

ESSENTIAL WORK
**DISPOSABLE
WORKERS**

MIGRATION, CAPITALISM AND CLASS

MOSTAFA HENAWAY

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Foreword

In March 2023, a police-led rescue operation of sixty-four Mexican migrant workers made national headlines in Canada. “A single foreign worker blew the lid off a massive international trafficking ring north of Toronto, police say,” read the CBC headline. Media commentators and political pundits focused on the horrific conditions for the workers: mattresses on the floor in bug-infested rooms, threats of physical violence and sexual assault, and being bused in to work long hours at farms, factories and warehouses across the Greater Toronto Area. By constructing migrants as “victims” and a nebulous ring of international traffickers as “criminals,” the police emerged as the miraculous saviours of migrant workers. Meanwhile, the bosses who employed and profited from the workers, as well as Canadian state policy that constructs migrant vulnerability, remained unnamed and unscathed in the media stories that ran for weeks.

Mostafa Henaway’s *Essential Work, Disposable Workers* is a crucial corrective and antidote to such commonplace liberalism. Rather than legitimizing the violence of borders or normalizing labour migration programs that emerge from border governance, Mostafa puts into question the entire structure of global racial carceral governance that undercuts labour power, while highlighting the collective capacity of migrant worker struggles to build mass-based, radical, democratic internationalist labour movements that are rooted in and relevant to the lives of migrant workers. He convincingly puts forward: “No anti-racist struggle for status and justice will be successful without utilizing migrants’ power as workers, and no struggle for working-class justice in our cities will be successful without organizing with migrant communities.” Few political theory books manage to offer an assessment that is so clear, accessible and succinct.

Stuart Hall argues: “Migration is increasingly the joker in the globalization pack, the subterranean circuit connecting the crisis of one part of the global system with the growth rates and living standards of the other”

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(2006: 34). Mostafa's deliberate and diligent work unravels the many dimensions of this subterranean circuit — from labour-exporting states' reliance on remittances in order to access international credit regimes to the nature of temporary work in nearly every economic sector within the rich states. By making visible the borders everywhere, including within migrants themselves, this important book drives home that the geography of the so-called Global South is everywhere. *Essential Work, Disposable Workers* also spells out how the precarity and disposability of migrant labour is specifically because of their *migrant* status. Free capital requires bordered labour, so labour is deliberately immobilized through the border in order to capitalize on it. Or, as Mostafa puts it in the book, "Migrant workers are both essential and disposable, and this dialectic is at the centre of this book's analysis of global capitalism."

Migrant workers have been a central structuring force in the global reorganization of capital accumulation and labour stratification since the 1970s. William Robinson (2007) explains: "The transnational circulation of capital and the disruption and deprivation it causes, in turn, generates the transnational circulation of labor." While immigration law and labour regulations are often analyzed as separate policy areas (and labour movements and migrant justice movements are similarly understood as overlapping but distinct struggles), *Essential Work, Disposable Workers* emphatically asserts that labour migration is a primary global economic driver. Migrant worker struggles are thus at the very heart of today's labour struggles against capitalism. "The struggle for status is fundamentally a question of class," Mostafa compellingly writes. Canada's internationally lauded model of permanent temporariness is a perfected system of managed migration that ensures the steady supply of cheapened labour while further entrenching racialized citizenship. Whether it's the Temporary Foreign Worker Program for farm workers and care workers, or it's temp agencies exploiting newcomer migrants in warehouses for the logistics economy and agribusinesses, precarious migrant workers are at the forefront of confronting the many emerging hydra-heads of this capitalist expansion.

Though the labour segmentation and race-making that marks migrant worker programs is unique, the disposability that underscores labour migration programs is central to capitalism. Indigenous communities, houseless people, single mothers, people with disabilities, seniors, precarious workers etc. are all systematically targeted as dis-

posable within capitalism. In settler-colonial Canada, colonialism and capitalism have been mutually reinforcing. The myth of *terra nullius*, for example, operates in two key ways. First, Indigenous lands are alleged to be barren — what capitalists today refer to as “dead capital” — because non-capitalist regimes of land ownership are deemed “unproductive.” Second, Indigenous Peoples are themselves constructed as unproductive, and hence disposable, for refusing to be disciplined into the labour force. The colonial state’s genocidal attempts to expropriate Indigenous lands and assimilate Indigenous Nations is linked to capitalism’s attempt to drive out Indigenous modes of stewardship that are a direct threat to its expansion. Reproductive and domestic labour is also devalued and invisibilized within capitalism. Single mothers become marginalized as “uncontributing” when they are in fact, as Silvia Federici observes, strengthening a key source of capitalist accumulation by reproducing the very labour power on which it depends. Ableism similarly dictates the norms of productivity under capitalism. Because capitalism defines what is characterized and valued as labour, it ties human worth to wage-labour productivity, hence leading to the predictable explosion of highly exploitative labour migration programs worldwide — with Canada at the helm of this trend, especially since 2006.

