

Learning to Resist-Immigrant Workers Experiences

“...anyone can do this job, so you don’t respect me, I don’t respect you...”

Project Paper

Immigrant Workers: Learning to Labour in Canada: Rights and Organizing Strategies

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1.Introduction

This report covers the first part of the research project from 2003 to May, 2004. Because this project is a partnership between the Immigrant Workers’ Centre and university researchers, the challenge of this project is to work at two levels at the same time. The first is to find a way to carry out a project that would respond to questions related to the social change activities of the IWC (see below). The second level was to develop a research project that would adhere to academic standards. This has been a complex process and challenged the group and resulted in deeper understanding of how to be very clear about our objectives and tasks. We have often come back to the question ‘what difference does the information make- what is it for? The following report will attempt to reflect both aspects and present the results of the first round of interviews with immigrant workers. We will explain the inter-relationship of those with interviewed with their involvement with the activities of the centre. This is a work in progress and we have discussed within our group some of the limitations of this report and ways to modify it.

The report is divided into the following sections: The first is a description of the IWC, followed by an overview of the conditions faced by immigrant workers in Canada. We have added a section called this week at the IWC as a way of concretely connecting the activities of the centre with the conditions of immigrant workers. Before we turn to a discussion of the interviews we will present a brief discussion of the research process and the related methodology. The interviews and an analysis will follow. Finally we will explore lessons that emerge for the practice of the IWC.

This research project begins with the work experience of immigrants to Canada, and explores their learning strategies to secure social and labour rights in the workplace. ParreaaS (2001) in her study of Filipina domestic workers provides an analysis of the dislocation of these workers and their process of constitution and the means by which migrant Filipina domestic workers resist (attempt to eliminate) or negotiate (attempt to mitigate) the effects of these dislocations in their everyday lives. (p.3) The research questions for this project build on this perspective, focussing on the experiences of immigrant workers in the current labour market. How have they adapted to these jobs,

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and how have they found ways to struggle against difficult working conditions to improve their conditions of work? The key question is how have immigrant workers learned to organize themselves and respond to the pressures of the economy to negotiate either through unions or informal association their means of self-protection.

2. Immigrant Workers' Centre- the Research Partner

The IWC, founded in 2000 by a small group composed of union and former union organizers from the Philippines and their allies of activists and academics, works with these issues and problems. It provides ongoing education and critical analysis of the workplace. The activities of the IWC cover education, participation in campaigns and individual services. Labour education is a priority, targeting organizations in the community and increasing workers' knowledge of their rights and helping them to build a critical analysis. Workshops have been presented to many organizations that work with immigrants on themes such as the history of the labour movement, the Labour Standards Act, and organizing processes. A program 'Skills for Change' teaches computer literacy and while incorporating workplace analysis and information of rights. The staff at the IWC are called upon by the anti-globalization movement and other organizations and campaigns to speak at a variety of educational forums. This is an opportunity to link the struggles of immigrant workers with other social and economic struggles and build alliances. In addition, the IWC continues to support union organizing where there is a high concentration of immigrant workers.

Along with many other groups in Quebec, the IWC has been involved in a campaign to reform the Labour Standards Act. This act regulates the conditions of workplaces that are not unionized. Because of the difficulties in unionizing workers, this act has increasing importance for immigrant and other workers, and it provides the means to contest injustices faced in many jobs. The Act however prior to and despite the reforms won in this provincial wide campaign is still inadequate in protecting immigrant other workers in precarious and irregular jobs. Its precarious finances and lack of regular sources of support have limited the activities of the centre. This and any other research project has to contribute both materially and politically to the centre. The partnership is based on mutual needs and interests.

3. Context-Immigrant Workers: Portrait of their Conditions

Immigration to Canada in recent years has transformed the racial and ethnic composition of the country as a whole and has had a huge impact on city life. In the 2001 Census of Statistics Canada reports that 18.4% of the total population were born outside of Canada, the highest level in 70 years. Between 1991 and 2000, 2.2 million immigrants were admitted to Canada, which represents the highest number for any decade in the past century. In addition, the population of visible minority is growing faster than the total population. Between 1991 and 1996, the visible minority population increased 27 % while the total population rose 6%. From 1996 to 2001, the visible minorities increased 25% whereas the total population only rose 4%.

Immigrants represent an important source of growth to the Canadian labour market. In the period 1991-1996, immigration accounted for 70% of the growth of the Canadian labour force (CCSD). Immigrants come to Canada with a wide range of skills, work experience, and education. According to the 2001 Census, 40% of the total immigrants, men and women, aged 25 to 44 who came to Canada during the 1990s had university degrees (only 23% of the Canadian-born of the same age had a university degree). Despite high education levels, according to Statistics Canada, the earnings of recent immigrants compared to those of the Canadian-born have deteriorated considerably. In 2000, male immigrants who have been in the country for one year made 63 cents for every dollar made by those born in Canada. Those who had been in the country for 10 years made only 80 cents for each dollar earned by Canadian-born workers. The pattern is similar for women.

Recent immigrants display higher incidences of poverty and unemployment. 27% of recent immigrants fell below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (widely considered the closest available approximation to a poverty line in Canada), double the rate for the rest of the Canadian population (CCSD). In 1998, just 58% of recent immigrants were employed all year, compared to 70% for other Canadians (CCSD). In the same year, recent immigrants also earned an hourly wage 18% less, on average, than that of other Canadians (CCSD). Further, an April, 2000 report (Picot and Heisz) indicates that not only were employment rates and average earnings lower for immigrant university graduates than for Canadian-born university graduates, but that the gap has actually been widening.

