, though there are practical challenges in realising it as an objective.

The first challenge is that employers currently pay the upfront travel and visa costs to bring workers to Australia and so would potentially be out of pocket if those workers changed jobs before repaying those debts.

There are two ways to overcome this obstacle. The first would be for government to pay these upfront expenses and recoup them through the tax system. This was the policy that the Labor Party took to the 2022 election for short-term PALM workers, but it has not shown any sign of implementing it since taking office.[15]

An alternative approach would be to restrict workers' mobility in the Australian labour market for their first three months after arrival until their travel costs are repaid. It is easier to see this change being implemented for long-term PALM workers on four-year visas than for short-term PALM workers on 9-month visas. Yet, since most short-term workers are employed by labour hire agencies, greater mobility could allow any labour hire employee to switch to a different labour hire agency, regardless of the work they do.

Flexibility could also be sector specific — meatworkers moving within the meat processing industry, horticultural workers within horticulture, aged care workers within aged care.

Workers would need to find another approved PALM scheme employer, although consideration could be given to widening the circle to include sponsors of workers on temporary skills shortage (TSS) visas. Like TSS visa holders, PALM workers who leave jobs should be given 180 days to find a new employer, rather than losing their visas after just 28 days.

Stephen Howes, Director of the ANU's Development Policy Centre says he's not against greater mobility for PALM workers in the Australian labour market but is sceptical of how it can be implemented.

> ***"The more you regulate the Palm Scheme," he warns, "the less attractive it is to employers, the more they'll go to backpackers or undocumented workers."***

There are several ways to address this concern.

RECOMMENDATION 2:
REDUCE REGULATION

The first is to offer employers a trade-off for greater worker mobility by relaxing some prescriptive PALM scheme rules.

Welfare managers must meet face-to-face with workers every two weeks, for example, which risks being more box-ticking exercise than useful engagement. This could be scrapped as the National Farmers Federation has suggested.[16]

Another proposal, already under discussion, is a "trusted trader" designation for approved employers with a good track record of exceeding the PALM scheme's minimum standards.[17] Trusted traders would enjoy preferential treatment such as priority visa processing, reduced reporting obligations and streamlined administration. The trusted trader idea would provide approved employers to improve their performance.

These changes could be made without any impact on the federal budget.

RECOMMENDATION 3:
NATIONAL LABOUR HIRE REGULATION

The second way to address concerns about over-regulating the PALM scheme is to shift the focus from the scheme to the sector-wide regulation of industries where abuses are widespread, such as horticulture and meat processing. This would not only benefit PALM workers but other vulnerable workers too.

The first and most obvious step in this direction would be the Australia-wide regulation of labour hire agencies — which is already a federal government policy commitment. National labour hire regulation was recommended by the Migrant Workers' Taskforce in 2019 and promised by the Albanese government when it took office in 2022. A consultation paper was released in 2023, but there has been little progress since.[18] National labour hire laws that at least match the standards set by the state-based schemes in Queensland and Victoria should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

REFORM WORKING HOLIDAY VISAS

Workers picking berries near Launceston in Tasmania (istock/chameleonseye)

The third, and perhaps most important step to ensuring that employers don't abandon the PALM scheme is to remove or reform "alternative, poorly regulated work visas" that they use instead.[19]

In effect, this means phasing out the offer of second-and third-year visas for working holiday makers who spend 88 days doing "specified work" like fruit picking in a regional area. As things stand, PALM workers are crowded out by more vulnerable backpackers.[20]

There is no vetting of employers and no regulation of workplaces under the working holiday scheme. As a result, argues Stephen Howes, the offer of second and third backpacker visas invites exploitation. Numerous inquiries support his view. In 2017, the Fair Work Ombudsman found that working holiday makers were "especially vulnerable" to exploitation and 88-day placements worsened that vulnerability because backpackers were beholden to their employers to get their next visa.[21] Noting the widespread exploitation working holiday makers, both the Grattan Institute and the expert panel commissioned to review Australia's migration program recommended government limit working holidays to one year.[22]

Farmers and the tourism industry will resist any proposal to wind back incentives for backpackers to work in agriculture. Changes would need to be phased in to give these sectors time to adjust and allow PALM numbers to increase to replace working holiday makers. An obvious place to start is with the removal of third 12-month visa, which was only introduced in 2019.

