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**Precarity in the hospitality industry:
How migrant workers cope –
and where policy intervention is needed
in a nutshell #28, February 2026**



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Messages for Decision-Makers

Migrant workers respond to precarious conditions in the hospitality industry with a great deal of adaptability and flexibility – but these strategies come up against structural barriers.

Limited prospects of leaving the low-wage sector, combined with a lack of affordable housing, present structural barriers that many migrant workers find almost impossible to overcome.

Measures to address these barriers are urgently needed, both for migrants and for the future of the hospitality industry. These should focus on the regulation of minimum wage, the promotion of continuing vocational training, and housing policy.

What is meant by ...

... labor migration

Employment of persons who are not nationals of the country in which the work is performed, in the context of short- or long-term migration, including seasonal employment.

... precarity

A combination of working and living conditions characterized by insecurity, low wages, reduced legal protections, and limited opportunities for participation and development.

... short-term residence permit (L)

Residence permit for short-term employment; for EU/EFTA nationals with a legal right to family reunification and change of employer; for third-country nationals without these rights.

¹ Our understanding of precarity encompasses structural characteristics of the labor market such as contract type (fixed-term or permanent), employment level (part-time or full-time), individual income, and contract duration, as well as an indicator of the extent to which these employment situations are involuntary and not the result of free choice.

Figure 1. Levels of precarity in key occupations across Switzerland's central economic sectors, 2009–2023 (EU Labor Force Survey).

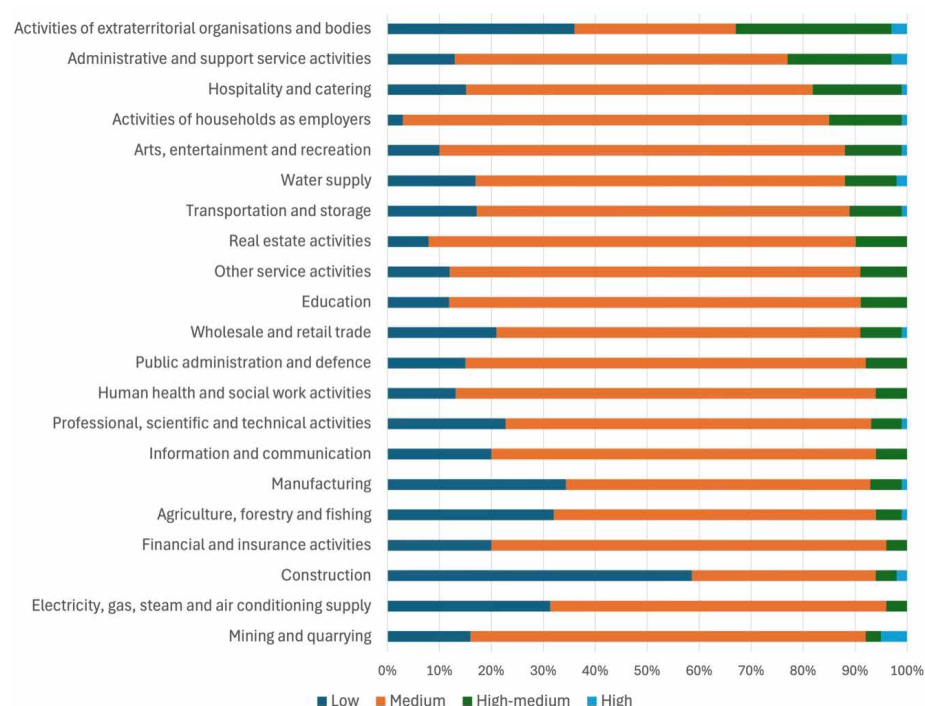
Note: “Low precarity” includes structural employment conditions such as fixed-term or part-time employment and income below the median. The “medium” and “above medium” precarity levels also consider the indicator of the (in)voluntary nature of the employment situation to reflect the difficulties in finding a permanent or full-time job. Finally, the “high precarity” level includes an additional dimension of instability by covering employment contracts of less than three months’ duration.

Labor migrants play a vital role in sustaining key sectors of the Swiss economy, often working under conditions that few Swiss nationals are willing to accept. The hospitality industry exemplifies this migration-dependent model, which is increasingly strained by labor shortages. Our research reveals that these workers show remarkable adaptability to precarious work and living conditions, yet structural barriers persist – particularly around career advancement and access to affordable housing. This points to urgent needs for policy interventions in the areas of minimum wage regulation, the promotion of continuing vocational training, and housing.

