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*“I would
never
go back”*

**FORCED LABOUR RISKS IN
BRAZIL'S COFFEE SUPPLY CHAINS**

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INTRODUCTION

To understand how shortcomings in corporate efforts to address forced labour, highlighted in the [2026 KnowTheChain food and beverage benchmark](#), affect workers at the bottom of global supply chains, KnowTheChain partnered with Articulation of Rural Employees of the State of Minas Gerais (ADERE-MG) to investigate working conditions on Brazilian coffee plantations. The testimony of workers interviewed by ADERE-MG bear witness to the abject failure of companies to respect the rights of their most vulnerable and hidden workforces. Interviews revealed multiple indicators of forced labour, with all 24 interviewees reporting at least one of the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)'s indicators](#), and many reporting as many as six. Among the most common were abuses of vulnerability, relating to precarious contracting and informality, and abusive working and living conditions. Deception during the recruitment process was also rife with most workers describing how they were mis-sold promises of harvest yields and quality, decent working and living conditions and the supply of equipment – before arriving to find conditions markedly worse.

These findings should ring alarm bells for benchmarked companies, **of which 64% disclose sourcing coffee, with several reliant on Brazilian supply chains**. Gaps in company practice included a lack of demonstrable oversight of sourcing relationships, ignorance of risks to supply chain workforces (including a failure to disclose data on the gender and migration status of supply chain workers), failure to monitor supply chain conditions beyond the first tier, a lack of practical support for freedom of association, and few meaningful efforts to ensure grievance mechanisms were accessible to supply chain workers. Despite the increased risks to migrant workers highlighted across interviews, benchmarked companies disclosed minimal data on the workers powering their supply chains. Against such inaction by those at the top of supply chains – and those with the greatest power to effect change – the exploitation workers described during the 2025 harvest seemed tragically inevitable.

CONTEXT: BRAZIL, COFFEE AND LABOUR RIGHTS

Brazil is the largest global producer and exporter of coffee, supplying one third of the world's output to over 120 countries with 70% of exports going to the ten largest buyers, including the USA, Germany, Italy and Japan. Approximately half of Brazilian coffee originates from Minas Gerais state, including 65% of Brazil's total Arabica output. The coffee sector employs around 300,000 workers directly and up to 8.4 million indirectly, contributing significantly to economic growth and sustaining countless livelihoods. These benefits are not, however, shared equitably along the supply chain. Farmworkers, including migrants from across Minas Gerais and other Brazilian states, such as the state of Bahia, toil in highly precarious and exploitative conditions, including conditions analogous to slavery based on Article 147 of the Brazilian Penal Code. Meanwhile, value is primarily concentrated downstream, with roasters and retailers accounting for around one fifth of the overall value chain. These actors – often headquartered in the Global North – stand accused of complacency, and an overreliance on voluntary reporting schemes which fail to detect labour abuse and can be circumvented by unscrupulous employers.

The climate crisis has severe implications for global coffee producers, who face a reduction in cultivable land of 50% by 2050. The 2025-2026 Minas Gerais Arabica harvest is projected to decrease by 11.6% from the previous year, partly due to it being a “negative” year, with naturally lower production. However, with cultivation of Arabica increasingly challenging, producers are facing rising input costs: a pivot to the newer Robusta coffee, which grows more successfully in adverse conditions, and biostimulants to reach a net increase on previous years. The industry's climate response must include meaningful transition, led by family farmers, small farmers and workers, beyond adaptation, to mitigate the impacts of changeable harvests: the worsening of deforestation and consequent droughts, which exacerbate job precarity for coffee workers back home and worsen coffee yields in producing regions. The effects are disastrous for harvest workers who are paid piecemeal and forced to work illegally long hours to maintain wages:

“ Man, I worked more than twelve hours a day, so if I'm right, that's 72 hours a week, right? That's a lot, isn't it? When I got home, people didn't recognise me because I was so thin, because it was very hard there.”

Brazil's labour code

There is broad consensus on the relative strength of Brazil's labour laws and code. According to the Labour Rights Index, Brazil has the region's strongest labour protections for formalised workers, codifying legal minimums on working hours, wages, employment and social security, safety at work, and child and forced labour. However, enforcement remains a major challenge, as a significant share of employers, particularly in rural areas, resist complying and evade responsibilities, as seen on many coffee farms.

The 2017 labour reforms, which purported to promote formalisation, instead encouraged a substantial increase in informality and deepened labour precarity, alongside the deregulation and disorganisation of trade unions. While unions faced significant attacks from urban businesses and large landowners via the Brazilian National Congress, the workforce bore the brunt of the abolition of such protections and administrative functions by the Bolsonaro administration. Brazil has also been criticised by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and others as hostile to trade unions.