Racism also appears to be a factor in the poor economic situation of immigrant workers. Recent data shows that white immigrants make, on average, 25.3% more than non-white immigrants, and that this gap is widening (Galabuzi). In the last decade in Canada, a growing number of immigrant workers are increasingly segregated to low-wage work and sweatshop conditions (CSWA). Furthermore, the economic conditions of globalized capitalism have been accompanied by a dramatic proliferation of low-wage, poorly regulated, factory work (sweatshop work), as well as piece-work, subcontracting, etc. At the same time, recent years have seen a significant roll-back of the welfare state, including cuts to health care, social assistance, changes to (un)employment insurance, etc. Changes in labour market trends and social welfare provisions have had specific impacts on immigrants (and particularly immigrant women), who form the majority of labourers in the competitive textile and service industries, in what are for the most part, non-unionized job sectors. Often subject to a variety of poor working conditions and abuses in the workplace, and ill informed about their rights and avenues of recourse, immigrant workers are a vulnerable sector of the Canadian labour force, and one which poses an unmet challenge to the labour movement.

Important factors in shaping immigration are the pushes from the countries of origin and the pulls of the host countries. This is not haphazard but relates to specific labour market needs. For example, the 'Live-in caregivers' is a way to bring cheap dependent and skilled labour into Canada for domestic work. At the same time, the Philippines has a deliberate policy of exporting labour that goes back many years. (Migrante??) It is a way

for the government to deal with issues of surplus population and remittances from abroad play a significant role in its economy. Remittances to Latin America from the United States totaled more than 32 billion US in 2002 (Campodonico:2004). An immigrant worker is often not only working for him/herself but also contributes to supporting relatives and immediate family members in the country of origin. This changes the stake for immigrants, as there is additional pressures to 'work hard'. In addition, as we saw from the participants in the study, they bring education and skills to Canada. This has two consequences. It acts to create skilled labour shortages in the host country. For example in the health care system in the Philippines, there is a severe shortage of nurses as they are recruited to the US and Canada (Third World Resurgence) or come to Canada to work as domestics.

Organizing immigrant workers into unions is a difficult process. There are several reasons for this. With the process of globalization, there are pressures to push down the cost of labour here in order to compete with production in countries in which there is cheap labour and little in the way of regulation. As a consequence, companies have moved production when unions attempted to or successfully organized their workers. The sectors themselves in which immigrants are employed tend to be unstable and provide 'flexible' and precarious employment conditions. Many women who come to Canada are brought over under the 'Live-In Caregiver Plan' and work in the home of their employers. In addition, the current climate, there is a strong anti-union sentiment among employers and lawyers who specialize in undermining union drives. This context has brought with it a need to new approaches to work on issues of labour that go beyond but do not exclude traditional unionization

4. Last month at the IWC

The situation of immigrant workers can be illustrated by some of the issues that were faced by the IWC between mid-April and mid-May-04. Although these have been presented as cases, they are approached and acted on as wider issues. The actions of the centre attempt to find new approaches that go beyond only the individual situations. The cases are also legally complex.

i) A Philippina woman found the centre through various connections with individuals and called for help. She was "employed" as a domestic by a family that had moved to Montreal from Saudi Arabia. She had no status except as a visitor. The family is wealthy but paid her for 3 of the 9 months that she was worked. The calculation of her back salary and overtime came to \$39,000. Workers and volunteers from the centre 'rescued' her from her employer. The police were involved at one point and one of the officers could not put her into a category and said that there was no employment category called 'slavery'. The IWC sees this type of situation as an example of human trafficking. This woman has no legal protection, but the centre through intervention has forced negotiation with the employer and hopes to reach a settlement. The Labour Attaché from the Philippine embassy has become involved in the negotiation because of international understandings between the Philippines and other governments on domestics. It is not clear who has jurisdiction. The IWC is pushing the Normes de Travail to intervene in

cases where workers have no official status.

ii) A domestic worker was suffering from allergies related to the condition of her room in the employer's home. Her job was terminated for various reasons and she wants to the CSST (Health and Safety Commission). The centre helped her prepare her case and accompanied her to the CSST. They were informed there that her case could not be heard because that government body does not cover domestic workers. The situation was the same at Normes de Travail until a reform last year extended coverage to domestic workers. A campaign with similar demands is currently being planned by the IWC.

iii) A clothing company in Montreal recently dismissed 13 workers arguing that they were abolishing these positions. 12 of these workers are from the Philippines and 1 is from a Caribbean country. However, the reality is that through an employment recruiter workers from South Asia have been brought in and are being paid less than the minimum wage. The workers who lost their jobs are preparing a collective case to bring before the Normes de Travail for unjust dismissal. They have all been working over two years. A workshop on their rights will be given to them. A collective case is a precedent. There has been an analysis developed so as to avoid blaming the workers from South Asia and there have been discussion with an immigration lawyer, who is interested in looking into their status.

These situations are examples of the complex issues faced by the IWC and how the centre tries to link individual situations with a broader organizing strategy.

5. Process of Research

The lead researcher for this project and one of the co-researchers were founders and continue to be an active members of the Board of Directors of the IWC. Because of the very limited budget of the centre, Board members are expected to be involved in many of the day-to-day activities of the centre. The research, therefore, grew out of an understanding of the activities and an ongoing discussion with staff and board members of the centre. The draft proposal was shared with a group composed of the research team, the staff of the IWC and a few board members. This group met several times to review the proposal and discuss how it would be implemented.

A part-time staff member of the centre and a recent graduate of the Graduate Diploma in Community Economic Development at Concordia joined the team. He had established relations with many immigrant workers through his previous work as a labour organizer and his current position at the IWC. His role was to recruit participants for the study and participate in the interviews as well as in the meetings of the research team. His participation made the recruitment of interviewees easier as he had a relationship of trust with them. Further, in the meetings the strategic interests of the centre were kept on the table and we had to ask ourselves questions related to the relevance of what we were finding and the contribution of the research process to the development of the centre.

