

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

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### **Research Plan:**

This research project will begin with the work experience of recent immigrants to Canada, and explore their learning strategies to secure social and labour rights in the workplace. The partner organization is the Immigrant Workers' Centre (IWC) in Montreal. Located in a multi-cultural neighbourhood, this centre was founded in 2000 in order to work toward supporting immigrant workers in their struggles to gain social and union rights. The underlying belief of the centre is that effective education and organizing work can most effectively take place in the neighbourhood.

There are four specific sectors or groups of workers that will be examined in this project. These are representative of the issues faced by immigrant workers and are based on the activities of the centre and the experiences of members and activists who participate in the centre's activities. They are:

- The organizing of a textile factory that employs immigrants from many different countries. This case was selected because it represents the complex problems faced in unionizing immigrant workers. The factory is the meeting place for people who have arrived in Canada with little in common-language, culture, religion etc. They face an employer who is facing tough competition in an international context, and has tried to avoid unionization, using repressive measures and intimidation to do so. How were these barriers overcome? How did the workers in this plant overcome these barriers and what did they learn in the process?
- Canadian workers are in theory protected by Labour Standards. A group of women, who had worked in a specific plant in the neighbourhood, approached the IWC because they were laid off. They felt that the employer was targeting workers with seniority. In exploring their claim, they and the support committee had to confront the limits and the complexities of the Labour Standards Act. This has led to a campaign on this question. This part of the study will examine the issue of how people learn and act on their workplace rights. How do they find out about them? How do they use

them? What are the limits of these regulations and how do workers work around them?

- Live-in Care Giver Program (LCP) is one of the most important ways that women immigrate to Canada. There are many problematic issues faced by this group, including lack of regulated employment conditions, and isolation. Women in these jobs are not considered “workers” under the law. Because of their status as “non-citizen” and dependence of their employer, they are vulnerable. How do women in this position organize themselves? How do they learn to survive in this role and understand their minimal rights? How do they build networks of support? The IWC was involved in a campaign that successfully stopped the deportation of one woman who was in Canada under the LCP. What did those in the campaign learn about the LCP and the related social and legal processes?
- Many arrive to Canada with skills and accreditation from their country but find that these mean little here. For some they face a downward occupational mobility upon arrival. Others immigrate under the LCP but when they are able to apply for other jobs find that their credentials from their country of origin are not valid. For others acquiring certification is a complex process. A work group at the IWC is exploring this issue with nurses trained in the Philippines. This part of the research will examine how these workers have found ways to work without accreditation, to find ways to get their education and training recognized and to challenge the barriers that they face.

These four sectors represent different dimensions of the experiences of immigrant workers in the current period.

### **Context: The situation of immigrant workers in Canada**

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. In 1998, 72% of immigrants selected in the pool of skilled workers applicants were university graduates (Galabuzi). With all immigration categories taken into account (skilled workers, refugees, family-class, etc.), 36% of immigrant men and 31% of immigrant women held university degrees, compared to proportions of 18% and 20% for Canadian men and women, respectively (CCSD). With these superior credentials, the normal expectation would be for immigrants to be highly competitive in the Canadian labour market. However, a brief survey of available data and literature on the topic shows that the economic status of immigrants is poor relative to that of the Canadian-born population. 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. Reitz estimates the net loss of earnings to immigrants due to pay inequity, i.e. unequal pay for equal work, at \$12.6 billion annually, in 1996 dollars (Reitz). Despite their higher education credentials, recent immigrants are proportionally over-represented in low-paying jobs. In 1996, processing and manufacturing accounted for 7.6% of Canadian jobs, but 15.5% of occupations among recent immigrants. Similarly, one-third of recent immigrants held jobs in the sales and service sector, compared with a rate of just over a quarter for the total Canadian population (Galabuzi). This indicates that not only are immigrants receiving unequal pay for equal work, but they are having difficulty accessing professions they have the skills and educations for, instead being relegated to other, lower-paying job sectors. Indeed, 10,279 immigrants arriving in Canada between 1991 and 1994 listed civil, mechanical, chemical, or electrical engineering as their intended profession, but by 1996, only 5,770 of immigrants arriving since 1991 were employed in these professions (Galabuzi). This can be attributed to discrimination in employment practices as well as other barriers such as discrimination in accreditation and recognition of foreign education and work credentials. Net earnings loss to immigrants due to under-utilization of skills has been estimated at \$2.4 billion annually, in 1996 dollars (Reitz). 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). This helps to account for the decline in immigrant economic performance in Canada since the 1970s, which corresponds with a growing amount of people of colour as a proportion of total immigrants. Of the approximately 250,000 immigrants arriving in Canada in 2000-2001, only about 50,000, or roughly 20%, originated in countries with predominantly white populations (Europe, US, Australia, New Zealand) (Statscan).