Brazil's legal framework defines four criteria indicating conditions amounting to modern slavery: forced labour; debt bondage; extreme working hours posing a risk to health; and degrading working conditions, which can include violations of labour, safety and health protections. It also empowers inspectors from the Ministry of Labour and Employment to conduct inspections, which can result in administrative, civil and criminal penalties for direct participation or negligence in supervising illegal practices. The Ministry also maintains a public registry of employers found to have used slave-like conditions: the "Dirty List".

Both coffee employers and the region of Minas Gerais are overrepresented in the Dirty List. Between 2020 and 2025, Minas Gerais accounted for 33 (the highest number of) violations, while coffee cultivation accounted for nine, the third most represented economic activity after cattle farming and domestic services. In one instance during the 2025 coffee harvest, labour inspectors found workers subject to degrading working and living conditions and restrictions on their freedom, two of the criteria defining slave labour under the Brazil Labour Code. In response, Cooxupé, Brazil's largest co-operative, banned five growers.

Legal risk to business

Coffee buyers should be alert to the legal risks of failing to conduct adequate human rights due diligence. Workers and their advocates are increasingly turning to legal avenues to hold companies to account:

In 2018 an OECD Complaint was filed by Conectas and ADERE-MG with the Brazilian National Contact Point alleging violations involving exploitation on coffee farms in southern Minas Gerais, including in the supply chain of Nestlé, and other major global coffee companies.

In 2025, Brazilian workers filed a civil lawsuit in the USA against Starbucks, supported by International Rights Advocates. Allegations included the worst forms of exploitation, including human trafficking and forced labour on plantations linked to Cooxupé, Brazil's most powerful coffee company and a major supplier to several well-known food and beverage brands.

Simultaneously, Coffee Watch filed a complaint with US Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) which sought to "exclude coffee and coffee products produced 'wholly or in part' with forced labour in Brazil" being imported by major brands including Starbucks, Nestlé, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Dunkin', Illy and McDonald's.

Coffee Watch and other NGOs, including ADERE-MG, also filed reports under the German Supply Chain Act against coffee giants, including violations in Brazilian coffee supply chains.



INTERVIEWS

ADERE-MG encountered more than 100 workers in forced labour conditions between May and October 2025. From this group, ADERE-MG interviewed 24 workers employed on at least nine farms that were officially identified in enforcement operations. The interviews covered: recruitment processes, working conditions, accommodation, discrimination, health and safety, freedom of association, and remedy. The research areas spoke directly both to forced labour risks previously documented by ADERE-MG and others, and six of the seven themes in the KnowTheChain food and beverage benchmark: risk assessment, supply chain transparency, fair recruitment, enabling workers' rights, monitoring and remedy. For reasons of worker safety, KnowTheChain has not named the employers, plantations or co-operatives identified through the interviews.

Key findings

Interviews with 24 workers across at least nine plantations revealed possible forced labour situations:

- Indicators of forced labour were reported by **all 24 interviewees**, representing possible forced labour conditions across recruitment, living conditions and working conditions;
- All but one** of the ILO forced labour indicators were present across the interviews;
- On average, each worker reported experiencing **five indicators** of forced labour.

Most workers did not know which co-operatives were buying the coffee they harvested, nor which supply chains their labour was benefitting:

- Two workers** were afraid to name employers and eight workers were unable or unwilling to name plantations for their own safety;
- Nine workers** named a total of six co-operatives they believed were buying from their employer but only three could do so with certainty.

ILO INDICATORS OF FORCED LABOUR PRESENT ON MINAS GERAIS COFFEE PLANTATIONS



Insights from the investigative team

In November 2025, KnowTheChain held a focus group discussion with ADERE-MG's four investigators to gather their expert reflections on the harvest and the findings.

Labour authority enforcement: The insufficiency of resources afforded to the labour inspectorate is a key challenge for advocates, leading to fewer inspectors and inspections, and a slow judicial response. In 2025, 30% of ADERE-MG's cases were lost due to a lack of enforcement power, making it difficult for them to maintain credibility with workers. ADERE-MG also pointed to a broader context of corporate capture of politics and the media, where companies lobby to obfuscate human rights abuses taking place in supply chains.

Climate of fear: ADERE-MG investigators noted a pervasive climate of fear, rooted in the latent threat of losing work and retaliation from employers or recruiters, which deterred workers from speaking about their experiences. In one case, an investigator described speaking to a young worker who was reprimanded for not working hard enough; he was deployed to a coffee warehouse and given the work of several people as punishment. Speaking to investigators, he was barefoot and deeply afraid he would never see his mother again. Another investigator mentioned that an interviewee was so suspicious he repeatedly rang his own contact at ADERE-MG to verify her identity. Informal workers – estimated to make up half the total workforce – are unprotected by the labour code and often deceived into accepting lower wages and worse conditions by employers who profit off the back of poverty pay.

