

Fear, the City and Political Mobilization
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Constructing Immigrant Workers: Adaptation and Resistance¹

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Introduction

We have approached the topic of “Fear, the City and Political Mobilization” perhaps in a way that is less high profile than some of the contemporary debates on security certificates, reasonable accommodation, and some of the struggles that contest these policies. The issue of wage labour and immigration is our central concern. We believe that underlying the contemporary experiences of immigration is how people are working and this structures permanent instability and fear in the lives of many immigrant workers. Inevitably, the material conditions of their lives and labour also impacts the forms of political mobilization that they adopt. When discussing immigrant or migrant workers, we include those with regular status, those in Canada on short-term work programs, and those without formal/legal status. Our discussion draws on the results of a research project associated with the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal and explored the experiences of immigrant workers through interviews. One framework of analysis was the tension between adaptation and resistance and the forms of the latter. We begin with an analysis of the context of migration and labour. We will present a few vignettes from the research project to illustrate the conditions faced. We will discuss forms of resistance and organizing, and draw some conclusions.

Context²

In this section, we will briefly summarize some of the elements of the political economic contest facing immigrant/migrant workers. The interrelationship between processes in their countries of origin and specific policies as well as the structures of labour markets in the new countries structures the place of migrant workers. Thus, this migration of workers has inter-connected pulls and pushes. For example, trade agreements like NAFTA and structural adjustment programs drive farmers off the land in order to

¹ This paper is part of a larger research project carried out in partnership with the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal. It is through a Social Science and Humanities Research (SSHRC) grant within a network- Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The members of the Immigrant Worker Centre Research Group are Eric Shragge, Concordia University, Principal Investigator, Jill Hanley and Steve Jordan, McGill University, Co-researchers, Research Assistants: Charlotte Baltodano, Aziz Choudry, Jaggi Singh, and Martha Stiegman. Contributing in previous years were Marco Luciano, and Lauren Posner.

² We have not included references in the text they are listed below as Bibliography 1.

develop export-based agriculture and force people into wage labour in Maquilas or to find ways to migrate north. At the same time both short-term programs and the promise of a 'better life' attract workers to advanced capitalist countries like Canada. The reality, however, does not live up to the promise.

There are four categories of immigrant workers in Canada. The main and largest group are those who come through regular immigration processes. Over the past 20 plus years, there has been a shift in who comes here. European immigration has been replaced by immigrants from Asia and Africa. This group tends to be highly educated and skilled. The second group is those brought here through specific programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Work Program or the Live-In-Caregiver program. These target workers from particular countries to fill jobs in Canada as domestic and agricultural labour. In the case of the former, workers have to return home after their work is completed. For the latter, they have to live and work in their employer's home for two of a maximum for three years and then apply for permanent status. These programs have been criticized for the abuse of these workers, but seem to be expanding because "Canadians do not want to work in those jobs". The third group is refugee claimants, who arrive here often because of threats of violence and political instability in their home country. The final group is made up of people without official status. The majority of this group is from the "South" and maybe 'failed' refugee claimants, people on expired tourist visas, etc.

Work is central in the lives of all of these people. Most are here because they had few options in their home countries. In addition, workers send remittances to families in their home countries, often actively encouraged by governments of those countries. The lack of options in their countries of origin and remittances act as powerful ties to the labour market. These ties are even tighter on the second, third and fourth groups. Those on specific government programs like SAWP and the Live-in Caregiver program are here to work and will be sent back if they break the work contract. For refugee claimants, work becomes one of defining criteria for whether or not they can stay. For the final group, those 'without status', work is survival and must be done 'under the table'. The consequence is to establish a large pool of labour that has little recourse to those mechanisms and social programs that exist to protect workers and is tied to the labour market, regardless of the conditions of work.

What are these conditions? Despite the wave of immigration of people from the South being highly educated, this large group of immigrants occupies the bottom of the labour market. They work in the most precarious jobs, do the service jobs, face significantly higher levels of poverty, and unemployment than native born Canadians (except Aboriginal peoples). Further, unlike other waves of immigrants, there has been little mobility over the past 30 years and there is evidence that the situation follows into the children of immigrants. Canadian immigration policy continues as a racialized one, bringing in migrants when there is a demand for labour whether to build railways or to plant and pick crops or to perform domestic labour. In the current context, immigrant labour is used to fill the bottom jobs, keeping the city running through their invisible labour. Further, because of temporary or lack of official status do not have recourse either to social programs or protection of their rights.

