

Comments for Forum on Immigrants and Precarious Work

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I had my political awakening in El Salvador. Growing up in Canada, I thought that politics was kind of boring. Nothing much seemed to happen or to really change. Then I moved to El Salvador to work in the rural community of La Ceiba. La Ceiba had been abandoned during the civil war of the 1980s, as residents fled to refugee camps or joined the guerrilla movement. Now they were trying to rebuild their community and their country, moving the struggle from the military to the political arena. In La Ceiba, politics was about life and death, dignity and survival. Everything and everyone was political, from local elections to preschoolers chanting political slogans at play. North – South relations weren't just a matter of radio debate but had a deep and lasting impact on the lives of everyday people.

Back in Canada, I was keen to do my part to make a difference, but also to join hands with newcomers who carried the passion, knowledge and skills of political activism in their flesh and their bones. There is a need for advocacy activities at many levels, but sometimes policy debates and coalition work can lose their grounding in community. When I began my work at the Mennonite New Life Centre, I began to look for ways to bring together a strong service relationship with newcomer communities and grassroots engagement for social change. With the support of the Metcalf Foundation, we launched a project entitled “Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less.”

The Newcomer Skills Project combines employment mentoring and civic engagement strategies to promote fair and meaningful employment for newcomers and racialized workers. Most often, our relationship with newcomers begins with a request for service – help with immigration processes, with meeting immediate financial needs, and – invariably – how to find a job – preferably one that uses individual skills and experience. In an effort to respond to these employment needs and concerns, we created a series of mentoring groups for newcomers with a shared work background – psychology, journalism, community work, and engineering. The mentoring group responds to practical needs by offering a place for learning about training and networking opportunities, and hearing from more established newcomers who have made it in their field. It also creates a space for collective analysis of structural barriers and brainstorming proposals for change. Sometimes it leads to concrete initiatives – like a workshop on mental health challenges arising from structural barriers to integration or a newsletter by and for newcomers on the theme of newcomers, poverty and social change.

In addition to the mentoring groups, we have launched two newcomer advocacy committees, one at each of our two offices, as a place for building shared understandings

of political engagement, exploring issues related to employment barriers and precarious work in Canada, connecting with related advocacy initiatives and campaigns, and developing our own reflection and action for change. Settlement services and mentoring relationships become a stepping stone for inviting newcomers into a process of collective reflection and action for social change.

Networking and collaboration has been key to this work. I'm honoured to share the stage today with Deena. The Worker's Action Centre has delivered a number of labour rights workshops to our newcomer advocacy committees, and has served as an example and inspiration in the work of grassroots community activism. Members of our advocacy committee also participated in the popular education workshop of the Immigrants and Precarious Employment Project and then subsequently adapted and delivered this workshop in Spanish at the New Life Centre. Last week, I asked Luis Mata, one of our participant – facilitators, for feedback on his experience. Speaking as a facilitator, he noted that the workshop had really engaged participants, speaking as it did to widely shared experiences and emotions. He talked about the way discussions highlighted the incredible wealth of skills and experience in newcomer communities, and the key importance of liberating that potential. He noted that the whole experience had been very enriching, and that learning more about his own situation and how it fit within the larger dynamic of the labour market had put him in a better position to be able to formulate concrete proposals for change. Luis cautioned that no one workshop is sufficient in and of itself, and that it was important for us to conceptualize the work of our newcomer advocacy committee as a larger, ongoing process and one that connects with other coalitions and change initiatives.

Over the coming months, our newcomer advocacy committees will engage in two important pieces of work to further the discussion about precarious work and social change. The first is a participatory action research process that will invite members of our mentoring groups and advocacy committees to name barriers to fair and meaningful employment and formulate proposals for change. Our focus group methodology has been shaped by the popular education approach used in the Immigrants and Precarious Employment workshop and we are grateful to the Catalyst Centre for agreeing to provide feedback on the focus group design. We are also grateful to the Public Good Initiative of the School of Public Policy at U of T for agreeing to provide us with student policy consultants to help translate our change proposals into public policy recommendations.

The second piece of upcoming work is a series of advocacy skills workshops for members of our newcomer advocacy committees. Through these workshops, we hope participants will come to a clearer understanding of the Canadian political and advocacy context, and be able to adapt their own advocacy knowledge and skills to that context. We also hope to begin to develop a strategy for collective action on some of the advocacy demands emerging from the research project. These workshops will be designed and facilitated in collaboration with the Labour Education Centre.

The struggle for fair and meaningful work is a struggle for all of us. It calls us to see beyond the artificial distinctions between “skilled,” “temporary,” and “humanitarian”

immigration streams to the shared experience of “survival jobs” and “precarious work” as well as the shared aspiration to employment that respects newcomer skills and dignity. It calls us to reach across the barriers which sometimes divide academics, community groups and the labour movement, joining hands in the work of change. We at the New Life Centre look forward to continuing the struggle – together with all of you.