6. Methodology

The methodology used in this project is influenced by the work of Burawoy et. al. (2000) and Foley (2001). Both have developed ethnographic approaches that draw on case studies that situate lived experience in a wider political, economic and social context. Based on in-depth interviews with those active in campaigns and struggles, the research will link these to what Burawoy describes as extending out from micro processes to macro focus, from the space-time rhythms of the site to the geographical and historical context of the field. (p.27) Similarly, Foley states: “We need a way of analytically connecting informal learning in particular workplaces to both micro-politics of those workplaces and their wider political and economic context. In particular, we need to focus on the stories people tell of their work experience and to locate those stories within an analysis of the capitalist labour process.”(p.280)

The research employed open ended, semi-structured interviews that emerged from a series of meetings held between the researchers and IWC workers. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit from respondents their experiences of both informal learning and ‘learning in struggle’ that they had encountered in their country of origin and on entering the labour market in Montreal. The participants for the research study for the first round of interviews were people who already had a relationship to the centre because they had made use of it as a resource. Moreover, those who were asked to be interviewed all had, in some way or other, participated in acts of resistance to the practices of their employers. The interviews explored several themes including life in their countries of origin, the migration process, settling in Canada, work, and learning to challenge injustices in the workplace. Consequently, the sample was purposive. In particular, we were interested in learning more about what immigrant workers knew of their statutory rights as employees as encoded in Quebec’s *normes du travail*. Of the nine interviews on which this report is based, the duration of each was between 45 minutes and 2 hrs in length. Respondents were between 35 – 55 years of age.

Several problems were encountered in conducting the interviews: a hesitancy on the part of respondents to be interviewed; suspicion of the purposes of the research; and confidentiality. Additionally, there was some initial unease at the interviews being conducted at the Immigrant Workers Centre. This was overcome by moving the location of the interviews to respondent’s homes.

The research team has met regularly to discuss the interviews and analyze them. Through the process of the research itself it has also become evident that focus groups might serve as a valuable tool to reflect on, clarify and validate findings from interviews with individuals. Thus it is our intention to add focus groups as part of the next stage in the research process. More broadly, we will share the results of the research and determine its use in the context of the work of the IWC.

7. Profiles of People Interviewed

The group we interviewed all came from poorer, developing countries. The IWC has worked closely with people from the Philippines and 4 interviewed were from there. The rest were from the following countries: Ghana, St Kitts, Haiti, Guatemala, and Sri Lanka. None of the 9 people interviewed are very recent arrivals. A couple arrived as recently as 1995 while several had been here since the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Eight of the nine workers did factory work, three from the Philippines worked as domestics; three did work at a nursing home; three worked in housekeeping, two eventually made careers within the union.

8) Themes

In the interviews we were able to explore the following themes: migration, settling, working, specific struggles and stories of opposition. At this stage of our project we will let those interviewed speak for themselves and then present some observations and implications.

a) Migration:

At the beginning of the interviews we asked about life in the home countries. It was a relatively easy way to open the interview. People decided to immigrate to Canada for a variety of reasons, always with the expectation that their lives would materially improve. Some came as young people with a sense of adventure, and a hope of a better life. Having relatives, friends or in one case a husband, who had already arrived in Canada, facilitated migration.

Well, what really happened is this, you know when you're young and your parents are trying to guide you, you figure you can get away from them and I think that was my motive, to get away from them. And then after my father died, I wanted to come, my friend came in 63, 64 something like that; and after my father died, I wanted to go somewhere. I had a baby in 64 or so. I had no problem, I was single.

I came from Ghana to Edmonton where my husband was living. He is a mixture of Black and white, his father was from Canada and his mother from Nigeria; we met in Africa (in a nearby country). He sponsored me to come to Edmonton. We met at a conference. There was some African Nation, there was some organizations, and my husband he was in Canada and he knew more, and we got to know each other. Right to way he said, I want you to be my wife in Canada. I thought he was joking. He wasn't too much older than me, he was handsome also. He told me that Canada is a very good country, you will see the changes, you are smart woman, you can do more to help your family.. he also said you can watch TV till midnight and things like that.

I wanted to be a successful woman in life, not to be poor, not better than my parents but I think I can do more than what they did. You know, new generation could do something better, but I wouldn't tell them that cause that wouldn't be respectful to them.

I was 28, after I finished high school, I was one of those street children for a few years: I sleep in the terminal, I wake up in the terminal. Just like the people who sleep down stairs. Yes, (it was) a good experience, gets me to go forward. After three years in this life, I think I have to leave.

For others they wanted to secure better employment and escape poverty. Some came to escape political repression and felt they did not have a choice except to leave.

Yeah, not only me everybody is struggling in the Philippines because of the economic condition of the country; because 60% is owned by foreigners so what will happen to our country, economics the country will collapse gradually; it's a systematic killing of people down there the multinationals.

The political system at home -we were afraid to sleep at home even. Some neighbors used to try to challenge the political system, they wanted to start their own party -- they would put on masks in the night, some young guys and go around to the houses asking for identification We were really afraid.

Guatemala is a poor country, the possibilities were not good, there were a lot of political and social problems.

For one person, coming to Canada was a way of settling down and not having to travel from job to job. The Philippines has a long tradition of exporting labour. People from there have moved from country to country often as domestics before settling in Canada.

*I decided to offer my wife to settle down and she was already here and she told me it was good down here; my income in Saudi Arabia was a lot better, no tax, good accommodation and I was able to use my knowledge there and here I am not able to use my knowledge; my education background is not recognized in Canada.
Well, like other Filipinos, they expect like Canada is heaven. But when I came down here, oh my God!*

Others wanted a way of life that was culturally different from their home country and 'more modern'.

Before that time, my grandmother wanted to choose the husband for me. Do you understand? I had no choice, I had to do what she said, I had to do what she said but then I look at that and I said, I can change that. I saw that arranged marriage wasn't in my favor and that the younger generation doesn't want to follow that either, so I was able to change that, I told my grandmother why I wanted to do that.

b) Backgrounds and Beliefs

One of the questions we asked was about their backgrounds before they left. The answers

helped understand the strength that many of them had to be able to resist and work against unjust situations. They brought with them lessons from family, youth, and previous political and social experiences that helped them later in Canada. We will see the links between an individual's background and the strength that resulted in later sections.

Because if I don't like the system, I will tell people. Ahh, maybe because I was, in our country it is very different. ... Even my little town, they told us that my family was an activist. My mother is also like that. Always happy when we help somebody or somebody that needs help. If there are policies, like for example, in my country, when the military was asking for volunteers, I was the one who told the chief of police, this is a voluntary work so you cannot force us. My father was very active in the Philippines. Parliamentarian on the street for change.

