



# RECLAIMING STATUS AND VOICE

## THE ARTISTS' BLOC

Aadi Ndir  
Mohamed Ali Ben Dellej  
Amy Darwish  
Carmelo Monge Rosas  
Koby Rogers Hall (artiste)  
Inti Barrios  
Mireya Bayancela  
Mostafa Henaway (artiste et  
représentant du CTI)  
Neil LaDode  
Noé Arteaga Santos  
Urled Comba Rodriguez

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## The Artists' Bloc

### Organization

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) (Montreal)

*January– December 2013*

## HUMANIZING COLLECTIVE STRUGGLES

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) is a human rights organization, located in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges since 2000. The workers the Centre looks after often face exploitation and discriminatory living conditions. Largely because of their status, these people lack job security, as well as access to education and health services, and often face the risk of deportation at any moment.

IWC continues to raise awareness by hosting monthly workshops, training sessions, and biweekly legal clinics. At the same time, it is organizing two campaigns. One targets employment agencies, which hire many of the aforementioned workers. Many

are employed in restaurants, hotels, factories, and in housekeeping, without being sure that they will be paid, or whether there will even be work for them the next day. These agencies exploit their clients, who are hard-pressed to earn enough to survive, and have little knowledge of the labour market, and its laws. Companies using these agencies have fewer responsibilities than if they were hiring permanent staff, and must be held accountable for exploitation. IWC has focused on the difficult working conditions in Dollarama warehouses, which uses agencies to employ 500 mostly-African immigrant workers for a pittance, usually in unsafe working conditions that have resulted in accidents. This situation produces systemic racism: Africans and white supervisors!

The IWC campaign aims to highlight the injustices of the Canadian Government Temporary Foreign Worker Program, created to meet the immediate manpower needs of large corporations, and increase their profits at the expense of people. Until recently, this program allowed foreign workers to be paid 15% less than the minimum wage - the Centre has worked with Tunisian welders working in the Saguenay, and landscapers in western Montreal. Unfortunately, these situations are quite common, and the struggle for respect in the workplace is always necessary, when faced with bosses who believe that exploitation is justified, especially if a person's status is related to the stipulations in their work permit. Quebec's agrofood businesses increasingly rely on cheap and easily "disposable" labour from Guatemala, Mexico and other Central American countries, as well as the Caribbean. Eric Shragge, cofounder, former chairman of the board, and member of IWC's volunteer staff says that changes in the capitalist system happen very quickly, and the level of exploitation increases daily.

The Center also seeks equal access to CSST (Commission de la santé et de la sécurité au travail) services for caregivers. In 2013, IWC launched a campaign to ensure equal access to social services for precarious workers in Quebec, regardless of their status. There are over 450,000 employees in Quebec who work in jobs that qualify as precarious.

One of IWC's goals is to build a labour movement, as well as a balance of power in the workplace and in the affected communities. Aadi Ndir, volunteer activist and community organizer at the Center since 2010, states, "What we really do is outreach work, because we go into circles where we are likely to meet immigrant workers, and

were we suspect abuse may be taking place. We try to mobilize them and give them advice about their rights, according to the country's minimum labour standards.”

The organization provides support services on an individual basis in up to six languages (English, French, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Iranian, Bengali, Tagalog, etc.), whether it be in dealings with the Commission des normes du travail, the CSST, or with employers directly. According to Eric Schragge, it does so in a highly politicized manner, asking clients if there are others in the same situation as them, or if there is something that can be done for them collectively. Those who enter the IWC office are well-aware that their work-related problems are caused by corporations, Canadian immigration policies, etc. They've made their own assessment. The Centre only helps them to identify and deepen their understanding of the facts.

The IWC has adopted a democratic process, which ensures that its direction is determined by the worker-members. These are people struggling to find a sense of fairness and equity in the workplace. Workers are the direct contacts and leading players in organization-led campaigns, or at meetings with representatives of the Ministère du Travail. It shows more credibility when the workers suffering from exploitation talk about their lives on their own behalf.

The organization seeks to develop leaders from the community who can articulate claims, develop an analysis and enlist others in the same situation. No one but people from the field can do it.

