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S'attaquer à la pandémie permanente qu'est la précarité : leçons tirées de l'organisation des travailleurs et travailleuses migrants et immigrés racisés à Montréal pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

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Résumé

Cet article démontre l'importance pour les travailleurs et travailleuses migrants et immigrés de s'organiser en fonction de leurs réalités. Pour ce faire, l'auteur s'appuie sur l'expérience du Centre des travailleurs et travailleuses immigrants (CTI) de Montréal. Beaucoup de ces travailleurs ont un st*atut d'immigration précaire, qui les rend vulnérables à une exploitation capitaliste poussée. On présume que leur besoin de rester au Canada et de gagner de l'argent les empêchera de parler des inégalités en milieu de travail et dans les pratiques patronales. Quand la COVID-19 a frappé, ce sont ces travailleurs, chargés des tâches reconnues « essentielles » par les gouvernements, qui ont permis à la société de fonctionner. Des promesses de régulariser leur statut d'immigration ont été faites. Mais deux ans après, ces promesses ne se sont pas réalisées et le statut des travailleurs demeure précaire. Toutefois, l'expérience acquise par la CTI dans sa lutte contre l'imposition de mesures néolibérales lui a permis de tenir bon face aux conditions de travail dictées par la pandémie. Les efforts pour régulariser le statut des travailleurs migrants s'intensifient. Il y a actuellement une mobilisation à l'échelle du Canada pour presser le gouvernement de tenir ses engagements, confortée par la reconnaissance croissante de l'importance de ces travailleurs pour le pays. L'article dépeint la réalité de nombreux travailleurs qui vivent et besognent à la confluence de la racialisation et du statut précaire de migrant, et révèle combien ces conditions sont essentielles au maintien du système capitaliste.*

LABOUR, Capital and Society 50:1&2 (2022)

Challenging the permanent pandemic of precarity: Lessons from racialized migrant and immigrant workers organizing in Montreal during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abtract

This article demonstrates the importance for migrant and immigrant workers to organize in ways that represent their realities. It draws on the experience of Montreal's Immigrant Workers' Centre (IWC) to do this. Many of these workers have a precarious immigration status, making them vulnerable to acute capitalist exploitation. The presumption is that since workers' need to remain in Canada and earn their living, they would remain silent about workplace inequalities and labour practices. When COVID-19 hit, it was these workers, doing what governments recognized as 'essential' work that kept societies functioning. Promises were made about regularization of their immigration status. However, it has been two years since the imposition of pandemic restrictions and these promises have rung hollow, leaving them with a precarious immigration status. Yet the organising experience gained by the IWC in the struggle against the imposition of neoliberal measures, prior to the pandemic, held the IWC in good stead as it faced pandemic working conditions. The struggle to regularize migrant workers' status is mounting and at this moment there is a Canada-wide mobilization to hold the government to its promise, bolstered by the growing recognition of the importance of these workers to the country. This article demonstrates the realities faced by many workers who live and work at the intersection of racialization and an insecure migrant status and reveals that it is key to propping up the capitalist system.

Introduction

On March 31st, 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, tweeted, "This virus is the great equalizer" (Cuomo. 2020). However, in March 2020, in the first months of the pandemic, when the world was being slowly shut down under lockdowns and stay-at-home

orders, nothing felt further from the truth. In New York City, one of the global epicentres of the pandemic, a picture was emerging of the sheer scale of the disproportionate impact and devastation the pandemic was having on Back and Latino communities. Black and Latinos were dying at a rate double that of white New Yorkers. (Barranco et al., 2020). In one dramatic example, a pastor said his church lost 44 members to COVID-19 (Shoichet, et al, 2020). His congregation was made up of essential workers; the vast majority undocumented migrants from Central America. Frankie Miranda, president of the Hispanic Federation said, "We are dying at a higher rate because we have no other choice. These are the delivery food people, the people that are the day workers, the farm workers, these people that are working in restaurants. They are essential services, and now they are not enjoying the protections that may be in other industries people can have" (Jimenez, 2020). Similar patterns emerged across advanced capitalist countries. Those deemed essential and unable to remain at home were largely racialized immigrant and migrant workers.

Moreover, the loss of working hours and income overlapped with endemic food and housing insecurity. According to Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith, director of the Equity Research and Innovation Center at Yale School of Medicine, "We know that these racial-ethnic disparities in COVID-19 are the result of pre-pandemic realities." (Godoy & Wood, 2020). Such analysis was echoed in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* by scholars who analyzed how workplace settings determined COVID-19 disparities along racial and ethnic lines (McLure et al. 2020).

In Canada, numbers released by Statistics Canada showed immigrants were at a higher risk of death because they predominantly work in essential industries such as care work, agriculture, food processing, and logistics. According to them, immigrants comprise 20% of the total population but account for 30% of all COVID-19-related deaths. Further, as of June 2021, immigrants made up 44 to 51% of COVID-19 deaths in Vancouver and Toronto. Prior to March 2020, these workers were in the shadows of society. (Ng, 2021). The disproportionate impacts along racial-ethnic lines concerning who got the right to remain at home and who was deemed essential, went beyond pre-pandemic disparities. Governments scrambled to make exemptions to the travel bans imposed during the spring of 2020, in response to pressing labour needs in the wake of the pandemic.

Migrant Workers were brought in the thousands to Canada, the UK, and the US to ensure food supplies for these countries. While these workers were rendered invisible, paradoxically, this army of labour was now deemed essential. Sociologist Zophia Edwards notes this contradictory dynamic in the production of the essential worker as an identity. "These Black and Latinx workers, as well as other nonwhite racialized workers, have now been deemed essential, so they still have to report to work despite stay-at-home orders. While viewed as essential, they are also treated as expendable." (Edwards, 2020). The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural vulnerabilities experienced by these now 'essential' yet 'disposable' workers (Stevano et al., 2021).

This article will both reaffirm and extend an understanding of the pandemic "[as] a manifestation of the existing systemic fragilities of capitalism" (Stevano, et al, 2021: 181) by examining the disproportionate impact of the pandemic upon racialized immigrant and migrant workers in Montreal. It draws upon the organizing efforts of the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal.[2] The IWC, already one of the central frontline grassroots workers' organizations in Montreal, from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, began organizing workers for better COVID-19 protections, to improve working conditions and to access services for undocumented workers. The article will demonstrate how racialized immigrants and migrant labour precarity remain central to capitalist economies, yet are treated as expendable, attested to by the context of COVID-19 which renders them at greater risk of becoming ill or facing death from this illness. The pandemic illuminated how public health is intertwined with the logic of racial capitalism, thus obscuring the structural causes of the transmission of the virus (McClure et al., 2020). Further, the article draws upon the novel experiences and lessons of the IWC during the pandemic. It explores the agency and struggles of migrant and immigrant workers in the city of Montreal and in the province of Quebec, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the article will demonstrate how collective action taken by 'essential workers' was not solely the result of spontaneous individual or collective action. Looking at the IWC as an exemplar, it will be shown that this is a result of worker organizations/strategic orientation, organizing immigrant and migrant workers over the past two decades in a context of neoliberalizing labour markets, propped up by low-wage, disposable and racialized labour.

The article will explore the contours of the victories made by the IWC in Montreal during the previous two years of the pandemic. It will also examine how the IWC has been able to broaden its base and strategic thinking to complement discussions of how workers in the midst of the challenges of the COVID-19 situation are organizing. Furthermore it will provide important lessons and knowledge about the struggles of migrant and immigrant workers.

