

BECOMING AN IMMIGRANT WORKER: LEARNING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract

This paper will examine the learning process of becoming an immigrant worker in Canada during current neo-liberal restructuring. We view learning as a complex process whereby individuals, embedded in social networks, develop a political analysis of their situation while they develop strategies of response. Our research is grounded in the work of our partner organization, the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC), a support centre for workers. The paper reviews some of the political and economic forces that place immigrant workers at the bottom of the labour market in Canada. Study participants reflect these general trends. Our analysis draws on participants' interviews and examines their experiences of leaving countries of origin, settling in Canada, and finding work. We conclude with a discussion linking these experiences with wider global forces.

Résumé

Cet article analysera le processus d'apprentissage d'un travailleur immigrant au Canada dans un contexte néo-libéral. Nous considérons l'apprentissage un processus complexe par lequel des individus, intégrés dans des réseaux sociaux, font une analyse politique de leur situation, en développant des stratégies de réponse. Notre recherche s'inscrit dans le travail de notre partenaire, Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC), un centre de soutien aux travailleurs immigrants. L'article passe en revue certaines forces économiques et politiques qui placent les travailleurs immigrants au bas du marché de l'emploi au Canada. Notre analyse fait état d'entrevues avec les clients du centre et passe en revue ce qu'ils ont vécu au moment de quitter leur pays d'origine, de s'installer au Canada et de trouver du travail. En conclusion, il présente une discussion faisant le lien entre ces expériences et des forces globales à plus large échelle.

Introduction

This paper will examine the learning process of becoming an immigrant worker in Canada during current neo-liberal restructuring. We view learning to be a complex process whereby individuals, embedded in social networks, develop a political analysis of their situation while they develop strategies of response. Our research is grounded in the work of our partner organization, the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC), a support centre for workers who come from across the Global South as immigrants, refugees, or temporary workers, or without formal status. We present a discussion of the learning process involved in "becoming an immigrant worker" based on the experiences conveyed to us through interviews with immigrant workers. We situate these experiences in the wider political, economic and social context of global migration to Canada.

The deterioration of opportunities in countries of origin force many migrants to travel north in hope of a better future. Upon arrival, they find the same forces of neo-liberalism lock them into jobs at the bottom of the labour market. Migration is certainly not a new phenomenon, and the racialized category of immigrant worker has been constructed in different ways throughout historical periods. While tracing this history lies beyond the scope of this paper, we introduce each section of our analysis with citations from two texts to draw parallels between earlier and contemporary periods. Oscar Handlin (1951) discusses migration to North America from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period of rapid increase in immigration. John Berger and Jean Mohr (1975) document European guest worker programs of the 1950s and 1960s. Both texts illustrate underlying dynamics in capitalist societies that create both "push" factors to leave countries of origin and "pull" factors to labour elsewhere in advanced capitalist countries.

Following an outline of methodological issues, we review some of the political and economic forces that place immigrant workers at the bottom of the labour market in Canada. Participants' interviews reflect this general trend. Subsequent sections examine participants' experiences of leaving countries of origin, settling in Canada, and finding work. We conclude with a general discussion and analysis of the process of learning to be an immigrant worker.

Methodology

This paper is based on research conducted in partnership with the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal from 2003 to 2007. The IWC is a community organization that works on questions of labour rights for immigrant workers, including challenging unjust working conditions through individual and collective action, providing education programs and workshops, and campaigning on issues facing immigrant workers. The organization participates in coalitions with social movements working toward migrant justice. Two members of the research team were part of the small group of activists who founded the centre in 2000.

The research project is part of an ongoing process within the IWC. Over a four-year period we interviewed 50 workers from countries across the Global South. Participants had been in Canada for as many as 20 years and as little as 2 years. Many were connected with the IWC. The interviews were conducted to hear the stories of workers in a variety of situations. We began by interviewing those who had been active in the IWC, either to

seek help or to be involved in other aspects of the centre. We broadened the interviews to include a group from Latin America who had been in Canada for at least 10 years. Several from that group came after the 1973 coup in Chile. We also included workers who are here under short-term guest worker programs such as the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) or the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)¹. Still others were here in even more precarious positions as refugee claimants or without any formal status. Interviews told the stories of people who left their countries of origin because they felt few options if they stayed, and who struggled to find their place in Canadian society with the barriers and discrimination faced in employment.