Removing the second and third working holiday visas would align with current concerns about high levels of net overseas migration by helping to reduce overall numbers. Fewer, more productive, PALM workers employed on nine-month visas would be needed to replace the large number of backpackers who only work in rural industries for 88 days to secure a second visa. Working holiday makers could still choose to work in rural industries but employers might need to entice them with better conditions.

Australia's interest in fostering development in the Pacific, and its strategic rivalry with China in the region, are added reasons to scrap the second and third backpacker visas and build up the PALM scheme to replace it: "If it's going to be migrants picking the fruit and vegetables on our farms, do we want them to be rich young kids from Europe and the US, or people from much poorer Pacific countries?" asks Stephen Howes. "The answer to that is pretty obvious."

RECOMMENDATION 5:

REINTEGRATION FOR DISENGAGED WORKERS

In response to the (unreleased) report of the PALM Disengagement Taskforce, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) developed a process "to ensure eligible workers are considered for re-engagement".

Workers are "eligible" if their PALM visas are valid for at least six more months, if they are not facing criminal charges and if DEWR assess their reasons for wanting to re-engage as "valid". While "valid" is not defined, the guiding principle appears to be that workers should only be able to re-engage if they left the scheme "through no fault of their own".[23]

Yet the reasons why workers disengage are diverse, complex and contested so DEWR's criteria of individual worker fault will be difficult to apply and involve judging between the competing accounts of workers and employers. Ken Dachi from Welcoming Australia says the DEWR scheme is too narrow in scope and unlikely to be successful. Welcoming Australia has co-authored a more versatile program to re-engage PALM workers using a case management approach and regional hubs in places such as Griffith where disengaged PALM workers congregate.[24]

While there is not space to evaluate the details of that proposal, a guiding principle should be that flaws in the PALM scheme were a greater driver of disengagement than the pre-meditated calculation of individual workers. Government data shows that disengagement has now fallen to low levels, which is probably because previous flaws in the scheme have been addressed through guaranteed minimum work hours and take-home pay. This suggests that most PALM workers who left prior to these reforms had valid reasons for disengaging and should be included in re-integration programs.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

ACCESS TO MEDICARE

Giving PALM workers access to Medicare is another necessary and urgent reform. This would lighten the regulatory burden on employers who must organise or purchase health insurance for PALM workers, ensure they maintain their insurance, assist them with claims, and report on all this to government.

Premiums are often deducted from workers' pay and private health insurance arrangements complicate the transfer of workers between employers.[25]

Access to Medicare would create another incentive for workers to remain within the PALM scheme rather than disengage and apply for protection as refugees.

Access to Medicare would come at a cost to government, but some revenue could be re-couped by requiring PALM workers to pay the Medicare Levy. More importantly, though, it is a false economy to deny PALM workers easy access to health care.

Access to Medicare meets with the PALM scheme's aim of promoting development. It would simplify healthcare for PALM workers and reduce confusion around their rights and entitlements in the medical system, especially in hospitals. It would lower the barriers to care, so that workers seek medical attention earlier, reducing costs in the system and making workers more productive. Most important of all, it would improve PALM workers' health.

Dancers at the Kiribati National Day celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

RECOMMENDATION 7:
PATHWAYS TO PERMANENT RESIDENCY

The consequences of family separation are harder to address, especially for long-term PALM workers. Seasonal workers at least spend three months at home with their families every year, but, with the possible exception of brief holidays, long-term PALM workers are effectively separated from their families for four years.

It's ironic to talk about the Pacific family when a flagship program like PALM requires family separation, says UNSW researcher Kirstie Petrou: "We're calling them our family, but we're splitting up families."

Prolonged family separation is unconscionable. The Australian Labor Party recognised this in its 2022 pre-election promise to allow PALM workers to bring family members to live and work in Australia.[26]

That policy is now being tested in a pilot program. The initial results of this trial are positive, although an unintended outcome is the large number of eligible parents choosing to leave their children at home in the Pacific. If this pattern persists, family separation will continue in a modified form.

