



After the promises, migrants demand decent work now

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers is a tragic and unexpected early test for the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). As the labor movement has warned for decades, current systems of labor migration management, which focus on temporariness and exclusion, are not designed to protect migrant workers. The pandemic has exposed to a dramatic degree these shortcomings. From a lack of occupational safety, health and other social protections for migrants to rampant wage theft, current migration management systematically fails migrants and their families.

The pandemic has reaffirmed that migrants are critical to our economies and to keeping us safe and healthy, in good times and bad. They harvest our food, provide health and elder care, and toil in the exploitative gig economy. They are essential workers, risking their health and lives while allowing many to stay safe at home during the pandemic. Yet their contributions do not tally in their favor nor do they benefit from the legal and social protections provided to non-immigrant workers.

The Global Compact for Migration was envisioned as a crucial multilateral initiative to more effectively address international migration within a people-centered and human rights framework. Though non-binding, the GCM objectives, when robustly implemented, have the potential to address the severe gaps in migrant worker protection exposed by the pandemic—but that is if, and only if, states are willing to take bold action. The UN Network for Migration and its member UN entities need to be bold, too, and call for such change among states.

Countries must re-envision regular (and irregular) migration under a framework of decent work, using core labor standards as the foundation, as described in the GCM. Now is the time for states—under the GCM implementation, follow-up and review process—to be honest and critical about the shortcomings of their current migration schemes and work within multilateral processes and through social dialogue with migrant workers, trade unions and other organizations that represent migrants to develop alternative models of labor migration that protect migrant workers and their families, respecting the realities of labor markets. We must use the GCM to call for regular migration schemes that respect this reality.

We have seen during the pandemic that states can quickly adapt to provide protections for migrants when they deem it necessary for their economy or to meet “essential” needs, for example, temporary status for undocumented migrant agricultural workers in Europe. Other states are stepping up even

in difficult political contexts to provide protections to migrants, like the re-engagement of the temporary protective status (TPS) program for long-term migrants in the United States.

Building up to the International Migration Review Forum in 2022, the UN Network for Migration, and key member agencies like the International Labor Organization (ILO), should challenge states to use the 23 GCM objectives to develop alternative models of regular labor migration that encompass the [new social contract](#) called for by the International Trade Union Confederation and the global labor movement. GCM implementation should lean into policy coherence, grounded in economic and labor market realities, and social protections for all, regardless of immigration status or nationality. We have plenty of time over the next year to use the implementation, follow-up, and review process as a platform for bold re-thinking of regular migration.

Governments in the Americas have the first opportunity to re-envision regular migration in regional corridors at the Americas GCM Regional Review Consultation at the end of April. We urge states, including the United States, which is re-engaging in multilateral migration processes, to come to the regional consultation with an honest and critical eye toward the failures of existing migration schemes and the lack of policy coherence in the Americas region. We urge states to engage with unions, migrants, civil society and each other to think innovatively about moving away from exploitative temporary migration schemes to migration policy based on human and worker rights.

It is essential that we recognize the value of [decent work](#) as defined by the ILO as a central force in this whole process. Migrant workers deserve dignity at work. They deserve freedom of association and the right to organize, to exercise their collective agency for greater protections in the workplace. They deserve their full earned wages and compensation, and easy access to justice mechanisms. Migrant workers and their families deserve regular migration schemes and migration governance mechanisms that no longer treat them as disposable or expendable. Achieving this within the goals and objectives of the GCM is possible, if and only if, the UN and its member states are willing to be bold.

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