



Film Discussion Guide



***My Friend Omar* Discussion Guide**

Intro:

Thank you for agreeing to host a film screening of *My Friend Omar*.

Tens of thousands of people come to Canada each year to carry out essential work, primarily in low-pay sectors, under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). They keep Canada's agriculture, food-processing, caregiving, construction, and hospitality sectors going. These workers are promised jobs with better wages and working conditions but face a different reality when they arrive in Canada. Many are made to work long hours without rest, assigned tasks not in their contract, are underpaid, experience discrimination, and suffer verbal, physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

For workers like Omar who come to Canada under the TFWP, it is extremely difficult to leave their job, change their employer, or report abuse because their work permit ties them to a single employer. Discrimination in Canada's immigration system puts permanent residency out of reach for most workers in the TFWP, many of whom are racialized, so their precarious status is maintained and they are further exploited. Workers are separated from their families for longer periods, have their labour extracted, and are then often disposed of at the will of their employer if they fall sick, suffer injuries or speak out.

Film Information:

Title: "My Friend Omar: The struggles of a Seasonal Worker"

Duration: 60 minutes

Year: 2024

Logline:

In his preparation for a TV role, Québécois actor Christian de la Cortina uncovers, through his Guatemalan friend Omar, the abuses faced by seasonal workers. Their story reveals the flaws of a system that favors employers at the expense of workers' rights.

Synopsis short:

"My Friend Omar: The struggles of a Seasonal Worker" follows Québécois-Chilean actor Christian de la Cortina, who, while preparing for his role as Sandro in "5e rang," forms a friendship with Omar, a seasonal Guatemalan worker. This documentary unveils the persistent abuses some workers experience, exposing the shortcomings of the system. It also highlights Omar's solidarity and fight for justice, representing the voice of often invisible workers.

Synopsis long:

While researching for his role as Sandro in a TV series, Christian de la Cortina, a Québécois actor of Chilean origin, befriends Omar, a Guatemalan seasonal worker. Gradually, Omar confides in Christian about the abuses he suffered on a dairy farm. Christian then embarks on a quest to better understand the underlying reasons for the problems experienced by his friend and his colleagues. Through Omar's personal story, the documentary exposes a system primarily designed to serve the interests of Canadian employers at the expense of thousands of foreign workers whose living and working conditions are often miserable and

whose rights are violated. We will also discover that, although a code of silence still exists in our fields, everyone can help in their own way to bring justice and respect to these workers.

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/941736329?share=copy>

Director's biography

Christian de la Cortina is an actor/director born in Canada to Chilean parents. Over the last 15 years he has had a successful career as an actor for both TV and film, recognized for the passion and authenticity he brings to his roles. He has drawn the recognition of the Latin community in Canada, winning the Best Actor Award at The Latin Awards Canada in 2021. Bringing his own stories to the screen has been his focus for the last few years, writing and directing his own theatrical feature films.

Producer's biography

Vanessa Caceres was born in Colombia where she studied Industrial Engineering before moving to Canada in 2002 and setting her sights on film production. In 2005, her first production, the short film CARJACKING, was part of the official selection of the Montreal Film Festival. In 2009, she was the Line Producer on TRANSIT which was released theatrically in Canada by eOne Films. Her first feature film production, GENERATION WOLF, had an extensive film festival run, winning the Best Latin Film at Borregos Springs Film Festival and being picked up by Samuel Goldwyn Films for the U.S. in 2016. THE OFFICE GAMES was her second feature film production and was acquired by Quiver Distribution. Vanessa was a participant in The Sundance Collab Producing Program in 2020. She was part of the ReelWorld producer delegation for Content Canada in 2022 and for Primetime Ottawa in 2023.

How to host a film screening

Amnesty International Canada is encouraging our Amnesty International members and volunteer structures across the country to host “living room” or public screenings of this documentary film.

The following “to do” list will get you started, but feel free to contact us for more information and support at activism@amnesty.ca.

- Choose a location for the screening and ensure you have the AV (audio/visual) components and capabilities needed to screen the film. The film is an MP4 file and can be played from a laptop/computer. You need a screen and projector.
- To get the film file (MP4) contact activism@amnesty.ca

Develop a Run of Event:

- welcome and land acknowledgment

- brief remarks to introduce Amnesty International and our work on TFWP
- after the screening, if time allows, you might want to add a Q&A or a guided discussion
- it is always important to include a Take Action element

Promote your event:

- invite your Amnesty networks, friends and colleagues
- post to e-mail lists and on social media
- invite like-minded groups and organizations
- post to local media outlets, put up posters, do an interview with a local media outlet
- Providing some light refreshments is always great
- Don't forget to take photos (ensure participants are aware photos are being taken and might be used on Amnesty's public channels) and send those our way after the event
- Have a paper where participants can leave their name and email for follow up if they want to get involved
- Thank everyone for attending!

Possible Questions for Discussion:

- What do you know about Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program? Who benefits the most from it, and who may be most vulnerable under it?
- Migrant workers are essential to many industries, including Canada's food system, yet many live and work in abusive conditions. Why do you think their experiences are often invisible in mainstream conversations?
- Workers in the temporary foreign work program are not allowed to change jobs or employers, unless they can prove that they have been abused. Would this be accepted for Canadian citizens and permanent residents? Why or why not?
- The program is called the "Temporary Foreign Worker Program", but many of the labour needs are permanent. Why do you think that Canada limits pathways to permanent residency for people within the TFWP, including those who come to Canada year after year to work?
- Canada is often viewed as a welcoming and inclusive country. How do stories of racialized migrant workers in the TFWP challenge or reinforce this image?
- Do the stories told in *My Friend Omar* support or challenge the idea that Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program is fair and beneficial to workers?

