

Chapter I

Introduction

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. — a factory worker

One of the major issues currently confronting almost all countries across the planet is that of migration and immigration. Its massive scale today is the result of two interrelated forces — the displacement of people from countries in the South and the demands for cheap labour in the so-called developed North. (Regionally a similar dynamic exists in the South with displacement from less to more advanced capitalist economies: people from Indonesia working in Taiwan exemplifies this phenomenon.) Both the displacement and the demand for labour are connected to a basic restructuring of capitalism arising from the current shift towards liberalized trade and investment and toward the reduction of working-class power through legislation and freeing the market from “state interference.” It is important to begin with an analysis of the political and economic context of the massive human displacement that we are witnessing. Fundamentally, it is in the interest of the capitalist class to have a surplus of labour that is competing for work. Both in Canada and elsewhere, to use Marxist terminology, migration and displacement create a huge, mobile and often desperate “reserve army of labour” that competes for jobs, and subsequently becomes a pool of cheap labour that is relatively easy to discipline. The consequence is a large number of workers who face competition and little in the way of protection in the labour market. Although this shapes the context, workers are not necessarily passive in the face of these conditions. This book examines not only the context and the possibilities for fighting back, but also the experiences of immigrant workers themselves.

This book results from the collaboration between a group of university-affiliated researchers who are all active in different social movements and community organizations, in partnership with the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal, and funded through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).¹ The goal of our research was to document the experiences of immigrant workers in a variety of workplaces: our underlying belief was that the best kind of research tells “how it really is” and comes from the lived experience of people themselves. Interviews were carried out between 2004 and 2006 with approximately fifty workers. Participants had been in Canada for as many as twenty and as little as a two years. We began by interviewing workers who had been active in the IWC, either seeking help there or involved in other aspects of the Centre. We then broadened the interviews to include a group from

Latin America, who had been in Canada for at least ten years. Several from that group came after the 1973 coup in Chile. We also included workers who were in Canada under short-term “guest-worker” programs — such as the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) or the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) . Still others were here in even more precarious positions as refugee claimants or those without any formal status. Many in this final group had little choice about leaving their home countries and faced much discrimination struggling to find their place in Canadian society. Throughout this book, we draw on these interviews to share these experiences and to illustrate broader trends.

The analysis presented in this book, which comes out of this research, also draws on the authors’ analysis and reflections resulting from our work with immigrant workers. Several of the authors are involved in the daily activities illustrated in the book, including campaigns, support work and other forms of resistance to the job conditions we describe. The royalties derived from this book will be donated to the IWC.

As engaged researchers, we are concerned not only with analyzing the conditions and issues faced by immigrant workers but also with examining the ways that workers themselves are able to contest these conditions, individually and collectively. One of the first questions we wanted our research to address was why some immigrant workers were able to defend their rights, and resist unjust conditions in their jobs. As we talked to immigrant workers, their stories revealed to us just how complex that question is. We learned about the ongoing adaptation that they undertook to survive the dislocations brought by the international forces of neoliberal globalization (an analysis of this political and economic context follows in the next chapter). The stakes for immigrant workers to succeed in economic terms are very high. They are not only struggling to find a footing in Canada; they must earn enough to support their extended families in their home countries. This is a huge challenge given the barriers they face. The workers we spoke with told us stories of endurance: how their hours were long, how they faced arbitrary discipline and racist comments on the job, and how they received little if any respect from their employers. Many shared with us their stories of fighting back, of moments when they were able to challenge these conditions, sometimes after they were fired or laid off. Many immigrant workers experienced survival and fighting back simultaneously, negotiating the tension between endurance and resistance. People adapted because of economic necessity; they challenged their bosses when their situations became intolerable. Often their acts of resistance and defiance were not motivated by the prospects of material gains, but rather by a demand for basic “respect” or “to be treated as human.” Resisting also brought with it the risk, not only of losing the jobs they had, but also of letting down those dependent on the wage they received. For those whose immigration status was inextricably tied to their employer, or for non-status workers, there were added risks of deportation. The narratives in this book are examples of both survival strategies and fighting back.

The Immigrant Workers Centre

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal was founded in 2000 by a small group of Filipino-Canadian union and former union organizers, and their allies, comprised of activists and academics. The idea of the Centre grew out of the experience of two of the founders who had worked as union organizers. They observed that much of their recruitment and education to support a union drive had to take place outside of the workplace and there were few places where this could happen, particularly in a collective way. Thus the idea of the Centre was to provide a safe place outside of the workplace where workers could discuss their situation. Further, they had a critique of the unions themselves, arguing that once the unions got a majority to “sign cards” and 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 Automobile Workers to intervene on labour issues in the community. The IWC then got to work providing ongoing education and a critical analysis that goes beyond the specific role of unions, as well as finding ways to address worker issues outside of the traditional union structures.

The activities of the IWC include individual rights counselling, as well as popular education and political campaigns that reflect the general issues facing immigrant workers, such as 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 analysis. Workshops on themes such as 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.