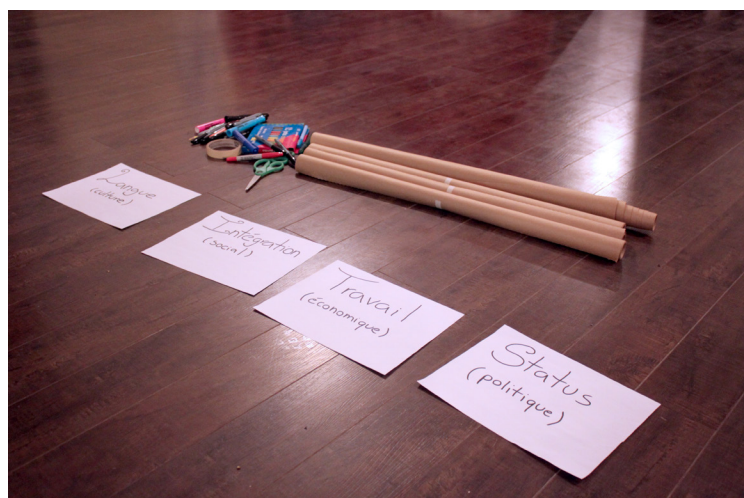
According to Mostafa Henaway, community organizer at IWC, the bulk of the agency's work has always been cultural in nature, that is to say, developing platforms and a means of enabling people to express their own experiences, and not just making statements at picket lines or events. The expression of individual experiences is important for the kind of movement that the Centre wants to create. When people work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, they not only experience poor working conditions or the deprivation of legal rights, but lose their humanity as well.

Activism is part of this human rights organization's culture. Several project members were workers who had already been involved in Centre campaigns for some time. One of the reasons that motivated the Centre to develop an activist community art project

in line with its principles was fostering a sense of leadership among immigrant workers, and their desire to represent themselves and regain control over their own history.

Aadi says, “We explored communicational channels so that these people could speak freely about the difficult working conditions they encounter. It is not easy for this group of people to talk about workplace rights. Essentially, it is done via events, campaigns, or testimonials, etc. Every time, however, we have run into obstacles where people did not feel comfortable enough to describe their difficult living conditions. Perhaps, this project could be a less intimidating setting, or a setting where people would feel more comfortable and less isolated, as a condition to sharing their experience. Art is more flexible and user-friendly.”

For the ROUAGE project, the agency decided to establish a collective of artists, consisting of Koby Rogers Hall, a performer and intercultural art and political activism enthusiast, as well as Mostafa, community organizer, and IWC Coordinator for the Centre’s various art events and projects. This “coalition” allowed for a direct link with the organization to be established, and to make a financial contribution for the work that would have to be performed outside of business hours.



*“Creativity shows a more human part of our struggles. We always see our activism in the scope of demands, victories, campaigns, and we never see it is actually as a struggle for our own humanity as individuals, communities, or society. In order to live in a world where we can all live to our fullest potentials and to increase the qualities of all of our lives and our planet”.*  
– Mostafa Henaway

# HOW THE PROJECT UNFOLDED

## POOLING THE STORIES



Developing a solid foundation for the project took three months (with help from ROUAGE). The period from October to December 2012 was meant for Koby and Mostafa to get to know each other better. The two had already met in other activist circles, especially during Occupy Montreal. In addition to allowing Koby to discover the organization's culture, this period served to clarify the project's intentions, work methodologies, needs to be met, and how the project could further the Centre's goals. While the IWC had already completed artistic projects, it had never dedicated as much time, space, and resources for this type of endeavour.

It remained to be seen whether the proposals arising out of this preparatory period would find any takers. They were presented at a member meeting held in December 2012. This led to a discussion about the direction to be taken, as well as strategies and themes the project could adopt to support and even expand upon existing IWC campaigns. The latter was adopted by those present, who made a commitment to move forward with the project.

The original proposal was to record a series of interviews for the *Migrant Voices* radio project, where Centre members shared their experiences with immigration, exploitation in the labour market, as well as the strength they have drawn from collective movements. These testimonies were broadcast on CKUT radio in the summer of 2012 (available here: [coco-net.org/les-voix-migrantes-une-entrevue-avec-aadi-ndir/?lang=en](http://coco-net.org/les-voix-migrantes-une-entrevue-avec-aadi-ndir/?lang=en)). The purpose of these interviews was to get the group to make a theatrical performance during the *Mayworks* event. Held every May since 2005, this IWC-sponsored event allows various cultural communities to express themselves through art (song, dance, theatre, etc.), and celebrate their claims. Presenting at *Mayworks* was a good first step, as this artistic event would give the participants an opportunity to feel at home. It showed that the Centre had coherent objectives and a clear timeline, and would give the group a working platform for broadcasting and recruiting other members.