- Migrant workers and others have been speaking out about the abuses within the TFWP for many years. Why do you think that the government refuses to address the issues?
- Why do you think that Amnesty has focused on the need to overhaul structure of the program, rather than the need for more inspections or enforcement against “bad apple” employers?
- Would increased inspections have helped Omar? Would they have prevented abuses against other workers in the future?
- How is racism — both structural and personal — present in the systems Omar must navigate? How does this impact his ability to access rights, justice, or basic dignity?
- What does this film reveal about the human cost of the food we eat?
- How do we benefit from exploited migrant labour? What can we do to avoid being complicit in this system?
- What lessons or questions do you take away from this film?

Canada TFWP Background Info

Since the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of racialized workers have only been accepted in Canada as temporary labourers through temporary labour migration schemes. These programs have gone through several reforms but closed work permits have remained a fundamental component over the years. In 2024, the Canadian government adopted additional reforms to reduce the number of migrants in the country and the length of TFWP work permits.

What is the TFWP?

The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) allows Canadian employers to hire foreign workers to fill temporary jobs when qualified Canadians are not available.

Canada relies heavily on the labour of temporary foreign workers especially in agriculture, caregiving, and food processing. These workers, often from the Global South, are issued closed work permits that effectively allow the employer to control their labour conditions and immigration status. That setup often leads to abuse, including excessive work hours, wage theft, racist discrimination and gender-based violence, restrictions on movement, and inadequate housing conditions.

These abuses are not the result of a few bad employers, but are directly linked to the structure of the TFWP, which prevents workers in the TFWP from freely changing jobs and employers and puts them at increased risk of labour exploitation. To learn more about the issues and read about some people’s experiences within the TFWP, please visit the [Temporary Foreign Workers Report](#) webpage.

What is Amnesty International Calling for?

Amnesty International is calling on Canadian authorities to abolish closed work permits. This does not mean the Temporary Foreign Worker Program should be eliminated, but rather overhauled to eradicate the root cause of the abuses: the closed nature of the work permit. The regime of closed work permits should

be replaced with open work permits that allow migrant workers to freely choose and change employers and jobs, as Canadian nationals and other migrant workers with open permits can do.

Amnesty International continues to call on Canada to ensure that the Canadian immigration system respects, protects and promotes the rights of all migrant workers without discrimination on the grounds of class, gender, nationality, ethnicity or race. The Canadian immigration system should not discriminate or set insurmountable barriers for migrant workers in “low-skilled” positions to access permanent residency.

Pressure from concerned Canadians is essential to ensure that:

- Migrant workers are treated with dignity and fairness, and enjoy the same right as Canadians to choose and change employers
- The government of Canada upholds its human rights commitments within its own borders
- Canada’s industries are not built on exploitation, racial injustice, or abuse. We all benefit from migrant workers’ contributions to Canada. We must ensure they benefit too — and can do their work safely, have their rights respected, and access justice if they experience abuse.

Why Should We Be Concerned?

There are many reasons why Canadians should be concerned. Migrant workers who come through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) carry out essential work that keeps Canada’s agriculture, food processing, caregiving, construction, and hospitality sectors going. Because migrant workers work in essential sectors, it is difficult for anyone in Canada to avoid complicity in these systems; migrant labour helps to put food on our tables and build our homes. However, like Omar, these workers often face **exploitative conditions**: long hours, wage theft, unsafe housing and working conditions, and restrictions on movement.

Migrant workers, who are predominantly racialized, are profoundly dehumanized through the TFWP. Separated from their families for long periods, their labour is extracted, and they are disposed of at the will of their employer. Many workers face termination and swift deportation when they fall sick, suffer injuries, develop occupational illnesses, or speak out and try to assert their rights. For those who are able to make complaints, language barriers, lack of supports, and precarious status make it difficult to navigate systems, and most are ultimately forced to return to working on a closed work permit, which made them vulnerable to abuse in the first place, if they wish to continue working in Canada.

The Government of Canada has known about this issue for years but has failed to act to meaningfully address the root cause of the rights abuses that take place within the TFWP: the closed work permit. Together, we can push them to make the vital changes that are needed to ensure that migrant workers can live in dignity and safety.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION

Sign the petition: [Canada: Stop Migrant Worker Abuse | Amnesty International Canada](#). Access a print petition [here](#).

Write a letter to your MP. You can find your MP by typing in your postal code here: [Find Members of Parliament - Members of Parliament - House of Commons of Canada](#). The following are key points to consider including in your letter:

- Workers in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program carry out essential work that is vital to many sectors, including food, caregiving, construction and hospitality.
- Closed work permits prevent workers in the TFWP from freely changing jobs and put workers at increased risk of labour exploitation and other rights abuses.
- Workers face reprisals if they speak out, including being unfairly dismissed and sent back to their home country. For many, access to justice is out of reach.
- Workers in the TFWP, many of whom are racialized, are separated from their families for long periods, have their labour extracted, and are treated as disposable.
- **Call on Canada to:**
 - **Abolish closed work permits, which make workers vulnerable to abuse.**
 - **Grant open work permits to workers in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, so they enjoy the same right as others in Canada to freely change their employer.**