The Position of Immigrant Workers: An Overview

Historically, Canada was established as a white settler society, a “hegemonic Euro-Canadian project” (Thobani, 2007, p. 16) based on the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples. As Thobani argues, the ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples and racialization of immigration policy (notwithstanding, and indeed often operating through, state policies of multiculturalism and diversity) contribute to maintaining a highly racialized construction of the Canadian nation. “White immigrants have historically been, and continue to be, integrated into the ranks of the ‘nation’, while people of colour continue to be marginalized as immigrants, as outsiders to the nation” (Thobani, 2000, p. 52).

Nonetheless, there have been major changes in the ethnocultural makeup of new immigrants to Canada. The number of immigrants proportional to Canadian-born citizens has increased, and, because the countries of origin of immigrants have changed from those of Europe to those of the South, there has been a large influx of non-white immigrants. Many have arrived with a high level of training and skills, including university education and advanced training (Picot, 2004). Despite these qualifications, immigrant workers find themselves disproportionately in low-wage jobs, with new immigrants facing chronically high levels of unemployment and poverty (Beiser & Feng-Hou, 2001; Picot, 2004; Picot, Hou & Coulombe, (see under Picot)2007). Despite high levels of education, immigrants also tend to stay at the bottom of the job market (Picot, Hou & Coulombe, 2007; Zietsma, 2007). The historical economic success of immigrants’ integration into the labour market has been reversed in the past 20 years (Shields, 2003). Lack of recognition of professional credentials has been identified as a major factor impeding the integration process (Aldridge & Waddington, 2001; Austin & Este, 2001; Krahn, Derwing, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000; Li, 2001). Ahmadi (2006) adds that during 2005 to 2006, there was a rising trend of job discrimination for both immigrant men and women. This information challenges the myth that new immigrants are economically upwardly mobile. Given the changes from European immigration to that from the Third World, one can ask about the labour market and income stratification across racial lines.

¹ The Seasonal Agricultural Program (SAWP) and the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) are programs of the federal government that bring domestic and farm workers into Canada. For the LCP, the domestic worker is required to live and be employed in an employer’s home for 24 out of 36 months and can then apply as a permanent resident to Canada (see http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/foreign_workers/lcpdir/lcpone.shtml). SAWP brings agricultural workers on a seasonal basis from Latin America. Workers must return after a maximum of eight months in a single agricultural season (see http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/foreign_workers/sawp.shtml).

The period of arrival has a major impact on the material success of immigrant workers, a trend confirmed by our research. Most participants arrived in Canada in a period of labour market transition. They arrived in a period of restructuring when the Fordist arrangement, with significant employment in unionized blue-collar jobs, was in decline and the new economy, characterized by services, new flexible working arrangements, and contingent work, was emerging. Such work includes "those forms of employment involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low job tenure, low wages and high risks of ill health" (Fudge & Vosko, 2003, p. 183). It is the fastest growing pattern of employment, and youth, women, and immigrants tend to be absorbed into the labour market through these jobs (Fudge & Vosko).

This era of economic restructuring has been accompanied by cutbacks in social programs, such as language and job training, which have reduced the ability of new arrivals to gain skills that would help them in the Canadian job market (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002). There are many informal associations in immigrant communities, but these lack funding, status, and recognition either to be a force to pressure government or have the capacity to provide large-scale support for new immigrants and their families. Immigrant groups who have been in Canada longer have been able to get themselves into the funding process, but this has become more difficult for newer communities. Meanwhile, in keeping with neo-liberal policy trends, new immigrants are increasingly viewed as commodities (Abu-Laban & Gabriel; Arat-Koc, 1999). This "leads to an evaluation of people's potential contribution to and value to the country solely on the basis of their expected place in the labour market" (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, p. 65).

In the following discussion we examine the process of becoming an immigrant worker. This category is constructed through social and economic relations, as well as the learning process on the part of im/migrant workers. As we have seen from both the statistics on immigrant workers and our interviews, such workers fill many of the jobs at the bottom of the job market and there is not a lot of upward economic mobility for them. In addition to analyzing the material reality of im/migrant workers and developing a political analysis of the social and economic conditions that structure this category of workers, our research was focused on the learning process im/migrant workers go through to survive, negotiate, or adapt.

While our in-depth interviews were semi-structured and exploratory, common themes emerged from the personal narratives. This allowed us to identify several parts of the process of learning to become an immigrant worker. The first step concerns the "leaving stories" about the economic and political pressures that push people out of their countries. The second step we have described as "settling stories" about having to reduce expectations sharply, particularly in relation to work. For most participants, the stories of work or finding jobs include the experience of finding oneself at the bottom of the labour market. Finally, the interviews illustrate issues faced over the longer term as people move on with their lives as immigrant workers. These include adaptation to reduced expectations or working below one's training level. We call this "learning in reverse".