The article draws on ethnographic work coming out of my experience as a community organizer at the IWC since 2007. I draw upon organizing campaigns and the experiences of our members who were essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The timeline of the article spans the start of the pandemic in March 2020, right up until the completion of writing this. The article focuses on the struggles for basic health and safety, for personal protective equipment (PPE), to access benefits, to counter challenges posed by punitive measures faced by non-status migrants during the curfews. All this happened in the context of broader struggles for regularization of resident status, access to services, and decent work. The ethnographic work is supplemented by reports, government documentation, and media sources to contextualize the ethnographic study.

The first part of the article situates migrant and racialized immigrant workers within the broader context of capital's constant requirement for cheap and disposable labour. This is key to understanding their 'essential role' in the reproduction of many societies. The second section gives a brief overview of the IWC, its history, and organizing priorities. The third section focuses on the context of Montreal as the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. The next section explores the struggles of immigrant workers deemed essential for COVID-19 protection and decent work within warehouses and meat processing plants, after which it looks at the struggles of migrants and immigrants for permanent immigration status as essential workers. The article will conclude by drawing on these experiences to contribute experience-based knowledge to the growing and urgent discussions of how migrant and immigrant workers' struggles can be best advanced. A constant will be the centrality of these workers to the renewal of the labour force at a time of intersecting crises.

Intersections of Migration, Race, and Capitalism

The unequal effects of the pandemic upon racialized workers and migrants are not the result of a moment but do give pause to reflect on how capitalism benefits and reproduces itself best by having access to workers who are rendered more exploitable, in this instance, racialized workers. "The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the deep structural problems affecting nonwhite racialized workers in the core and periphery" (Edwards, 2021). Migrant labour thus needs to be viewed within a framework that can analyze the continued need for racialized migrant labour within advanced capitalist states. It makes critical the requirement to connect the relationship between capitalism and racism (Schling, 2017). Robin Kelley contends that capitalism as a system of accumulation does not rationalize race, yet is reliant upon the profitability of exploiting racialized workers (Kelley, 2002). In this vein, Freshour and Williams examine how racial capitalism was a mode of manufacturing vulnerability through monoculture agribusiness, premised on low-wage, non-unionized, and devalued labour as a result of capital accumulation along racial lines (Freshour and Williams, 2020). Essential for capital accumulation is a global racialized division of labour (Roediger, 1993). As migration scholar Aziz Choudhry reminds us, "The imperialist exploitation and undermining of many societies in the Global South under earlier eras of colonialism, and historical institutional arrangements concerning labour, are key to understanding labour and migration in today's era of global capitalism." (Choudry 2016). Racialization of migrants is key to understanding race as a central mechanism to prop up capitalism.

Migration patterns are embedded within the structural transformations of the dynamics of flows of capital, the spatial dimensions and concentrations of capital accumulation (Hanieh, 2019). The most significant transformation in the period of globalization has been the scale of transnational migration (Herod, 2003), which has created a global reserve army of labour that has been vital to the transformation of labour markets and intensification of precarious work (Buckley et al., 2017). As Adam Hanieh remarks, "Through the very dispossession that generates movements of people across (and within) borders, migration comes to powerfully shape processes of class formation in specific national contexts." (Hanieh 2019, 55). This makes migration central to the transformations of

the global economy (Ferguson and McNally, 2015; Hanieh, 2019).

We need to understand border regimes in the contemporary context. Migration flows are inherently racialized by the ways in which borders and immigration regimes act not to repel migration but as filters to control migration which produces subjective identities, thus differentiating the value of workers. Whether distinguishing 'illegal' and 'legal' migrants, 'temporary' or 'permanent' residents, and 'citizen' and 'non-citizen' (Walia, 2013), this categorization and stratification of migrants are essential to producing the requisite 'precarious worker'. "Immigration controls work with and against migratory processes to produce workers with particular types of relations to employers and labour markets." (Anderson, 2010: 306). The increased policing of borders and restrictive measures on migration are not to stop migration. Instead, manufactured precarity among migrants, is a strategy to manage and discipline labour for capitalist exploitation; the more vulnerable, the more exploitable. (Anderson 2010; Choudry and Hlatshwayo 2016).

At this moment in history, migrant workers have become central to capital because the costs of reproduction are offloaded onto them and their home countries; they are no longer the responsibility of the state in which they work, or of their employers. As Ferguson and McNally argue, "Migrant workers' transnational households and networks, and the state policies supporting these, also institutionalize dramatically lower costs of social reproduction." (Ferguson and McNally). For undocumented migrants, the costs of their reproduction are non-existent as they are entirely separated from the citizenship population (Buckley et al., 2017). Arat-Koc describes this as part of the neoliberalization of immigration. Drawing on the patriarchal gender division of labour, reproductive and care work is commodified and outsourced to migrant women who enter the global North's labour market (Strauss and Fudge, 2014). In her study of domestic migrant workers in Canada, Arat-Koc points to how the burden of self-sufficiency is foisted onto the workers themselves (Arat-Koc1999). The increased commodification of social reproduction in North America and the European Union (EU), and its externalization from more traditional spaces, have happened with the reliance on a reserve army of migrant labour from the global South.

Migration, Race and Capitalism Create Disposable Yet Essential Labour

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated a global crisis of productive and reproductive work across the globe. The pandemic also exposed what occupations were essential to our social reproduction. Though if we follow Kim Moody's argument that pre-dates the pandemic, such occupations have been increasingly marketized,[3] even as they have become vital to capitalist economies in the global North (Moody, 2017). *The American Journal of Medicine* has argued it has been migrant and immigrant workers that have borne the brunt of the pandemic (Reid, Ronda-Perez and Schenker, 2020) and these workers were produced as the ideal 'essential worker' during the pandemic (Reid, Ronda-Perez and Schenker, 2020). More traditional sectors such as care work, agriculture, food transformation, and the maintenance of fixed capital (i.e. work in cleaning, security), as well as the new titans of global capitalism such as Amazon or Uber and the on-demand gig economy, have all become reliant upon racialized migrant and immigrant workers. This racialized division of labour can be seen in the stark inequalities witnessed during the pandemic. Amazon serves as a prime example. During the early days of the pandemic, Jeff Bezos became the first person in human history to have personal wealth amounting to 200 billion USD. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Amazon's racialized workforce, from its warehouses ('fulfillment centres') to delivery drivers who were deemed 'essential', worked without proper COVID-19 protections. The implication being their health didn't matter; they were disposable, even as they played a key role in the functioning of many cities (Alimohamed-Wilson and Reese, 2020).

Another key sector of the economy, premised upon a racialized division of labour, is agribusiness, particularly meat processing and packing. In the United States, meat packing plants and industries were deemed essential services (Samaneigo and Mantz 2020). Honing and Genoway's study of companies such as Brazilian-owned multinational JBS, the world's largest meat processor, illuminate the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and workers being deemed 'essential', gave the employer greater control over the intensification of work, while workers incurred ever greater risks during the pandemic. (Honing and Genoways, 2020). Through their study of JBS, Samaniego and Mantz articulate how essential industries are propped up by racial inequalities (2020). In

the sector of care work we see how neoliberal policies have made this the most fundamental sector of the economy that has become marketized. Increased austerity has favoured privatization and measures to contain costs of labour, to rationalize to meet budget cuts, but to continue to remain profitable by exploiting the precarity of the workers. A key mechanism in containing costs is the heavy reliance on racialized immigrant and migrant care workers in hospitals, private nursing homes and for elder care. The pandemic had shed light on the ways in which these workers are key to the reproduction of society in what Tithi Bhattacharya calls life-making work (i.e., care work, agriculture), much of what was deemed essential. (Jaffe, 2020).

