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Résumé de l'article

Suite aux éclosons mortelles de COVID-19 dans l'industrie albertaine du conditionnement de la viande au printemps 2020, nous avons mené une recherche auprès d'emballeurs de viande qui étaient auparavant des réfugiés et qui sont maintenant résidents permanents ou citoyens canadiens. Les recherches sur les travailleurs migrants temporaires présentent souvent le statut juridique permanent comme solution aux mauvaises conditions liées au travail précaire au Canada, mais même avec un statut d'immigration permanent, les anciens réfugiés vivent un écart entre leurs droits «garantis» par l'État en vertu de leur statut permanent et leur travail quotidien dans les usines de conditionnement de la viande dans l'Alberta rurale. Le travail dans les usines est dangereux, sale et difficile et les employés éprouvent de la difficulté à faire valoir leurs droits comme travailleurs. L'accès à des pauses adéquates, à des congés de maladie et à d'autres dispositions réglementaires a été signalé comme étant contesté et contingent. Les anciens réfugiés qui travaillent dans ce secteur font l'expérience d'une “non-liberté” inattendue.

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“There Is No Safe Place in This Plant”: Refugee Workers in Canadian Meatpacking and the Limits of Permanent Legal Status

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ABSTRACT

Following spring 2020's deadly COVID-19 outbreaks in the Alberta meatpacking industry, we conducted research with meatpackers who were formerly resettled refugees and now Canadian permanent residents (PRs) or Canadian citizens. Research with temporary foreign workers often promotes permanent legal status as a solution to poor conditions of precarious work in Canada, but even with permanent immigration status, former refugees experienced a large gap between their rights as “guaranteed” by the state through their PR status and their daily work in meatpacking plants in rural Alberta. Work in the plants is dangerous, dirty, and difficult, and employees found it difficult to enact their rights as workers. Access to adequate breaks, sick days, and other mandated requirements was reported to be contested and contingent. Former refugees working in this sector experience unexpected “unfreedom.”

KEYWORDS

refugees; legal status; precarious work; COVID-19, meatpacking; Canada

RÉSUMÉ

Suite aux éclosons mortelles de COVID-19 dans l'industrie albertaine du conditionnement de la viande au printemps 2020, nous avons mené une recherche auprès d'emballeurs de viande qui étaient auparavant des réfugiés et qui sont maintenant résidents permanents ou citoyens canadiens. Les recherches sur les travailleurs migrants temporaires présentent souvent le statut juridique permanent comme solution aux mauvaises conditions liées au travail précaire au Canada, mais même avec un statut d'immigration permanent, les anciens réfugiés vivent un écart entre leurs droits «garantis» par l'État en vertu de leur statut permanent et leur travail quotidien dans les usines de conditionnement de la viande dans l'Alberta rurale. Le travail dans les usines est dangereux, sale et difficile et les employés éprouvent de la difficulté à faire valoir leurs droits comme travailleurs. L'accès à des pauses adéquates, à des congés de maladie et à d'autres dispositions réglementaires a été signalé comme étant contesté et contingent. Les anciens réfugiés qui travaillent dans ce secteur font l'expérience d'une “non-liberté” inattendue.

INTRODUCTION

On April 19, 2020, 67-year-old Bui Thi Hiep was the first person to die in connection with the COVID-19 outbreak at the Cargill meat processing facility in High River, Alberta. She and her husband, Nguyen Nga,

came to Canada as resettled refugees. They met in a boat fleeing Vietnam and landed in the same refugee camp before coming to Canada and marrying. The couple both worked at the Cargill plant. Bui had worked there for 23 years, removing bones from ground beef. Speaking through a translator,

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Nga explained that he had been unable to be with his wife the day she died due to COVID-19 restrictions in hospitals: "I am so, so sad. I am speechless, because I know I will not see my wife again" (CBC News, 2020, para. 10).

As resettled former refugees, Bui and Nga joined a workforce at Cargill predominantly composed of other racialized immigrants and migrants to Canada. Bui worked alongside former refugees from Vietnam, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Afghanistan; migrant workers who came to Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program from Mexico and the Philippines; immigrants who entered Canada as sponsored family members (spouses and parents) from China, India, and the Philippines; and other immigrants from numerous other countries. In sum, the labour force in the Alberta meatpacking industry reflects the nuances of Canada's permanent and temporary immigration programs as well as the distinctly racialized nature of Canada's labour market: 67% of workers in the Canadian meatpacking industry are immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016).¹

Refugees make up only 2.6% of Alberta's population yet represent 18% of workers in the province's meatpacking industry, where 70% of Canada's beef is produced (Statistics Canada, 2016). The majority of this beef is produced at two plants: JBS Foods in Brooks,

Alberta (pop. 15,000), which has a workforce of 2,800 workers, and the Cargill meat processing facility in High River, Alberta (pop. 14,000), which employs 2,000 workers. This paper reports on data collected from workers at both these facilities.

We examine the conditions former refugees face when working in one of Canada's most dangerous industries: meat processing. Resettled refugees arrive in Canada under one of three programs: (a) as Government Assisted Refugees (GAR), who are selected by UNHCR and supported by the Canadian government for their first year in Canada; (b) as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR), who are selected and sponsored by a group of Canadian citizens; or (c) as Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees (BVOR), who are supported by a combination of government and private sponsorship funding. Regardless of the refugee program through which they arrive, these former refugees are granted full legal status (Canadian permanent residence) upon arrival. Drawing on a unique data set of research responses from former refugees who work in meatpacking, our research shows that despite having more rights "on paper," formerly resettled refugees face significant barriers to enacting rights and accessing entitlements on the job, especially vis-à-vis their conditions of work. These barriers invite questions about what it means to have permanent legal status.