Difficulty accessing plantations: With rainfall for 2025 well below average, coffee prices were inflated by shortage fears. The resulting high rate of coffee robberies and violent theft meant surveillance of workplaces and accommodation during the 2025 harvest intensified. ADERE-MG faced greater challenges accessing workers during the investigation:

“ We have been saying that the employers are more prepared so we can see more closed gates, locked gates as well. We can see cameras on gates... because the farm gates are locked to make sure that even those that are going to steal coffee cannot access.”

Personal security: ADERE-MG investigators were regularly threatened by farm owners, sometimes with violence and guns, reflecting the extent to which farms operate without scrutiny and a degree of lawlessness. At one farm, they were greeted with gunshots. At another, a farm owner threatened them that they would never leave if they did not stay away from his workers. Consequently, it was easier to interview workers once they had returned home rather than during the harvest. However, while workers felt able to speak more openly in their place of residence, it was often difficult to locate and identify them once they had left the area.

Who picks the coffee?

Although oversight and transparency on workforce demographics are essential to tackling discrimination and protecting workers, **the 2026 food and beverage benchmark revealed that companies are still withholding the very data needed to confront these risks.** The human rights risks of this lack of oversight are borne out in the interview data.

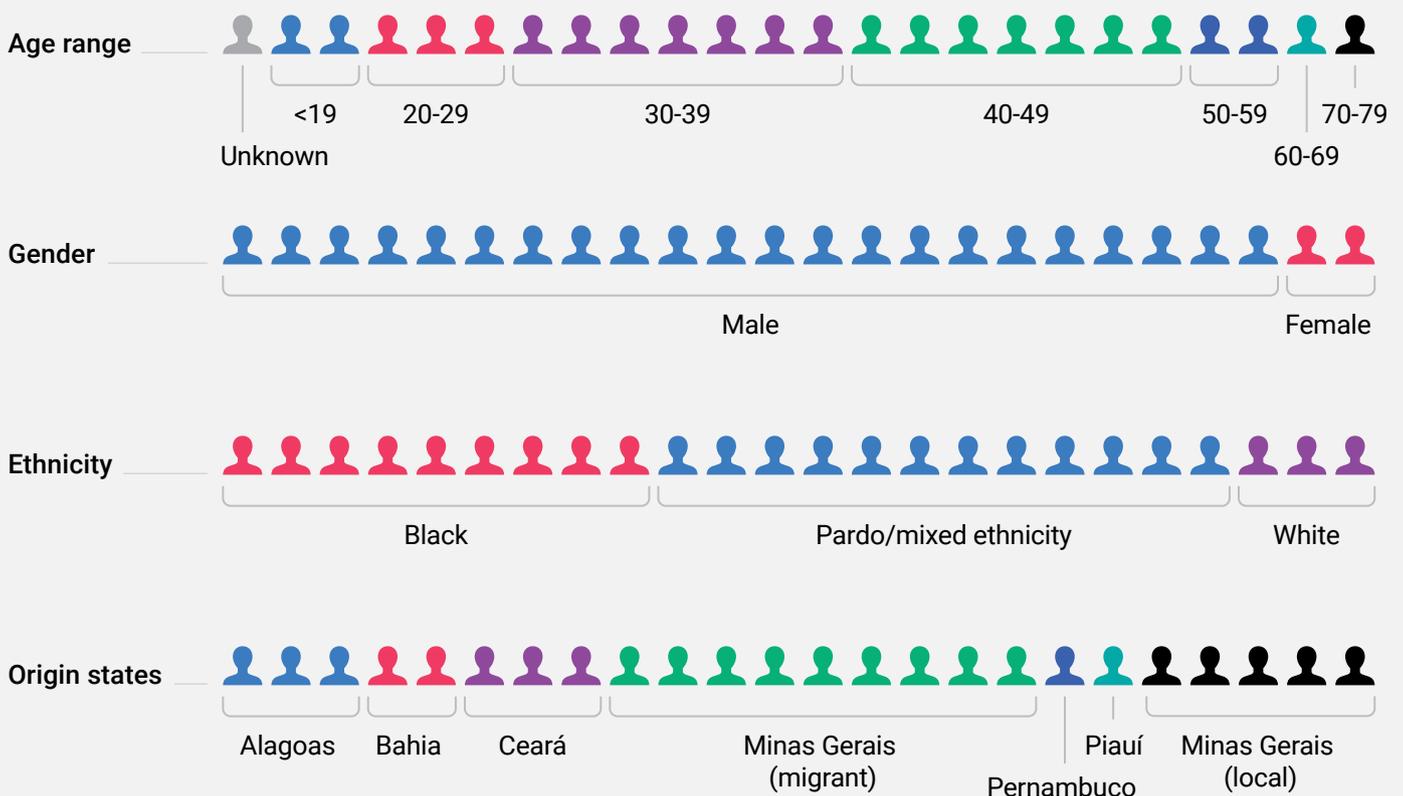
Precarious and informal employment arrangements: All workers were employed short-term and three were explicitly employed informally, with two thirds (19 of 24) employed only for two to five months. 14/18 workers asked about contracts did not have one, in contravention of labour laws.

