

The empire's new clothes: Where does boutique capitalism leave Montreal's garment workers?

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Walk down Chabanel Street on a weekday afternoon at 3:00 p.m. and you will see people streaming out of the large buildings that line the street, housing the factories that make this the center of the garment district of Montreal. Earlier located in Mile End and before that downtown, the garment industry has historically been an entry point for immigrants into the local economy. Now the future is uncertain for its thousands of workers. In the last five years, there has been a steady decline in manufacturing jobs in the garment industry, the direct consequence of a WTO-GATT mandated ending of quotas and tariffs on garments between 1994 and 2005 and the shift of garment manufacturing jobs to lower wage regions such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China and increases in importing the products to Canada.

Since 2003 Canadian apparel manufacturing shipments have declined. Imports have gone up, for example 2004-2006 those from China have risen by 52%. In Canada, between 2003 and 2006, clothing manufacturing for its domestic market has decreased by 41% with a corresponding drop of employment by 31.7%. With the changes in production, between 2000 and 2006, there was a loss of 25,000 jobs in Quebec; production has dropped by 40%. Between 2004 and 2006 the total number of employees declined by 10,106 while revenue for the companies increased by \$905,117. In other words, with its reduced workforce and off-shore production these companies made more profits.

The garment factories that operate in Montreal have been steadily laying off workers. Many have circumvented their legal obligation to provide adequate compensation by avoiding the appearance of mass layoffs and letting workers go in ones and twos. In September 2007, a worker at L'Amour Inc. who had been abruptly laid off after fifteen years came to the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) and asked if there was anything we could do to help him obtain fair compensation for his years of loyal service to the company. This was the beginning of the IWC's campaign to mobilize and fight for justice for garment workers at L'Amour Inc., a 55-year-old Montreal clothing manufacturer with 2,500 employees worldwide. The campaign has expanded to include 70 workers, some of whom worked for L'Amour for as many as thirty years and are now jobless.

Interviews with the workers reveal the depth of their anger and frustration with L'Amour. One former employee, S, recounted how he had worked for forty hours a week for thirteen years, but was then laid off by L'Amour with no compensation beyond what he had earned. In our conversation, he emphasized how skilled he was, consistently pressing as many as 11,000 socks a day: "I was one of the special guys on the tube machine. Nobody like me." E, who had worked as a knitter's helper for five years and then as a knitter for ten years until he was laid off by L'Amour, also emphasized his skill and dedication to his work, and his sense of outrage that he had been so little valued: "I gave thirteen years of my life to them, and what I got, I got nothing."

Both workers also pointed to problems with their working conditions. They noted that workers on the night shift were locked in, often having to wait half an hour after their shift for the security guard to unlock the main door and let them out. E said that workers had to work continuously for eight hour shifts: "During that time we had no break. The machine was running. We have no

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choice to go to eating place, to cafeteria, get fresh air." E was especially vexed by the fact that the L'Amour management played favorites among workers: "If they like employees, they say 'OK OK OK, we want to keep that person.' Let's say I have no back up. Some person back up the person. I hadn't back up. If I had back up, I still working at L'Amour. That's the policy at L'Amour. Let's say you are manager, you are so close to me, you save me, you say, 'Don't touch this person, I recommend this person.'"

"But we are all good. We are all able to work. We are all skilled...so why I need that person to back me up. I know how to work. I know how to work 25 machines. I was working long time. 10 years I was knitter, 5 years I was knitter's helper. Why I need someone to help me?"

When we asked them about the union to which they had belonged, they said that it was in fact a union established by the management which they were forced to join, under the threat that they would lose their jobs. S recalls: "Everybody need the job, so everybody scared. They gave the vote to the union. Not just me, so many people gave the vote. The management want the union." E describes the pressure that was put on workers to join the management's in-house union: "After that time some people against the union, they fire those people. At that time it was torture, because we were scared. We were scared that they would ask if we had joined the union. It was a kind of mental torture." The union that the management established was a complete sham: "So many people had questions about the union, about personal life—insurance, whatever, but nobody listened there. They made a room for the union, but nobody sat there. There was a table and a chair, but nobody came!" By setting up a fake union, the management effectively kept workers from forming a real union that would fight for their interests.