This paper builds on existing literature on the racialized nature of the Canadian labour market and the reliance of particular industries—in this case, meatpacking—on immigration policy to secure their labour force. We join with other scholars to argue that the reliance on former refugees and migrants with precarious legal status is not accidental, but rather a deliberate strategy to maximize profits (Miraftab, 2016; Ribas, 2016). We make this argument by elaborating the forms

¹Beyond census data used here, an accurate portrait of the composition of the meatpacking workforce, including the immigration status and countries of origins of workers, is elusive. Based on census data from 2016, 67% of workers in meatpacking are classified as immigrants, 18% of whom are resettled refugees. Temporary worker data are more challenging to access, but census data from 2016 indicates that 6.7% of workers in Alberta's meat processing industry are temporary foreign workers (Statistics Canada, 2016). This number reflects the number of "non-permanent residents" working in National Occupational Classification code 3116 (meat product manufacturing), that is, 590 out of a total of 8,740 workers representing 6.7% of the workforce. This number, however, is largely seen as an undercount as the number of temporary foreign workers (non-permanent residents) varies over time.

of labour “unfreedom” (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) that former refugees, now Canadian permanent residents (PRs) and citizens, face at work.

Concomitantly, we also draw attention to the social production of citizenship and “refugeeness.” We are inspired, and troubled, by scholarship on precarious legal status that demonstrates the ways that vulnerabilities and exclusions characterized by precarious legal status persist even after regularization (Goldring & Landolt, 2022; Landolt & Goldring, 2013b). Writing about migrants to Canada with precarious legal status, Landolt & Goldring argue that

non-citizenship is socially produced—and not simply as a residual category opposed to citizenship, but in the sense that social relations and practices mediate non-citizenship, turning an insecure legal category into a social location and lived experience that has long-term negative outcomes that shape post-regularization life.

(2013b, p. 155)

Like non-citizenship, refugeeness is also a socially produced location, with long-term effects even after resettlement and permanent residence. In this paper we extend Landolt and Goldring’s argument to show that even permanent status upon arrival in Canada is no panacea to avoiding dirty, dangerous, and difficult work. We argue that although many formerly resettled refugees hold a relatively privileged legal status in Canada, precarity and displacement do not end through resettlement. Rather, a predatory and geographically strategic racialized capitalism exploits people’s newness to Canada and their transnational financial obligations to extended family and other kin elsewhere (Bragg & Hyndman, 2022).

We begin by presenting a brief history of the North American meatpacking industry to contextualize this argument, highlighting its structural dependence on international migration regimes to secure its labour force.

The arrival of the Cargill plant in High River in 1989 provides a case study of how the Alberta beef industry relies on a low-paid, and predominantly racialized, im/migrant labour pool and what these arrangements imply for workplace safety and substantive rights. We connect this history to the literatures on precarious work in Canada and intersections with im/migration status, concluding the literature review with a brief discussion on the social construction of citizenship and refugeeness.

We subsequently present our findings and illustrate the hazardous conditions faced by workers who came to Canada as resettled refugees. Our data document the disconnect between the secure legal status of Canadian PR and the lived experience of former refugees who work in Alberta slaughterhouses. Two specific aspects of their work life force us to query what it means to have purportedly “secure” legal status: the conditions of work themselves (as dirty, difficult, and dangerous [3D]) and the conditions of labour unfreedom (Strauss & McGrath, 2017). While former refugees have the **legal right** to change employment, they report feeling trapped and unable to leave their jobs in meatpacking. A discernible gap emerges between their rights on paper (they can change employers/industries and choose their jobs) and how these rights are understood and enacted (or not) by former refugees. This research thus builds on scholarship that demonstrates the ways in which labour unfreedom is not something inherent to specific migration categories or the work they do, but rather “describes relationships that are actively produced and institutionalized by employers and the state” (Strauss & McGrath, 2017, p. 200).

Finally, we demonstrate that these former refugee newcomers are far less secure and safe than they expected to be in Canada with

PR status. This contributes to literature on the challenges of labour market integration for resettled former refugees in Canada (Kosny et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). This unfreedom is witnessed in relation to occupational health and safety provisions and labour relations at meatpacking plants. Despite formal provisions, their ability to advocate for workplace safety is undermined through their marginalization and their concerns and fear of losing their livelihood. As racialized former refugees, most of whom spoke little English or French upon arriving in Canada, they have few employment options and yet many obligations to kin elsewhere. The gap between de jure rights and substantive rights is notable in the failure of the state to protect workers through occupational health and safety regimes and the basic entitlements these are supposed to provide.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Alberta Beef Industry, the State, and the Creation of a Precarious Workforce

The disproportionate number of former refugees working in Alberta meatpacking is no accident. The meatpacking industry faces a perpetual labour shortage (Food Processing Skills Canada, 2019). While the industry suggests that this shortage is because of a series of “perceptual challenges” (p. 11) about the work, we concur with other scholars who argue that the challenge in recruiting workers stems from the industry’s poor safety record, brutal conditions of work, and relatively low pay (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021; Miraftab, 2016; Ribas, 2016). In turn, immigration is a central pillar of labour recruitment and retention by the meatpacking industry (Broadway, 2013; Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021; Miraftab, 2016; Ribas, 2016).