I always tell my kids that I didn't have a childhood, I didn't live my adolescence, I was an adult even before the age because I had adult behaviors, I had to make decisions and take responsibility. My father raised me like that, I had two younger brothers, I was the toughest one... I was always respected as a person and I respected others.

My mother was a housewife and my father was a barber. But my father was kind of a poet, and he was kind of on the left side politically

I am from Royal Family. Every city they have the Queen Mother and the King Father and I am from one of these families. And they don't take no nonsense, excuse me for my language, they don't put up with garbage, they stand up for their right. We fight.

In 1992, I ran for an elected position in my town (in the Philippines), for a policy maker and I lost because the politics, money, you know, I didn't have the money to buy votes but for me it's not a loss; I won by my principles, I wanted to change and I went for it without any money at all.

I was in a nun's school, a religious school run by Quebecois (in Haiti), they came from here and worked at schools there, (les soeurs quebecoises). That's why I was always independent and when I came here, I was independent very quickly.

The sense of self-respect and independence are important personal attributes. These also create expectations of respect and justice, which as we see in the working and living conditions they faced was not often forthcoming.

Having Faith

A number of those we interviewed have a deep religious belief that contributed to their courage to fight back and seek justice.

I believe that I have a gift of being courageous as a fighter, and I believe that that could be a gift from God. Because I remember the organization told me at the beginning that even if they help me with this campaign that if I myself don't back it up, there is nothing

they can do. And I heard that again, this statement from the lawyer. He said, "Don't give up!" Because even if he helped me, he can't do anything if I give up. I always heard it- don't give up, don't give up! So I said, I was all alone in that country, and I said, nobody will fight for me either they kill me or I kill them.

Well you know, as a human being, you trust God, so if you do good, good will come to you. If you are not wrong and people try to put you wrong, God doesn't accept that so He will try to give you the thoughts and then the ideas come to my min. Yes, I would pray. I asked God what to do. When it comes, I begin to put down and I bring it to my advisor and I tell him what we should say and it works.

I had faith in God that's number one. And because I believe that I have a gift of being courageous as a fighter, and I believe that that could be a gift from God.

c) Settling- Initial experiences:

Arriving in a new place with expectations of a better life led to hopes that were not fulfilled. We heard stories of disappointment and abuse both in and outside of the workplace. Everyone we interviewed had or continues to have a job that is precarious or at the bottom of the labour market. The new arrivals did not experience a welcoming environment. They remain on the outside with little power, at times a lack of community and isolation. Contrasts between the feelings of 'belonging' in their home countries contrasts with feelings of 'exclusion' from the mainstream of Canadian society.

Well, the expectations were kind of economic. I thought living here would bring a kind of freedom. When we got here, I was working here and my wife was working here. But I didn't like to see the strong people abusing the weak ones, and I saw a lot of arrogance in the factories. The people had to work hard almost for nothing. And people had no choice but to work in bad conditions because they had responsibilities in their home countries.

For about 4-5 months I was not happy at all. I was telling that guy to send me back. I had not seen snow before. I arrived October 25th. When my husband came to get me from the airport, I saw snow all over his car, and I thought he must be really crazy about me because he put powder all over his car! He brought me a coat. First of all, I didn't know the place very much or very much about the system. I was lost. It was very hard to cope. Totally strange. And I never thought I would come to Canada, to cross over.

Coming from an underdeveloped country, you can see the difference that here people can buy houses and cars; but the treatment of people is unacceptable. Coming from my country with these kinds of abuses it is somehow more acceptable but here, where they have human rights, the situation on paper looks good but the reality is different and that is why I get upset.

I knew another Sengalese couple in Plamondon (a street in Montreal) so I went to stay

with them. I stayed with them about a week. Then I got my refugee status, I was at the YMCA until I got my first check. I came here in November, it was very cold then. I had no idea how cold it would be. I had no idea where I was in the beginning... I was thinking that I had to settle, that's what I was trying to do.

d) Working

As described below, the working conditions were often difficult and these new arrivals faced discrimination. Some were able to move on from that initial job drawing on previous experiences or finding ways to get further training. Despite these gains, particularly in nursing homes, they remained in low wage and often contract work. Getting a job was facilitated by friends and relatives who were already employed in that workplace.

I was working at hotels, at La Cite, and I worked at Simpsons cleaning at night and from there, then, I got a job at Royal Vic hospital as a housekeeper. I started with housekeeping. After I finished housekeeping, then there were nurses, there were other Black nurses who told me, put the housekeeping track away and go to school. Learn something and do better than this. So they encouraged me, some of them were provoking me, so I studied Gerontology, which is equivalent to the nurses' assistant.

We used to type, like the telephone book and you type names and addresses out of this book. I stayed one year there because I needed to get experience. I mean, being alone in Canada, you can't lose a job!... Then I got a job at Royal Bank but I didn't like it there because to me, they were really prejudice. I was doing data entry.

I was a factory worker (he laughs!) for a textile factory. I worked at Peerless; I worked there for 3 years. 96-late 98. That was my first job here. That's why I tell my wife, I have to go home. But I had obligations- my first child had a problem and he died at the age of 18 months old so I could not find another job with better pay because I had obligations. So I worked for one or two years in Peerless and then I moved to another company. I tried to up my salary by working in another company. I just needed to press so I said okay.

So I went with my cousin to the immigration; and there they told me that if I find a job, they would help with the residence; I gave all my information from Haiti so I needed a job. My cousin worked in a hotel, she was cleaning and she helped me to find a place to work. So I got something in manufacturing, on Parc Avenue, close to Waverly and Jean Talon maybe (T)ricoman, I forget what it was called, they did sewing.

I was a machine operator at Peerless. Before that I was training with one lady for about 8-9 months for 2-4\$ an hour. I went to be trained. I worked in Peerless around three months, but I left the job because I had a hard time with the machines. I could not balance the work on one leg, the whole day- my left leg was hanging. And after the day, I

couldn't even put my shoes on. I asked if there was something else I could do but they didn't accept so I left the job.