From January 2013, a series of workshops to take members through the creative process in time for the *Mayworks* event was proposed. According to the Centre's objectives, leadership would be encouraged through shared workshop planning. Members were invited to host various parts, depending on their skills. Koby offered preparation and hosting help whenever needed. In the last eight weeks, at least four of these workshops

were facilitated by outside members and supporters. This really inspired the group, as well as the entire project's collective process.

The first workshops were attended by a group of about fifteen people, all with different experiences. Participants were able to pool their stories of domination and powerlessness through basic concrete exercises, which contributed to the sharing of experiential life stories.

Some of the exercises proposed by Koby greatly influenced Urled Comba Rodriguez, member, artist, and visual and media arts student, "I'm used to reflecting and taking action afterwards. Here, the opposite was true: we took action, and only then became aware of what we had said or done, which in itself said a lot." One of these inspiring exercises began with every participant receiving a sheet. One sheet at a time was taken out. At first, everyone tried to take a sheet without thinking of the others. As more sheets were taken out, however, people were forced to think about how they could fit everyone on part of the sheet. As Mostafa recalls, "This workshop was the most emotional one of all, because for the first time, people understood their own individual stories, why they were all in the same room, and what they had sacrificed or left behind. It was a breakthrough."

*"We did not necessarily consider ourselves artists, because we were doing other things. I was a temporary worker, participating in the Centre as a volunteer. The project taught me that art is not just for artists. Art is a tool for anyone who uses it."*

– Noé Arteaga Santos

Another exercise involved making objects speak and creating sculptures about power, oppression, etc. As not everyone was comfortable in expressing themselves this way, it was more the external things that created images for people. "This slowly helped us bring about action," said Urled. In another exercise, people spoke phrases, and depending on whether the others agreed or not, they would position themselves on either side of a line on the ground. According to Urled, "I think it showed that sometimes we seem to be in conflict, but in truth, we just need to learn how to accept each other's opinions." I felt that there was room for different views, and that we were confident enough to say what we needed to say."

Some workshops were theatrical in nature (especially given that Koby provided them). This one focused on activist practises such as forum and picture theatre, based on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Brazil), as a way of studying issues related to exploitation. Other influences included Pocha Nostra performance art (Mexico, California), and the concept of cooperation across national boundaries, as well as Teatro Campesino character development/physical theatre (Chicanos of California), which advocates for worker rights. This contributed to creating a balance between the



project's creative and activist elements, while placing them in their respective historical and cultural context, via artistic endeavour.

Other workshops focused on exploring different artistic approaches, depending on the group's skills in the visual arts and writing. One of these, led by Urled, focused on migration maps. Members created a collective work, that involved drawing their personal immigration journeys on a map. While working on this piece, people pooled their stories by discussing why they were forced to make these trips. First drawn on paper, *Migrant Memory* (the title of this work) was then transferred onto fabric with colourful threads symbolizing the various journeys undertaken. This iconic work was regularly used on subsequent occasions.

In collaboration with Laura Morales, Urled then invited people to create postcards representing a place that was once home, and addressed to someone they had left behind. This gave people a tool to express themselves differently, as opposed to starting with spoken word.

Other workshops allowed for other people's stories to be heard and learned. One of these was co-hosted by Amy Darwish, a IWC volunteer involved in project preparation since November 2012, and Marcus Peterson, a IWC intern from March to May 2013. Another one was offered in conjunction with members of Pinay, the Filipino Women's Organization in Quebec. Javiera Araya-Moreno and Alvaro Gonzalez, two artist-activists and Radio Centre-Ville members, addressed the media neutrality myth, and had participants think critically about the current mainstream media, in order to equip themselves for writing their own stories and building their own news. For a robust activist group such as this one, having other ways of getting things done was very helpful.





## OUTREACH AND RAISING AWARENESS

Although the organization's original goal for the *Migrant Voices* project was to present something at the *Mayworks* event, members did not just want to be inspired by stories presented in these interviews. They wanted to build from their own experiences, and expand the skills acquired over previous weeks. The members thus put on five short plays, with physical theatre as their medium (mime and movement), which allowed them to reach a multicultural audience without worrying about the language barrier. It was a challenge for most people, who were doing theatre for the first time.