Another, complementary, approach to family accompaniment would provide a pathway to permanent residence for long-term PALM workers on four-year visas who fill permanent gaps in the labour market. This aligns with the aim of greater integration between Australia and the Pacific. The Australian government hopes its new Pacific Engagement Visa will grow Pacific diasporas in Australia and strengthen people-to-people links.[27] A pathway to permanent residence for PALM workers would advance the same aim.

Pacific governments concerned about the exodus of working age citizens and their children may not welcome a pathway to permanent residence. They would also be concerned that PALM workers who settled permanently in Australia, would soon send less money home — a phenomenon known as "remittance decay". Yet research suggests this fear is misplaced since Pacific diaspora remittances remain remarkably stable over long periods of time.[28]

An alternative to a pathway to permanent residency would be to limit long-term PALM workers to a single four-year visa with no prospect of returning to work in Australia, and perhaps limit short-term PALM workers to no more than six or eight rotations. This would have the advantage of spreading opportunities to a greater number of people in the Pacific. Such a restrictive policy, though, would deny the agency of workers and their families to make their own decisions, given that evidence suggests a widespread desire to come to Australia multiple times.

RECOMMENDATION 8:
SUPERANNUATION

Current superannuation settings are unfair. PALM workers are forced by circumstance to access their retirement savings early and so pay a punishing effective tax rate of 50 cents in the dollar. The process for accessing their super contributions is so complex that a significant share of PALM workers lose all their savings.

The Departing Australia Superannuation Payments (DASP) process should be simplified to make it easier for PALM workers to access their money and the tax on withdrawals reduced, ideally to zero. DASP taxes are not set in stone and have been adjusted three times since 2002.[29] Parliament has previously made laws to change the DASP tax specifically for working holiday makers, who pay an even higher rate than PALM workers.[30] If a visa specific rate can be set for working holiday makers, then a specific lower rate can be set for PALM workers in keeping with the developmental aims of the scheme.

A rough estimate suggests if PALM workers paid no tax on their superannuation withdrawals this would cost the government at least $50 million annually. While this is a considerable sum, all that money would flow to PALM workers' home communities, satisfying the PALM scheme's central aim of supporting economic growth and development.

An alternative reform would see PALM workers' superannuation entitlements paid directly into eligible provident funds in their homelands. A precedent exists in the Trans-Tasman Retirement Savings Portability Scheme that enable New Zealanders permanently departing Australia to transfer their superannuation into a Kiwi saver account.[31]

PALM workers in their accommodation in NSW (Australian Workers Union)

RECOMMENDATION 9:

STAGGER PRE-DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL BRIEFINGS

Briefings to prepare PALM workers for life and employment in Australia attempt to convey too much information and should be spaced out and held at times when workers are better placed to absorb the information.

PALM workers are prepared for work and life in Australia in short, intense briefings, both immediately prior to departure and soon after arrival. Using PowerPoints, short videos and exercises, they are informed about life in Australia (from weather to religion to First Nations history), Australian values and culture, visa rules, what to pack, travel logistics, Australia's workplace relations system, pay rates, deductions, superannuation, workplace health and safety, pay and conditions, accommodation and transport, support systems, budgeting, physical and mental health, drugs and alcohol, road rules, respectful relationships and Australian law. On arrival, they may also be receiving specific workplace inductions and training.

Many PALM workers are travelling overseas for the first time, and some have never been formally employed. Just prior to departure they may be both excited and managing the intense emotions of parting from family. Similarly, when workers first arrive in Australia, they may experience profound culture shock compounded by loneliness and isolation. These are not ideal times for workers to process large amounts of essential new information.

Ema Vueti from the Pacific Islands Council Queensland suggests a pre-departure preparation should be conducted over four weeks in workers home communities and involve their families as well as local churches, provincial offices and chiefs. The AWU's Griffith-based organise Kristen Johns recommends a slower induction process on arrival too.

"Meeting the local cultural groups, football teams, all those sorts of support mechanisms, who they can speak to in the community if they need help," she says. "Slowly integrate how taxation works, how super works, what a payslip actually looks like and how to break that down, especially if there's deductions that they're not too sure about."