There is an emerging duality which creates a low-wage precarious labour market with a disproportionately high concentration of migrant labour of multiple statuses, creating 'outsider' concentrated in specific urban neighbourhoods. The pressures on countries of the South creates an indefinite 'reserve army of labour' that can be pulled in or expelled as needed by countries like Canada, keeping a large supply of workers for its 'sweatshops'. The combination of unstable work, and often precarious or short-term status adds to the level of fear and uncertainty faced by immigrant workers. We quote Hart (1992) at length because she captures the essence of the consequences of the new economy for immigrant workers.

What is called for is a psychological, mental and behavioural preparation for living with instability, and for being able to think of oneself in terms of a renewable, exchangeable and updatable resource rather than in terms of a human being with unique experiences, hopes, wishes, and dreams. (p.87)

She continues:

Furthermore, the ideal worker becomes a self-sufficient nomad, migrating with moving job possibilities, keeping specific ties to neighbourhoods, friends and families suspended long enough not to interfere with the need for mobility.... People who are unwilling to move because they rely on established social networks rather than risking both unemployment and social support do not display rigidity, inflexibility, 'fear of change' ...as much as a realistic assessment of actual chances for survival.

...In sum, the new *generic worker* must be able to adjust to indeterminate change, and is characterized by low expectations regarding pay, work conditions, and above all job security. ... new jobs will not be enough for workers to get by, but will have to be combined with other employment, ...as well as work associated with unpaid social and personal services. In short, the new workers will be 'working like women' whose flexible working patterns have already made them into preferred labour force in many instances."(p.88-89)

Immigrant workers are ideal as this 'generic worker'. They have arrived in a situation in which their choices are restricted. They have often come from situations of desperation, leaving as refugees or because of economic hardship. They also carry responsibilities for families at home. The labour market conditions that they face are described above. Some resist but many accept that their dreams of what Canada might offer are just that – dreams. Adapting to the realities can mean reducing expectations and just surviving with what the job has to offer.

Testimonies

We have selected some quotations from interviews carried out in a study of resistance and adaptation of immigrant workers to illustrate some of the issues discussed in the previous section. There is a lot at stake-status in a new country, income for themselves

and family, and time to participate in organizing efforts, particularly for women who were expected to do their domestic chores on top of their factory work.

“A lot of Filipinos and others are silent in their jobs... They don’t say anything in their jobs even if they are exploited because they are scared. They are scared that if they do something for change, they will be deported, especially those who are in the live-in caregiver program, and even those with immigrant status. They are scared to be terminated. They feel held at the blade between life and death. Most of these people are closed, so it’s better to go to the young people because they are still motivated, receptive, but these people, forget about them they are traditional, their mentality.”

“Yes, they always want you to come to the meetings, they nudge you to come. But it’s hard because, as I said, the system is so demanding, people don’t have time to go to meetings after working hours which are already so long. Also because garments and textiles are comprised of mostly women, they have responsibilities at home, so they aren’t going to want to come to meetings; and even for men, it’s hard to go spend 2 hours there.”

One farmworker in the SAWP program reflected the fear and how the structures of power acted in concert against them, said;

“They look down on us. But the quebecers, when they finish their contract the government pays them all winter long. But us, who pays us all winter? We have to pay our own bills at home with our own hard earned money. If we’re gonna have to pay taxes... at least if we were paying taxes to our own government we would be getting benefits and social services. It’s exploitation, pure and simple”. “Sometimes you’re scared as an immigrant because you don’t want to lose your job. So standing up for your rights, you can defend your rights as an immigrant but with the fear that if you leave all and after they don’t support you you’re putting your neck on the line. The consulate is supposed to defend us but really it’s the consulate and the bosses that help each other. But if you know the laws and you know your rights you can defend them and win.

Even for those with regularized status, there is a process of learning one’s place in the labour market. This vignette comes from an interview with a North African man with a PhD in oceanography. He was told in no uncertain terms by his employment agent that he would have to sharply reduce his expectations and find other work.