As Sarah Farris and Mark Bergfeld argue, the devaluing of social reproductive work ensures that profits remain higher. Social reproductive professions are devalued through the use of disposable labour, often racialized, gendered and with precarious status. Employers can force lower wages, non-unionization, and flexibility to reduce costs and increase productivity (Bergfeld and Farris, 2021). Much before the pandemic, racialized workers from countries in the periphery were being recruited to North American and European countries to fill gaps within their health care systems. And, in the wake of the pandemic, this actually produced higher profits. (Edwards, 2021).

While these workers were celebrated during the first critical months of the pandemic, they remain disposable, a condition that is not primordial, but has been carefully constructed in the service of greater profit-making. Despite this, migrant workers have displayed agency through new forms of collective organizing, unionization, and mobilization (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2015). During the pandemic as well, workers organized. In fact, in areas there was a great upsurge in organizing. This cannot be explained solely by the conditions produced by the pandemic. There is a necessity to connect spontaneous actions with long-term political objectives. There had been organizers in North America and Europe, whether with new unions in the UK, workers centres in the US and Canada. Their strategic orientation and leadership with a long-term vision to organize precarious immigrant and migrant workers prior to the pandemic is central to any long term labour renewal (Ness, 2005; Fine 2006; Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2016).

The Immigrant Workers Centre

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal was founded in 2000 by community and labour activists to defend, promote and expand the labour and immigration rights of precarious immigrant workers. It was also a counterpoint to the blitz model of union organizing that often failed to bridge ethnic divides within workplaces (Choudry, Hanley, Jordan, Shragge, Stiegman 2009). In the beginning, the IWC worked mostly with Filipinos employed in textile industries or as live-in caregivers. The IWC fits easily into a growing phenomenon of non-traditional labour organizations seeking to address the impact of economic restructuring on workers. In the absence of any collective representation, the IWC became a space where workers could discuss their workplace issues and find collective solutions. The IWC was at the intersection of community and labour organizing. By 2006, the work had expanded to include a broad range, from individual casework and campaigns to improve the conditions faced by immigrant and migrant workers, to labour rights education, training, and workshops.

The IWC also tries to insist on another major issue which is organizing workers based on their needs and demands, not solely on what is inscribed in the law. This is because workers (particularly those with precarious work or precarious immigration status) experience forms of injustice that are considered legal within existing institutional frameworks. This is particularly compounded for workers in precarious working situations who lack immigration status. This means taking on pressure campaigns, direct intervention, appeals, and various other mechanisms to ensure that workers' rights are upheld.

The strategic focus of the IWC began to shift with the deepening of economic restructuring and growth of temporary labour migration in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. This led the IWC to address new forms of precarious work that were emerging. The first was a consequence of the expanded use of temporary placement agencies within low-profit sectors such as agribusiness, cleaning, and warehousing. The second was the Canadian government's expansion of the temporary foreign worker program, and the third was the growing phenomenon of the working poor. As a result of the above, the strategic orientation of the IWC was to not focus solely on workplace struggles, but to engage in campaigns on the broader issues of precarious labour. Consequently,

the IWC embarked on building worker-led associations which could build broad-based campaigns to challenge the key pillars of precarity in Quebec (Calugay, Henaway, and Shragge, 2011). This meant the formation of the Temporary Agency Workers Association (TAWA), the Temporary Foreign Workers Association (TFWA) and the building of a coalition against precarious work, which included migrant domestic workers, temporary foreign workers, temporary agency workers and undocumented workers from Mexico who formed an organization called Mexicans United for Regularization (MUR). The Coalition Against Precarious Work, created in 2012 has campaigned for a living wage, the right to permanent full-time work, permanent immigration status, and the right to open work permits for temporary foreign workers.

Temporary migrant worker programs have become a central element of the process of creating a temporary, flexible workforce. In Canada, for example, the number of temporary foreign workers under Canada's temporary foreign worker program outpaced permanent migration. Migrant workers are absorbed into flexible, lean labour regimes characteristic of neoliberalism. Meanwhile unionized, secure jobs have been been transformed with flexible, atypical work arrangements characterized by insecurity, low wages, and increased risks to health and safety (Fudge and Vosko, 2003). In Quebec, nearly 90,000 temporary foreign workers and roughly 19,000 in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program come mainly from Central America. They face constant abuse, low pay and inability to access their rights because they are on closed work permits.

In 2013 when the IWC supported the formation of the Temporary Agency Workers Association (TAWA-ATTAP)[4], it was led by 30 immigrant workers who worked for temporary employment agencies (temp agencies) in Montreal. TAWA-ATTAP organizes social events, general assemblies, rights workshops, and does consistent outreach in workplaces and neighbourhoods with high numbers of temp agency workers. Importantly, TAWA-ATTAP is worker-led, ensuring that political priorities and outreach (for example, around issues of workplace health and safety or access to permanent work) are always dictated by the members themselves. Canada has also witnessed a growth of asylum seekers who have applied for refugee status but remain in limbo with temporary status. Many of them seek work through temp agencies, agencies,

that 'racialize'[5] these workers exploiting their lack of 'Canadian experience' (Vosko, 2000) and they end up in warehousing, food processing, and other occupations deemed low-wage, dangerous, and precarious (Hanley et al., 2018).

TAWA-ATTAP's outreach and membership focus was around two specific groups of workers. The first, warehouse workers deemed permanent-temporary workers (perma-temps) in Montreal, in particular working in warehouses and recruited by temp agencies for major corporations such as Dollarama, Stokes, Reebok, and David's Tea. These workers were predominantly new refugee claimants, waiting for their claims to be heard. The second group was predominantly women, recruited by 'fly by night' agencies that operated outside the confines of the law that hired undocumented workers for sectors such as food processing and cleaning (Salamanca, 2016). Over the years, TAWA-ATTAP has struggled to organize workers who are among the most difficult to organize within the neoliberal labour market context. Informed by this work, the IWC began to adopt a similar strategy with Temporary Foreign Workers.

The focus of the IWC is not simply to have a worker-led organization to deal with barriers and challenges immigrants face on an individual or collective basis. It is to also link these challenges to broader systemic issues such as neoliberal economic restructuring and its intersection with immigration policies. This showed the critical importance of broader political policy in addressing members' needs. The result of the neoliberal transformation of Canada's immigration regime has meant nearly 1.2 million people live with temporary or no legal status (Migrant Rights Network, 2022). The hyper-exploited have been the growing proportion of undocumented workers. The number of undocumented migrants is now estimated at 500,000. These workers, as a result of their lack of status, have become the most exploitable, without protection, and thus a focal point for organizing within the IWC, especially for undocumented women agency workers. Such creative organizing strategies were necessary to deal with the difficulties of incorporating such workers into collective structures or existing unions. (Choudry and Henaway, 2014).