Industry consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu says refresher briefings enable workers to raise issues that arise over time and in the context of their experiences in Australia. He ran refresher programs for a large labour hire firm that was receiving up to ten calls a day about welfare-related issues. After the briefings the calls stopped.

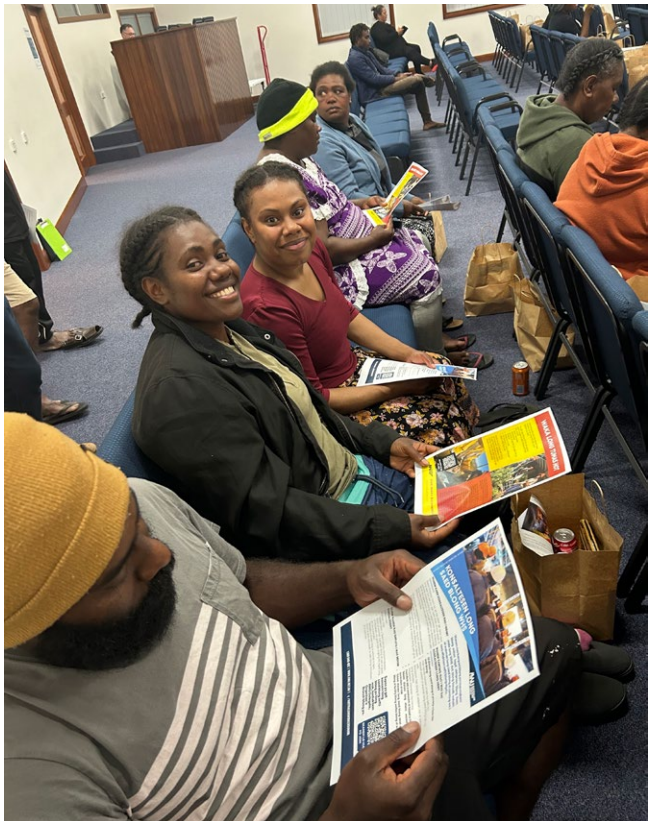
RECOMMENDATION 10:

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND TRADE UNIONS

Country Liaison Officers, the Community Connections Program and DEWR support teams cannot respond to all the challenges that workers face. Diaspora groups, local community organisations and individuals often step in to fill this gap, placing huge demands on volunteers.

Greater government support for these efforts is needed. This could take the form of information sessions on the PALM scheme for community organisations and diaspora groups, and perhaps an easy-to-access small grants scheme administered by local government to help community members support PALM workers. This would provide a mechanism to hold support groups accountable and set protocols around privacy and the handling of personal information.

When PALM workers are exploited at work, trade unions are generally their most effective advocates, though they can only act for members. Trade unions also work collaboratively with business to improve worker welfare through structural reforms. The Retail Supply Chain Alliance is an initiative of three unions that advocates for workers at every stage of the horticultural industry from farm to shelf and has agreements with Australia's major supermarket chains. The Australian Workers Union has worked with the peak PALM employer body, Approved Employers of Australia, on issues including PALM workers' access to superannuation. Trade unions help counterbalance PALM workers' lack of political voice as temporary visa holders.



PALM workers attending an education event as part of the Retail Supply Chain Alliance (Australian Workers Union)

Trade unions are not widespread in the Pacific and will often be unfamiliar to PALM workers. While trade unions representatives are invited to speak at arrival briefings, this is a cursory introduction and there is scope to increase the visibility of unions and workers' access to them. With the cooperation of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, the AWU now plays a role in pre-departure briefings in Fiji, a practice that could be expanded to other countries.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

It is worth considering what a more successful PALM scheme looks like.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade took a stab at this, assessing that its support for PALM would be successful when six conditions were met:

- the scheme would be tailored to each sending country's national context,
- participating governments would see it as an effective partnership that improves relations with Australia,
- more women would be involved,
- there would be more support for workers to reintegrate when they return home,
- families, community groups and employers would feel actively engaged,
- various Australian government departments would operate PALM as a unified scheme.[32]

These are worthy goals, but I was struck by what was not on the list. There was no mention of workers' experiences in Australia and whether they feel respected and valued for their contribution. There is no aspiration for the PALM scheme to foster closer people-to-people links between Australia and the Pacific. Nor is there any mention of growing the PALM scheme to include more workers in line with the ambitions of some regional governments such as Papua New Guinea.