Employers’ concerns are growing louder, and the statistics are stark: Compared to other sectors in Switzerland, the hospitality industry is particularly hard hit by the current labor shortage – both in terms of skilled and unskilled workers. According to the [employment statistics published by the Federal Statistical Office \(BFS\)](#), 15.6% of businesses in the industry reported difficulties recruiting skilled staff in mid-2025; this is more than double the average across all sectors. When it comes to staff without vocational training, 6.8% of hospitality businesses reported recruitment difficulties; the average across other industries is 2.2%. The situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was already tense beforehand. In response, the hospitality industry is implementing various strategies: in addition to image campaigns to attract new apprentices (e.g., avanti swiss), these include low-barrier industry courses designed to attract new groups of people to the hospitality industry, including refugees. Efforts are also being made to retain existing employees, for example by offering seasonal workers more year-round contracts, e.g., with an 80% workload spread over 12 months (Voll et al. 2023).

The hospitality industry: a classic example of a migrant-dominated low-wage sector

The hospitality industry can be described as a prime example of a low-wage sector: characterized by seasonal, temporary employment contracts, a high proportion of part-time work, limited social rights, and little protection for employees. In other words, employment conditions in this sector are particularly precarious. This is also evident in our quantitative analyses based on cross-sectional data from the EU Labor Force Survey (LFS) for Switzerland for the period 2009–2023, in which we define precarity based on various structural characteristics of the labor market, as well as an indicator of the (in)voluntary nature of the employment situation.¹ The results are shown in Figure 1. They indicate that the proportion of people with a medium (66%) and particularly a higher-medium (17%) level of precarity is significantly higher in the hospitality industry than in most other sectors.



At the same time, and closely related to this, the industry could hardly exist without labor migration: In 2024, 49% of the employees in the hospitality industry had a foreign passport – more than in any other industry. The largest proportion is made up of people from the EU/EFTA area; they account for 31% of all employees in the hospitality industry (FSO Swiss Labor Force Survey). The L (short stay) permits are geared to the seasonal structure of the tourism industry.

Our research, which focuses on the hospitality industry, provides insight into typical perceptions and strategies found in a migrant-dominated low-wage sector. At the heart of the study are 29 in-depth interviews with labor migrants working in gastronomy or hotels in the cantons of Graubünden and Valais. All but three interviewees hold EU/EFTA passports.

In conversation with migrant workers: Precarity and adaptability

The evident precarity of the hospitality industry, as shown in the statistical data, is reflected in the accounts by migrant workers themselves: They report physically gruelling work that harms their health; schedules that leave them with “no life” outside of work; a toxic work atmosphere within the team, and low wages that have dwindled over time and are increasingly insufficient to live on. These wages remain at minimum level even for those with many years of experience in the profession.

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“I think if I were in Switzerland all year round, and I would really have to fund life in Switzerland 100 percent, then it would be difficult. I think that’s the case for many of my colleagues. And that’s why I tend to stick with the model I have and I just finance my permit every season.”

48-year-old, male, trained as a chef and further training as a master chef in Germany, head chef in a restaurant

Despite the stark precarity evident in our data, many interviewed migrants still express a fundamentally positive view of life in Switzerland. This seems to stem from their remarkable adaptability to challenging work and living conditions – they make do with what they have. Even issues often highlighted in critical discourse on labor migrants, such as legal uncertainties from short-term permits, barely feature in their accounts. They’ve devised personal and family strategies to navigate annual work cycles around immigration permits and contracts. Some also use off-seasons to register with regional employment centers (RAV).

The role of transnational comparison

This high adaptability also extends to low wages: “It’s enough,” “I don’t need much,” or “It’s enough for me at the moment” are typical responses – even when interviewees admit they couldn’t cover a CHF 1,000 bill. Others note they can make it work for themselves but that they cannot imagine how they would make ends meet if they had children.

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“You can live here and make ends meet. But that’s not possible in Portugal. That’s why I’m here.”

25-year-old, female, 9 years of schooling in Portugal, various jobs in service and room cleaning

A key factor in the acceptance of precarious working conditions is migrants’ transnational perspective, shaped by experience in their home countries and other workplaces abroad. This allows them to particularly appreciate positive aspects – like the often-praised infrastructure of workplaces – while negatives such as low pay can be downplayed, at least in part: “It’s worse in Portugal,” for example. The option of returning home also offers emotional relief as a fallback if conditions worsen; some have already done so temporarily, while others are planning their return.