Migrant workers: All workers were Brazilian nationals, 19 were migrants – nine from within Minas Gerais – and new either to their plantation or the coffee harvest entirely.

Financial hardship: Several interviewees were smallholders whom poor public financing had left with little benefit to trade their own products. Forced to migrate, they often suffered worse working conditions than local workers. ADERE-MG were aware of several workers forced to sell their own land to finance migration.

Women, black and minority ethnic workers: ADERE-MG consistently found these groups faced worse labour conditions, lower wages and greater barriers to access remedy. However, for example, it was extremely challenging to find women workers willing to be interviewed: “so women are left behind in every single situation.”

WORKER PROFILES





ANALYSIS: CONDITIONS IN COFFEE SUPPLY CHAINS

Indicators of forced labour were reported across recruitment, living conditions and working conditions on all nine farms, in all 24 interviews.

On average, workers reported five indicators of forced labour.

Recruitment process and deception

Opaque recruitment is prevalent in industries like agrifood, where a high degree of informality and precarity obscures unchecked abuse. **In 2026, KnowTheChain found 71% of companies failed to disclose efforts to support responsible recruitment in their supply chains while 89% did not provide information on labour recruiters.** In coffee supply chains, producers often turn to informalised labour recruiters – gatos (a derogatory term for deceptive labour brokers) – when there is an urgent need for labour, including during the intensive harvest season. Most interviewed coffee workers said they were recruited through a gato or by word of mouth; three were directly hired and six said a fellow worker had connected them either with the gato or the plantation. Such opaque processes are fraught with risks for workers including a lack of checks and balances, and falsely raised expectations with few avenues for recompense.

Contract deception was identified as a top driver of exploitation by ADERE-MG. Workers were told contracts were digitised, yet none had seen or accessed them, fuelling informality. Investigators stressed workers had no power, as employers wrongly claimed formal registration would raise costs and lower wages; workers who protested were simply told to find work elsewhere.

Deception and the manipulation of workers' vulnerability during the recruitment process was rife. Workers said they were misled on several aspects of the job:

Eight workers said the quality of the coffee and harvest were much worse than they had been led to believe by supervisors. This directly impacted earnings because the coffee beans were lighter and smaller, meaning workers were forced to pick much more intensely to fill measures and accrue the same pay.

Seventeen workers said they had to pay for essential materials and tools themselves, including personal protective equipment and machinery, since these were not provided by plantations free of charge, as determined by Brazilian labour laws. Eight workers realised this only on arrival, resulting in debt, wage deductions and unsafe working conditions. ADERE-MG also observed workers often did not have effective equipment to protect themselves, for example, harvesting barefoot while exposed to poisonous snakes in the area:

“ We had to buy them ourselves. The machine was ours too – we bought it on the farm through the gato, who deducted payments from our wages in two installments during the harvest.”

Seven workers said the living conditions were worse than expected, including being subject to unexpected salary deductions for rent of unfurnished accommodation.

“ They promised a lot of things there. They promised a very high salary based on production, and first they put us to harvest bad coffee, so we couldn't earn any money, because there wasn't much coffee and we worked ourselves to death and got nothing. We already knew we would have to buy our own food, but we didn't know we would have to buy blowers, machines, gloves, boots and goggles, because they don't provide them. We had to buy those things ourselves.”

Recruitment fees and related costs

Bonded labour was also identified as a top driver of exploitation by ADERE-MG, which manifests particularly through travel, food and other recruitment-related costs by employers and gatos. **In 2026, KnowTheChain found only 22% of companies fully aligned with the international standard on responsible recruitment – the Employer Pays Principle – recognising such costs are a key driver of exploitation and that employers bear responsibility to cover them.**

Among 23 workers asked whether they were charged recruitment fees, 19 said they were not. However, **19 workers described bearing recruitment-related costs** such as for transport, subsistence and buying their own equipment; all these workers were migrants, while no locally recruited workers paid such costs. Disclosed costs included:

- | Bus travel (18 workers);
- | Food while migrating (15 workers);
- | Equipment (17 workers);
- | Rent, including through wage deductions (3 workers).

Amounts ranged between BRL450-2,300 (USD80-432), a significant burden in contrast to workers' average daily wage of BRL300 (USD55). One third of workers said they had taken out loans to cover costs and described situations of **debt bondage**. Three workers took loans from their boss or gato. One worker said the loan amounted to BRL1,000 (USD184) and they had taken it from their boss; another worker said the loan was deducted from wages. Four workers borrowed money from family, including one worker who borrowed BRL1,500 (USD278) from their daughter. Just four workers said they had been reimbursed costs, and for three workers this only happened after enforcement by the labour authority.