Michael Broadway (2013) provides a vivid portrait of Lakeside Packers² search for workers from across Canada. The plant recruited labour from the Maritimes and Newfoundland to its plant in Brooks, Alberta. However, people from Eastern Canada stayed only a year or two in Brooks, and once word got back to the sending communities that conditions and terms of employment were poor, the plant struggled to recruit Canadian workers. In response, Lakeside turned to resettled refugees from Somalia and Sudan, who started to arrive in Brooks in the early 2000s. Due to the difficult conditions in the plant, employees at Brooks sought to unionize, an effort that was led in part by South Sudanese workers (among others) (Foster, 2016). This labour mobilization shaped Lakeside’s preference for temporary foreign workers (TFWs) who are tied to a single employer and, by the nature of their precarious legal status, are seen as more desirable and docile employees.

Plants like JBS and Cargill, both multinational companies, require thousands of workers to keep the lines moving and their billion-dollar transnational industry operational. In turn, these companies rely heavily on governments where plants are hosted to help secure workers. This is evident most recently through the successful industry lobby to raise the cap on the number of TFWs a plant can employ at a specific time (from 10% to 30% of the workforce) (CBC News, 2022). In this way, the Canadian government acts as a quasi-employment agency for the highly profitable meatpacking industry, furnishing workers with precarious legal status through the expansion of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. The industry is dependent on low-wage, vulnerable workers, most of whom are racialized newcomers or “temporary” workers and are less likely to attempt to

²Lakeside Packers was a precursor company to JBS Foods (the current American-owned meatpacking corporation in Brooks).

enact their substantive rights to decent work and basic occupational health and safety (OHS) provisions (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021). This dependency emerged with industry consolidation in the 1980s and the related downward pressure on worker wages (Foster, 2016; Miraftab, 2016; Stull & Broadway, 2013).

Historically, meatpacking plants were located in urban areas and had high rates of unionization (Foster, 2016; Miraftab, 2016). While the work was difficult and dangerous, the jobs were secure, unionized, and relatively well paid, even above the sector average (MacLachlan, 2001). This changed dramatically in the 1980s, when Iowa Beef Packers initiated restructuring, now referred to as the “IBP revolution” (Stull & Broadway, 2013). Meat processing plants relocated to rural areas closer to farms and feedlots. This both reduced the cost of transporting live animals and led to vertical integration of facilities. In turn, the industry consolidated around a few key players. Industry consolidation drove down worker wages, in many cases undermining or cancelling union contracts (Foster, 2016).

Alberta provides a clear example of industry consolidation and the commensurate downward pressure on worker wages and labour conditions. In 1988, Alberta’s provincial government incentivized Cargill to come to Alberta with a \$4 million grant (Schuler, 1990a). Additionally, the towns of High River and Okotoks and the municipal district of Foothills paid \$3.5 million to build a waste sewage system to deal with the effluent from the Cargill plant (Cargill paid the rest, according to media reports) (Mofina, 1988). When Cargill first opened in 1989, industry analysts estimated that the High River plant was losing \$300,000 to \$500,000 per week, though Cargill denied this (Climenhaga, 1989b). This strategy of

short-term losses was part of a longer-term strategy to drive out urban competitors with higher labour costs. Cargill also relied on immigrant workers from Calgary to drive down wages, bussing them from Calgary and “paying them \$2 to \$3 below union industry rates” (Schuler, 1990b, p. B1). They succeeded and wages decreased across the province (Climenhaga, 1990). At the same time, the work remained among the most dangerous, with an accident rate of 29.9% in Alberta in 1990 (Schuler, 1990a).

In the 30 years since Cargill arrived in Alberta, the industry landscape has changed dramatically. Production has increased and consolidated. When Cargill opened in 1989, it had a slaughter capacity of 6,000 cattle per week (Cybulski, 1988); today, it slaughters 4,700 heads of cattle per day. JBS in Brooks slaughters 4,200 heads of cattle per day. Most of the original big players in the Alberta beef industry closed in the following decades (Broadway, 2013; Schuler, 1990a). While the industry landscape has shifted, the conditions of work continue to be depressingly similar to those described in 1990: the work is dangerous, employee turnover and injury are high (Charlebois & Summan, 2014), and the work continues to be done for low wages that *dropped* precipitously between the mid-1980s to 2000 (MacLachlan, 2001). The mostly Canadian-born urban workforce of white men in meatpacking has been largely replaced by predominantly racialized, immigrant workers, including many former refugee workers.

Precarious Work, Immigration Status, and COVID-19 in Meatpacking

Precarious work is a broad term referring to “forms of work involving limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill-health” (Vosko, 2005, p. 3). While precarious work

is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it is understood to be a key feature of contemporary global capitalism with the proliferation of non-standard and contingent labour relations (Fudge & Vosko, 2001; Vosko, 2005). These labour relations are shaped by the social locations of workers, which includes their gender, race, and im/migration status (Cranford et al., 2003; Fudge & Vosko, 2001; Hira-Friesen, 2018).

The over-representation of racialized immigrants, including former refugees, in precarious work in Canada is well established in the literature (Hira-Friesen, 2018; Kosny et al., 2019; Krahn et al., 2000; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). Former refugees face barriers to decent work, which include foreign credential recognition and deskilling (Sweetman et al., 2015), as well as a lack of "Canadian work experience" (Smith & Mustard, 2010), and they face discrimination (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012) and language barriers (Premji et al., 2008). In turn, former refugees, now Canadian PRs or citizens, end up concentrated in precarious jobs without access to paid sick days and other basic safety provisions (Smith & Mustard, 2010).