Now, these workers have come together to challenge L'Amour's practices and to get just compensation. E explained how he learned of the L'Amour campaign. "My sister-in-law's friend, she told me, you have the right to at least speak up. Why you hiding. That's why I came here to meet you. And this is the story. They are treating me like an animal, not like a human being." Asked about what they hoped to achieve through the IWC, E said, "They get organized. They have the right to say something and they do. They are doing. Something could happen. I want to see people organized—they have the right to say something. They are trying to speak." The struggle for many of the workers is for more than monetary compensation. S and E were dissatisfied with their employers' lack of appreciation and recompense for their many years of unstinting work. As E put it, "What is the worker's worth? Somebody is torturing. I cannot explain that feeling. It's not a question of my salary. It's a question of my dignity. My personality, my working identity, and my experience, they are healing."

The Context of Textile/Apparel Manufacturing

The story of the changing context of the textile industry in Montreal is the same as that in many developed capitalist nations. Montreal is the Canadian centre of the garment industry with 75% of the jobs in manufacturing in Quebec and 62.3% of Quebec's garment manufacturing

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establishments are in Montreal. Traditionally, the textile and apparel sector has drawn from migrant workers, initially from rural to urban-small single-industry towns or large cities-or from other countries at times Eastern and Southern Europe and now from all corners of the 'Global South'. These workers with a high number of women have been subject to the ups and downs in the sector and have attempted to protect themselves through some of the most important union struggles in the history of the movement in Quebec. Currently, shifts in production from so-called developed capitalist countries to the South is the way that companies have been able to reduce their production costs and increase access to an unregulated market in labour.

There have been major consequences for many workers who have lost jobs and for others who are hired in small sub-contracting production and who face only precarious situations. Further, companies argue that if they do not move their production 'off-shore', they will no longer be profitable, and would close down. In the cases of the larger textile and apparel companies in Montreal this is not the case. These companies are profitable and the moves are designed to increase their profits, at the expense of those workers who over many years contributed to building these companies. In addition, these companies, in different ways, have received support from different levels of government such as grants to support technology development and municipal subsidies for their buildings; yet these same governments have either not demanded the companies remain or indirectly encouraged their moving.

The governmental response to this crisis entirely neglects the needs of the workers who are its worst victims. Governments have given up on large-scale mass production for an international market. They propose instead to foster niche production focusing on design and the use of advanced technology, and to promote Montreal as a fashion center and to develop niche brands, with an emphasis on creativity and technological advancement.

To support this vision the government has been pouring resources into convening trade commissions, funding trade missions, high tech research and development, and the redesigning of the garment district. The City of Montreal wants to revitalize Chabanel Street, the centre of the textile industry. This would further displace manufacturing and pre-supposes that textile and apparel production is finished. Judging from the vision spelled out in government policy brochures, the workers who have spent years of their labour in manufacturing and have built the sector appear to be completely irrelevant and dispensable.

The Immigrant Workers Centre

The IWC was founded in 2000 by a small group composed of Filipino-Canadian union and former union organizers and their allies, activists and academics. The idea of the centre grew out of the experience of two of the founders who had worked as union organizers. The activities of the IWC include individual rights counselling, popular education and political campaigns that reflect the general issues facing immigrant workers, such as dismissal, problems with employers or, sometimes, inadequate representation by their unions. Labor education is a priority; the IWC has focused on targeting organizations in the community and increasing

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workers' skills and analysis. The IWC has held workshops on themes such as the history of the labour movement, the Labour Standards Act and collective organizing processes. In addition, the IWC supports union organizing in workplaces where there is a high concentration of immigrant workers.

Campaigns are viewed not only as a way to make specific gains for immigrant workers but also a way to educate the wider community about the issues that they face. For example, because many immigrant workers do not work in unionized shops, the Labour Standards Act provides one of non-unionized workers' few recourses against their employers. Along with many other groups in Quebec, the IWC became involved in a campaign to reform the Labour Standards Act in 2002. The IWC brought to the campaign specific concerns including the exclusion of domestic workers from this Act and the difficulty in accessing information on workers' rights. In 2003, several victories were won, including the coverage of domestic workers by the reformed Labour Standards. However, despite the reforms won in this province-wide campaign, the Act still has many inadequacies in protecting workers in precarious and irregular jobs.