Leaving Stories

Handlin (1951) attributes the migration of 35 million people from Europe to North America at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries to the destruction of traditional rural life:

The old structure of an old society began to crumble at the opening of the modern era. One by one, rude shocks weakened the aged foundation until some climatic blow suddenly tumbled the whole into ruins. The mighty collapse left without homes millions of helpless, bewildered people. They were the army of emigrants. . . . (p. 7)

Year by year, there were fewer alternatives until the critical day when only a single choice remained to be made—to emigrate or to die. Those who had the will to make that final decision departed. (p. 37)

In more recent years, the move from poorer to richer societies is also related to how the development of the former is tied to the latter. Berger and Mohr (1975) argue:

A man's resolution to emigrate needs to be seen within the context of a world economic system. Not in order to reinforce a political theory but to that what actually happens to him can be given its proper value. That economic system is neo-colonialism. Economic theory can show how this system, creating under-development, produces the conditions, which lead to emigration: it can also show why the system needs the special labour power which the migrant workers have to sell..... (p. 41)

The first step in the construction of immigrant workers is the process of migration. It is important to recognize that most people leave their countries of birth because of hardships brought about by political and/or economic factors that create a sense that they have little choice. Many come because of the lack of economic possibilities or because of displacement as a result of war or political repression (Castles & Loughna, 2003). Often these factors are tied to the economic interests of so-called "developed" countries or repressive regimes supported by them. For example, one participant described the economic conditions that he faced, linking his analysis to wider global relations of power:

Yeah, not only me. Everybody is struggling in the Philippines because of the economic condition of the country; because 60 percent 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.

As Razack (2004) suggests, "our implication in various contemporary conflicts may be hard to trace; after all, obscuring these details remains a priority for both corporations and governments" (p. 165).

Others talked about the need to flee because of their political beliefs. The stories of Daniel, Faoud, and Sanjeeve are three examples. Daniel came to Canada in 1976 from Chile, where he had been a political prisoner at the time of the overthrow of Allende in 1973. He was forced to leave his family because he was hunted down by the Pinochet regime and could not get any work because he was branded as a political prisoner and leftist.

Faoud left his wife and four children to come to Canada from Lebanon. His father had been a leader in Fatah. When he died, the organization called on Faoud to join the ranks. Faoud went to the Lebanese authorities for help but was told they did not concern themselves with Palestinians. He was jailed by Fatah until he agreed to serve. Two months later he got a visa to the U.S.; he fled there and then made his way to Canada.

As a university president, Sanjeev had drivers and servants, but he left his comfortable life in his native India after his brother was assassinated for his leftist political beliefs. Warned by the police that his life was also in danger, Sanjeev lived six months with the constant protection of four body guards. But the stress of continual surveillance became too much for him: "You have no more personal life." Fearing for his life, he left his wife, son, and career behind to come to Canada.

The push out of their countries has meant that it is impossible for these immigrants to go back. Survival involves learning to adapt to what is offered in Canada. Some had a contact, a friend or family member who was already here, encouraged them to follow, and paved the road for them. The building of social connections for immigrants, therefore, begins even before leaving and becomes the first step in setting up networks of support.

Canadian foreign, international trade, and economic policies also negatively impact those who migrate to Canada from the Third World. Canada's foreign and international trade and economic policies operate simultaneously through its bilateral aid and development cooperation relationships, its positions in multilateral forums such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and other bilateral free trade and investment agreements. It also operates through joint initiatives with international financial and economic institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank. As one of the world's most ardent supporters of trade and investment liberalization (not least in the area of agriculture), Canada is implicated in exacerbating the internal polarization of societies in the Third World between a privileged elite and a growing disenfranchised, dispossessed majority (Desmarais, 2007; Kuyek, 2007).

Canada's advocacy for the comprehensive adoption of neo-liberal export-oriented policy frameworks by Third World nations has several consequences. Agricultural liberalization, erosion of workers' rights, closure of domestic industries, the undermining of public services like health and education, and waves of privatization of other essential services all add to the push factors for peoples of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Walia, 2006). In particular, these factors affect immigrants from rural areas who have sought their chances overseas in order to earn an income for their families' survival over the past 20 to 30 years (Hayter, 2000; Lindio-McGovern, 2007; Mathew, 2005; McNally, 2002).