The variegated and uneven nature of the Canadian labour market became highly visible during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from Statistics Canada reveal that immigrants to Canada were more likely to die of COVID-19 than non-immigrants in the first wave of the pandemic (March–July 2020); 25% of COVID-19 deaths occurred among immigrants, a group that makes up 22% of the total population. For those younger than 65, immigrants represented 20% of the total Canadian population but accounted for 30% of all COVID-19 deaths (Ng, 2021). The Statistics Canada report suggests that these deaths are, in part, attributable to the fact that "newly arrived immigrants live in low income or in overcrowded or

multigeneration households. They are also more likely to be employed as essential workers in occupations that are associated with a greater risk of virus infection" (Ng, 2021, p. 1). This was confirmed in our survey data, with 42% of respondents reporting that they or someone in their household had tested positive for COVID-19 in 2020.

Work in meat processing meets the definition of precarious work because it is quintessentially 3D work—dirty, difficult, and dangerous. Meatpacking employees have the highest probability of a disabling injury of all manufacturing employees, at a rate that is more than double the manufacturing average in Alberta (Charlebois & Summan, 2014). Modern plants rely on a Taylorist mode of production involving line workers standing shoulder to shoulder, making the same cuts of meat over and over. This results in a high rate of repetitive motion injuries (Stull et al., 1995). In this study, 34% of survey respondents reported being injured at work. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these dangers: the crowded industrial nature of work in the plants led to the death from COVID-19 of at least six im/migrant workers in Alberta's meatpacking industry.

The Limits of Secure Legal Status and Labour Unfreedom

Our work draws together literature on the racialized nature of precarious 3D work with current theorization of precarious legal status to examine how a supposedly secure legal category (Canadian PR) is, shot through with vulnerability and insecurity that characterize the lives of former refugees. More specifically, we argue that meatpacking workers who are formerly resettled refugees may be granted formal legal status by the Canadian state but are often unable to enact the purported benefits of this status. The economic geography of employer recruitment, work-

place locations, and government concessions and incentives to transnational corporations investing in these industrial meatpacking facilities perpetuates precarity.

Most of the scholarship on the gap between the “right to have rights” (Arendt, 1951) through citizenship or permanent legal status and actually accessing those rights focuses on those who have transitioned from temporary or precarious to formal legal status (Goldring & Landolt, 2022). Specifically, Landolt and Goldring (2013a,b) describe the ongoing and repeated gains and then setbacks that migrants endure. Rather than conceiving of legal status as a linear trajectory, migrants are more likely to experience a “complex, multi-entry and multi-directional set of legal status trajectories and negotiations” (Landolt & Goldring, 2013a, p. 9). To date, little scholarship has examined the trajectories of those who arrive in Canada with the purported benefits of full legal status but with a history of displacement and precarity elsewhere (such as resettled refugees). Rather than comparing one group of migrants/refugees with another, our aim is to interrogate the ways in which legal status is unevenly experienced even by those to whom it is immediately granted.

While literature on precarious legal status tends to centre on the shift from precarious to “regularized” (permanent) legal status as the vital change to access better employment, critical scholarship unsettles that long-held assumption. It points to the way in which legal status is socially constructed, relational, and contingent: non-citizenship is a “a sticky social category” (Landolt & Goldring, 2013b, p. 160; see also Landolt & Goldring, 2015). A transition from precarious or temporary to permanent legal status does not necessarily translate into commensurate improvements in access to rights and “belonging” (Goldring & Landolt,

2022). Many people remain in situations of poor employment and face other forms of marginalization even after legal precarity is resolved and permanent status is secured (Goldring & Landolt, 2022). In other words, precarious legal status can produce enduring marginal social status within Canadian society and labour markets that continues after full legal status is granted.

Central to understanding the gap between rights on paper and substantive rights is the notion of unfreedom as described by Strauss and McGrath (2017). The authors argue for an understanding of labour unfreedom that takes into account multiple and intersecting forms of precarity and unfreedom that are co-produced and institutionalized in the formal capitalist labour market by employers and the state:

In the case of migrant workers, and refugees and asylum seekers, employment restrictions associated with their legal status can create situations in which unfree labour relations are a direct condition of their status, or in which low pay, a lack of knowledge of and access to employment rights, and debt, create conditions in which unfree labour relations emerge. These conditions also produce multi-dimensional forms of vulnerability beyond the workplace, which relate to notions of precarity and precarious life.

(Strauss & McGrath, 2017, p. 202)

Our analysis draws on this notion of labour unfreedom to examine how unfree labour relations exist even when one has legal status. As such, we advance a relational view of labour unfreedom that does not see it as only linked to one’s immigration status or history—rather, it is co-produced through state policies, economic geographies, and racialized immigration programs that ensnare workers in conditions of vulnerability and unfreedom. We elaborate on the production of these unfree labour relations as they take shape for formerly resettled refugees who labour in Alberta slaughterhouses.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Research for this paper took place between January and May 2021. Data collection took the form of an online survey and qualitative interviews with workers (see [Table A1](#) for details on survey participants and [Table A2](#) for interview participants). Workers were recruited from across the province, but most were from communities in southern Alberta, including Calgary, High River, and Brooks. The research took place under the auspices of a community–university research partnership funded by a special COVID-19 SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant, with community partner organization ActionDignity.³ Some data presented in this paper are available in the community report titled “No Safe Place,” which was produced for ActionDignity in 2021. Bragg had a previous relationship with the community-based organization, ActionDignity, in Calgary, Alberta.

