

BOOK REVIEW

Aziz Choudry, Jill Hanley, Steve Jordan, Eric Shragge and Martha Stiegman. 2009. *Fight Back: Workplace Justice for Immigrants*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552662977. Paperback: 15.95 CAD. Pages: 128.

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The ongoing slippery slope of neoliberal capitalist restructuring continues to have a disproportionately racialized and gendered impact on people around the globe. The stark meaning of this is that people are more and more surviving and resisting in conditions of often-profound inhumanity. Along with too many cases of out-and-out war, the various forms of combined economic, political and social attacks all are intertwined, causing large-scale displacement of people and increasingly fragmented and weakened possibilities for working-class power.

The authors of *Fight Back*, who form the Immigrant Workers Centre Research Group in Montreal, offer us a detailed primer on (im)migrant conditions, struggles and rights in this context. The book is based on interviews with some 50 people whose lives have been wholly re-organized by their displacement and migration, varying in form with the different market forces and related state-based immigration programs and policies they encountered when arriving in or in order to depart to Canada and Quebec in different periods.

Before exploring a number of these different socially organizing forces and systems, the authors explain the importance of the Immigrant Workers Centre (IMC) as 'a place of intersection between the traditions of labour and community movements' (12). Founded in 2000 by Filipino-Canadian unionists critical of how union officialdom has often treated workers, given the traditional organizing (limited-to-unionizing) model, the core group is now a mix of immigrant labour organizers and allies, all of whom have a range of experience in labour and community struggles. The IMC carries out individual case work, as well as labour education to increase skills and analysis, and builds union-community relationships, through campaigns 'that reflect the general issues facing immigrant workers, such as dismissal, problems with employers or, sometimes, inadequate representation by their unions' (11).

A key piece of the context for the IMC activity is the historic organization of migration to Canada, spanning over four periods of white-settler colony and nation-state building. Slavery, indentured labour, modern-day displacement in the global South, the dispossession and 'triple exploitation' (31) of Indigenous peoples, and the historic favouring of white migrants have all led to an ongoing 'racialized hegemony that underpins immigration and labour market policies' which plays out in 'contemporary Canadian immigration, labour and other policy frameworks [that] maintain a regime where different categories of workers enjoy deeply unequal rights' (16).

Neoliberal restructuring, starting in the 1970s, has deepened the racialized class character of Canadian social life through the casualization and expanded precariousness of work with new job creation largely in part-time, service sector work in which migrants of colour are over-represented. The late-1960s origin points system for independent immigration, the 1995 \$975 head tax, and the various and expanding temporary worker programs of the last four decades, are all state-organized and market-driven mechanisms that have resulted in the 'commodification of immigrants' (19).

The generalized experiences of immigrant workers, across the various programs that organize migration, are summarized by the concept of 'learning in reverse.' This learning is a process of socialization into the immigrant worker category and experience, involving various degrees of accommodation to poor economic conditions and possibilities, as well as denial of class and social position, educational background, and often of hiding skills and expertise to get access to the low-paid jobs that are generally available to immigrants. It is also about loss through the process of accepting disappointment and injustice, and a self-redefinition to less than one's full humanity. This is fundamentally about survival in a context that also sees major inequities in migrants' access to legal and social rights.

Fight Back focuses on two significant and longstanding temporary migrant worker programs in Canada, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker and Live-in Caregiver Programs (SAWP and LCP). The endurance of these programs demonstrates how the labour shortages they are addressing are not temporary, even if the workers are treated as such. The organization of the SAWP on the basis of low-wages, precarity, isolation and vulnerability is a case of 'an explicitly racialized underclass' (60). Yet SAWP workers continue to apply to the program because of few options in their home countries. And, like LCP workers, the remittances to family back home are a huge driving force for workers to endure the multiple harsh workplace

and life conditions, not limited to but involving long hours, no overtime pay and threats of job loss and deportation when they are ill or injured.

The LCP workers are mainly women, who also labour in often quite difficult and under-paid conditions, a reality that is partly socially condoned by the historical undervaluing of this gendered and, in this case, racialized form of work. While its early incarnation – the Caribbean Domestic Scheme – granted permanent residency status right away, LCP workers now must wait until they complete their two-year contracts before making such application. This is a deeply material demonstration of the impact of neoliberal policies of precarity on thousands of peoples' lives. And it plays out in profoundly disrespectful day-to-day forms, in conditions women must put up with, one of whom interviewed graphically described as being 'treated...like an idiot' by her employer (79).

In the face of such inhumanity, (im)migrant workers are living a complex mix of survival, adaptation and resistance. Learning in reverse is accompanied by often-courageous acts to restore and maintain dignity and demand respect from abusive employers. Many different types of organizations have developed to try to support individuals and collectivize this when possible.

What I experienced as breathlessness in the writing style of the book seems to be about the real urgency and commitment of the authors to migrants they interviewed and the complexity of supporting their ongoing resistance in increasingly challenging conditions. What I was not entirely sure about was for whom this book was written, largely because of the not fully explicated theoretical frame. The anti-capitalist, anti-racist working class politics is unmistakable but the full meaning of this for the authors – beyond the 'anti' – is not clear. And some key concepts – such as 'material conditions' – are left unexplained. Given it is such an important primer, a better explicated theory of social organization and change would have been extremely valuable.