In the last decade in Canada, the labour force has seen a significant growth in the population of immigrant workers, a growing number of whom 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.

In response to continuously shifting conditions in the workplace, the failure on the part of organized labour with regard to organizing immigrant labour, and with the aim of

addressing the real needs of immigrant workers, immigrant workers centres have sprung up to support immigrant workers in mobilizing to defend their rights. These workers' centres, of which there are now many in the United States and a growing number in Canada, have been largely based in immigrant communities and offer workers an infrastructure centred around four main approaches: service, education, advocacy, and organizing. Perhaps most importantly, workers' centres promote the self-organization of immigrant workers through various workplace campaigns and actions, serving as an important locus for broader strategizing and political organizing. Workers' centres seek to enable workers to build organizing skills and experience, develop consciousness and leadership, connect with other workers and organizations, and make important links between immigrant communities and labour struggles. Women are at the forefront of workers' centre social unionism, organizing immigrant workers around common labour, social, and gender issues, so as to unite to effect change, both in the workplace and in the community.

### **Research Questions:**

Parreñas (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 negotiated the conditions of these jobs, and how have they found ways to struggle against difficult working conditions to improve their conditions of work? The research begins with the experiences of immigrant workers. 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. Sub-questions include the roles of different forms of organization in shaping learning in varied work settings. Because the sectors that we study employ a very high proportion of women workers, the study will add the question of gender in relation to the learning processes.

### **Definition of Social Learning:**

Confronting new working conditions, immigrant workers learn both to adapt to and to challenge the situations that they face. Both involve process of learning. It is these processes that this project will examine. 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." This approach to social learning grows out of the

experience of the NALL project. 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. With these definitions and perspectives the experiences of immigrant workers and their strategic learning will be examined in particular contexts, with an emphasis on the actions of these workers in adapting and challenging to their workplace.

### **Methods:**

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 four areas discussed above will each be treated as an individual case study. Each grows out of the experience of campaigns and activities at the IWC, and are influenced by wider global process of migration and the impact of international competition on specific sectors of the economy. The goal is to keep those in the centre active in the shaping of project and interpreting its results. In order to do this a reference group will be established that brings together the research team and several key activists from the centre. This group will play a key role in the analysis of each of the 4 specific contexts, establishing the interview guide and analyzing the results of the interviews. This participatory process will be used throughout the life of the project.

The case studies will be constituted by integrating the background information with in-depth interviews of leading activists and other participants in each of these sectors of activity. All of the interviews will be videotaped. The reason for the videotaping of interviews is to collaborate with Multi-Monde, a documentary film company, on the production of a video on the learning processes of immigrant workers. Younger activists will be trained to do the interviews and the videotaping in conjunction with the research team.

**Key Activities:**

The activities are centred on the creation of a case study for each of the sectors. This includes in-depth interviews with key informants and those active in each specific sector as well as interviews with other participants. There will be a team formed through the IWC composed of researchers and activists to build and analyze the context of each of the studies. A notable feature of the study will be the inclusion of younger activists from the centre, who will be trained as interviewers and will be encouraged to actively participate in all stages of the research process.

**Year 1**

- Formation of reference group at the IWC, members would be the staff of the centre, representation of the Board of Directors, activists involved in some key activities, union organizers, and the research team.
- Preparation of a background document- The context of immigrant workers: challenges and strategies in the labour market. This would be a discussion document that would pull together the literatures and help define the questions related to social learning.
- Identification of young people at the centre who will be trained as interviewers and will videotape the interviews.
- Each year there will be one case study. The first will be Union Organizing at Agmont:.
- Steps in the Case Studies: Each of the case studies will follow similar processes but with some variation for the specificity of each case. For the first – Agmont- i) Examination of the history and context of the company, labour force, social backgrounds etc. ii) Identification of the participants in the union drive- particularly diversity of ethnicity and gender representation. iii) Preparation of the specific interview guide with the focus on social learning in this particular context. iv) Carrying out interviews with activists and participants in the organizing process. v) Preparing resumés of interviews with selected transcriptions vi) meeting with reference groups to analyze the interviews and discuss their implications. Process notes will be taken at these meetings. vii) A monograph that integrates all the above part will be prepared.

Similar steps will be taken for each of the case studies in the subsequent years. The last year will be reserved for a more in-depth analysis and writing and dissemination of the results in a conference organized by the IWC.

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