The plays presented in *Mayworks* focused on different the members' significantly different experiences, such as life without documentation, and injustices committed on the part of hiring organizations and employers. One of these plays, entitled *The Phantom Agency*, referred to employment agencies that advertise as a phone number in the newspaper, and disappear the following day without paying people. *Postcard* was adapted by Noé and Carmelo from a workshop activity. *Dollarama* was based on the experiences in the company's warehouses. It was also the story of Aadi, who had worked there and could see how employees were exploited. *You Must Leave* humorously presented what seemed like an inhuman and arbitrary deportation proceeding, but with all the terrible consequences for those affected. The group had also presented two installations: *Migrant Memory* and *Memories of the Deported*, a banner incorporating clothing in memory of forcibly deported people, inviting the public to write their name.



The following week, the group participated in the *Status for All* march with other immigrant rights groups. This event demanded an end to deportations and detentions, and denounced the double punishment, to which immigrants with criminal records are often subject. After viewing the work performed to date, the group decided to adopt certain workshop ideas and incorporate them in this event. It has, among other things, made giant ID cards, where instead of the usual photography, you could see the face of a person holding their own card and write how they wished to be identified. This activity shows how an immigrant's daily life is categorized according to their immigration status, and how this does not represent their true identity. Neil LaDode took this time to continue his *Mayworks* poetry-slam performance.

## AN AUTONOMOUS COLLECTIVE THAT HOLDS ITS OWN

After the very intense period leading up to *Mayworks*, further project evolution seemed much less straightforward. This period coincided with the summer months, which led to a drop in motivation. The group consisting of fifteen people was reduced to a small core of three to five members, with new people occasionally in attendance.



*"At first I was nervous. Then I was filled with emotion. Now, I am filled with passion."*

– Carmelo Monge Rosas

*"Before, I mostly stayed within the Latino community. It's very rewarding to work with people from other cultures".*

– Inti Barrios



Several members found the project too demanding, due to the number of rehearsals required in preparation for *Mayworks*. As a result, the group decided to adopt a more informal and less frequent meeting schedule (every two weeks), in order to account for each person's commitments (work, family, volunteering, etc.) Along with the commitment for more modest and realistic goals, this decision helped maintain group cohesion during this period of uncertainty. Although at times disheartening, the small group took the time to reaffirm its pride in "holding the fort", and the importance of continuing with the project.

And that point, in Fall of 2013, the core members really decided to appropriate the project and initiate a process of reflection, guided by Koby, which allowed the "IWC Artists Bloc" collective to come into existence. People started to draw up projects and events that they'd like the Bloc to be involved in, often as a result of invitations from other groups.

*“For me, this capacity of change was always the strength of the group. I admit that I dreamed that an artists’ block forms, but this initiative had to come from the group.” – Koby Rogers Hall*

And that is how the Artists’ Bloc adapted their performances to public spaces, and theatrical shows at various events and manifestations. It created workshops to make space for a collective reflection on immigrant-related issues, as well as the creative process in the context of collective struggles. These workshops were special because they promote reflection by using creative exercises already tested within the project’s framework, such as writing postcards, newspapers exercises, and the development of small theatre performances with people on site. On each occasion, the group brings the *Migrant Memory* work to new participants, who use it to log their immigration journey. The Bloc had many opportunities to practise its experiments, interact with the public and encourage participation. Theatre is a good way to get people to participate and raise awareness. Members also acted as facilitators at these events.

Among its various public activities, the Artists’ Bloc was involved in the *Semaine contre les prisons* (No-Prisons Week) by leading workshops in August 2013, as part of the CLAC’s (Convergence of anti-capitalist struggles) anti-capitalist summer camp. On this occasion, the group invited reflection on how migration has become criminalized in the current capitalist system. As part of this event, people made cards with messages of hope for those imprisoned and awaiting deportation.

Also in August, the Bloc organized a creative set during a demonstration at the Immigration Detention Centre in Laval, for detainees awaiting deportation. The event aimed to denounce the Canadian government’s practise of imprisoning and deporting people without status. It took place at the same time as the *Prisoners’ Justice Day*, held every year on August 10 to highlight the importance of preserving the rights and dignity of prisoners. Noé reminds us that 10 to 20 people are deported at Montreal airport everyday. At this event, clothes were hung on the fence of the detention centre, symbolizing the things that the people leave behind. Part of the fence was even ripped down in reaction to an announcement that the detainees were denied visitation that day, because of the demonstration. (English version of the report available here: [youtube.com/watch?v=2o9O89q3f9E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o9O89q3f9E))

Artists’ Bloc activities continued to evolve according to the proposals and wishes of the group. Thus, the group organized its own picnic/workshop in the fall in a Côte-des-Neiges park, where about 20-25 people attended. This autonomous activity was meant to reach out to new participants and promote the group’s activities.