The Canadian government is thus not neutral in constructing the category of immigrant worker, taking advantage of the push from poor countries. It has created policies that draw migrants to Canada to perform cheap labour without any guarantee of permanent status. The LCP and the SAWP are two examples of programs that attracted our participants to Canada. These programs are designed to fill short-term labour demands in jobs that other workers in Canada refuse to take.

Another issue that arose is the policy mechanisms that push people to leave their countries of origin. This issue is often discussed in the IWC, particularly in relationship to the Philippines. The Philippine government has encouraged mass migration and the country's economy depends on financial remittances from abroad (Chang, 2000; Lindio-McGovern, 2007). The labour export 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 to families back home acts to bind workers to low-wage work and compels them to endure difficult conditions. The first step in creating the category of immigrant worker is a situation in which a person is stuck here and cannot return to her or his country of origin either for political reasons or their family members' needs for money.

Settling Stories

Arriving alone, the shock of the birth of his new life is immediate. He calls upon each year of his manhood in order not to panic. In a group it is easier. . . . (Berger & Mohr, 1975, p. 67)

Migration involves the transfer of a valuable economic resource—human labour—from poor to rich countries. The workers who migrate may have been unemployed in the country of origin, but this does not alter the fact that the community has invested considerable sums in their upbringing. (pp. 68-69)

It is clear from our interviews that these immigrant workers bring education, skills, and hope. They then find themselves in a position in which they have to learn to live with disappointment. When we asked people about their process of settling in Canada, this material reality and concurrent learning process were quickly apparent. Whatever status and skills they had seemed to make little difference here. Further, the conditions they faced were difficult and at times abusive. These citations from two participants are examples of that experience:

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.

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.

Funnelling people into low-paying work is aided by the counselling received from official bodies. Credentials are not recognized and there are major blocks that prevent educated workers from entering the professions of their choice. The majority of those

interviewed expressed belief that any job is better than no job. Furthermore, people arriving here feel that there is no choice except to work. This was explained in interviews as both the drive to succeed here and, especially for refugee claimants, a means to get residency. It is important to understand that it is not only the market that structures the position and category of immigrant, but the processes and policies of government services. There is also a not-so-subtle racism about where newcomers are supposed to work. A few in the group we interviewed came as trained nurses and hospital administrators from the Philippines, but they continue to work as domestics many years after their arrival.

Another source of pressure to accept poor conditions in Canada is the relationship to family in home countries. Remittances from immigrant workers play a significant role in the lives of families and in countries of origin's economies. This process changes the stakes for immigrants in their workplaces, as there are additional pressures to work hard and stay employed. Many immigrants accept a drop in social status and live many years apart from their families in order to provide better opportunities for their children. The hope is that their children will benefit from the educational system here and achieve some economic upward mobility. This was not the experience of some we spoke to who came to Canada with some schooling. Their process of immigration meant that their prior education was not recognized and they had to repeat all or part of their secondary schooling. As one participant said, "Imagine you already graduated [from high school] and here you have to start all over again."

Work Stories

These elements of insecurity, the immigrant learned were not confined to the conditions of the working day; they pervaded a total relationship of the worker to the economy. The fluid labor supply that gave the employer complete liberty to hire as many workers as he wished, also gave him the ability at will to dismiss those whose toil he no longer needed. (Handlin, 1951, p. 74)

The naturalness of his inferior status—the naturalness with which he is accorded his inferiority by people, by institutions, by the everyday etiquette of the metropolis, by ready-made phrases and arguments—would never be so complete and unhesitating if his function and the inferior status which it entailed, were new. He has been here from the beginning. . . . (Berger & Mohr, 1975, p. 113)

An unemployed labour force existed. It existed in a state of underdevelopment, created by the development of those countries now suffering a labour shortage. (p. 126)

Participants' work stories confirmed what the literature says about the place of immigrant workers. Despite education and skills, they tend to end up in low-paying jobs. All of those we interviewed had relatively high expectations of Canada. While they expected to live through a certain period of transition, they also expected that they would be able to find work that reflected their qualifications. Instead, they found themselves filling positions at the very bottom of the Canadian labour market.

Formal rules and regulations supposedly govern both the LCP and SAWP; however, from our interviews and discussions with those who work directly with these workers, it is evident that these programs offer no recourse if a problem arises. Furthermore, despite the fact that labour standards apply to the LCP, employees are isolated and the standards are not enforced. One woman told us the following:

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 . . . And it was always long hours. The contract was supposed to be 51 hours, but I always worked 55 to 60 hours a week, without getting paid overtime. But it was supposed to be overtime after 51 hours.