Campaigns are viewed not only as a way to make specific gains for immigrant workers but also as a way to educate the wider community about the issues that they face. For example, the first campaign, in 2000, was formed to defend a domestic worker, who had entered Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Program, against deportation. In addition to winning the campaign, the issue of importing labourers as “indentured servants” was brought into the public sphere: as a result, many community organizations and unions became involved in this issue. Because many immigrant workers do not work in unionized shops, the *Labour Standards Act* provides one of the few recourses for non-unionized workers in disputes with 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 used the campaign to raise specific concerns, including the exclusion of domestic workers from this Act, and the difficulty faced by these workers in accessing information on their rights. The IWC actively contributed to the campaign, using the campaign to educate, mobilize and organize immigrant workers. In 2003, several victories were won, including the coverage of domestic workers by the reformed *Labour Standards Act*. However, despite the reforms won in this province-wide campaign, the Act still fails in many ways to protect workers in precarious and irregular jobs.

Another aspect of the IWC's work has been its contribution to the organizing of cultural events with political content. The first was an International Women's 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 in Canada, as well as international solidarity. This event has become an annual event: its success has increased the profile of issues faced by immigrant women within the wider women's movement in Quebec. The first Mayworks event, a community/union festival celebrating labour struggles through the arts, was launched for May Day of 2005. The festival, initiated by the IWC, found collaboration from trade unions and the wider activist community. Two concerts and a community event in a park marked the event. The event has been held annually since then.

Overall, the IWC is a place of intersection between the traditions of labour and community movements. Traditionally, 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 that union representation is limited because of the difficulties in organizing immigrant workers discussed above. New forms of labour organizing are required in the current context that include both support for and from the trade union movement. The IWC works at both levels with the goals of serving, organizing and educating those who are not unionized. At the same time that it supports worker efforts to unionize, it also helps 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, as well as supporting immigrants in organizing and in helping them negotiate conflicts with their trade unions.

The work of the IWC has formed new alliances and its office has become a meeting place for many groups of social activists. The core of the organization is a group made up of immigrant union and labour organizers and allies who have been active on both labour and community issues for many years. In addition, the IWC is connected to student and anti-globalization activists. There are several reasons for this. The centre has been fortunate to have student placements from law, social work and related fields from several Montreal universities and colleges. Many of these students have been involved in student organizing: this has helped to connect students to the issues raised by the IWC. In addition, students have found the IWC to be a setting that offers them an opportunity to

combine radical politics and local work. At the same time, the IWC's connection with these groups has helped to clarify its own positions on broader social issues. The IWC is a place that brings together union, community and student activists, and people of different ages, ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds to work for social justice for immigrant workers.

Overview of the Book

This book brings together experiences of immigrant workers, their stories of adaptation to Canadian society and their experiences with defending their rights and resisting injustices, mainly at work. Chapter 2 presents a broad contextualization of immigration to Canada. It provides an overview of the history of Canada as a “white settler colonial state” and of the role of immigrant labour as one of the key ingredients necessary to “build” the society. The current neoliberal context is explored in order to situate the forces that push people to leave their countries and come to Canada. The chapter surveys the situations facing immigrant workers that these global neoliberal forces construct. Understanding the context is the beginning of an analysis of barriers and opportunities to challenge them.

In Chapter 3, we turn to the experiences of immigrant workers and explore the process we term “becoming an immigrant worker.” Drawing from the interviews, we share workers’ stories of leaving their countries, of settling in Canada and of their situations at work. These stories reflect how the wider economic and political forces shape the choices for immigrant workers, the pressures to leave their countries of origin, the choice of employment and the lack of options that ties them to low-wage work.²

Chapter 4 examines the issues of policy and rights. In theory, Canada offers the same rights and services to all workers: they are supposed to have equal access to regulatory bodies when the legislated norms are violated. In practice, as our interviews make clear, this is not the case. Labour standards, workers’ compensation, employment insurance, access to education and recognition of credentials all function to keep immigrant workers ghettoized in low wage work. Further, it is difficult for many immigrants to learn about and act on their rights because of discrimination and racist practices.

As Canada moves toward adopting broad programs of importing workers on a temporary basis to fill particular jobs in areas such as construction and tourism, it is important to understand that such temporary labour mobility programs have been in operation in Canada for decades, particularly the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). Chapters 5 and 6 examine those programs. In each chapter we present the wider policy context of these programs, the experiences of the workers in them and finally the forms of resistance and organizing of these workers and their fight against specific working conditions, as well the policy structure of the programs themselves.

Chapter 7 presents the dual experiences of immigrant workers, enduring and

surviving the brutal realities of immigration and work, while and at the same time fighting back and challenging them. We do not see these two concepts — survival and fighting back — as being in a binary opposition. They are processes people live and experience simultaneously. The chapter presents some of the resistance stories in more detail. We conclude with political lessons — political in the sense that immigrant workers and their organizations are challenging both the power of employers and the wider government policies that shape the unjust situations of immigrant workers. We end with lessons drawn from these experiences.

Notes

1. The grant was entitled *The Changing Nature of Work in the New Economy: National and Case Study Perspectives*, SSHRC-Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Program- Project No. 512-2001-1011, covering 2003–2007.
2. All names of migrant and immigrant workers have been changed out of concern for their job security.