The PALM scheme remains relatively new and is still a work in progress. It has many layers of administration, regulation and support, yet many gaps too. A lot of media coverage of the PALM scheme, and some research, tends to either celebrate the success of the scheme or condemn its failures, rather than accepting its complexity.

> ***"There are things that are wonderful about the scheme and the kinds of things that people can achieve," says UNSW Researcher Kirstie Petrou, "but there are also things that aren't so good, and those positives and negatives sit alongside one another."***

The scheme will never be perfect. The positives and negatives arise partly from the tensions between PALM's various priorities: to be a labour market program that benefits the Australian economy, to be a development program that enhances Pacific wellbeing and to serve a strategic purpose in Australia's geopolitical rivalry with China.

These aims are not entirely compatible and emphasis on one can be to the detriment of others. If Australia's economic interests are prioritised, for instance, then concerns about family separation will take a back seat. Equally, a focus on Pacific wellbeing could prompt regulatory measures that see Australian employers stop using the PALM scheme. PALM will always be shaped by the power differential between Australia and its Pacific partners and it must grapple with three fundamental structural features that characterise all guest worker schemes.

First, guest workers can be told to leave and are always beholden to their hosts.

Second, guest workers lack the same rights and entitlements as citizens and are more vulnerable to exploitation.

Third, guest workers are brought in to do jobs that most citizens and permanent residents would refuse to do for the same wages and under the same conditions.

Yet PALM can be improved, not only through reforms like those proposed above, but through a shift in thinking. The benefits of the PALM scheme are generally framed in depersonalised language, with a focus restricted to material considerations. This official summary from a DFAT documents is characteristic:

> ***"Labour mobility is one of the primary economic opportunities available to the working-age population in the region, with the potential to generate significant economic and social benefits for workers (e.g. financial income, work experience and skills development including formal qualifications); their home countries (e.g. unemployment relief, development of human and financial capital, reduction in finance trade deficits and investment in community assets); and Australia (e.g. alleviation of labour shortages, increased production and greater competitiveness). A 'triple win'."***[33]

The fourth win — strategic advantage in Australia's security rivalry with China — is equally transactional.

In such formulations, the experiences of people engaged in the PALM scheme are blended out. There is no accounting for the emotional, psychological and cultural effects on workers, families, employers and communities. Yet a lesson of the blackbirding era is that these experiences, and the questions of justice that attend them, will be remembered across generations, and shape perceptions of Australia role in the Pacific family.

It's worth recalling Swiss playwright Max Frisch's famous quote about post-War guest workers in Europe: *Man hat Arbeitskräfte gerufen, und es kamen Menschen*. "We called for labour power, but people came".[34]

If the PALM scheme is regarded as transactional — money in exchange for labour power, jobs in return for keeping China at bay — then something vital is lost. In place of human beings with rights and interests, hopes and dreams, needs and wants, people are turned into commodities, units of production to be swapped around as needed. If this is the dominant approach, then exploitation and disengagement will continue, and the PALM scheme will fail to live up to its full potential.

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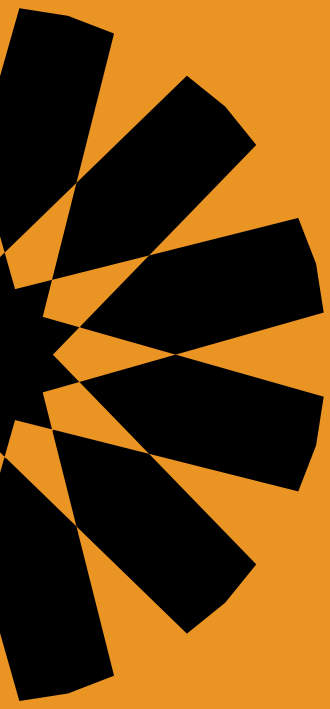

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