There has been much important research and writing about migrant work in the Canada over the past two decades. One of the distinctive contributions of *Essential Work, Disposable Workers* is its principled opposition to left nationalist responses of migrant work. Many putatively progressive voices are willingly joining an essentially xenophobic chorus of scapegoating migrant workers for the lowering of the wage floor, the housing crisis and erosion of public services. Thankfully, this book’s expansive focus — connecting regimes of dispossession across Canada, the US, the Philippines, Mexico, Guinea, Egypt, the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council states — reorients us to the nature of *global* capitalism and labour segmentation. We are witnesses to growing anti-migrant xenophobia worldwide: the closing of Roxham Road in Quebec and expansion of the Safe Third Country Agreement at the Canada–US border, daily deaths in the Mediterranean, suffocation in cargo trucks and fires in detention centres, and the outsourcing of border violence into Niger, Mali, Mexico, Guatemala, the Pacific Islands, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Rwanda and Turkey. Mostafa reminds us that the border creates this scale of death, misery and violence intentionally

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to increase precarity, so that migration can be controlled and managed for the needs of big business. Therefore, in contrast to left restrictionism, campaigns against deportations and for immigration status and demands of “no borders” and “status for all” are expressions of an actual internationalist working-class politics.

Perhaps the most valuable offering of *Essential Work, Disposable Workers* is that it is written by Mostafa Henaway, one of the most skilled and committed (and hilarious!) organizers I know. For over twenty years, Mostafa has contributed to building some of the most dynamic and effective movements in this country, including anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-poverty and immigrant workers’ movements. In *Undoing Border Imperialism*, I wrote about my early days learning from Filipinx movement OGs at the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal, where Mostafa has been a community organizer since 2007. Like any good organizer, he teaches us that movements do not just happen through singular moments or flashy campaigns or individual heroes; they are made with many hands in the struggle over time. In this book, Mostafa skillfully weaves incredibly inspiring and intimate stories of migrant worker resistance, including worker centres in the US and Canada, union-migrant worker solidarity in Italy, sans papiers strikes in France, refugee organizing in Germany and new labour formations of warehouse workers and cleaners across North America and Europe. It is apparent that this book could *only* be written by a movement organizer and scholar. It is unsparring and sweeping in its analysis, while remaining rooted in a praxis of hope, solidarity and transformation through radical struggle. Mostafa argues, “By building and creating new forms of organization and solidarity along class lines, not disconnected from the root causes of the conditions migrants face, we can transform society.” That Mostafa has taken the time from his daily community-based work to write this excellent book and impart movement-based analysis, stories, lessons, strategies, victories and a compass for our future work is a tremendous gift to us all.

— Harsha Walia, author of *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*

Introduction

Essential Yet Disposable

During the winter of 2020, the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) in Montreal, Quebec, brought together a coalition of precarious migrant workers on a Zoom meeting to discuss working conditions and build campaigns to protect the rights of essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The gathering included Julius, a Nigerian refugee who had risked travelling from the United States as he feared being deported. He and his wife arrived on foot, walking over Roxham Road, near the Lacolle border crossing, just like thousands of others. Julius's first job was in a large distribution centre, where he laboured alongside thousands of other refugee claimants, all hired through temp agencies. His wife worked in a food delivery warehouse. Julius had worked less than a year before he was hit by machinery and severely injured.

Another participant at the Zoom meeting, who I'd met while handing out masks to workers at the same warehouse, was Gaurav from India, who did political theatre. Coming from Punjab as a refugee nearly three years before, he is part of a growing trend of Indian refugee claimants in Canada, whose numbers have increased 283 percent since 2018 (IRB 2021). Gaurav was injured at his Dollarama warehouse job due to its gruelling pace and left to work for Uber Eats. Unable to perform warehouse tasks any longer, he decided the only way to secure a living for his family was as a delivery driver.

Ronnie, a truck driver from the Philippines, was also in that meeting. He came to Canada as a temporary foreign worker, propelled by a recruiter's promise of permanent residency. But Ronnie has remained in limbo, without access to a path to permanent residency, working a minimum wage job nearly sixteen hours a day in the transportation industry. He longs for his family. Merlyn, also from the Philippines, came to Montreal to work as a live-in caregiver, working seven days a week, without access to basic health and safety. In Quebec, the home is still not considered a workplace, and thus live-in caregivers lack the protections and rights accorded to other workers. Nina faces much harsher condi-

tions. She lives without status, toiling in the shadows doing cleaning work in care homes after escaping bitter poverty in Guatemala. On the Zoom meeting, she represented a group of undocumented women who face constant threats and abuse from employers; recently they lost two of their closest friends who became very ill from the anxiety and pressures of living without status. Without access to healthcare, those women complied with deportations back to Mexico and subsequently passed away, their deaths a bitter reminder that they had become invisibilized to the point of death.