*“Since this project began, I felt that we had the desire to come out of isolation and talk about the conditions we’d been through. This work allows us to pass on the message.” – Aadi Ndir*

*«There are immigrant-activists like me, and others who have not yet learned what their rights are. And I find mutual-sharing very interesting. Sometimes, after we have digested all of the ideology, we can forget what it’s like to be a newcomer. It keeps us in touch. Understanding each other’s path, and building a new one together is a great experience.» – Urel Comba Rodriguez*

In November, the same group represented the IWC Artists’ Bloc by giving a presentation at the *No One is Illegal* conference in Ottawa-Gatineau, as well as a performance at the launch of the Association des travailleuses et travailleurs étrangers temporaires (ATTÉT). This association is run by IWC-led workers, who support and advocate for the welfare and rights of all workers and migrant workers in the province of Quebec. Also throughout the year, the Bloc responded to invitations from ROUAGE to share their experiences or lead creative workshop to inspire people to participate in future projects.

## CHALLENGES AND NECESSARY ADJUSTMENTS

Together, the group has continually redesigned the project structure to better adapt its techniques and strategies to the changing realities of the group. Regular assessments, whether verbal, physical, or through drawing, were an integral part of the process. Each time, it allowed the group to jointly consider the next steps, desired structure, and skills necessary to achieve this.

Changes in functioning occurred as members committed to different parts of the project. Besides facilitating workshops and initiatives, members have begun to take on administrative tasks within the project, and participate in coordinating it. Project tasks were further divided, although some people admit they could have done more. As part of these changes, the group changed the way that members were paid. For events requiring a greater time commitment, one-time lump sum payments were offered to members regarded as “resource persons”. This expenditure was allocated as part of the ROUAGE budget. Koby’s role as an artist has also evolved over the course of the project. She began her work with the group as a facilitator. This relationship then evolved into co-facilitation and sharing of skills by and with members, until every person was able to take responsibility for the group’s vitality. At that point, the artist could soundly admit that she was a project participant.

One of the first challenges was: How is it possible to practise inclusion by ensuring the participation of everyone in this project? It was a logistical challenge to bring together people, who all worked under different conditions. Many work long hours, often on an irregular basis. Some do housekeeping at night or on weekends, while others work weekly from 9 to 5. Domestic helpers only have Sundays off. Others juggle multiple and difficult-to-predict priorities, such as family, children, etc. This challenge alone made it difficult to bring people together to build a collective experience. Schedules and punctuality were often challenges in this project. They led to a fluctuation in participation and a lower-than-expected work pace. As a result, members often lacked the time to express themselves, reflect on their discontent, or build on what they had already achieved.

Faced with this problem, the group’s strategy has been to hold meetings on a regular basis. As a result, the project could provide people with the freedom to come when they were able to, a place they could rely on, and the hope that they would hang on to the group and actively participate in it. The group also earmarked part of the budget to provide meals at meetings, which made it easier for some members to be present, and made the atmosphere friendly.



*«It turned me into a better communicator, and gave me the audacity to speak in front of groups of fifteen, twenty, even a hundred people. That’s courage! I’m discovering that I can do more than I thought.»*

*– Mohamed Ali Ben Dellej*



Another problem arose: How to work with different cultures? From the beginning, the group worked in different languages, mainly in Spanish, French, and English, and needed simultaneous translation throughout its meetings. Because of this, some people found it difficult to follow, while others were intimidated when they were invited to

co-host for the first time. It helped when the group tried exercises such as physical theatre, which required less talking.

Another difficulty was the emotional aspect. When people immigrate, they leave to build a better life, and don't want to show vulnerability by admitting to suffering and failure. A common strategy with immigration is to demonstrate strength, and the ability to cope with roadblocks. Bringing about a change in participant relations was a task onto itself, and gave people the opportunity to be vulnerable, and talk about common experiences.