One farm worker shared his bitterness in his interview:

They treat us like slaves. The Mexican government sells us and the Canadian government exploits us. They take all this money off our cheques—and our pay is going down. Last year our contract was for 14,000 but this year it's 9,230. Plus they're taking off all these taxes. I'm not fine with that—they take off so much! Around 12 percent—imagine! We come here to work. We leave everything behind. We leave our families; we aren't there to raise our children. We come here to make a little money. The only reason we come is because we can make more money here than at home.

Another commented:

Let me tell you again—they have us here like slaves. The Mexican government sells us, the Canadians exploit us. They pay us minimum wage but I'd like for anyone to try to live off this and see if you can eat! We're doing all this for nothing. We're sweating to give a little bread to our children.

Many experienced harsh conditions in factories. One commented:

It was the most dreadful work I've done. I was there about two years. It was really tough. My hands were bleeding; we were standing for half the day. We could only sit after lunch . . . We'd complain, but we had no choice—we had to work. My other co-workers, they have families—they didn't speak French, they had difficulties in English. We complained, but we stayed.

The complaining and staying goes back to the conditions of immigration. People feel that there is no choice except to accept what is offered. The new labour market, characterized by sub-contracting, requires people who are desperate. For the im/migrant workers we interviewed, survival depended on learning to accept this reality and develop coping mechanisms to deal with it.

Another participant, Sanjeeve, learned very quickly that jobs reflecting his qualifications were impossible to get. He found a couple of temporary jobs thanks to friends. In both cases, workers were not hired directly by the employer but by an agency who kept close to half the wages of the workers it contracts to factories and farms. One job was in a factory making ice cream. The workers were all people of colour, from different communities. The only white people in the place were the supervisors. Standing up for your rights was out of the question. As Sanjeeve said, "Talk about your rights and the next day you're not there!"

One of the Latin Americans we interviewed who had been here since the late 1970s has either encountered barriers to improving his position in the labour market and limited mobility, or found that the jobs he has had do not match his level of education. He completed technical studies in the Quebec college system (CEGEP) and began his career as an information analyst. He worked for the Ville de Montreal for a couple of years but has not been able to hold stable employment. He works by contract. He believes that racism explains these experiences, and stated:

Many times, even though you know the French language, it is forbidden to work here in some places. You are not allowed to be admitted because you were not born here. Some places, like the Ville de Montreal, where there is a lot of work to be done, but you are not allowed to be part of that status quo because you are an immigrant. . . . There are places that it is actually impossible to work.

The jobs of many participants presented major challenges. Face-to-face conflicts with employers and supervisors were common, along with feelings of marginalization because they are from racialized minority groups or because of their vulnerable status as new immigrants. Experiences of racism were frequent. Supervision and discipline were generally arbitrary and always direct, and there was little or no autonomy in workers' jobs.

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.

Many faced situations in which they were vulnerable to pressures from employers. One woman said:

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!

Others felt pressures of arbitrariness and pressures to increase production:

Then they sold it [the company that employed her] to . . . [another 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. . . . Yes, they abused our working hours, they were permanently dismissing people with seniority. They did it by asking 100 percent efficiency from people who were already very old.

Those employed in the LCP, partly because of their isolation and the rigid rules of the program, are especially vulnerable. One expressed it as follows:

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.

We found another kind of learning that we call "learning in reverse". The immigrants we spoke with have had to learn to navigate the doublespeak of the Canadian immigration system, which recruits highly educated, skilled people to fill the very bottom of the labour market. Immigrants must learn to unlearn their status—to deny their social status and education, to hide their overqualifications and adapt to the very bottom of the labour market.

I followed a 10-month intensive *Attestation d'études collégiales* [college equivalency course for immigrants] that qualifies you to work as a lab technician There were people with master's and doctoral degrees in chemistry in the class We learned basic chemistry and biology that qualified us to do what you can do with a high school education.

Another aspect of this is using the skills people have while not recognizing their accreditation. This allows employers to benefit from the higher level of training but not compensate workers. For example, domestic workers often have training as nurses. In their jobs they provide a high level of care but are paid as domestics. Regardless of training and background, it becomes very difficult to attain proper status.

