

Timor-Leste workers part of PALM scheme helping to fill NT workforce gaps

By David O'Shea

Darwin hospitality business owner Darren Lynch employs about 200 people at his various bars and restaurants, but he finds securing a reliable workforce a constant battle.

Backpackers on working holiday visas fill some gaps, but the amount of time and effort it takes to train them, before they move on, means it isn't ideal.

"You spend a fair bit of energy training people up in these roles and it might take a month to get them up to speed," Mr Lynch said.

"You get a good six to eight weeks' service out of them ... and then their mind is on their next destination."

He said that hadn't changed in his 30 years in the industry.



Darren Lynch says hiring workers through the PALM scheme has helped him address staff shortages. (ABC News)

But he has found workers from developing Timor-Leste, who make up a large proportion of workers coming to the NT with the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, have different motivations.

The PALM scheme brings workers from eight Pacific nations and Timor-Leste to work in Australia to fill staff shortages in certain industries, mostly on farms and in meatworks.

The scheme was recently expanded to more industries including hospitality, and there is currently a pilot program running in child care.

It has been controversial, including facing allegations of allowing modern slavery — however advocates say regulations have been tightened and the program has benefits for both employers and workers.

Chopping vegetables in the kitchen at Mr Lynch's bar on the Darwin Waterfront, PALM scheme worker Reynaldo Armando da Silva earns almost as much in a couple of shifts as a kitchen hand as he would in a month back home.

The Timor-Leste man said he was very happy to be working in Darwin.



Reynaldo Armando da Silva says he enjoys working in Darwin and hopes to open his own hospitality business one day. (ABC News)

"You can make a lot of money. When you go back, you can make your dream come true," he said.

"I hope one day I can open a mini coffee shop in my country."

Mr Lynch said it was virtually impossible to find locals to work entry-level jobs like this, but with his new Timor-Leste staff, his business finally had some consistency.

"They'll do it with a massive smile on their face, and they'll do it for four years ... so from an employer's perspective it's absolutely a no-brainer," he said.

The frustration of endless recruiting was the catalyst for Mr Lynch to recently start a labour hire company focused on the needs of the NT, in partnership with Queensland business CANEX.

It was the first company in the NT to bring in workers with the PALM scheme specifically for the hospitality industry.

CANEX manager Mark Cantoni said with "huge pain points in labour, especially for those lower-skilled or semi-skilled positions", the scheme presented a "fantastic solution" and "mutually beneficial arrangement".

Company recruit Madelena de Araujo Guterres was given an opportunity to work in housekeeping at Darwin's Bladin Point FIFO accommodation centre, which she said would help her secure a future back home.

"I can save for my retirement, help my family, help my brother and sister," she said.

Fellow recruit Luzia Obe, who works at the same facility preparing food for FIFO workers, said she was gaining skills she could take back home.

"My objective is whatever I learn here, I would like to apply in my country, and also to open my own business to give more jobs for my people," she said.

From Dili to Darwin

Ronan Mackey works at the NT Chamber of Commerce, where he was until recently tasked with growing the PALM scheme in the NT.

He said the program had huge potential for the territory.

"I don't see why we can't grow this to thousands and thousands of workers here in the NT," he said.

"Our closest neighbour Timor-Leste ... who have 51,000 workers have the supply and we definitely have the demand."

The chamber's work involves making sure NT-bound workers are not trapped in exploitative arrangements or abused by unscrupulous labour hire companies.

"There are ... labour hire companies out there that are not part of the program but saying that they are, and they are taking advantage of some of the workers here in the country," he said.



Marcelino Mendes Pereira, Luzia Obe, and Gonsalo Gregorio Martins Babo are some of the workers from Timor-Leste working at Bladin Village supporting workers at the Inpex site. (ABC News: Michael Franchi)

Late last year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata, visited Australia at the invitation of the Albanese government.

In a report about his visit, published in July, Professor Obokata said he held "serious concerns about the treatment of migrant workers in Australia", including the PALM scheme.

Mr Mackey said he was aware of such concerns around the scheme, but was confident there were checks and balances in place to guard against exploitation.

He said with the scheme's expansion, there was potential for it to help fill gaps in more industries in future, such as maintenance, trades and mining.

Mr Lynch said after the positive impact he'd seen on his businesses, he hoped the scheme would continue to grow.

"Whether it's onshore gas or other industries, it's going to need more and more people," he said.

"Right now we've got a massive undersupply of thousands of people.

"When the new industries come on board it's going to be even more people, so [we] need to start now."

Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-10-11/palm-scheme-workers-timor-leste-nt-workforce-shortages/105876688>