Another challenge was more technical or institutional in nature. Various partners, such as the artists' collective, Centre coordinators, and project members and volunteers, were involved, even if their roles overlapped. Communication between the latter could sometimes be difficult. Even though they were well-supported, members of the Artists' Bloc still had to find better means of communication and ensure, that main goal of allowing members to take ownership of this project, was shared by everyone.

One remaining challenge involved improving the aesthetic quality of the works produced, to not only ensure member satisfaction, but to ensure that the message made it across. For *Mayworks*, there was not enough rehearsal time, and preparation was too often set aside or left until the last minute. There was a lot of stress in the end, which a greater sharing of responsibility could have avoided.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The following two main project objectives were achieved: giving a voice to workers, and allowing them to express their experiences with exploitation, as well as their struggles for justice and dignity; as well producing art founded on experience, and not on disembodied analysis. Being seen and heard already indicates that the workers have taken a political position that confronts the issues they've had to deal with, namely workplace exploitation, and the invisibility and isolation it engenders. Members were free to express their stories and share them with others, which allowed them to see their common bonds and act publicly.

This process also helped participants to build a sense of belonging, and developed a greater solidarity amongst each other. These people are no longer isolated, but work together with the support of their communities. Urel has felt this group's support, "In one of the *Mayworks* pieces, I had to scream and for me, it was really difficult and troublesome. One practise, everyone screamed at the same time as I, so that I could do it. It gave me the courage and energy to do it in front of people."

The project was also used to develop leadership among IWC personnel, another of the project's objectives. The agency noted that those involved in the Bloc were the same artists who were more involved and visible in campaigns, and were often willing to speak at press conferences and as spokespersons, when needed. In addition to co-facilitating the project, several members are more ready to speak in public, participate in large group discussions. Group support has allowed them to develop that confidence.

Bloc members shared IWC's mission to use this experience to not only publicly show the struggles of immigrant workers, but as a tool to mobilize others and their community. Through their public activities, their work is increasingly recognized in a wider activist network.

Inti Barrios, a native of Mexico and one of the members of Artists' Bloc, is a writer, actor, and collaborator at Radio City Centre in Montreal, and Radio Huayacocotla, "the voice of agriculture", in Veracruz, Mexico. Her experience with the Artists' Bloc confirmed for her that theatre is a powerful tool for raising awareness and helping with struggles. Having survived a car accident in 2012, she appreciates this gentle opportunity to physically and emotionally return to theatre. Mohamed Ali Ben Dellej has been involved in the project since May 2013. He came to the Centre seeking answers to serious issues he was living through, but never thought he would become involved in the Artists' Bloc, where he has since taken on a series of leadership roles.



Initially, he did so out of curiosity, as he didn't believe he would be able to create art, but the other members encouraged him anyway. He likes the fact that art is not just produced for art's sake, but for worker rights as well.

For the organization, this project is a success that goes well beyond its initial objectives. Mostafa did not expect that the Artists' Bloc would ever come into existence. The Bloc supported and made IWC campaigns more visible, while maintaining its autonomy. It allowed for people not familiar with the Centre, or with immigrant worker rights in general, to be reached.

Through the various teaching roles he performed, Koby lived a rich experience. Among other things, the group was presented with the following question: "As artists, how can we accommodate time, scheduling, and accessibility constraints with regards to other members?" She's accepted her privileged position, which has allowed her to be more available for the project, as well as the fact that other members had constraints and responsibilities, and were not always able to attend on a regular basis. Understanding the precariousness of participants' situations helped her to take a step back from leadership when the need arose, while providing some structure for collective goals.

*"This project matches my desire to bridge the false isolation between the arts and public worlds, intervening on the notion that the arts are an elitist practice, and that the public realm has no room (or time) for creativity and imagination".*

– Koby Rogers Hall

She eventually learned to become a participant in the project, to let go of her fears about the future direction of the group, and to trust in the ever changing nature of the project and group dynamics. She has since incorporated the practise of patience as an intrinsic element of her art.

## PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Noé Arteaga Santos est venu du Guatemala en tant que travailleur agricole temporaire pNoé Arteaga Santos came from Guatemala as a temporary agricultural worker for Serres du St-Laurent, a company producing Savoura tomatoes. He was fired and deported to Guatemala after he took part in a "work stoppage" to draw the company's attention to a colleague poisoned by pesticides, who was prevented from going to the hospital. In May 2012, Noé was back in Quebec and faced arbitration against his former employer. He is now seeking refugee status in Canada, and demanding justice from his former workplace. Noé's story was presented in *Migrant Voices* and was the subject of demonstrations, and a public support campaign.