This group of inspiring and passionate workers all have their own histories but also share a common story and understanding of the injustices they face. During the COVID-19 lockdowns across North America, these migrant workers were deemed “essential,” or, as portrayed by the mainstream media, “guardian angels.” When confinement measures were imposed and borders closed, employers issued desperate pleas for people to replace migrant workers in the agricultural sector and meat-processing plants, healthcare workers such as patient attendants (some of whom paid with their lives), delivery drivers, cleaners and behind-the-scenes workers in massive warehouses to ensure that goods flowed from overseas into stores or directly into our homes. Their stories are not unique to Montreal. From New York to London to Stockholm, migrant workers have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Across Europe and North America, these workers share similar traits: many are immigrants, asylum seekers or without status, come from the Global South and are racialized.

These racialized migrant workers generate great wealth for capitalists inside the rich countries because of being rendered exploitable through xenophobic policies, especially restrictive immigration regimes designed to ensure they remain vulnerable, docile, deportable and disposable. During the pandemic, we collectively realized that our society is unable to survive without low-paid essential workers. Their work is essential to the reproduction of global capitalism but also of life more generally; they are the ones who do the care work in institutions, the cleaning that has become so crucial during the pandemic, the service work and logistics that capitalism requires to function. These forms of work are essential to all of us and underlie our interdependent condition — a condition which came into stark relief with the pandemic. And despite how essential their labour is to the way our global, interdependent

societies are organized, as people they are also disposable *because* they are migrants. Migrant workers are both essential and disposable, and this dialectic is at the centre of this book's analysis of global capitalism. Migrant worker struggles should similarly be at the centre of global struggles against capitalism.

Drastic shifts in migration patterns illustrate migrant labour's direct connection to the neoliberal globalization of capital. Between 1970 and 2010, the estimated number of international migrants more than doubled, from 81 million to 215 million (World Bank 2011). Although this increase has not altered the percentage of people living outside their countries of origin, which has remained relatively stable at about 3 percent since 1960, it has profoundly affected the relationship between the Global South and Global North. In contrast to earlier periods of high migration, the vast majority of today's migrants are from the Global South, and the fastest-growing flow of people is from the South to the North (although South-South flows are also significant). Between 1960 and 2010, the number of international migrants living in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries increased from 37 to 56 percent. By 2009, about 80 percent of all migrants were from low- and middle-income countries. As of 2020, 272 million people in the world lived outside of their homeland. Globally, the number of migrants has doubled since 1990. Most come from the Global South to advanced economies in Europe and North America. The neoliberal project and the globalization of capital have only intensified migration patterns established under colonialism. Even the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conclude that economic globalization, meaning the free movement of capital and goods, did not lead to the expected trickle-down effect or economic development. Martin Ravallion (2016), the former head researcher at the World Bank, notes that previous World Bank policy approaches suggesting that economic growth "would lift all boats" were misguided and, in fact, when the top strata's incomes grow, the result is further inequality and underdevelopment. What we have witnessed has been growing inequality and deeper poverty across the Global South. Certain regions have experienced greater underdevelopment than others, and with export-driven development as a result of globalization has come new patterns of migration.

This book is about understanding migration, migrant workers and their resistance within the dynamics of capitalism as a global system. It

explores the following questions: How do we analyze and understand patterns of migration? What role do migrant workers play in the global reorganization of capital accumulation? Why should we think about migration and migrants in terms of class, capitalism and worker exploitation? What are the political implications for social movements, trade unions and radical egalitarian social transformation?

This book was born out of my experience working with the Montreal-based iwc, where I've been an organizer since 2007. The iwc is an organizing and education space to defend the rights of migrant workers who are on the margins of the labour market. The composition of the workers affiliated with the iwc has changed since its origins in domestic worker struggles. While, in 2007, most came to Canada with some kind of status, now the majority are toiling with precarious status. For me, the iwc has always represented a microcosm of the cracks in global capitalism. While my experiences have shaped the analysis of this book, the implications of what happens in Montreal are broader. Global migration has become central to the reproduction of capitalist globalization, and migrant workers' struggles, carried out under conditions of extreme precarity, are central to the historic movement against capitalist exploitation.