ActionDignity actively supported workers and their families when serious COVID-19 outbreaks hit the Cargill and JBS plants in April 2020. They organized a vigil for Hiep Bui, the first Cargill worker to die of COVID-19, and engaged with the media and advocated for better protections for workers. The key questions for this research were developed in collaboration with ActionDignity. The aim of the research partnership was to better understand links between the migration status of workers in Alberta’s meatpacking industry, the work conditions they face, and their experiences of COVID-19.

The authors worked with ActionDignity to hire five research assistants with language proficiency in Somali, Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya, Tagalog, and Arabic. This team assisted in the development and translation of the

survey questions and interview guide. The online survey was available in these five languages and accessible by smartphone or tablet.⁴ Research assistants occasionally assisted participants with completing the survey over the phone if online access was restricted. The survey was open between February and April 2021. We distributed the survey through ActionDignity’s network of community brokers, their website, the research assistants hired, and social media feeds. In total, 224 im/migrant workers completed the survey.

This paper reflects a tranche of our survey and interview data: 55% of survey respondents and 10 interviewees entered Canada through a refugee resettlement program and landed with permanent residence. The survey asked questions related to the demographic and immigration characteristics of participants, including their immigration pathway, current legal status, and language capacity, as well as their conditions of work, both related to COVID-19 and other aspects of workplace safety. The final question of our survey was an open-ended one that asked for any additional information participants wished to share. Some of these answers are included in this paper.

Following the survey, the research team conducted 17 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with im/migrant workers in the meatpacking industry. These interviews were conducted in participants’ first languages and then transcribed and translated to English. The interviews covered three broad themes: immigration experiences, work conditions in meatpacking, and the COVID-19 outbreaks in the industry. The interviews

³Ethics approval for this paper was received from York University’s Conjoint Ethics Committee under certificate #e2020-265.

⁴To comply with COVID-19 restrictions, our research methods were designed to avoid in-person engagement. Qualitative interviews took place over Zoom or the phone. The survey was designed to be short and accessible to workers who had limited time and energy to engage in research due to commuting time, long workdays, and caregiving responsibilities for their families; our survey was very short and took only 10 minutes to complete.

sought to add depth to the survey data, and survey participants were recruited from those who participated in the survey and agreed to be contacted for further research. Inclusion criteria for both the survey and interviews required that participants were born outside of Canada, were 18 years of age or older, and worked in a meat processing facility in Alberta. The open-ended survey questions and interview transcripts were coded for key themes using NVivo.

FINDINGS AND ARGUMENT: UNFREEDOM AND THE LIMITS OF SAFETY VOICE

This section draws on interview and survey data to document the gap between the legal rights granted to resettled former refugees and how those rights take shape, or rather do not materialize, in the lives of former refugees, now Canadian PRs, who work in meatpacking.

Pathways Into Meatpacking—Precarious Work / Precarious Lives

Our data suggest that a confluence of factors lead former refugees to employment in the meatpacking industry. These include the urgent necessity of earning an income to support family members both in Canada and abroad; significant structural barriers in the labour market that lead refugee workers to move between precarious and low-paying jobs with minimal job security or benefits, ultimately ending up in meatpacking; language and literacy barriers that make meat processing a viable employment opportunity for some refugees; and a large pre-existing workforce made up of other former refugees from similar countries who assist newcomers in finding employment. These findings align with other literature on the barriers facing

resettled former refugees in Canada (Kosny et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

Our central argument is that despite holding a relatively privileged official legal status in Canada, former refugees' precarity and displacement does not end with resettlement in Canada. When we trace these employment trajectories in meatpacking, a pattern emerges. Upon arrival in Canada, resettled refugees struggle to find work and often move between low-paid and precarious jobs:

I worked in a bedding factory for a short period, was covering someone. Another time I worked in Ottawa, Ontario. I was housekeeping at the university for five months. When I was new to Canada. Sorry, I also worked factory in Edmonton for three months. They were looking for extra employees for the holidays before Christmas. When their employees came back to work they fired me. They said, "We do not have the position for you." (Fawzia,⁵ former refugee from Somalia)

I worked in some places like [local community college, name withheld], [large department store], restaurants, and at a bakery, but I did not work for long time in these places. In these jobs, I worked only for one, two, or maximum six months. In most of these places the workload was way bigger than what they were paying me. When I found out about the job opening in Cargill I applied for it. (Aaila, former refugee from Afghanistan)

While work in meatpacking is understood to be difficult and dangerous, participants also reported that it pays better than other work that was available to them, and they were often able to secure employment in this industry despite language barriers or a lack of Canadian work experience, as described by Farzin, a former refugee from Afghanistan:

For the first six months, I was looking for a job, but no one trusted me and accepted me to work for them as I was not speaking English.

Aabhass, a former refugee from Afghanistan, recalled how his willingness to undertake a job that could lead to injury and

⁵All participant names in this paper are pseudonyms.

chronic pain was the key factor in his employment:

One of our relatives, who is no more with us, brought me the application and I applied for it. Cargill called me and I went there with my son for an interview. They told me that this job was not easy as one could be easily injured or develop chronic pain and discomfort in their body due to hard conditions, physical work, and cold temperature at work area. I accepted all the conditions and started working there.