At the Centre, Noé met a few people who are in similar situations as he was, or worse. Some of them work for employment agencies and often aren't paid. This is what

motivates him to be involved in the project. He wanted to do theatre to raise awareness about a situation that the public is largely unfamiliar with. Sometimes, we hear distorted comments such as, “If immigrants come here, it’s because they’re better off than at home. But we mustn’t be silent,” he says. Noé also wanted to reach people who’ve had similar experiences, and see what they can do together to expose these situations. Through theatre, the group discovered how the message can be conveyed to people who do not speak French, English, or Spanish.

Originally from Indonesia, Neil Ladode has been in Quebec since 2010. He considers himself lucky to have successfully performed at *Mayworks*, and in his native language at that. At the Centre, he also met people struggling with employers who exploit them and do not respect their rights. “This project allowed us to express ourselves in different ways, so that the public could understand that society is beset with systematic problems.” Neil notes that his group is more supportive. He’s had many positive experiences, but regrets that his schedule prevents him from participating as much as he would like.

Carmelo Rosas Monge, a native of Mexico, has lived in Quebec since 2009. In the play presented at *Mayworks* [while he was facing deportation], he spoke a few sentences in Nahuatl, his native language. He worked with an employment agency, that had other people living in aberrant situations similar to his. Given that he could not stand working there without protesting and defending his rights, and given that there was no union, the boss lobbied hard for him to take voluntary leave. He thus became involved with IWC, and the organization helped him claim his rights. He then participated in the art project and did theatre for the first time.

Still, Carmelo lived through this experience while in possession of a work permit. “But what happens to people who do not have papers?” he asks. “It’s worse, and disgusting. They don’t exist, are invisible, cannot claim their rights, and even their children cannot go to school!” All the more motivation for him to continue participating in the project. “Sometimes you can fight individual battles,” says Carmelo, “but to go further, we must work in groups, be it with art, theatre, music, drawing, etc. We have very few resources at our disposal to help us grow.” Large companies come and take everything. It’s dehumanizing. As workers, we still have minimal rights. No one says we have to live like animals, without rights, a body or feelings. At the same time, we hear all this talk about how we live in a just and democratic society.”





## TO BE CONTINUED...

At the end of their first year, members of the project showed a continued desire to make their experiences visible, and demand more dignity for workers in similar situations. With ROUAGE support, their project will continue for a second year, starting in January 2014.

Still, the organization showed reluctance when it came to renewing the project, leading to tension and insecurity between participants on both sides. The choice was not easy to make. While not being opposed to the project as such, members of the board felt that it had moved away from IWC's mission, and that its future goals were vague. Admittedly, the group worked closer with the IWC team when the project first started. When the Artists' Bloc emerged, however, there was gradually less communication with the organization, and a lack of attendance at meetings and events.

Budgetary constraints, which ROUAGE is well-aware of (given its sizable contributions towards the arts), and the difficult financial situation of many community organizations, played a role as well. Despite IWC's significant achievements in the past year, the Centre made it through with little funding, and thus questioned the soundness of artist compensation in a mostly volunteer-run organization, as well as the project members' reluctance to find other sources of funding (ROUAGE grants renewals, provided that a group funds 25% of its budget during the initial year). Recognizing the value of artistic work is also not a given.

The Bloc addressed these concerns by maintaining regular presence at team meetings, reporting its business activities, and working closer with the team during certain events. This helped clarify group intentions, and allow for the project to be renewed.

A significant change was made in the second year. Noé, project member from the beginning, joined the artists' group to facilitate project leadership. He became a IWC community organizer and is involved in the "Status for All" coalition, as well as producing shows for Radio Centre-Ville. His involvement will ensure that Mostafa's responsibilities will be delegated, given that the latter is expected to leave later during the year.

At the end of the first year in December 2013, the group held a debriefing session, where it set goals, made plans, and put together a list of themes and artistic means.

The Artists' Bloc wishes to continue its artistic interventions, in response to invitations from multiple immigrant rights advocacy groups. Members also expressed an interest in acquiring more autonomy, for example, by receiving video training.

“The project for us is a viable model because it has taken a life of its own in the sense it has created a sustainable group, that has been able to meet consistency and take into account many of the variables of workers schedules, language, and building internally a sense of community amongst the workers”.

– Mostafa Henaway