It didn't work well. I just worked with them for about 2 months and 1 week. Well the female employer was always complaining about my work, she wasn't satisfied. She wants everything to be done, like this, like that they wanted me to pick up the clothes they threw on the floor, one by one there was a hamper that they could have put it in, but they wanted me to pick up after them, like if they took their socks off in the kitchen. If they took it off just beside the bed, I had to pick it up. So, I got mad and complained, that it wasn't supposed to be my obligation to pick up their underwear. Why can't they put it in the hamper? And it was always long hours. The contract was supposed to be 51 hours, but I always worked 55-60 hours a week, without getting paid overtime. But it was supposed to be overtime after 51 hour.

The jobs presented major challenges. Face-to-face encounters with employers and supervisors was common along with situations of feeling marginalized because of being a from a racialized minority group or because of their vulnerable status as a new immigrant. Experiences of racism were frequent. These situations provoked a response and were challenged by some of those we interviewed.

There was a woman who wanted to make a union, and the boss started pushing her around, this woman had been sitting next to me, and then the boss came and asked me if I would be a witness saying that it was her that had caused it; and I said, never in my life! He tried to bribe me, but I said, no way, you can't buy me! From that moment on, I became more aggressive, I knew that injustice is there, it exists and there needs to be someone to help fight it.

I remember a long time ago, a woman was coming from Afghanistan; and after a few weeks, she started wearing something on her head. The other co-workers were complaining about it, the manager tried to get rid of her but not directly. You know the supervisors never really like when people take time on Fridays to pray or something; in the beginning they say nothing because they need the people but after a few months, they start to ask them for those Fridays, they don't really respect their religion.

Then they sold it to Sarah Lee (a company), and they were nice at first, the wages increased, and at first they discussed things with the workers and they respected the seniority of workers. But later on they changed their strategies. I noticed that people were starting to be laid off. People with seniority were beginning to be laid off. That was my observation.(Later as Onentex): Yes, they abused our working hours, they were permanently dismissing people with seniority. They did it by asking 100% efficiency from people who were already very old -- in that company they went bankrupt so we could not get anything

I was not qualified to get my permanent residence, for that you have to have 24 months of live in work within three years. But because I got pregnant, I wasn't able and it was

impossible; no employer would accept me to live in with my son. I could not deny that I had my son with me, and every time they found out how old he was, they rejected me. I did more than 12 interviews, until I found part time cleaning

The supervisor did not like me and he terminated my employment and I filed a complaint with the labour standards and the company paid me. My complaint was termination without notice.

Then I got a job at Royal Bank but I didn't like it there because to me, they were really prejudice. I was doing data entry. (Against blacks?) Yes, against blacks. It was funny because the guy who was in charge was from Barbados and the lady who was in charge was from somewhere like from up there, um, I mean you would be surprised. But then would you believe it, in 19..89?, I went to work at Bank of Montreal, and I saw the prejudice there, and Oh my God, Oh my god, they don't want to teach you nothing, they don't want to show you nothing. And you ask them questions too and they don't want to answer you.

In another company where I was working, there were immigrants from Haiti, Latin America, Africa and the Quebecer.. the Quebecer said we are Quebecers, we don't need the immigrants, you want to improve the working conditions, its just the immigrants, not us. Because they had good positions. The majority of cases, the Quebecers are favoured by supervisors so you are not really welcomed by them.

Almost all of the people interviewed expressed difficulty with employment because of language barriers. The demand for French, for those whose second language was English, constituted a particular challenge.

At that time we were going to school twice a week to learn French at night. From 7-9 o'clock after finishing work at 6. I wanted to do it because we wanted to integrate; we couldn't even ask a question in a shop so that's why we wanted to learn French but it was hard, we also had to have someone watch our son during this time. We did it for three months, we tried to communicate with people, but it wasn't enough. Even still I don't really feel fluent in French.

My problem is that I don't want to go back and start the French, that's the worst thing. I can't find an accounting job here because of French.

I knew English a little bit before, but I didn't have to speak it perfectly before they give me a job. That's why English is almost everywhere, because they are not prejudice. They are not picky, so that helped. But French people, I studied French many times here in Montreal but here I cannot get a job.

I couldn't do anything because there is this transition period when you are dealing with people from different nationalities. I was trying my best to learn French and communicate with them but some people speak Portuguese, Italian, and it was hard.

Often the supervisor would try to impose their language on other people, it was hard to communicate in French. But still its hard because in the garment industry, you are alone with your machine so you cannot practice, if you speak the supervisor will jump on you

At that time we were going to school twice a week to learn French at night. From 7-9 o'clock after finishing work at 6. I wanted to do it because we wanted to integrate; we couldn't even ask a question in a shop so that's why we wanted to learn French but it was hard, we also had to have someone watch our son during this time. We did it for three months, we tried to communicate with people, but it wasn't enough. Even still I don't really feel fluent in French, but in the practice, you never quite fit; if you go to apply for a job, you need to speak French, if you speak French, you need English but if you speak English its worse.

e) Resistance Stories-

“ So I tell them right then, but I make sure when I tell them that I have my rights- as they always say, “you can't be wrong and strong”

The workers we interviewed all had to confront face-to-face supervision on the shop floor, in nursing homes or in domestic work. Their assertion of their rights occurred after a series of what they felt were abuses of power and authority. People felt that enough was enough and reacted. They differentiated between what were their legal rights-Normes de travail, and what they see as some kind of natural justice and basic respect. The situation is unfair and they will then look for recourse, after confronting the person in authority. It is not as though they entered the workplace armed with knowledge of their rights. The workers were demanding basic respect from their employer and when this was not given, they looked for a way to respond, to push back and get some justice. Unions provided a useful mechanism for grieving, when one was present. It seems that they had a moral code by which they expected to be treated and when this was broken action followed.

They (the head office of the union) did step in but I found out that the man there was lying. He offered me \$12,000 without tax, under the table. I was going to accept that, if I would get my job back so I went to the meeting to sign the paper and I found out that it wasn't true, that they would take the taxes, so I said I would not talk to this man until he does the right thing. He began to call me all the time but I would not answer back. One time I talked to him and I told him he was not honest. I told him not to deal with me. So then they got the union lawyer to deal with me. That's when they came to 28,000 and I said yes. I'm still working there.