Addisu, who arrived as a privately sponsored refugee from Ethiopia, described how his sponsor connected him to work at Cargill. He describes the necessity of finding work to support his family in Ethiopia, a pressure familiar to many former refugees:

Thus, our sponsor facilitated my application to Cargill. He advised me that it was comparatively an attractive job. It was hard to get casual job for \$13 fee per hour [as at Cargill] through Calgary. By then, I assumed full responsibility of taking care of the entire family until others get job. Besides, I was helping my mom and brothers in Ethiopia.

Unlike migrants to Canada who enter through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and who are limited in their ability to change employers, resettled refugees who have permanent residence have the ability to change employers and seek different or more preferable employment.⁶ Despite this de jure right, we observe that few refugee workers perceive they have the power to change their employment situation, despite experiencing hardship, injury, and/or work-related stress. Throughout our interviews and across survey responses, workers expressed that they felt trapped in their job. Fawzia, originally from

Somalia, described the collective anxiety of being laid off and the need to continue working to support family in precarious places:

I've talked to them, but everyone is afraid of being fired. You can understand people are suffering. Especially as Somalis, we are people who help their people back home support. We don't take a mortgage, or car, the only thing we think about is people back home who are in distress, drought, explosion, daily fighting, and fighting...

These sentiments were reinforced by survey responses such as this one, from another former refugee from Somalia, working at JBS. This person described their conditions of work in terms resembling slavery:

We work hard, the pay is very bad. Management gave power to the supervisors to abuse the newcomers, seniors, women, and they treat us like dirt. I'm full-time [permanent] employee, when I take a sick day the company [is supposed] to pay me that day, but they refuse. If I complain they will automatically fire me or anyone who has the audacity to speak up about the issues we face every day. Our break, we have 15, 30 minutes. When we go for 15 break, they will come and tell us, "Your break is finish, get back to your stations." Same thing, the 30 minutes becomes 20 minutes. I have diabetic in my file, when I request washroom, they will tell me, "Wait someone [went] before you," and that will take very long time. They treat us like dirt, there is no respect, dignity, and decency. **Practically we are slaves. If we have options we would not stay there even one single day** [emphasis added]. We came to Canada to have better life than our homes we left behind. Instead we fall on trap. Why they say Canada is free and fair for all people? (Survey response from a male worker from Somalia)

This response reflects a sentiment that came through elsewhere in both the survey and interview data: of being trapped and having few options ("If we have options we would not stay there even one single day").

We theorize that the racially segmented labour market and the geography of meat-packing, coupled with pressing financial obligations, make it difficult for former refugee

⁶TFWs can also change employers if they meet a range of conditions set by the federal government, but research suggests that there are also considerable barriers for TFWs to access these rights (cf. Cedillo et al., 2019; Lewchuk et al., 2008; Nakache & Kinoshita, 2010). More details on the rights of TFWs in Canada can be found at <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/protected-rights.html>.

workers to imagine a way out of meatpacking, despite the legal right to change employment. This is evident in a comment from Bachir, a former refugee from Sudan:

I didn't change my work since I came to Canada. I feared from being jobless and changing my position, that is why I preferred to stay in JBS and I was newcomer with a lot of commitments. I was thinking if I left this job I will only work as a housekeeper and I always used to work in decent jobs back home.

These comments reflect the gap between the legal right to switch employers and the significant challenges faced by former refugees to find other work. Participants described uncertainty about where they might land if they left current employment. While this feeling is distinct from the legal ties that bind TFWs (for example) to one employer, it is also very different from the purported freedom enjoyed by those privileged to hold secure legal status. [Strauss and McGrath](#) suggest that rather than viewing labour relations as either “free” or “unfree,” it is more generative to view the range of unfree relations institutionalized in the labour market (2017, p. 200). Similarly, we contend that research participants' comments reflect the range of “unfree labour relations” that shapes the lives and livelihoods of former refugee workers who, despite holding legal status in Canada, still endure forms of unfreedom.

Conditions of Work and the Impossibility of Safety

In the final section of this paper, we explore the distance between the legal rights promised to resettled former refugees, and the enactment of these rights. We argue that while Canadian PRs who work in meatpacking have legal rights granted to them under occupational health and safety (OHS) legislation in Alberta, there is a fundamental disconnect between these rights and how

they are accessed (or not) by former refugees. This gap—between legal and lived rights—further challenges what it means to have a secure legal status in the context of 3D work.

The COVID-19 outbreaks at Cargill and JBS exemplify the failure of OHS regimes to protect meatpacking workers. The plants in High River and Brooks remained open, running full shifts, even after Bui Thi Hiep died on April 19. While Cargill ultimately made the decision to close temporarily, JBS only slowed production without actually closing. Similarly in 2021, an outbreak at the Olymel plant in Red Deer, Alberta, left three workers dead and several hundred infected ([Rosove, 2021](#)). At no point did the Alberta government step in to force a plant closure; rather, in the cases of Cargill and Olymel, plant management made the decision to close. The decision not to force the closure of plants differed from actions taken by governments in other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia ([Agahi, 2020](#)).