Immigrant workers accept this doublespeak at least partially because of the pressure to send remittances to family members and escape from repression. Learning to adapt to desperate situations is another aspect of immigrant or refugee life. This was particularly vivid for those, like Faoud, awaiting government decisions about their refugee claims or status. "I lie awake at night thinking about my wife, my children, my life, my story," he said. If his claim were refused, he said, "I will kill myself in Canada, because in Canada I know they will make arrangements for me. In Lebanon, they will put me in the garbage." He added:

Hope for? What do I have to hope for? In this life you only have so many years to make a contribution, to do something with your life. Those years have been robbed of me. The only thing that I have to hope for is that no one has to go through what I am going through.

In these ways, learning to become an immigrant worker can mean learning to live in jobs with little or no mobility at the bottom of the labour market with little recognition of skills and prior training. Learning is about redefining the self relative to these conditions and becoming an immigrant worker.

Conclusion: Learning to Become an Immigrant Worker

The context of migration and that of the local service economy in which most immigrants labour, with its sub-contracting, precarious work, low pay, and lack of power for workers, structure the daily lives of new immigrants. The category of immigrant worker is formed by the relations learned in the workplace—arbitrary power relations, lack of stability, poverty, long hours, and lack of respect—and the impossibility of returning home; in other words, the options are limited and pre-structured for them. Workplace learning is about becoming an immigrant worker. The combination of these realities, as well as the continuing processes of racialization in Canada outlined in the introduction, creates a category of immigrant worker that is used to respond to the demands of the particular conditions of the contemporary Canadian labour market (Cook, 2004). We quote Hart (1992) at length because she captures the essence of the consequences of the new economy for immigrant workers:

What is called for is a psychological, mental and behavioural preparation for living with instability, and for being able to think of oneself in terms of a renewable, exchangeable and updatable resource rather than in terms of a human being with unique experiences, hopes, wishes, and dreams. . . . Furthermore, the ideal worker becomes a self-sufficient nomad, migrating with moving job possibilities, keeping specific ties to neighbourhoods, friends and families suspended long enough not to interfere with the need for mobility People who are unwilling to move because they rely on established social networks rather than risking both unemployment and social support do not display rigidity, inflexibility, 'fear of change' . . . as much as a realistic assessment of actual chances for survival. (pp. 87-89)

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

Nancy Jackson (2005) itemizes the different forms of learning that emerge from the interviews discussed in this paper. She states, "The interviews explored many themes,

revealing many layers of learning seamlessly embedded in (sometimes tacitly, sometimes informally, sometimes formally) the daily activity of surviving as an immigrant worker.” Learning is tied to the daily lives of immigrant workers, particularly in adapting to and resisting the relationships of work. For many the learning was how to survive, to live with disappointment, despair, low incomes, and instability. The challenge is to learn to work hard and stay employed no matter how bad the jobs, to keep one’s expectations low, to take what is offered.

Part of becoming an immigrant worker is to unlearn a former status and redefine the self as an updatable resource as opposed to a human being. This process described in this paper is about learning to navigate the doublespeak of public life, to learn what is impossible, to fear the bosses, to be silent about your rights, and to accept that possibilities for action are limited. There is also learning that injustice exists, that one can resist it by taking action, and that one must demand respect as a human being. We use the term “learning in reverse” to describe the sense of loss people feel, their marginalization, their having to reduce expectations from what they hoped to achieve and be in a new country. This process of learning is part of a wider process of how the lives of immigrant workers are structured by the international political economy and the historical legacy of the policies of the Canadian government, which act together to restructure economic, social, and political relations that push people to leave their homes and pull people to come to countries like Canada (Thobani, 2007). Thus, immigrants learn what it is to become an immigrant worker in a context shaped by local, national, and international forces. Learning is adaptive to these new situations and, as the experiences of those we interviewed demonstrate, underlying this learning is a critical understanding of the forces that shape their lives.

The research project raised many policy issues that range from the way that Canada imports labour to the conditions at work and the deterioration of individual status. It is clear from our analysis of the experiences of those we interviewed and the perceptions of our partner organization, the Immigrant Workers Centre, that immigrant workers are being used as a pool of people who fill low-wage, mainly service jobs in a sector of the economy that is largely unregulated. Although there are policies in place to limit abuse, these have been difficult to enforce and have not been useful in protecting the interests of immigrant workers. Clearly, given the scope of the problem, steps should be taken by government to enforce at least minimum standards. We also have seen the dangers of guest worker programs such as LCP and SAWP for the creation of sub-standard working conditions, and we are concerned that the Canadian government is interested in expanding rather than eliminating these types of programs (HRSDC, 2007; Morton, 2008). Finally, the possibilities for these changes will depend, at least in part, on sustained and strengthened mobilization and advocacy by immigrant workers and their allies.

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