ADERE-MG also described how workers were required to pay for everything at overpriced stores determined by the boss, acting to keep workers in employment while they are indebted. Workers often said they were restricted to a certain supermarket, with several buying food on credit after which employers paid the supermarket directly. Only one was aware of the link to his employer. Seven workers told investigators they paid for food through wage deductions and debt.



Transparency on sourcing relationships and buyers

A foundational element in assessing and mitigating human rights risks involves the mapping and disclosing of supply chain relationships. **Yet in 2026, KnowTheChain found the majority (89%) of companies failed to disclose any identifying information even on first-tier suppliers, with far fewer (49%) disclosing sourcing information covering even one raw commodity** – typically where risk is greatest. Likewise, interviews revealed most workers **lacked information on who they were working for** and which co-operatives bought their harvested beans:

Eight workers named six co-operatives they believed were buying from their plantation; three did so with certainty, most had heard names of co-operatives or seen logos on the bags used to collect coffee beans.

Only 16 workers could name the plantation on which they worked.

Two workers were afraid to name employers for their own safety.

Contrasted with the lack of transparent sourcing data disclosed by benchmarked companies, these findings should be of serious concern. Workers who do not know who their employers are or who their labour is profiting – so-called hidden workforces – face increased vulnerability, proven higher risk of forced labour and limited recourse to remedy.



Abusive working conditions

Rather than salaried pay, during the harvest **every worker was paid piecemeal** according to volume of coffee picked, rather than hours worked. Workers reported pay averaging BRL25-30 per 60l coffee picked, totaling up to BRL300 (USD55) per day. While no worker described explicit targets being set by farms, eight workers described the pressure to complete a certain number of measures to earn sufficient wages, while another eight workers witnessed colleagues being reprimanded for not working hard enough.

“ He showed me a very good, strong, beautiful coffee, and said that the worst picker there could pick 10 measures a day. And in fact, 10 is the best you can get, and not even every day. Some people do two or three measures a day.”

The **intensity of the work** was compounded by the **lack of paid holidays and rest**: 21 workers said they had one, unpaid day off a week (Sunday), while three workers said they had no rest day. Seven workers did not get a paid break during the working day, stopping only to eat quickly. Further, 19 workers described **total number of working hours above the legal maximum for the week**: averaging 59 and ranging between 44 (the legal maximum over six days per week) and 91 hours at the most extreme.

“ We would arrive at the farm at half past five, six in the morning, and get home after dark, and the lights were already on because it was nighttime. I think I worked more than 12 hours a day... We didn't have much time for lunch, because we worked on a production basis, so we had to eat quickly and get back to work to earn some money.”

Most (18) workers said they had **concerns about health and safety** on the plantations, including suffering illness or injury (6 workers), and arising from a lack of training or the necessary personal protective equipment (7 workers), and dangerous wild animals such as snakes (12 workers). Six workers said they or colleagues needed sick pay on at least one occasion, but did not receive it. This included an informally employed worker who could not access social security. Four workers said employers had provided medical assistance at least once, one worker said workers had to bear such costs themselves.



Abusive living conditions and isolation

Most workers (19) reported living in employer-provided accommodation, with most living in housing of multiple occupancy – up to 28 people, often sharing only one bathroom. For some workers, **living conditions were dirty, pest-infested and unsanitary**. For others, expenses such as electricity and gas were not included, or they had to equip kitchens to be able to cook for themselves.

Twelve of 20 workers asked were concerned about **unsafe accommodation**; one-third of workers asked said they had access to personal, lockable storage, kitchen or laundry facilities, but even these were limited, broken or insecure. All workers had to provide their own bedding, and nine of 11 workers asked reported that at least some workers in their accommodation were forced to sleep on the floor. Investigators also repeatedly observed the poor quality of workers' beds and mattresses.

Workers were often physically **isolated**, either in the accommodation or on the plantation. Most workers (13) lived remotely either on their employer's farm, another farm or elsewhere in the countryside. Five of 20 workers asked were concerned the condition of transportation to work was unsafe, with two workers describing unpaid commuting time of up to two hours each way. While 23 workers did have access to a personal phone, 18 workers either did not have reliable internet access or had to provide it themselves. The isolation meant that while no employer physically restrained workers from leaving accommodation, other conditions impeded them leaving. Further, 11 of the 20 workers asked said the combination of remote accommodation, lack of transportation, and long working hours meant they were exhausted or simply did not have free time after work. ADERE-MG observed worker trust in public institutions is low, worsened by extreme isolation as workers live either on plantations or in unfamiliar towns, without internet access or phone signal.

