



Justice for Immigrant Workers! (Jill Hanley & Eric Shragge)

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“All other sources of labour having been exhausted, the migrants were the last resource.” So reads the text accompanying the 1940-41 Migration series of paintings by Jacob Lawrence on display at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. More than 60 years later, the demand for migrant labour remains Canada’s “last resource” in efforts to maintain economic growth, although the overall context has shifted somewhat.

In the “South,” globalization has contributed to a process of industrialization and urbanization, accompanied by a deterioration of living standards and the destruction of traditional means of subsistence. Migration to so-called developed countries is a by-product of the resulting poverty, while serving destination countries by providing a pool of cheap labour. As well, the elites of the countries of origin benefit as pressure for structural change is relieved to some degree by the remittances sent home to help family members. Workers experience a push to migrate and a pull towards what is hoped to be better conditions in advanced capitalist countries and their labour markets.

Immigrant workers who have arrived in Canada in the past 20 years — mainly people of colour and from the South — face disappointment. Many bring high levels of education and training, which has traditionally led to good jobs. However, racial and other barriers in the labour market push new immigrants to the bottom, where they work in the worst jobs. Some, like domestic and farm workers, are recruited through special immigration programs to do specific kinds of work that Canadians are unwilling to do for the wages and work conditions offered.

Immigrant workers like many others are vulnerable to precarious and unstable working conditions, and few avenues are open to them to protect themselves and to improve working conditions. Traditionally trade unions have provided workers the means for collective action. They have been successful in gaining better conditions of employment and securing a higher standard of living for workers in both the public and private sectors. However, their ability to organize recent arrivals to Canada has been limited. It is difficult to organize workers in small factories and in unstable jobs with high turnover.

A New Form of Organizing

New strategies to organize have been devised. These include community/union campaigns to protect rights, often using direct-action tactics. All of these imply an alliance between immigrant workers themselves and their allies in the community, unions and social movements. For example, in the United States, immigrant workers and their allies have founded new

organizations that organize labour in the community and take on labour issues from that vantage point. They are organized by “community unions,” a new form of labour organizing that provides direct services, organizes immigrant workers and advocates for policy changes. In the United States there are 133 such centres in more than 80 communities.

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal is an example of the community labour approach being put into action in Canada. The IWC was founded in 2000 by a small group composed of Filipino-Canadian union and former union organizers and their activist and academic allies. The idea of the centre grew out of the experience of its two founders, who had worked as union organizers: Tess Tesalona, who remained as coordinator of the centre, and Marco Luciano, who went on to work for a union in Toronto. They observed that much of their recruitment and education to support a union drive had to take place outside of the workplace, and, apart from personal homes, there were few places where this could happen. The idea of the centre, then, was to provide a safe place outside the workplace where workers could discuss their situations. Further, they forwarded a critique of the unions themselves, arguing that once they got a majority to sign cards and thus join the union, the processes of education and solidarity built into the organizing process were lost as union “bureaucrats” came in to manage the collective agreement.

In its first year, the organization was able to secure a grant from the social-justice fund of the Canadian Auto Workers to intervene on labour issues in the community. The IWC then got to work providing ongoing education and critical analysis beyond the specific role of unions, and finding ways to address worker issues outside the traditional union structures.

IWC activities cover individual-rights counseling, popular education and political campaigns that reflect issues facing immigrant workers, like dismissal, problems with employers, or, sometimes, inadequate representation by their unions. Labour education is a priority, targeting organizations in the community and increasing workers’ skills and analyses. Workshops on themes like the history of the labour movement, the Labour Standards Act and collective-organizing processes have been presented in many organizations that work with immigrants, as well as at the IWC itself. The “Skills for Change” program teaches basic computer literacy, while incorporating workplace analysis and information on rights. The goal is to integrate specific computer skills while supporting individuals in becoming more active in defending labour rights in their workplaces. There is also an ongoing link between the struggles of immigrant workers with other social and economic struggles; building alliances is a priority. In addition, the IWC supports union organizing in workplaces where there is a high concentration of immigrant workers.

Standing Up for Immigrant Workers

Campaigns are viewed not only as ways to make specific gains for immigrant workers but also as means to educate the wider community about the issues they face. For example, the first campaign, in 2000, was to defend Melca Salvador, a domestic worker admitted to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program, against deportation. Besides winning the campaign, the IWC was able to bring into the public sphere the issue of importing immigrant labourers as “indentured servants,” and many community organizations and unions became involved.