Overall, the IWC is a place of intersection between the traditions of the labour and community movements. The IWC works at both levels with the goals of serving, organizing and educating those who are not unionized. At the same time, it supports workers' efforts to unionize and to help them get adequate services from their unions. The IWC is a place that brings together union, community and student activists, people of different ages, ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds to work together for social justice for immigrant workers.

Mobilizing Against the Lay-offs

How to respond to lay-offs? What goals can be established in the context of these lay-offs? First of all, one would expect the union to protect its members and at the very least negotiate a decent lay-off package. The union at L'Amour, however, was one put in place by the bosses as a way to circumvent a stronger worker organization that would actually make demands and push for improved working conditions. It is possible within the framework of labour law in Quebec for the company to bring in an outside union. As the workers at L'Amour stated, the union was useless and did not represent them. One of the first steps the workers in the campaign took was to challenge their union through the Labour Relations Board for lack of representation. The outcome is not yet determined but it is clear in this instance that the trade union was another barrier to overcome. In another factory closure in the same time frame, a unionized company with a strong union was able secure a far better benefits package for its workers.

Do government agencies play any role in protecting workers? The Labour Standards Board has many rules and regulations designed to protect workers, particularly those working in non-unionized environments, setting minimum standards for all workplaces. In addition, this agency has a program for 'collective lay-offs', which entitle the workers to a severance package and training allowances. However, here too the path was blocked. The company had gradually

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laid-off workers and the total number in the required time period was below that required despite the fact the company had closed its production. Further, the company had deliberately circumvented the collective lay-off requirement through their lay-off strategy and by using multiple company names and related lists of workers to make it difficult to track the numbers of people being laid-off. Although the Labour Standards Board would not let the case go ahead, because there were less than 100 within a two-month period, it has decided to prosecute the company for circumventing the law. It is clear that the policies of this agency were designed for large production units and do not respond to the needs of the textile/apparel sector in which 3/4's of the firms have fewer than 50 employees, and a lot of production is through just-in-time subcontracting or homework.

Many of the laid-off workers are receiving unemployment benefits but these are rapidly running out. The provincial government social assistance program does have a program for those facing collective lay-offs but a pre-condition is that the employer has to register with the Emploi Quebec office and acknowledge the collective lay-off. In the case of the L'Amour workers, the employer has not done this.

Up to this point, the institutions that are supposed to protect workers' rights and at least establish minimal working conditions have failed the L'Amour workers. In addition, the governments have not protected textile and apparel manufacturing, instead participating in international trade that has left the workers vulnerable while protecting the competitive position of the companies. The workers from L'Amour have decided that the situation of textile workers is a political question and that they have to challenge both state agencies and policies, and employers, and their union. This is a political campaign that raises the failure of government to protect working class interests and at the same time both directly and indirectly to increase profits of the larger textile manufacturers. The campaign has unified the workers across nationality and language, brought strong leaders to the forefront in the demand for justice and respect. The campaign goes on with a demonstration being planned for the Minister of Employment office. They will present the following demands:

- 1) The Minister of Labour intervene in the L'Amour case and workers be compensated for the years that they worked. The compensation should be 1 year of pay for every five years worked. For those less than 5 years they would have an additional 4 weeks of salary added to their 8 weeks that they already received.
- 2) Recognizing that the current laws and policies regulating lay-offs are inadequate and L'Amour was able to by-pass them, the Minister launch a public inquiry into the situation at L'Amour.
- 3) Because the union did not represent the workers, it must return all of the dues received over the past three years to the workers.
- 4) The Minister force L'Amour to register for a government program for laid-off textile and apparel workers, under the Minister of Social Solidarity that would provide up to two years of benefits to the workers after their employment insurance runs out.

The struggle of the L'Amour workers for justice continues.