In February 2017, TAWA launched the Stability and Dignity campaign. It presented demands to the minister of Labour in February 2017 (Salamanca Cardona, 2018). The members of TAWA-ATTAP, mainly undocumented warehouse workers from

Francophone Africa, the majority women, had converging but also diverse sets of issues they faced in regard to their integration and participation in the Labour market. The approach was for broad political demands for improved health and safety, to have temporary placement agencies registered with the ministry of labour, and equal work for equal pay for temporary workers. In 2018 workers saw a key victory with changes to the labour law which included some of the demands of the IWC and TAWA-ATTAP, such as equal pay for equal work, paid sick days, and all temporary placement agencies having to be registered passed (El-Khouri and Benoit, 2018).

Certain things changed as a result of the pandemic. Demands by immigrant and migrant workers prior to the pandemic only got validated during the pandemic. During the pandemic, sector-specific and workplace issues faced by immigrant and migrant workers which had been priorities of the IWC were to become the epicentre of the struggles. While during the pandemic, there was an upsurge of spontaneous forms of worker organizing, the struggles discussed below show the continuity and necessity for long-term organizing that can play a key organizing role during moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Montreal, Epicentre of the Pandemic

While the world's attention became focused on cities in China, or in Lombardy, Italy, and New York City as global epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic, Montreal joined them as it came to face a crisis of the same magnitude. The province of Quebec in which Montreal is located, was one of the first provinces in Canada to put a full lockdown into place on March 24th, 2020, shutting all non-essential businesses and restricting travel out of cities. By this time, though, the spread of COVID-19 had taken its toll. Montreal became the seventh deadliest place in the world (Berube, 2020). The vast majority of deaths took place in the province's long-term care homes, which accounted for 82% of the deaths. By May 2020, there had been 2,003 dead in Montreal, 74% of those who died were over 80, 97% of them were over 60 (Lindeman, 2020). As the prime minister of the province, François Legault admitted, a cause of this was that Quebec's senior care had become drastically underfunded (Canadian Press, May 15, 2020). Under the previous government in Quebec, which had been in power 2014 to 2018, the Health Minister Gaétan Barette had implemented reforms to "optimize"

resources, making community and preventative care subordinate to the needs of regional hospital networks, especially long-term care homes, CHSLDs [Centres d'hébergement de soins de longue durée]. (Leier, 2021). The CHSLDs experienced cuts in funding and lost management autonomy (Siedman, 2015). These austerity measures are what is seen in 'two-tier'[6] labour market segmentation, as critics of these measures in the healthcare network pointed out. The use of temporary placement agencies to provide a ready pool of cheap labour within the healthcare system was exposed. Especially among lower-skilled workers such as orderlies often known in Quebec by their French nomenclature, *préposé aux bénéficiaires*, cleaners, and security guards within the healthcare system undermined the management and standards within Quebec's public health system. A deteriorating healthcare network that was unable to respond adequately to the pandemic, coupled with where places community transmission was most acute, showed how public health corresponds to socio-economic conditions (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020; Whitacre et al., 2021). While elders were the most severely affected, another picture emerged in Montreal, similar to other major cosmopolitan cities. Within the city of Montreal, it was neighbourhoods with high concentrations of essential workers which became a fault line in the COVID-19 crisis.

Particular neighbourhoods and areas of the city emerged as epicentres in epidemiological maps. One such neighbourhood was Montreal North, one of the poorest and most racialized areas of the city of Montreal. It was estimated that 23% of residents of Montreal North contracted COVID-19. The vast majority of these residents were essential workers or 'guardian angels'[7] working in long-term care networks through temporary placement agencies. As Will Prosper, a community organizer with Hoodstock, a community organization that was in direct contact and provided PPE to the community, states; "It's these people who are still taking care of us, when not too long ago they were the people whom we wanted to kick out," (Lindeman, 2020). Montreal-Nord was not the only neighbourhood at this global epicentre. Here again what was laid bare were pre-existing structural issues in consonance with the dynamics of neoliberal migration. As has been stated above, this precarious work is the result of decades of economic restructuring and the politics of neoliberalism. They have transformed the nature of work to create a cheap and disposable workforce.

Challenging the work conditions inside Montreal's warehouses

On March 23rd, in Quebec, Premier François Legault declared, "What I want to tell Quebecers who are not working in an essential service, please stay at home. The more we limit (human) contact, the faster we will limit the virus and the faster we will be able to return to our normal lives. So it's time to be united more than ever." (Authier, 2020). Those businesses that were deemed essential included grocers, companies manufacturing PPE, pharmacies, agriculture- or food related sectors.

In Montréal, by the middle of June 2020, there were 35 different workplace outbreaks of COVID-19, many of which occurred in places with a primarily immigrant workforce. (Luft, 2020). Québec public health statistics show that 20% of all virus transmissions were workplace-related (Santé Quebec). This fact remains the key preoccupation of workers and their communities: how to ensure that workplaces remain safe when employers feel that they can act with complete impunity, even if their workforce is at risk.[8]

Despite the economic and public health crisis, retail e-commerce sales reached a record $3.9 billion in May 2020 in Canada (E. Ng, 2021). Other firms that could leverage their logistics and online sales also attained record profits. Loblaw's reported $240 million in profits in the first quarter ending March 29th, 2021. Dollarama reported sales of $844.8 million and $86.1 million in earnings from April to June. Yet many of the thousands of immigrant workers who continue to carry out essential jobs were left behind. For major corporations and retailers, logistics operations are central to the circulation and distribution of food and essential goods. This meant that warehouses and distribution centres remained fully operational during the pandemic. For the IWC, the pandemic made more urgent the pre-existing issues faced by precarious immigrant workers. Employers who, prior to this had little regard for the health and safety of their workers, when the pandemic began, ignored their pleas and prioritized profits over their employees' lives.

In Montreal, one particular retail corporation that serves as a prime example of this dynamic is Dollarama. On March 24th, 2020, Dollarama was deemed an essential business and saw its sales increase by 20% in 2020 (Canadian Press, March 2020). Dollarama is a Montreal-based multi-national corporation and a low-end retailer which has been the focus of the work of the IWC since 2010.

It operates nearly 1,200 outlets in Canada. As a major corporation, its presence is felt across Canada and Central America. The Rossy family which owns Dollarama,, has accumulated a net worth of 2.52 billion dollars, making them the sixth richest family in Montreal and 50th in Canada (Canadian Business, 2015). Dollarama's wealth is built upon a familiar formula -- rapid movement of goods from the global South at the lowest possible cost. This has meant, in particular, the need to contain the costs of labour. This strategy, particularly with regard to logistics operations, is similar to other major firms.