Because many immigrant workers do not work in unionized shops, the Labour Standards Act represents one of these non-unionized workers’ (few) recourses against their employers. Along with many other groups in Quebec, the IWC became involved in a campaign to reform the Labour

Standards Act in 2002. The IWC brought specific concerns to the campaign, including the exclusion of domestic workers from this Act and the difficulty in accessing information on workers' rights. Several victories were had, including the coverage of domestic workers by the reformed standards. But the Act still has many inadequacies with respect to protecting workers in precarious and irregular jobs.

The IWC has also initiated a campaign on issues related to the North-to-South relocation of production and the resulting job losses and factory closures in Montreal. The spring of 2003 saw the closure of three recently organized factories employing immigrant workers. Using union-busting techniques, the companies laid off workers who then came to the IWC for help. Actions to sensitize workers and the wider public were initiated. One of these actions was directed at the Montreal Jazz Festival, a large buyer of t-shirts manufactured by one of the companies, Gildan. The IWC demanded that the festival adopt an ethical buying policy in response to Gildan's labour practices, both locally and in their factories relocated to Honduras. The campaign was part of a wider campaign against Gildan led by the Maquila Solidarity Network in Toronto, and has resulted in some improvement in the conditions in factories in Honduras.

As the IWC has become better known, workers come there for advice and support on specific problems and issues. The Centre sees this as a way to encourage and support people in standing up against their bosses, but also as a basis upon which to build wider campaigns.

The case of one live-in domestic worker, who became ill in her employer's house and subsequently unable to work, was the beginning of the Centre's most recent campaign. This worker was assisted in making a claim with the CSST, Quebec's workplace health-and-safety agency, for compensation while she could not work. She was told that, under provincial CSST legislation, domestic workers do not fit the definition of "worker" and therefore are not covered by the CSST. The IWC's research found out that, in fact, three provinces in Canada (Ontario, British Columbia and Manitoba) protect domestic workers from workplace injury or illness. In conjunction with PINAY, a Filipina women's organization, and the Association des aides familiales du Québec (AAFQ), which represents and serves domestic workers, the IWC launched a campaign in March, 2006, demanding that these workers be covered. It has been supported by over 70 organizations, including the large union federations.

Bringing Labour and Communities Together

Another aspect of the IWC's work has been its contribution to organizing cultural events with political content. The first was an International Womens' Day event organized in 2001. A coalition of immigrant women of diverse origins organized a cultural event, panels and a march to emphasize the concerns of immigrant women and international solidarity. This has become an annual event, and, through its success, has increased the profile and the issues faced by immigrant women within the wider women's movement in Quebec. The first MayWorks, a community/union festival celebrating labour struggles through the arts, was launched on May Day, 2005. The festival, initiated by the IWC, collaborated with trade unions and the wider activist community. Similar events are planned for 2006.

The IWC is a place of intersection between the traditions of the labour and community movements. Work-related issues have been the concern of the labour movement, acting on the assumption that the best way for workers to have a strong voice is through the union movement. However, the IWC, along with other organizations, sees limits to this approach owing to the

difficulties in organizing workers discussed above. New forms of labour organizing are required in the current context that includes support both for and from the trade-union movement. The IWC works at both levels with the goals of serving, organizing and educating the non-unionized. At the same time, it supports worker efforts to unionize and to help them get adequate services from their unions. The union-community relationship is developed through many activities of the Centre, including building alliances with younger union activists, supporting immigrants in organizing and in helping them negotiate conflicts with their trade unions.

The IWC has become a meeting place for many groups of social activists. The core of the organization is a group comprised of immigrant union and labour organizers and allies who have been active on both labour and community issues for many years. The IWC is also connected to student and anti-globalization activists, and there are several reasons for this. The centre has been fortunate to receive student placements in law, social work and related fields from several Montreal universities and colleges. Many of these students have been involved in student organizing, and this has helped to connect students to the issues raised by the IWC. In addition, students at the Quebec Public Interest Research Groups (QPIRG) have found the IWC to be an opportunity to combine radical politics with local work. At the same time, the IWC's connections with these groups have pushed its own positions on broader social issues. The IWC is a place that brings together union, community and student activists, people of different ages, ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds, to work together for social justice for immigrant workers.

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