“ By the time we got home from work, it was already dark. We only had time to wash the dishes, prepare food for the next day, and sleep so we could get up early the next morning. Everything was very rushed. We also had Sundays off, which we used to do laundry and buy anything we needed in town. So it wasn't that easy because there were twenty-five people in the group, and only one means of transportation that could fit five people, and it had many structural and engine defects. And since we only had Sundays to go shopping, and we were three separate groups, we divided the car seats so that it would cover all three houses, so it wasn't easy to go out.”

Despite significant evidence of such issues associated with workers' accommodation, ADERE-MG found labour inspectors and monitoring efforts focused primarily on conditions on plantations, missing a significant risk factor for exploitation.



Access to freedom of association

Freedom of association is an enabling right for workers, one which goes to the heart of challenging power imbalances between workers and employers along global supply chains, and which empowers workers to demand better treatment. **In 2026, KnowTheChain found that only 7% of benchmarked companies could demonstrate engagement with trade unions in practice.**

In Brazil, while freedom of association and collective bargaining are legally permitted, significant structural challenges including the high incidence of precarity and informalisation for workers, as well as challenges for migrant workers in particular mean rates of union density are low. Further, ADERE-MG criticised trade unions in the country politically:

“ Our trade union movement is broken politically, morally, ideologically, financially. It’s a trade union movement that, as I see it, should be reassessed. And at the same time, if it’s the case, we have to hear from workers how it has to be rebuilt because mostly it has lost its way.”

Workers demonstrated low rates of awareness, trust or membership of trade unions, and access to freedom of association in practice. Only nine workers said they understood these concepts, but this was extremely limited. Workers believed variously that unions were for asking for information, making a grievance or intended for people with “formal employment contracts” only, for example. Just five workers were aware of a trade union in Minas Gerais. Five workers told investigators they were trade union members but could not provide more detail on its operations than non-unionised workers. A total of 18 workers described barriers to engaging in freedom of association, ranging from long working hours during the harvest to fears of reprisal from “the boss”. Among non-union members, seven workers said they did not know what one was, and two said they believed them to be ineffective.

However, despite the absence of formal organising in the sector, and the lack of grievance or remedy mechanisms, the interviews revealed important manifestations of worker power, including instances of work stoppages and strike action, though negotiations with employers and gatos had mixed results. Most frequently these were in response to low coffee pricing, with five workers saying their boss had declined to raise prices and five others saying improvements had occurred, including in response to strikes. For most workers who complained about the price of coffee, employers replied simply that they could leave if they were not happy.



Monitoring

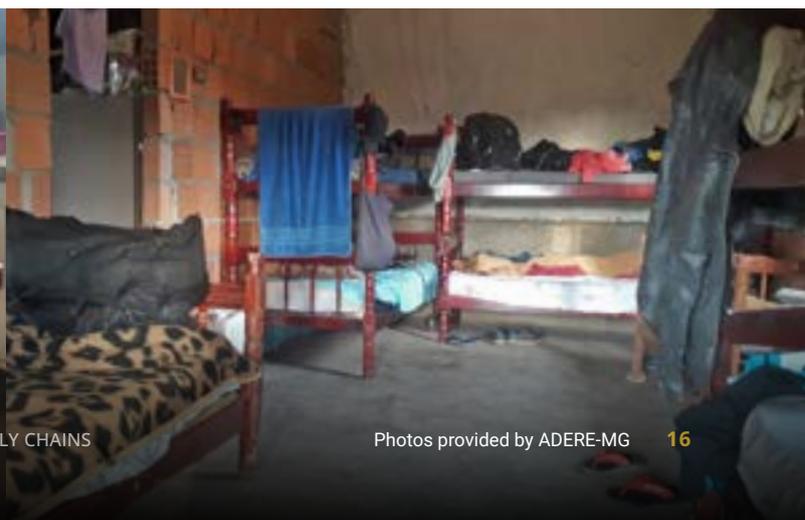
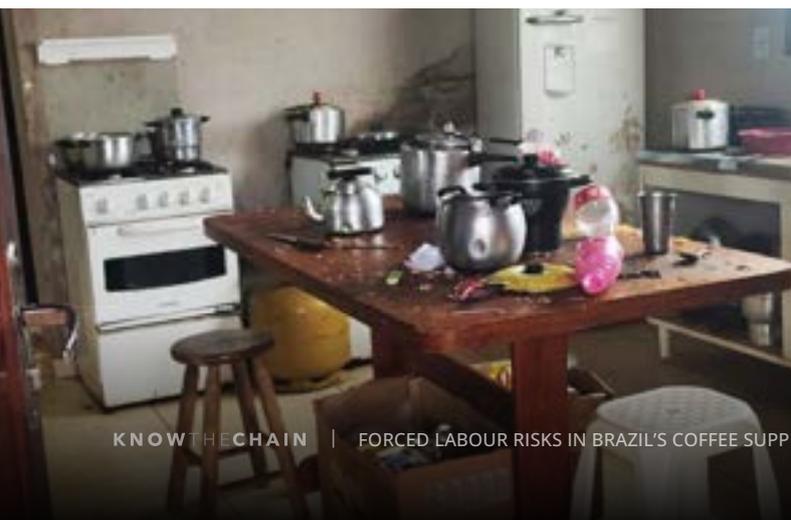
Given the degree to which food and beverage companies are exposed to forced labour risk throughout complex supply chains, companies – whether plantations, co-operatives or retailers – should be implementing supplier monitoring regimes commensurate in risk and scope. **Yet in 2026, KnowTheChain found only 11% companies disclosing quantitative data on the proportion of their supply chains monitored and assessed against robust methodologies, including worker interviews and in-person visits to worksites and accommodations.**