“The employment agent, she must make 50\$ hour. Do you know what she told me? She said, you want to work as an Oceanographer, well, you should go to such and such an address in the old port. I got there, they were looking for ship captains – she couldn’t even take the time to find out what Oceanographer meant – either that, or she took me for a fool.”

The MCRI steered Ahmed towards l’Hirondelle, a community organization that provides immigrant services, where he followed a three week course in job search training. “They told us that we shouldn’t devalue ourselves, that we should valorize our skills and experience, that we should ask for payment that reflects our worth. I learned very quickly that that is not the way it works here... If I had followed their advice I never would have gotten a job... I took bachelor off my CV – you have to understand employers want to save money – they won’t recognize an immigrant’s qualifications and they don’t want to pay you for it.”

These quotes are examples of the experiences of people with a lack of power, and pushed to the margins of the Canadian society. In the next section we will examine some of the forms of resistance.

Organizing Resistance³

Migrant workers have found a variety of ways to contest their conditions at work. At times, these are linked to organizations that help them their fight for status. Given the structures of the labour market- devastation/atomization of workers and workplaces through closures, out-sourcing, homeworking and relocation of production- for all workers and the decline of industrial unions in North America and elsewhere, traditional forms of unionization have been difficult, but not impossible, particularly for those unions committed to an aggressive recruiting strategy (SEIU and janitors). New organizations of immigrant workers have been put in place over the past 15 years in cities across North America. They have used a combination of community and labour organizing. Some work with immigrants from a specific country and others bring people together in neighbourhoods or through common work situations. Examples range from encouraging workers to make complaints against their employers at Labour Standards board and accompanying them in the process to campaigns for improvement of labour laws that regulate non-unionized workplaces. Living wage campaigns in the United States are an example. Community-based labour centres are informal places in which workers' learning and organizing. Some work in conjunction with trade unions and other independently at the community.

From those we interviewed, there were a couple of important lessons. The first was that there was a high risk in resisting at work. For those new to Canada, finding out about basic rights and then acting on that information to defend themselves in the workplace is a huge challenge. For most people, there were connections to other individuals, unions and community organizations that played a key role. Some of these connections were informal but initiative was required to make the connection and then act on the information that they received. The process of creating networks was a first step in getting information that could be used to resist in the workplace. Another means available for non-unionized workers to contest their conditions are through individual complaints to state agencies. Because this process is individualized, organizations accompanying and supporting workers through it are important. These processes are usually time consuming and often unsatisfactory, but they are one of the few structured mechanisms available. Direct action has been taken in some instances, such as direct confrontations with employers, but these are not too common. Clearly, new means of collective action are necessary, but outside of unionization there seem to be few avenues available. Finally, one of the underlying currents in the interviews was the centrality of the demand for respect. As one person told us:

“But in general, I started watching all these relationships, this behaviour; when the supervisor started yelling at me, I told him, listen, I don't need a university degree to do this job, anyone can do this job, so you don't respect me, I don't respect you. So I tried to demand some respect as a worker, as a human being.”

The tension between adaptation because of the high stakes for immigrant workers and resistance is always there. The demand for respect tips the balance when workers feel they have had enough and then can connect to either informal networks of support or

³ There is a growing body of literature on immigrant labour organizing in the North American context. See Bibliography 2.

existing organizations to help them learn about what to do and accompany them in the process

Conclusions

We conclude with several observations related to the theme of the conference. The first is that immigration and the type of labour available to most of them shapes the way that cities function. In Montreal, large concentrations of people from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa are concentrated in neighbourhoods with the worst housing and facilities. Despite high levels of academic/professional qualifications, they find themselves doing the service work, providing care, and working in the most marginal manufacturing jobs. There are increasing demands from employers to import contract workers for specific jobs in addition to homecare and agriculture. Canada is continually reconstituting a racialized labour apartheid which is deeply intertwined with a longstanding and highly racialized notion of nationhood and 'citizenship'. Fear in cities may be discussed in relation to some of the events in a post 9/11 period, but we argue that a core fear is the instability and precarious work faced by immigrants and few options to defend their situation against the international reserve army queueing at the gates and the stance of employers that competitiveness is equated with the race to the bottom. Informal networks both in the workplace and neighbourhood have been one way to resist and new forms of opposition such as worker centres and new forms of labour organizing have emerged and these are one of the bright spots in an otherwise grim picture.

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