In the case of Cargill, eight days before Bui died, workers wrote a letter the mayor of High River requesting that the plant shut down ([Dryden, 2020](#)). After the outbreak spiraled out of control, media reported that workers had been incentivized with cash bonuses to come to work sick and were not given access to adequate personal protective equipment ([Blaze Baum et al., 2020](#)). A year after the outbreak, the Canadian Broadcasting Company obtained documents that revealed that despite knowing that COVID-19 was still spreading among workers inside the plant, the chief medical officer of health and the Ministers of Labour and of Agriculture assured workers at a telephone town hall on April 18 that it was safe to return to work ([Rusnell & Russell, 2021](#)). On April 19, Bui died. Less than three weeks later, Armando Sallegue died after contracting COVID-19

from his son, who worked at the plant, and 51-year-old Benito Quesada, union shop steward and Cargill worker, died on May 7.⁷

COVID-19 brought to light the fundamental challenges of securing equitable health and safety measures from both government and employers for vulnerable (migrant and immigrant) workers (Barnetson & Matsunaga-Turnbull, 2018).⁸ It exposed existing vulnerabilities and labour shortages in this context. As in other provinces, Alberta's OHS system relies on the "internal responsibility system," which means it is complaint driven and requires that workers assert their rights to workplace safety (Government of Alberta, 2022). The fundamental principles of OHS are that workers have the right to know about their rights at work, to participate in their health and safety, and to refuse unsafe work (Cedillo et al., 2019). This system disadvantages immigrant workers who, as precarious workers in low-wage jobs, may be unable to assert their rights to workplace safety, lack clarity around how to exercise these rights, or fear reprisal for speaking out about unsafe work conditions (Lewchuk, 2013; Lewchuk et al., 2008; Premji et al., 2008).

Tracing the relationship between OHS and newcomer workers who are both temporary and permanent residents is challenged by the fact that the Workers Compensation Board—the organization responsible for tracking workplace injury and death—does

⁷UFCW local 401 has a presence in both JBS and Cargill; as such, both plants are unionized. The unions played an active and public role during the COVID-19 outbreaks in 2020. Both TFWs and resettled refugees—indeed, most workers at these plants—are in the union, and the battle to unionize Lakeside Packers (now JBS) was hard fought (see Foster, 2016). Despite the important presence of the union, participants in this study expressed ambivalence about the presence of the union and skepticism about its ability to secure their safety at work. This is an important avenue of research to explore further but unfortunately exceeds the scope of this study.

⁸For more detailed worker perspectives on the COVID-19 outbreaks in meatpacking in Alberta, see Bragg and Hyndman (2022).

not collect data related to immigration status (Barnetson & Matsunaga-Turnbull, 2018). The limited research that exists suggests that not all workers are equally able to voice concerns about access safety in the workplace (Kosny et al., 2019; Lewchuk, 2013). While this can be especially challenging for TFWs who are tied to their employer via their work permit (Cedillo et al., 2019; McLaughlin & Hennebry, 2013), we also heard from those with PR status that there are fundamental inadequacies in the OHS regime for former refugees. We elaborate this point by way of a few examples from our interviews and survey data.

The **right to know** about workplace hazards and have clear information on how to protect oneself at work is foundational to the OHS regime. This is especially important in an inherently dangerous industry with high levels of risk. Specifically, meatpacking workers use long knives and other sharp equipment in a fast-paced environment. Training is cited in the legislation as a crucial element in ensuring the right to know (Government of Alberta, 2023), yet workers reported profound inadequacies in the depth and kind of training they received at Cargill and JBS. Workers reported either not being trained at all or having to learn on the job from co-workers. Yafet, a former refugee from Ethiopia, describes his experience with training at Cargill:

Interviewer: What type of training have you ever taken relevant to your career?

Yafet: Just nothing! I have never taken any upgrading training at Cargill. If you assign for new position, you have to learn by observing from your co-workers.

Bachir, a former refugee from Sudan who works at JBS, confirmed Yafet's experience with training:

The last thing is my concern about the job training. It is really a big issue and very risky for the work-

ers. We were asked to watch people while they are doing their jobs without real training, and if you don't get it they don't bother, and it is easier to fire you as they always give the feeling that they don't care if you go many others need your position.

Workers reported that if they changed jobs within the plant, adequate training was not provided, and they were required to learn by observing their co-workers. For example, Fawzia, a former refugee from Somalia, describes being moved from one role to another at JBS and having to learn on the job from her co-workers:

After my training, they put me in an area where there is heavy big meat. I worked there for seven months, I got used to it, after that they have moved where I just left now, which is smaller meat. I did not get training in the second place they moved me. I was watching co-worker how they do it and they were telling my piece. That's how it is.

Participants also noted that there are significant challenges with respect to on-the-job training. Addisu, a former refugee from Ethiopia, shared that he was not able to understand the technical jargon in the training he received, and requests for clarification were met with ridicule from his supervisor:

I used to read the technical terms without adequately comprehending details. I used to ask the supervisor every morning. Nevertheless, she used to turn down my inquiry and with resentment she used to ask me: "Aren't you reading the instruction? Why do you then ask me?" I used to respond, "Yes, I can read but could not comprehend the technical jargons. Why wouldn't you help me?"

Addisu's description of struggling to understand the technical jargon related to training and being met with derision by his supervisor reflects the fundamental inadequacy of a safety regime that relies on workers asserting their rights to safety. Former refugee employees, often working in their second or third language, fear being laid off and thus avoid "rocking the boat."

While they may have access to a myriad of legal rights on paper—even as unionized members of the workforce—they report significant barriers to enacting these rights. These barriers demonstrate some of the ways that access to rights is limited by the social location of those seeking to access fundamental rights (Premji & Lewchuk, 2013; Strauss & McGrath, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to extend analysis and expand conversations around the purported security offered through the permanent legal status of refugee resettlement in Canada, specifically in the context of 3D (dangerous, dirty, difficult) labour. It queries the unexpected relationship between secure immigration status (Canadian permanent residence) and precarious labour and conditions. Building on the important scholarship about precarious legal status, we have explored the ways refugee status is also "sticky" and how the precarity and displacement experienced by former refugees can follow them into resettlement in Canada (Landolt & Goldring, 2013b).