Then the floor lady started on me because I was the one who helped the new people when they came. And she loved treating the new people badly. There were some new people, Filipinos and I had told them to come there to the job, and she treated them so badly so I felt bad. She started to give me more work, but my average was going down, so I asked her why my average went down when I was working more; she didn't like me talking to her like that, she doesn't like when people talk back to her. I went to the Human rights

association.

I say if you do something wrong with me, I am not quiet. I told them I need my job back. They thought I would sit down and take that? Last week I met with the union lawyer, he learned that I am not an easy person, so I we win the case. Again, you see, these people stand with big papers in their hand, but they don't know that this person if you touch her, she is not going to sit down, she will start a fight. And now, look they are losing the case already.

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.

Well, I wouldn't say they treat me badly but as time goes by I see whereby they could have done it but I never let them do it. I am a person that speaks up. I guess you know that by now. I tell them you don't tell me that nonsense, you don't tell me that. You see?

Because my objective was to be a lawyer, I like the law, I like helping people who need help. Even if I have to suffer or die to help others. Like poor immigrant workers who have no idea what to do, I am always there, you see my telephone doesn't stop ringing. It's all the workers calling. I really feel like I should be there for people.

f) Fear to Challenge

Some of the interviewees acknowledged that some of their co-workers feared their bosses. 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 Philipinos 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 its better to go to the young people because they are still motivated, receptive, but these people, forget about them they are traditional, their mentality

We had meetings but the workers didn't want to go.. the women mostly and immigrants were afraid.

Oh, no, that's another problem. They (workers) will support you but they are very scared. They won't come out. We have a meeting at the board, and I tell them but some of them don't want to go because they are scared.

Yes, they always want you to come to the meetings, they nudge you to come. But its 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, its hard to go spend 2 hours there.

Yes, that was when I went to tell them how badly she was treating the immigrants. They told me to bring another two people as witnesses. I could have brought all of them but they were afraid to come. I told them that nobody wanted to come because they were afraid so nothing happened in the end.

g) Finding support- learning to resist

"So, if I am experiencing this kind of exploitation in the workplace and I do nothing about it, what will happen? So, I work for change, to give warning to these companies not to do it again."

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.

Unions:

The unions played a crucial role for many and for a couple of interviewees unions became a means of earning a livelihood and broadening their commitment to justice for immigrant workers. One statement below reflects the difficulty in getting unions into the type of workplaces in which immigrants work. Over the past year, many unionized workers from at least 5 factories came to the IWC to ask how to respond to factory closures. Despite unions the precarious job market remains.

But I knew that there was a union there... One day, the union asked me to represent the workers and I told myself, if I want to know the monster, I have to go inside. So, I was a member, then I was a member of the local, then I was president of my local, I was part of the board of directors, I was part of the international local. And I learned a lot, when I learned, I tried to educate these people.

Well, when they organized the union, I was on vacation. When I got back, one of the representatives called me secretly to the washroom, and told me they had a business. I asked what kind of business, but he told me that they wouldn't talk further in there. So after, he asked me for my phone number or address. And nobody called me but they came straight here, to my home. They came to discuss it, they said that there were lots of people in the problems in the company, so it would be good to sign this, to organize with

the group. I asked many questions, of course you're going to be scared of what's going to happen to you. But they told me, oh, this is confidential, nobody will know about this, this is just for us. So of course I was encouraged to sign. And when I signed, the union got inside and after a couple of weeks, we voted and we had more than 50% but I was doubting already with that because why were they conducting the voting inside the company when it was supposed to be confidential. So that's what others were thinking too. I didn't talk though, I just kept to myself about it. We just obeyed and the union won with 50%.

Despite the importance of unions, there were criticisms and examinations of their limits.

I like to have the unions in the companies. But some of them are just following the orders of the management; they don't really fight for the workers. But still, I prefer to have unions because that will protect us. But this union will depend only on the members; if the members are updated and aware of their rights; they have options. If the members are not aware and educated. You could do something about it, to establish their own independence.

The union provided just how to work with collective agreements, health and safety, dealing with people who have problems; but the problem is that the system here, we are living in a hurry. WE work a minimum of 40 hours, especially for single people, people have no time to learn their rights because the system is so demanding people have to pick up the children from the day care, they have to make dinner, they have to clean the house; its so demanding, so when they have problems in the factories, what do they do sometimes they talk to the delegates but the delegates sometimes is not a good representative, so they call to the permanent. But the permanent is giving another interpretation workers they are just so busy.

Being part of the union is a struggle because if you have your own idea, and you really are committed to help workers but at the same time are representing the union and having a salary, it's a conflict because you are supposed to give everything to the workers but the reality is that when they sign up for their first contract, there is a lot of things that you cannot do for them in reality, it is hard to apply it strictly. I experienced union people discouraging workers, telling workers not to go for a case and fight for their rights, telling them that they wouldn't really have a chance at winning but it was because it cost a lot of money to pursue it; but of course they don't say that its because it cost a lot of money. The workers they start to call back and complain. This is not providing a good education to the workers. Some unions are not really interested in providing this education.

Community Associations

Connections with community associations tend to be through others from the same country, and these provide an important network for learning and promoting individual and collective rights.

Oh, yeah, very hard. I pitied myself, why am I doing this? Why do I have to tell all these people who I don't know my life and what happened to me here? It wasn't easy. But there was the support of many different organizations all over Canada. Of course, I never thought that I would become a speaker for my own case. It wasn't easy but Malcolm suggested that it would be better if it was me who was speaking for my own speaking because if it was me, then we would get more support.

I met Tess (from the IWC) on the street; I had filed the complaint already and then I met Tess on Van Horne in front of the metro and I was encouraged. I just encountered Tess and she told me about (the IWC). I think I had heard of Tess before, somebody told me that Tess was with the Centre. When I looked at her, we were smiling and then we talked a long time. The Centre helped me to call the union lawyer and ask them to do something

A second employer (part time) saw me crying and she helped me, referring me to a woman at PINAY (Filipino Women's association). She told me she knew someone who could help me and that I should leave a message. Well, I told PINAY everything and they pushed me to go to the labour standards and complain.