Dollarama, like many other low-end retailers, was reliant upon a largely temporary low-wage and racialized workforce (Gonos and Martino, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). It employs over 1,500 workers within their five warehouses and distribution centre in Montreal. It uses five temporary placement agencies to get workers for all its warehouse work. Irrespective of how long workers have worked for Dollarama, be it one month or ten years, they are employed as temporary workers (Salamanca, 2018). Much of the workforce in Dollarama's distribution centre is composed of new refugee claimants in Montreal. Since the election of Donald Trump, there has been a renewed crisis for refugees in the US. As a result, more than 60,000 people entered Canada through Roxham Road along the Quebec and New York state border. (Guardian, (Tremayne-Pengelli, 2022). These refugee claimants coming from Nigeria, Haiti, Guinea, India, and Palestine seek their first jobs (as a result of the lack of 'Canadian' experience) through temporary placement agencies. These agencies are looking for a docile and disposable workforce for logistics and warehousing, sectors, as noted above, that seek to maximize profits. Workers whose status is precarious are ideal. According to the Immigrant Workers Centre's report on warehouse work, of the workers surveyed, 38% were from Africa, and 31% were from Haiti (Immigrant Workers Centre, 2019). South of the border, in the US, Amazon warehouses and distribution centres in Minneapolis largely employ new immigrants from East Africa. In Chicago's warehouse industry, the workforce comprises Black and Latino workers. A flexible, low-wage labour force perfectly fits with just-in-time delivery to match just-in-time production on a global scale (Moody, 2017; Alimohamed-Wilson, 2021).

In the early days of the pandemic, workers from the Dollarama warehouse had begun to approach the IWC. They

wanted to make the demand to stay home. Dollarama which was not providing health and safety equipment prior to the pandemic was now not enforcing or enacting measures to keep workers safe during the pandemic. For example, during the first weeks of the pandemic, PPE such as masks or gloves was not mandatory, as COVID-19 had not yet been identified as an aerosol spreader, and this continued even when this became widely known. The reason for this was that these PPE products which were in short supply were being given to frontline health workers. However, the workers at the Dollarama warehouse felt that with the denial of any basic PPE for them, their lives were continuously being put at risk in the name of profit.

The IWC thus focused on doing direct work with workers and workplaces to ensure workers were provided with adequate health and safety equipment. It began distributing sanitizers and masks at workplaces prone to outbreaks, such as large warehouses and distribution centres. Furthermore, the IWC began to focus immediately on guaranteeing the rights of 'essential workers' to remain at home with adequate financial support and access to new government financial aid programs such as the Recovery benefit.

During the first days and weeks of the pandemic in March and April of 2020, organizers distributed 'know your rights' pamphlets pertaining to COVID-19, masks, gloves, and sanitizers, along with juice boxes, to the 1,500 workers weekly during their shift change. Workers became more aware, appreciated these efforts and began lodging complaints with the Labour Standards Commission. During the first week of April, a small group of workers gathered to organize for better protection. These workers, mainly Haitian refugee claimants living in neighbourhoods such as Saint-Michel and Montreal Nord, some of the areas hardest hit by the pandemic in Montreal, making them epicentres both Montreal and globally. While pundits declared the high rates of community transmission were due to multi-generational housing, a common denominator was that many of the people living in these neighbourhoods were working at Dollarama.

As Dollarama refused to place workers' health and safety over its profits, the IWC, along with workers, went public with a press conference on April 5th, 2020. One Dollarama worked from Haiti testified, "Workers at Dollarama's Montreal distribution centre aren't being supplied with gloves, masks or soap." (Tomesco, 2020). The press conference was successful. Workers got some basic PPE.

It was the first victory for these marginalized workers. Yet there was retaliation by Dollarama against its long-term agency workforce. According to the testimony of one of the worker activists about the conditions and consequences of Dollarama; "There was nothing resembling physical distancing on the job. He said he raised concerns with a supervisor and — the following day — he was out of a job. "I had worked there three years; I'm not a thief, I'm not a dog, I just wanted to be safe," said Maxime, who did not want his real name published. "I just wanted my coworkers to be safe." (Curtis, 2020).

The more publicized the conditions of these essential workers became, more allies became involved. In May 2020, Dollarama announced it would cut the COVID-19 premium given to workers despite record profits and immense risk workers took. In June 2020, nearly 60 workers along with the Conseil Syndicats Nationaux (CSN) Metropolitain Montreal, Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ) Regional Council, migrant justice groups like Solidarity Across Borders (SAB)[9] and new formations of essential workers, came together in one of the first in-person demonstrations during the pandemic alongside. This demonstration made a demand to maintain workers' COVID-19 premiums, for permanent jobs and to inform the public about the role of essential workers who were performing very dangerous jobs during the pandemic, yet who were excluded from the 'guardian angel' program (Government of Canada, 2021).

The campaign after June 2020 gained momentum. Through 2020 to 2021, each time it was made public that COVID-19 premiums were to be cut, workers organized rallies in front of Dollarama's main distribution centre. Dollarama would reinstate the $2 premium each time and then promised to keep their COVID-19 premium indefinite as long as the company was deemed essential. This victory was significant in that it took place during a context when the vast majority of employers had cut such premiums.

Cultural workers in Montreal penned an open letter calling for direct solidarity with Dollarama's warehouse workers. It read, "As artists in Montreal, we have a responsibility to amplify the message of Dollarama employees. This solidarity is also a civic obligation for us because it is a Canadian company whose head office is in Montreal, and it is an integral part of the social fabric of our city." (IWC-CTI, 2020). Former workers became spokespeople, as workers inside still felt unable to speak in public. By June 2021,

with the support of the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU), who took the role of an activist shareholder in Dollarama, wokers tabled a motion in the annual investor meeting to ask for a human rights report. The investors rejected the motion, but again Dollarama had to give concessions. The first of which was its admission that agencies were operating inside Dollarama. The second was a promise for a permanent pay increase to $15 an hour. These victories with Dollarama provided lessons.

These workers, though under the duress of the pandemic, came together because they realized that their employer was more concerned with profits than their health. The workers chose life over death. For the IWC, this was the result of nearly a decade of outreach, workers' assemblies, and campaigns. And the pandemic brought about conditions in which workers themselves the confidence to go public themselves.

Organizing immigrant working class communities at the epicentre of the pandemic

Another epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic within Montreal was Parc-Extension, a working-class, immigrant neighbourhood, with the highest percentage of working poor in Montreal. According to a study by the Institut national de la recherche Scientifique (INRS), 30.7% of the population of this neighbourhood are workers who live below the poverty line. Many of these residents are employed in essential services (Leloup et al., 2016). Residents are predominantly new immigrants and migrants from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, but also from a range of other countries. Parc-Extension can be viewed as a microcosm of global capitalism. The neighbourhood has become home to a growing number refugee claimants from India, whose numbers have increased 283% since 2018. These immigrant workers are deemed disposable yet essential, as day labour or temporary agency workers. Since 2015, the IWC has focused a series of activities and organizing efforts on Parc-Extension. The approach was to build worker organizations in the community to reach people more effectively and create the conditions for workplace organizing and broader campaigns within their community. The focus had been on the 'Fight for $15'[10] campaign to address systemic poverty faced by working poor residents in Parc-Extension. This struggle has also been inextricably tied to housing and immigration justice issues.

The majority of IWC members in Parc-Extension, work in major corporations such as Dollarama, Mega Blocks, and Amazon but also are concentrated in a number of meat processing plants and greenhouses. During the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, many residents in Parc-Extension worked in a meat processing factory known to have major outbreaks. One major case was at a plant called Concord Premium Meats (Curtis, 2020). In the summer of 2020, 24 workers on the evening shift were affected. During that summer, the IWC focused on outreach, particularly at Concord Meats, which hired workers through 'fly by night' agencies, bringing immigrant workers from Parc-Extension on buses to the factories. Concord Meat employs over 500 workers through several different temporary agencies that all bus in the workers from Parc-Extension. During the first wave, the transport provided by the employer did not meet public health standards for COVID-19. The workers at Concord Meats were stuffed into school buses without physical distancing. "That scares me because these people get on the (work) buses, and they're packed," said city councillor Mary Deros. (Carpenter, 2020). By the Fall of 2020, Parc-Extension had the highest rates of infection in the city. (CBC, October 2020).