In an article titled, "Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?" Vinh Nguyen (2019, p. 110) writes:

The work of seeking refuge does not end when refugees are granted political asylum; what begins instead is a life of low-wage labor, with few opportunities for upward mobility, despite the prevalent discourses of "refugee exceptionalism," whereby the refugee's struggle and suffering are cast as provisional, and deliverance into freedom is always just on the horizon.

"A life of low-wage labor, with few opportunities for upward mobility" aptly describes the experiences of former refugees who labour in meatpacking. Despite the legal right to change jobs and exercise labour mobility, research participants report vari-

ous factors that limit their ability to exercise this right. With few choices to earn a steady income without the official language skills, the meatpacking industry provides an opening but renders life difficult for these workers. Their lives belie a gap between the de jure right to labour mobility and geographic and de facto economic realities of employment for former refugees, now Canadian PRs or citizens in Alberta. This gap is further revealed through the disconnect between rights to “safety” assigned through the occupational health and safety regime and the realities of OHS as they are manifest in an industry with high rates of injury and even death. If access to safety is contingent on workers voicing their concerns, the great disparities between the multibillion-dollar meatpacking industry and racialized newcomer workers who may not speak or read much English or French renders access to safety elusive. As we document in this paper, the unfree labour relations are co-produced by state incentives to the industry, an OHS system that is difficult for newcomer workers to navigate, and barriers that refugees face in the labour market (Kosny et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

These gaps reflect the ways in which legal status in Canada fails to insulate certain categories of people with this privileged status against the precarity of dangerous work. In turn, our attention is drawn to what it means to hold permanent legal immigration status as a social category, as well as a juridical one. As Nguyen (2019) states, while struggle and suffering are imagined as temporary, the reality for many former refugees is that arrival in Canada, and integration into the most dangerous corners of the labour market, introduces another form of struggle and suffering: one that reveals the limits of what it means to have “secure” legal status in Canada.

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APPENDIX

Table A1

Survey Participants (n = 224)

Average age	41 years
Gender	
Man	70.09%
Woman	29.91%
Transgender	0.00%
Other/prefer to not say	0.00%
Country of origin	
Philippines	24.11%
Somalia	22.77%
Eritrea	16.96%
Ethiopia	10.27%
Sudan	9.38%
South Sudan	7.59%
Colombia	2.68%
Afghanistan	1.79%
Cuba	0.89%
Other	3.57%
Length of time in Canada	
1–5 years	28.57%
6–10 years	33.04%
11–15 years	17.41%
16–20 years	12.50%
21–25 years	4.46%
26–30 years	1.79%
30+ years	2.23%
Employer	
Cargill, High River	29.91%
Cargill Case Ready, Calgary	5.80%
JBS Foods, Calgary	52.91%
Other	9.38%
Length of time with employer	
<1 year	12.95%
1–2 years	13.84%
2–3 years	9.38%
3–4 years	11.16%
4–5 years	7.59%
5+ years	45.09%

Continued on next page

Table A1*Continued*

Immigration program	
Refugees	54.90%
Government Assisted Refugees	43.10%
Privately Sponsored Refugees	50.40%
Refugee claimants	5.70%
Program of family reunification	25.00%
Economic immigration programs	5.40%
Temporary Foreign Worker Program	13.00%
Other	1.80%
Current legal status	
Canadian citizen	34.40%
Permanent resident	63.40%
Work/other visa	1.30%
Implied status	0.45%
Other	0.45%
Have you ever been injured at work?	
Yes	33.48%
No	66.52%
Has anyone in your household tested positive for COVID-19?	
Yes	41.52%
No	56.70%
Don't know	1.79%

Table A2*Interview Participants*

Pseudonym	Employer	Gender	Immigration stream	Immigration status	Language	Country of origin
Fawzia	JBS	Woman	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Somali	Somalia
Jamilah	Harmony beef	Woman	Resettled refugee	Canadian citizen	Somali	Somalia
Aaila	Cargill	Woman	Family sponsorship	Permanent resident	Dari	Afghanistan
Farzin	Cargill	Man	Family sponsorship	Canadian citizen	Dari	Afghanistan
Aabhass	Cargill	Man	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Dari	Afghanistan
Jay	Cargill	Man	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent resident	Tagalog	Philippines
Julio	Cargill	Man	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent resident	Tagalog	Philippines
Ernesto	Cargill Case Ready	Man	Skilled Worker Program	N/A	Ilonggo	Philippines
Dani	Cargill	Man	Temporary Foreign Worker Program	Permanent resident	Cebuano	Philippines
Asim	JBS	Man	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Arabic	Sudan
Bachir	JBS	Man	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Arabic	Sudan
Jamal	JBS	Man	Resettled refugee	Canadian citizen	Arabic	Sudan
Aziz	Cargill Case Ready	Man	Resettled refugee	N/A	Tigrinya	Eritrea
Addisu	Cargill	Man	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Amharic	Ethiopia
Yafet	Cargill	Man	Resettled refugee	Permanent resident	Amharic	Ethiopia
Lami	Cargill	Man	Resettled refugee	Canadian citizen	Amharic	Ethiopia
Dawit	Cargill	Man	Resettled refugee	Canadian citizen	Tigrinya	Eritrea