Oh, I met Tess at a meeting, I a member of the woman's centre and one time I was there and they had advertising about that and I saw a sign also at the Children's Toy Store, downstairs from the women's centre. I saw that they will be discussing labour standards and I found that interesting and I wanted to know! So I went there, it was very interesting. People were asking lots of questions and people complaining about similar problems. I told them my experiences.

Because he sent me to school, thank God for that, he did good thing for me, and I met people in school. It was a school to learn English. So I met people from Ghana. And they offered to bring me to the market and buy the right food to cook Ghanian meals. They showed me how to cook and we ate together and they said they knew the feeling.

(at church) you FEEL, you mingle with all the Filipinos and get support.

I met people in the Philippines organization. There are different dialects, regional organization.

I'm the vice chairman of the Filippino workers support group. Also part of a traditional Philippino organization; we were able to help people in the southern part of Mindao who were massacred in hundreds, we sent boxes of used clothes. Anything that will help them in order to rebel.

In the beginning I concentrated on my job, but then I went to a club for Guatemalans.... We provided support for people from Central America...

Building inter-personal relations-learning with others

The day-to-day contact between workers allowed the sharing of information. Outside of

the workplace, contacts with friends and neighbours provided a source of information.

Somebody told me, one of co-workers told me that what they did was wrong, I deserved to be suspended, or to get a warning letter. But the one who told me that I can still fight too, they fired him too and then he fought for his job and he got it back, so he referred me to his lawyer.

I learned about it (human rights court) because lots of other girls there took her to the human rights court. There was another guy who works in the kitchen, he is a cook, and he came to tell me that she is suspending him because he did not work some day, ... she suspended him for three days. And he said, I'm going to the human rights! And I said, when you come back tell me where the human rights is. So he told me where the office was.

One time we had a meeting like to talk about so much unfair things that was going on with the immigrants. We had a meeting, only the workers, we didn't have a union. We did it because the floor lady treated us so badly, she fired a couple who was working there 14 years. So we decided to talk about it. So I went. We were about 25 out of 45 employees, we went to McDonalds to discuss. The French Canadians and about three immigrants; we spoke in English and French because we don't speak French.

Individual Learning

People took initiative on their own to research their rights, and found some success in this process.

Resourceful, resourcefulness. I have a complaint. I know international labour organization, which has labour standards. I go to the directory, find the number, they tell me this is the right office

I always work with this book. See, all the rights are listed here. "Every person is the possessor of the fundamental freedoms including freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of peace and assembly and freedom of association." So, she's the one who told me and it was good. It's a nice book. You know, I always walk with this book, everywhere I go.

9) Discussion:

In this section, we will begin an exploration of issues that come out of the interviews. We see this as a beginning and some of the issues will be explored in greater depth in our next round of interviews. In reviewing the interviews and discussing them in our research team, we have reached some preliminary observations. We will organize these by the themes and in relation to parts of the stories we have presented above. At the same time our discussion revealed some problems with the interviews and their implications for the organizing and educational work of the IWC. We return often in the discussions to the political and social relevance of these interviews that goes beyond what they contribute to university researchers. In addition, even though WALL is focusing on issues of

workplace learning, this was not always the element that came out of the interviews. When research is conducted with a community organization and with a relatively open interview guide, the interviewer and researcher is not the only voice that shapes the content and direction of the interviews. Thus other themes and issues have emerged that have been given importance and these will also be explored. We will return to the latter at the end of the discussion.

In the **leaving stories**, we saw a group of people searching for a better life, either because they wanted to find improved economic opportunities or because they were fleeing difficult political or social situations. Although people came in different time periods that motivation was common and perhaps that has always been the prime motivation for leaving ones home. Those who left their homes in the 1960s and 1970s expressed almost surprise at how easy it was to immigrate. This is in contrast to the current context. It is important to note and this will be a key observation that we will build on later, that people had a contact a friend or family member who was already here. This person encouraged them to follow and in a way paved the road for them. The building of social connections therefore begins even before leaving and become the first step in setting up networks of support.

Another issue that arose, which will be explored in more depth in future, are the policy mechanisms that push people to leave their country of origin. In the daily life of the IWC, this issue is often discussed, particularly in relationship to the Philippines. The government has encouraged migration and society depends on financial remittances from abroad (the proliferation of Western Union outlets here is an indication of this). The labour supply of countries like the Philippines is directly related to the demand for specific labour in countries like Canada, particularly for domestic service work. In addition, the ties of dependence and responsibility with families back home acts to bind workers to low wage work enduring difficult conditions. The risks of challenging the conditions are high. There is a lot at stake.

The discussions of the **backgrounds** of those interviewed opened an important avenue of exploration. All of those we interviewed described themselves as people who came from a background that gave them strength and self-respect. They were also relatively privileged, compared to others in their countries, with both skills and education. However, their current work situations revealed downward mobility as the forces of racism and immigration marginalised them within the most unstable and precarious sectors of the labour market. However, they brought internal strengths, and self-respect and they expected to be respected in return that as a minimal standard for human interaction. In his recent book Sennett (2003) puts the issue of respect as a central issue. He concludes by stating "In society, attacking the evils of inequality cannot alone generate mutual respect. In society... the nub of the problem we face is how the strong can practice respect toward those destined to remain weak."(p.263) This challenge is more striking for immigrant workers, who have arrived here with a belief in mutual respect and find themselves invariably placed at the bottom of the labour market, where respect is replaced by insecurity, dependence on jobs, and supervision that is mostly arbitrary and authoritarian. Coming here with an expectation of respect, learned in their

communities, creates a pre-condition to resistance.