The outreach team of the IWC distributed pamphlets and organized workshops on COVID-19, rights in the workplace and how workers can access worker compensation and other benefits. Concord Meat had a track record of complete disregard for its workers' health and safety. Another plant which became the source of a major outbreak was Les Aliments Cargill at its meat processing plant in Chambly just outside Montreal. At least 64 workers contracted COVID-19 during this outbreak. Many of the workers were refugees working through temporary placement agencies. The transmission belt from workplace to community was clear as Montreal Nord, a largely immigrant working-class neighbourhood, was the epicentre of the pandemic. Much of the focus on community transmission focused on poverty, poor housing, and education. Yet it was the negligence of large employers who were deemed essential during the pandemic.

The result of the struggle inside Parc-Extension for the IWC led to the formation of the South Asian Worker's Committee in the summer of 2021. The IWC brought together worker leaders and focused on their development, fundraised to hire a community member as a full-time organizer, and began organizing along

strategic linguistic lines such as Punjabi and Hindi. The IWC fought several cases from Concord Meats regarding health and safety and unjust dismissal, and also, from the course of 2020 until 2021, brought in over 100 workers from the community to workshops on immigration and the formation of such a committee. This work was not solely due to a reaction in the moment; it was the result of organizers being grounded in a long-term strategic manner. The strategy paid off as they were able to respond to the crisis facing the community and mobilize in this political moment. The struggles and organizing inside Dollarama and in Parc-Extension had been shedding light on the structural issues of precarious work. However the catalyst was the pandemic and the response by governments who publicly declared the essential need for workers in certain sectors, while simultaneously not addressing the lack of permanent status that many of these workers faced. This lack of status became a key point for mobilization during the pandemic.

From Guardian Angels to 'We are All Essential'

In April 2020, during the first lockdown, Premier Legault of Quebec posted a video thanking healthcare workers for their contribution, calling them "guardian angels who watch over us and who combat the invisible enemy that is COVID-19" (@ francoislegault, 2020). 'Guardian angel' became a popular term in Quebec to describe essential workers, in particular those within the health sector. This was seized on by migrant justice organizations, who had identified that many so-called 'angel' essential workers' were migrants and refugee claimants without permanent status in the country or access to the same supports that sustained permanent residents. In May 2020, a 40-year-old refugee claimant from Haiti, Marcelin Francois, died from COVID-19. During the week, he had worked in a textile factory and on the weekends, he had worked at a CHSLD, sent there by a temporary placement agency (Lindeman, 2020). He lived without permanent status and was among many of those who played a key role in the healthcare system. However the Premier's words remained rhetoric. There were no concrete steps implemented to truly recognize the contribution of refugees.

Legault's 'thank you for your service' appeared especially empty when his party members rejected a motion by an independent member of Quebec's National Assembly, Catherine Fournier, to recognize the contribution of refugee claimants working in health

care and public long-term care homes by pressing Ottawa to regularise their immigration status. Fournier's motion was a response to mobilizations, especially in Montréal's Haitian diaspora. As noted above, Haitians make up a significant number of the asylum seekers with still pending claims. The majority of them had crossed into Canada at Roxham Road. These protests brought attention to the number of 'essential' workers who had long-pending asylum claims and were threatened with deportation while working and dying in jobs as healthcare workers, often with no access to public services. Essential worker narratives, deployed by migrant rights groups and circulating in the press, combined with a brewing consciousness of how 'sheltering in place', a possibility for many white, middle-class Québecers was not an option for them.

Around this time, the idea of a regularisation program that would grant permanent residency to asylum seekers in healthcare began to be floated in the press, and in June 2020, Radio-Canada obtained a draft paper for the first version of a special immigration program for health sector workers in the pandemic. The program, penned by then Federal[11] Immigration Minister Marco Mendocino, was quite broad in its conception of health care and had relatively accessible eligibility requirements. Most of those who could have qualified for the program resided in Quebec.

Despite the crisis, the position of Premier Legault was, in fact, to maintain his anti-immigrant position. He asserted: "We can't open the door and say, 'If you come here illegally, if you find a job, we'll accept you as an immigrant'. That's not how it works." (Macpherson, 2020). With the immigration restrictionist mandate of his party, Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ), Legault couldn't politically afford to support a generous program that would exceed their promised limits. But when the migrant justice movement gained support from the media, a media who were writing for a Québecois public. And now, thanks to what was unfolding during the pandemic, this public was primed to think about the necessity of social reproductive infrastructure and work, *especially* in the healthcare system. The Premier could not be seen to to maintain an entirely hard line. As a result, he partially demurred, at first proposing a case-by-case selection of asylum seekers.

In August 2020, the federal government announced Guardian Angel program. Quebec-based applicants had to apply for a Certificate of Selection (CSQ), typically a rubber-stamp

procedure for refugees , however eligibility criteria had become highly restrictive across all of Canada. The program opened on 14th December 2020. From then till February 6th, 2021, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) received 978 applications which covered 2525 persons (as dependents were included). Of those only 239 principal applicants got approved in principle and decisions were pending on the remaining ones. (Government of Canada, 2021).

The reality was that essential workers with precarious status were left out of the new 'guardian angel' program and they were also excluded from accessing the basic tools to combat the pandemic, such as COVID-19 PCR[12] tests, government financial support, and later vaccines. This generated an apartheid system which excluded non-status migrants and raised questions such as what would happen to undocumented[13] migrants and those without status who contracted COVID-19. Also, non-status workers without access to PCR tests would be left out of the collective effort to save lives and protect the most vulnerable. For others, despite the grave risk COVID-19 posed, without access to the benefits available to other workers, in particular the Canada Recovery Benefit,[14] they were left with only two choices: starve or risk contracting COVID-19 by taking on essential work, especially in the burgeoning sector of cleaning for public hospitals or long-term care homes.

One of the first actions taken by the Women's Committee of TAWA-ATTAP, in order to gain access to healthcare and to PCR tests for non-status migrants, was to present their demands and realities to the public. The provincial government had informally approved that everyone would have access, however the reality was that healthcare workers had to continue to ask for PCR tests. During this time, too, they did not get access to state support. This led to substantial grassroots efforts by the IWC and SAB to raise a solidarity fund for undocumented workers. It also meant building networks with government agencies and other state bodies to ensure access to these supports. Since a lot of these exclusions emanated from not having status, the Women's Committee of TAWA-ATTAP began to use the realities of the pandemic to highlight the plight of undocumented workers. Alongside immediate demands, the pressure began to build towards a call for full regularization of all migrants. This was in response to the critiques put forth by migrants and allies of the 'guardian angel' program. Many essential workers

-- warehouse workers, cleaners, delivery drivers, care workers, and agricultural workers, most of whom had precarious migration and resident status, felt they were deliberately being excluded from the conversation about essential workers being deserving of status. In addition, we have already noted the co-relation between agency workers and those with precarious status and the alarming number of increasing deaths among such workers and their communities. The actions of the Women's Committee was born of the challenge of pure survival that many of them faced. Then in the spring and summer there were began to be growing calls for full status for all from sectors outside of the IWC and SAB.