While international coffee brands point to membership of multi-stakeholder initiatives or certification schemes as evidence of “ethical” practices, such efforts run the risk of outsourcing responsibility for upholding respect for human rights in supply chains to yet another bureaucratically driven, tick-box style enterprise.

Investigations have long documented the failure of audits to capture abusive working and living conditions in coffee supply chains accurately. ADERE-MG investigators were unequivocal that certification schemes on the farms they visited were falling short from protecting workers in practice and actively misleading about working conditions on the ground. In one example, they mentioned how audits were conducted prior to the start of the harvest, at a time when interviewed workers were far more likely to be regularised and permanent employees; irregular migrant workers who arrive after certification are thereby rendered invisible and dangerously exposed to risks.

Concerningly, no worker could confirm the presence of any kind of **worker committee or workplace forum** to raise concerns on their plantation. A total of 12 workers had been visited by an external stakeholder either in the workplace or in accommodation but only two workers had been asked about working conditions prior to being interviewed by the investigative team; for example, on worker’s plantation was visited by a representative from “a company that provides safety and health services on the farm... but they didn’t talk to the workers, they only talked to the manager.”

“ Only the inspectors from the Ministry of Labour, because we called them, and if we hadn’t called them, they wouldn’t have gone there either. Now, the union and the police never even showed up there to ask us anything. Then, on the day the Ministry of Labour went there, they asked us everything, they went to the fields first, stayed there for about two hours asking questions, then went to the farm, and I felt confident.”



Grievance mechanisms

The availability of effective grievance mechanisms for workers along supply chains to raise concerns, report violations, and expect investigation and redress is a vital part of worker-led due diligence models. **In 2026, KnowTheChain found only 51% of benchmarked companies disclosed making a formal mechanism available to supply chain workers, either directly or via their legitimate representatives; only 9% disclosed how the mechanism was communicated in practice to workers**, even to those at direct suppliers. These failures are borne out in worker interviews.

Most workers (19) described having access to their employer or to the gato to raise a grievance, but none described in any detail an **established impartial grievance mechanism, process or policy** at their plantation. Among those who had raised grievance, one worker said they had complained to a human resources representative, another to a trade union. Asked whether they had the contact number of someone to whom they could raise complaints, 13 workers said they could access some kind of “hotline”, but it was often unclear as to who this would connect them with. A total of nine workers described having contact details for an external actor such as NGOs (two workers), a trade union (one worker), and labour authorities/federal policies (six workers).

Further, investigators were clear there were consequences for workers who spoke up about their conditions, contrasting with workers’ reluctance to denounce employers themselves:

“ There are some co-operatives that have a list of the names – those people that have already gone to justice and have denounced their employers – and they go through this list. And those workers that have actually complained and demanded their human rights, they are no longer employed. For those who live in the farm, the housing is really poor: like the houses are painted, but inside there are gutters.”

The informality, lack of independence and the absence of worker knowledge on grievance mechanisms are highly problematic. Communications channels reportedly made available by international coffee buyers simply are not reaching those they are intended to serve, and call into question companies’ claims that grievance mechanisms provide effective and appropriate avenues for redress for workers experiencing harm.



Remedy

Given the prevalence of adverse human rights impacts in the sector, the provision of effective remedies to safeguard workers' dignity and ensure non-recurrence is vital. Yet KnowTheChain found that **76% of companies failed to disclose having a remedy process in place and 91% failed to disclose any examples of providing remedy** to supply chain workers in practice. Worker testimony bears out the impact of these failings in real time.

Throughout the 2025 coffee harvest, the Brazilian labour inspectorate undertook parallel raids and inspections of workers' working and living conditions. Over 100 workers had been rescued from situations identified as modern slavery by the inspectorate. All cases bore hallmarks of forced labour, particularly debt bondage, and abusive living and working conditions. Four workers said they had been reimbursed costs related to recruitment including transport costs, including three for whom this was enforced by the labour authority. Three workers were provided with beds after intervention from the labour authority.