The **settling** process was one of becoming aware of disappointments. Those we interviewed lost status and a sense of belonging that they had in their countries of origin. Whatever status and skills they had seemed to make little difference here. One aspect of settling was reconstituting social and at times political connections. Taylor in his examination of identity argues that collective identity creates the basis for both collective and individual self-esteem. The process of settling involved building a collective life, either through associations of immigrants from the same country or churches. This extends beyond the individual relations that individuals established that helped him or her to immigrate. This is a crucial step. It is clear that Canadian society is not welcoming, and that immigrant groups have to organize themselves in order to negotiate and to establish their place. In order to establish oneself, building a renewed collective identity through organization-formal and informal is a crucial step in settling and provides the strength and knowledge for people to challenge the abuses they experienced in the workplaces.

The **work** stories that we were told confirmed what the literature said about the place of immigrant workers. Despite education and skills, they end up in low-paying jobs. Even improving skills and language does not seem to have a major impact on their situations. Their chances of social mobility are limited. One of the most striking features of the interviews is the type of supervision and discipline confronted. It was generally arbitrary, always direct, and there was little or no autonomy in their jobs. The conflict in the workplace then manifested itself as direct, face-to-face conflict with supervisors. This in turn created the conflicts that led to opposition. One of the barriers was language. With the demands of work, family, and other activities, it is difficult to find the time to successfully learn language. Returning to identity, it is clear that this group of immigrants remained outsiders to mainstream Quebec society. As a note to this discussion, in the first year of its operation the IWC co-organized an event during Black History Month with the Canadian Autoworkers. The event was called “The Changing Face of the Quebec Labour Movement” and brought together 150 people about half were mobilized by the centre. Some of the union speakers from Quebec union centrals argued that the key to integration was language-if people learned French and businesses functioned in French then integration into Quebec society would happen. Speakers, who had immigrated from French-speaking countries as well as immigrant union members who had learned French challenged this argument. They argued that they still stood on the outside of Quebec society and the union movement, and that this was not as result of language but other factors. The perception of immigrant workers as outsiders is a major issue for both collective identity and strategies of action.

Resistance was not an easy step to take. It expressed itself as individual actions challenging the employer through the existing structures, union grievances or Normes de Travail tribunals. Underlying these actions was a demand that people had to be treated with fundamental respect. . This is linked to the earlier section in which individuals talked about their own self-respect and expectations around it. At the same time, fear was raised in relation to union action. It is clear that the risks in challenging in the workplace

are high. As we mentioned earlier, many of the jobs are precarious. Job loss not only affects the immediate situation of the worker but his/her obligation to family in their home country. Another observation that emerges is that the possibilities for action are limited and individual. Recourse to Normes de Travail or a Human Rights tribunal occurs only through individual action. As we saw the individual will be willing to do this as a last resort and with the support of others. Collective action outside a union structure is impossible with the possible exception of actions like the IWC. Unions can play an important role, with both collective agreements and grievances but based on what people told us and the experience of the centre, there are risks here. Unionizing small workplaces with a high proportion of immigrant workers has not been a priority of the union movement. Further, as mentioned earlier, for some employers unionization has been the invitation to leave Quebec. The following questions should be explored in more depth in the next round of interviews to understand the possibilities of opposition. What are the conditions that support opposition and what works against it? What can be gained or perceived to be gained and what are the risks involved?

We began our project with a focus on **learning** in the workplace. Confronting new working conditions, immigrant workers learn both to adapt to and to challenge the situations that they face. Both involve processes of learning. Learning grows out of social activity. It is embedded and incidental as opposed to structured and formalized. Livingstone and Sawchuck (2000) draw on activity theory and argue “learning is a dynamic inherently social process which cannot be isolated from the rest of social life in any simple way. This is particularly true of informal learning, which can be recognized as pervading everyday life experience, the sources of what workers and working class ethnographers have called ‘street smarts’. Griff Foley (2001) points out that in organizational settings most significant work is informal and incidental. He describes ‘strategic learning’ in the workplace as complex, contextual and contested and leading to positive or negative, productive or unproductive outcomes. Church et. al (2000), through the examination of community-based organizations, identified three forms of learning: political/organizational; solidarity; and redefinition of self. Political/organizational learning is the way that the main actors in community organizations come to understand how to operate and position themselves in relation to the government, funders, and learn how to carry forward their agenda for social justice. Solidarity learning takes place not according to an explicit curriculum but spontaneously and unpredictably through social interaction in situations that foster peoples participation. Reshaping the definition of self is a form of learning in which participants in social processes build new identities and rethink who they are in relation to wider social definitions. This last one will be of particular importance for the lives of immigrants as they face many challenges in positioning themselves in relation to the host society.

The learning that was reported to us echoes the literature cited above. Learning works at several levels. The impetus to learn about rights begins with events and attitudes experienced in the workplace and the sense of self-respect that this situation violates. Learning about how to take action followed. Another necessary ingredient for action is connection to others who provide support, and information. This can occur through unions, community organizations and informal relationship with co-workers or friends.

‘Street smarts’ are shared between people and small victories are shared and this in turn encourages others to take action. The learning grows out of pre-existing relations. However, organizations play a key role. People find them by word of mouth and seek knowledge and support. Organizations like the IWC build on and contribute to solidarity learning and provide political education. The latter is structured through workshops and also takes place informally in the day-to-day activities of the centre. The issue of redefinition of self is a key and complicated issue. It related to shifting identities of immigrant workers, as immigrants with association with others from their countries of origin, with other workers and the wider working class, as women, particularly as domestic workers. Building and shaping collective identity is important and can contribute to building solidarity and collectivity. However, there has to be a place for this to happen, either informally or through associations-community or unions. This is a key process and without it there cannot be a collective voice. However, without the deep strengths and self-respect of the immigrant workers we interviewed, building collectively for action is almost impossible given the difficult working conditions they face.

10) Connecting to Practice

From the outset, the challenge of the project was to find ways to connect the research to the priorities and practices of the IWC. At a recent meeting this question was raised and Marco said that one of the unanticipated results of the research was recruitment. Interviewing became a means of deepening relations with those interviewed. 5 of the nine are active in the centre and 3 have joined the board of directors. In addition, the interviews confirmed the understanding and analysis of work and immigration. The stories of the people will help as well to modify programs and skill development. A document profiling the interviewees and their stories will be developed as a way to talk about the issues and the way individuals can stand up for their rights. These stories become educational tools and the people in them examples of those who have resisted.

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