The reaction to the limitations put on the 'guardian angel' program by Premier Legault began to grow louder. Paul Clarke, executive director of Action Réfugiés Montréal said, "While it's always good news when asylum seekers are granted status, this measure does not go far enough." Again he went on to remind everyone that, "There were asylum seekers who were working in warehouses all through the pandemic making sure that there was food at your local Loblaws or Provigo". Migrants who were essential workers in long-term care homes were also excluded. One mediatized case was of a refugee claimant from Cote d'Ivoire, Mamadou Konaté who worked in a number of Montreal CHSLDs. He was facing deportation, despite working throughout the pandemic, risking his life. He caught the coronavirus at the end of April, at the height of the first wave. When he recovered, he went right back to work at the front lines. His situation exemplifies the new fault lines in the politics around COVID-19. As articulated by Frantz André, a member of the IWC board and spokesperson for the Action Committee for People Without Status, noting the shift in tone. "When they came, they were considered the zeros of this world…[n]ow they are heroes." (Julie Young, et al, 2020).

The lack of status and absence of any program to regularize migrants came to the fore in the summer of 2020. Various groups -- SAB, alongside the IWC, TAWA-ATTAP, Pinay, Le Québec c'est nous aussi, Guineans for Status For All, as well as blocs organized by Artists For Longterm Care – got together, to demand permanent immigration status for all, not just a select group of 'guardian angels', based on the affirmation that all migrants are essential. A demonstration was planned. The statement put out by the organizing committee "…stressed the urgency of an immediate, inclusive

and comprehensive regularization program, as a response to the coronavirus pandemic and redress for centuries of discriminatory and racist government policy." (SAB, 2020). Nearly 1,000 essential workers and their allies came out to demand a comprehensive regularization program. The march exposed the hollowness of the narrative of the federal government. "While we welcome the regularization of any migrant without status, we roundly reject the Liberal party's rhetoric for what it is: the same divide and rule tactics that the colonial state has always used to quell resistance, a strategic attempt to maintain its hold on political power." (SAB, 2020). The march marked the beginning of a renewed movement for status. Migrants mobilized under the banner of essential workers to demand status. The IWC supported groups of warehouse workers and delivery drivers. In the summer, a group of international students and refugee claimants from India also began to organize for status. Their group United Refugee Council got a petition signed by nearly 6,000 people from the community. The federal government attempted to silence dissent by blaming the province of Quebec for not having an expanded program. During that summer and fall, there were actions by a diverse network of self-organized migrant workers.

The question of status, particularly for undocumented workers, became acute during the second wave of Covid in the winter of 2021 when the Quebec government instituted not only a lockdown but a curfew which the police would enforce. This curfew had dramatic effects on undocumented migrants who were facing deportation orders. According to the law, undocumented migrants who face deportation have a warrant issued for their detention prior to removal from Canada by the Canadian Border Services Agency. The police can enforce this order.

> *A police car pulls alongside the van as it exits the highway. Inside, the silence is tense. "Odette" clenches her fist and prays. Then, as the police pull ahead and move in another direction, she and her coworkers start breathing again. It is after curfew. Although she has a letter from her employer verifying that she is working nights, if the police ask to see it, they may realize that there is an arrest warrant in her name. The warrant was issued after she failed to show up for deportation about a year ago (Foster, 2021).*

Despite having letters, those without status do not have valid identification papers which would become evident if the police stopped them and ran a check. This created immense stress. As a precaution, workers would arrive at work before the curfew began; some would stay at another worker's house that might be closer to their workplace, all to minimize commuting and the risk of being stopped by the police. Community groups deplored the curfew because it disproportionately penalized marginalized populations. They pointed out how adopting effective health measures would make such draconian policies unnecessary. The IWC began to work with law students to prepare a guide for workers to deal with the curfew and what to do if police stopped them. The curfew also began to bring again to the centre of the public's attention, a key demand of the IWC and migrant organizations: enacting a real 'sanctuary city.[15] Under the former Montreal mayor Denis Coderre, Montreal declared itself a sanctuary city at a time when there was also a wave of similar motions adopted in the US by city governments in reaction to Donald Trump's anti-immigrant politics. The motion was adopted in Montreal, but was largely symbolic as it did not put in place any attempts to curb the powers of the police to execute deportation warrants.

During the pandemic, the emptiness and unwillingness of the city to move further to protect undocumented migrants from potential deportations was called out by the borough mayor of Parc-Extension, Villeray and Saint Michel, Giuliana Fumagalli. She had been a board member of the IWC and a migrant justice activist. On 23rd February, 2021, she submitted a motion to Montreal's city council to support full regularization of status. (Local 514, 2021). Fumagalli maintained the adoption of the motion represented a significant step toward protecting the city's citizens. "We have a responsibility to represent the interests of marginalized populations who suffer disproportionate and discriminatory effects from certain measures put in place in the context of the health crisis" (2021). While it was mostly symbolic, it did amplify the movement's voice and put forward resources from the city towards organizations such as the IWC through one of the city departments, Bureau d'intégration des nouveaux arrivants à Montreéal (BINAM). This was a victory for those who had been rendered invisible prior to the pandemic.

Issues related to essential workers during the pandemic would continue to open new avenues for organizing immigrant

and migrant workers. The coalition that had become active during the pandemic organized a major mobilization to demand access to government services for immigrants regardless of status and the right to work in Quebec. The demonstration was organized under the banner of "Immigration Precarity Maks Labour Precarity! We Are All Essential!" The mobilization was successful as the leadership of migrants put forward the experiences of workers and their communities. South Asian migrants facing deportation spoke, as did welders from Morocco under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, domestic workers, warehouse workers and allies from various organized labour such as the Confédérations des Syndicaux (CSN), and Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec (FTQ). The large union centrals had also mobilized to support the workers.

The success of such mobilizations in workplaces, communities, and among migrants represented a shift in consciousness as the willingness of workers to take action grew. By reframing it "We are all essential", undocumented migrants and those with precarious status found a slogan that they identified with, they were able to unite and put forward compelling discourse related to their central role during the pandemic. This did lead to success as migrants used their identity as workers who were essential. It gave them the confidence to mobilize and speak out. At the same time, during the pandemic, migrants' power within their workplace was limited. This was a major challenge to gaining a full regularization program.

Despite the challenges that remain, the IWC began to not just mobilize essential workers but to focus on strengthening and deepening its organizational capacity and leadership. The IWC did this by bringing together warehouse workers, undocumented workers, and workers from the arabophone speaking community who worked in factories and the South Asian community working in warehouses. The IWC worked to develop their leadership through education and building a broad-based workers' council which directs the actions of the IWC. The members who became active were not just a result of the major campaigns waged by the IWC, but of an increased number of workers who filed complaints and challenged their employers during the pandemic. The work of the IWC during the COVID-19 pandemic was a key turning point in the scale and reach of the IWC. However but the pandemic alone

cannot be credited for these advances. The earlier organizing of the IWC has been key.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the fragility of global capitalism and its reliance upon a global racialized division of labour within and across countries. The pandemic devastated racialized workers and communities disproportionately. COVID-19 exposed how our societies were reliant on a racialized immigrant and migrant workforce. Stay-at-home orders exposed structural racism and its intersections with class. The pandemic exposed the structural inequalities faced by immigrant and migrant workers, including how these workers' expendability was a hard-wired necessity for the reproduction of capitalist societies. Those who remained home and safe relied upon migrant workers to grow their food, clean hospitals and care homes, package and deliver the goods to households, keep stores open, and care for those who were sick. These workers deemed 'essential' had been invisibilized prior to the pandemic. Decades of economic restructuring under the guise of maintaining global competitiveness meant the proliferation of precarious work to keep labour costs low, ensure productivity, and bolster the existence of non-unionized workplaces across entire sectors of the economy, in the service of profit margins. The transformation of work occurred in tandem with the reliance upon racialized immigrant and migrant workers. This is because the ideal worker was a precarious worker, whose precarity was created by immigration regimes that did not deter the growth of migration from the global South to the North but controlled and disciplined them to serve the needs of capital.