Tellingly, most workers said they would never go back to the coffee harvest again in Minas Gerais and explicitly described their working conditions as "slavery":

“ I would never go back. Because there's nothing there, you just have to work. Because you don't get a salary, they don't know how much you're going to get paid. There are a lot of bills to pay, like accommodation, food, coffee-picking machine, gas. You leave home to see if you can get something to pay your debts, you get here and you fall further into debt, so it's not worth it.”

During questioning by labour inspectors, workers' experiences varied greatly – from those afforded privacy, security and the comfort of being able to denounce their employer without fear of retaliation, to those who were interviewed within sight of the employer of gato. For several workers, the relief of being interviewed by federal police and labour inspectors was apparent:

“ When the ministry went there, I felt safe, and so did my colleagues. Then the boss became very quiet, he seemed like a saint, not like the guy who was always talking about beating me up.”

Such is the cycle of abuse that workers continued to be mistreated following rescues, ADERE-MG observed. In one instance, a group of 47 rescued workers housed in a hotel away from the plantation suffered daily indignities of having to use the back entrance – “as if they were criminals” – with investigators reflecting it was as though the police were transferring prisoners between locations and not victims. Workers were nervous about speaking to investigators within the vicinity of the hotel and were not afforded privacy in meeting the investigative team.

Nevertheless, investigators reported that workers were eager to share their stories and that despite adversity, manifestations of worker power prevailed: workers “organised themselves to protect us and protect them, to make sure we could conduct our interviews, and safely.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rights holder engagement: Beyond consultation, ensure engagement with workers – or their legitimate representatives – is incorporated into due diligence processes at all levels, including in the design and evaluation of interventions, risk assessment, monitoring processes and remedy (including public disclosure of the latter to demonstrate commitment to workforces themselves). Ensure worker interviews are conducted by organisations that workers recognise as credible and trustworthy.

Risk assessment and tracing: Companies must make every effort to carry out robust human rights due diligence on high-risk commodities including coffee, and trace coffee supply chains to raw bean level, including by:

Collaborating with worker representative organisations at global, national and local levels to conduct human rights risk assessments to understand the profile of, and risks to their supply chain workforces; high-risk sourcing geographies; and supply chain structures;

Mapping coffee supply chain actors below first tier at farm, processing and packaging levels to identify sourcing relationships between, for example, co-operatives and exporters, and publishing complete lists of suppliers at each level;

Mapping recruitment processes used and costs incurred by plantation and processing workers, recognising risks specific to internal migration where it is a salient risk in certain jurisdictions (such as Brazil);

Verifying suppliers against Brazil's Ministry of Labour Dirty List as part of human rights due diligence processes. Use purchasing power leverage to improve conditions at investigated supply chain companies including where necessary in the provision of remedy for substantiated abuse.

Monitoring: To mitigate poor oversight of the supply chain at plantation level, implement a robust, worker-centric monitoring regime that includes on-site visits throughout the coffee harvest at workplaces, accommodation and processing/warehousing facilities. Beware the limitations of third-party certification schemes and ensure monitoring and due diligence efforts are overseen and effectively implemented by in-house specialists and carried out to standards of best practice.

Remedy: Design and implement an independent, impartial grievance mechanism that is explicitly available to supply chain workers; ensure it is publicly communicated among workforces and demonstrate its effectiveness by disclosing data on grievances reported, investigated and remedy provided to workers. In the case of identified abuse by the Ministry of Labour or another body, collaborate with other coffee buyers in the formulation of reparation plans.

ABOUT KNOWTHECHAIN

KnowTheChain – a programme of the Business and Human Rights Centre – is a resource for business and investors to identify and address forced labour and labour rights abuses within their supply chains. It benchmarks current corporate practices, develops insights, and provides practical resources with the aim of informing investor decision-making and changing corporate approaches to the identification, prevention and remedy of forced labour conditions.

Humanity United is a foundation dedicated to bringing new approaches to global problems that have long been considered intractable. It builds, leads, and supports efforts to change the systems that contribute to problems like human trafficking, mass atrocities, and violent conflict. Humanity United is part of The Omidyar Group, a diverse collection of organisations, each guided by its own approach, but united by a common desire to catalyse social impact.

KnowTheChain would like to acknowledge the work of **Articulation of Rural Employees of the State of Minas Gerais** (ADERE-MG), for their hard work and dedication in gathering testimony from workers employed in the 2025 coffee harvest in Minas Gerais. ADERE-MG is a rural workers' union which works to document cases of abuse, mostly in Brazil's agrifood sector. It also participates in transnational legislative efforts to hold companies accountable for supply chain abuse, including filing complaints, alongside allies, under the OECD Guidelines, the US Customs and Border Protection and the German Supply Chain Act.