Changing jobs:

a popular strategy when problems arise

Even more than transnational mobility, switching jobs emerges as a key and widely used strategy for addressing workplace difficulties or dissatisfaction. The hospitality sector’s shortage of skilled workers and staff, coupled with the lack of permit requirements in the case of changing employers for EU/EFTA citizens holding L status, reduces migrants’ dependence on specific employers, thereby shifting the power balance between employers and employees. Both qualified professionals and unskilled laborers report that they have been using this approach and switched jobs one or more times due to low pay, poor infrastructure, team conflicts, issues with management, or stalled career and personal growth.

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“You’ve been here for 20 years, 23 years, it doesn’t matter. You get the minimum. That’s not motivating either. That’s why we change jobs more often now.”

49-year-old, female, 5 years of schooling in Portugal, various jobs in room cleaning

Yet as effective as this strategy can be, it carries longer-term risks. Workers without recognized vocational training or upskilling remain stuck at minimum wage levels, even after years of experience. Employers, meanwhile, seem unable or unsuccessful in providing better prospects through suitable training programs. This is despite the excellent state-backed and collective labor agreement funding models, which would cover not only the course costs but also the loss of earnings in full.

Where every strategy reaches its limits: lack of affordable housing

The only issue that comes up in almost all conversations and is also a concern for relatively better-off workers is the overpriced and tight in touristic mountain regions. Coupled with low wages, it heightens dependence on affordable housing. Many repeatedly stress they’d have little chance of finding (let alone affording) new housing if they lost their current one: “In the past, we always had housing but no jobs. Now there are jobs, but no housing.”

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“There are lots of people buying houses, which makes it impossible to live up here. And I think they’ve forgotten the people who used to live here.”

36-year-old, male, 9 years of schooling in Portugal, sous chef in a hotel

Even the legal progress tied to short-stay permits for EU/EFTA nationals, allowing workers to bring their children to Switzerland, proves meaningless without the availability of housing that can accommodate families – a prerequisite for family reunification. Various initiatives have been launched at municipal and cantonal levels to tackle housing shortages in tourist areas, including zoning adjustments, partnerships between local governments and businesses, support for non-profit housing, and regulations on private rentals. Given migrants’ accounts, it is hoped that these efforts will soon gain traction and encourage further action.

Implications for policy

Our findings clearly show that individual adaptation strategies employed by migrant workers cannot overcome key structural barriers. This applies both to factors within the hospitality industry labor market and to external conditions, such as the lack of affordable housing in tourist regions.

Despite industry efforts to address labor shortages, our results highlight the need for complementary policy measures. Action is especially urgent where structural constraints limit personal strategies – such as minimum wage regulations, access to vocational training, and affordable housing.

The study also reveals that a transnational comparative perspective – comparing living and working conditions across countries – often enables migrants to subjectively downplay precarious conditions and view their situation more positively overall. This high level of adaptability underscores the fact that individual strategies cannot resolve structural problems, making policy intervention essential.

Further Readings

Ecoplan (2023). *Analyse der Arbeitsmarktflüsse in die und aus der Gastronomie und Beherbergung Entwicklungen von 2016 bis 2022. Im Auftrag des Staatssekretariats für Wirtschaft.*

Voll, F., Pescia, L., Schenk, B. & Tamborini, M. (2023). *Bedürfnisse der Arbeitnehmenden und Arbeitgebenden der touristischen Leitbranchen in Graubünden.* Chur: Fachhochschule Graubünden.

Tomás, L., Ludwig-Dehm, S. (2024). *Precarious Work in Switzerland: Experiences of Crises of a Hospitality Worker.* Blog, NCCR On the Move

Yalcin, S., Hubenthal, N., Dietrich, J. (2024). *Arbeitsfelder der Ankunft. Migrantische Perspektiven auf Arbeit in der Gastronomie.* Hans Böckler Stiftung, Study 487.



Evolving (Im)Mobility Regimes: Migrant Workers' Entitlement and Precarization in Times of Crisis

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A project of the "nccr – on the move"

The project analyzes how crises and related legal changes drive precarization among migrant workers. It employs a multilevel design with two subprojects: the first examines macro-level legal, economic, and demographic factors through case studies in three European countries and EU/EFTA labor data; the second investigates crisis measures' impacts during and after Covid-19, integrating migrants' experiences on a meso/micro level. Findings will reveal precarization dynamics across regulations, organizations, and worker strategies.

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Cover image of this Policy Brief by **Pedro Rodrigues**

The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics, and law. Managed at the University of Neuchâtel, the nccr – on the move is currently in its third phase (2022–2026) for which it receives SNSF funding of 10.8 million Swiss Francs. The network comprises eleven research projects at eight universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel, as well as the ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences.

"in a nutshell" provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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