The case study of the organizing of immigrant and migrant workers involved with the IWC during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the seeming paradox of the 'essential' worker who is also the 'disposable' worker. The study also shows how despite migrant and immigrant workers facing conditions of low-pay, dangerous work, and precarious immigration status, organizing of workers, supported by organizations such as the IWC posed challenges to employers and made public unjust labour laws and immigration policies. Essential workers in warehouses for corporations such as Dollarama, usually perma-temps with precarious status and refugee claimants in meat processing plants or cleaners without status or living in fear of deportation, suffering the devaluing of

their labour and their rights as workers, surmounted precarity and invisibilization through organized mobilization and articulation. In the early moments of the pandemic with all the politics involves, despite fear and the lethal character of the pandemic, and the fact we were collectively facing something unseen for generations what emerged was the possibility of a more socially just and equitable world.

In an era of labour defensiveness, of the weakening power of trade unions in advanced capitalist countries, the struggles of these 'essential workers' for basic health and safety protection, living wages, and ultimately, full status have posed a significant challenge to global capital. The direct impact of two decades of grassroots labour organizing by the IWC began to bear fruit as it built the leadership capacity, relationships, and skills needed to support workers' struggles during the pandemic with concrete victories -- at Dollarama, workers gaining masks, better protection, and a living wage. The struggles of undocumented women who work through temporary agencies to place in the public discourse that there can be no real protection of the rights of essential workers without full status for all undocumented workers were major successes. Beyond these campaigns, the IWC was able to forge new alliances with communities in Parc-Extension, build new worker-led committees along a geo-spatial and community basis. This work demonstrate how broad-based workers' councils are key to expanding these victories and ensuring the sustainability of the organizing work, especially as the sympathy for essential workers and collective memory of the pandemic fades from public discourse.

As in the case of Montreal and other cities, the momentum built has charted a new path for labour renewal led by the most marginalized sectors of the working class. This work has shown that there is not a decline in labour militancy but that it is taking place in new sectors, and sections of the working class. The challenge for such renewal, though, is the ability to build organizations that cannot just bring together immigrant and migrant workers, but ultimately translate that identity of 'essential' workers into building the collective worker confidence. Experience has demonstrated how this transformation fostered the taking of collective action along economic lines and how this action enabled the workers to realize their true power as essential workers. The consequences of such mobilization and action would not just disrupt marginalized

sectors of the economy, but could have a major societal impact. This inherent power that the workers have and are realizing can chart a path to challenge the very structures which have produced the racialized inequality and exploitation that has enabled a global public health crisis which has not been seen for a century.

Endnotes

1. Mostafa Henaway mhenaway@gmail.com is a Ph.D candidate at Montreal's Concordia University, Department of Geography, Planning and Environment
2. IWC started in Montreal in the province of Quebec in Canada. Over the years the work of the IWC has expanded to other parts of the province.
3. Marketized – areas under public or governmental sectors that get privatized and become part of the for-profit sector.
4. The name in French is Association des travailleurs et travailleuses d'agence de placement (ATTAP). It may be referred to from time to time as TAWA-ATTAP. In this article it will be referred to from here on as TAWA-ATTAP.
5. Lack of Canadian experience results in 'racializing' which is unconnected to skin colour but works in the same way that racism does. I.e. it constructs a rationale to justify exploitation.
6. Two-tier or dual labour markets are those in which governments reduce protections for temporary workers who become increasingly attractive as labour when compared to permanent workers who have permanent immigration status and worker protections.
7. 'guardian angels' was a label that was used by politicians during the early days of the pandemic for essential workers, particularly those in healthcare and care in general. While an accurate descriptor it also had elements of paternalism that soon became clear once vaccines were introduced and there was less fear and uncertainty about the pandemic. Then the status quo re-emerged.
8. Since this article was written, the government of Quebec has removed the 5-day isolation requirement for anyone testing positive for COVID. This will impact the spread/contagion conditions described above and has been strongly criticized. For example, see epidemiologist, Dr. Donald Vinh in René Bruemmer, "Some doctors denounce Quebec's 'common sense' COVID recommendations", Montreal Gazette, 4 November 2022 https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-ends-five-day-covid-isolation-period-counsels-common-sense
9. Solidarity Across Borders is a Quebec-based network of refugees, and migrants.
10. 'Fight for $15' is a campaign to wage minimum wage in Quebec to $15 an hour.
11. Canada has a federal system of government with Provincial and Federal

government ministries. But while a federal system, the province of Quebec has special status and jurisdiction over areas like Immigration. E.g. in order to settle in Quebec, an application for immigration must first succed in obtaining a Quebec Selection Certificate (CSQ). Only after this can the Federal immigration process be followed and completed.

12. PCR – polymerase chain reaction tests are accepted as being more accurate than the rapid test, in detecting COVID-19 infection. However access to these tests is not as easy and depending on the context and situation, individuals wishing/needed to get a PCR test have to pay out of pocket and the fees can be high, at times over $100. Since the PCR test is more accurate, often a report from this type of test is required by institutions
13. Undocumented – "An undocumented migrant is an individual who has no authorization to reside and/or work in Canada. The majority become undocumented by falling out of status when they cannot meet eligibility criteria for existing immigration programs after lawfully entering Canada, and have overstayed their authorized period of stay. Only a small portion of undocumented migrants are thoughts to have unlawfully entered, or were trafficked or smuggled into Canada." (Government of Canada 2022).
14. "The Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) provided financial support to employed and self-employed Canadians who were directly affected by COVID-19. and were not entitled to Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. Depending on when you applied, applicants received either $1,000 ($900 after taxes withheld) or $600 ($540 after taxes withheld) for a 2-week period, between September 27, 2020 and October 23, 2021. The last day to apply was December 22, 2021." (Government of Canada, n.d. https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/benefits/recovery-benefit.html, accessed 14 November 2022).
15. Sanctuary cities can be defined as "policies and practices [that] generally serve the purpose of accommodating illegalized migrants and refugees in urban communities" (Mancina, 2013). Sanctuary cities gained widespread attention after an important milestone for sanctuary cities in the USA. (Mancina, 2013). In 1985, San Francisco passed the largely symbolic "City of Refuge" resolution, followed in 1989 by the "City of Refuge" ordinance. The latter specifically prohibited using city funds and resources to assist in federal immigration enforcement, cooperating with investigations by or surveillance requests from a foreign government. Today, dozens of cities in the USA have passed sanctuary legislation to protect illegalized migrants who are de-facto residents of these cities. Concrete policies include Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), which typically prohibit municipal police forces and city service agencies from interacting with immigration officers.

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