Global Migration at the Heart of Global Capitalism

Though this book takes a sweeping look at seemingly disparate places and professions — from warehouse workers in Canada, to taxi drivers in the US, to cleaners in European states — what draws all of these examples together are the migrant workers that keep these essential industries going. Migrant work is characterized by precarity and exploitation in terms of wage and working conditions, and this happens across the world as neoliberal policies and colonial histories send people from the Global South to the Global North to eke out their survival.

In this book I use “migrant” as an inclusive political descriptor that encompasses people under all categories of status — refugee claimants, undocumented people, temporary foreign workers and racialized immigrants. While I understand these terms to hold different technical definitions that affect the specific kinds of precarity and exploitation people experience, the migrant justice movement has begun to purposefully use the umbrella term “migrant” to emphasize solidarity with

each other. At the same time, the term points to a shift in our work due to increasingly neoliberal government policies toward migration. For example, we called ourselves the Immigrant Workers Centre because, at first, many of the people coming to seek support were racialized immigrants who had permanent residency but still faced workplace precarity. Back then, we used “migrant” to refer only to temporary migrant workers and “immigrant” to refer to people who had permanent status yet faced similar conditions wrought by their racialization (and sometimes, that distinction is still used in this book when the specificity of status matters to the kinds of organizing that can happen). Over the years and with changes to migration regimes, the IWC has seen fewer immigrants and more undocumented people, refugees and temporary foreign workers. This is simply because permanent residency has become harder and harder to get, not just in Canada but also in other Global North nations. Our language changed to acknowledge that. My use of the term “migrant” is a political choice, not to homogenize the experiences of people with varying statuses but to describe the similar outcome of racialized precarity, to build a common narrative that brings strength to our movements. That condition is a result of restrictive migration regimes that have become essential to the globalized capitalist project.

Capitalist globalization causes uneven development and produces mass global migration. Since the 1970s, the globalization of production and the adoption of neoliberal economic policies — in the forms of structural adjustment programs, privatization, deregulation, austerity — have magnified global hierarchies. Major developing economies such as Mexico, the Philippines, Guinea and Egypt — all adherents to the global neoliberal project — have faced dreadful levels of external debt, a loss of domestic industry and decreasing exports, creating unprecedented inequality. The first chapter describes how the failures of globalization to deliver on its promise of prosperity forced these states to turn from exporting commodities to exporting labour power, upholding globalized capitalism at the expense of their populations.

Since the 1990s remittances have become the largest financial flows from the Global North to South. Chapter 2 argues that remittance flows and their financialization have become integral to maintaining capitalist globalization and reinforcing labour export policy. To access international capital markets and remain creditworthy, low- and mid-

dle-income capitalist economies have become locked into this model of neoliberal development. As a result, remittances and migration have been promoted as a new model of development by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. This is mutually reinforcing: countries in the Global South are trapped in a development path of remittance dependency, which necessarily also requires the export of labour. The implications are far-reaching: as opposed to seeking other forms of state policy to redress inequalities created by capitalist development, countries are locked into a model of labour export that separates families, destroys communities and lacks concern for workers' livelihoods. Labour export has become a centrepiece to this neoliberal model, where real development is no longer necessary. This model has been a win-win for the worldwide capitalist class, which requires a constant pool of cheap and exploitable labour, and it has simultaneously meant continued impoverishment for the majority of the global population. Migrant workers have not only been shaped by global capitalism but have now become central to propping it up: the capitalist drive for profit requires an ever-expanding, disposable, exploitable workforce. Here is the dialectic again: essential as labour, disposable as humans.

In response to these global movements, borders and migration regimes have been constructed. Chapter 3 argues that borders serve not to deter migration but to control and discipline a global working class. Border regimes and immigration laws in core capitalist countries in the Global North function as filters, producing those who are deemed deserving as "legal" and those who are rendered vulnerable as "illegal." The illegality of migrant workers has forced many of them — like the good folks I met at the IWC Zoom meeting in 2020 — to live in the shadows. Increasingly restrictive asylum regimes and swelling rates of deportation and detention have whittled away paths to permanent residency by making it impossible for migrants to access equal rights or status, thereby creating a precarious workforce. At the same time, militarization and the extension of the borders — of Europe into Africa, the US into Guatemala, and Canada as far away as Guinea — have unveiled the extent to which Global North countries have gone to undermine the right to asylum and the subsumption of all forms of migration into labour migration.

The politics of border control involves re-engineering migration regimes to focus not on permanent migration but on temporary labour

migration from the Global South, which is the focus of Chapter 4. Despite the incendiary anti-migrant rhetoric of conservative politicians like Quebec's Francois Legault and former US president Donald Trump, capitalists tend not to be fundamentally anti-migrant but rather seek to control and manage migration for the needs of business. They envision migration to be a kind of kitchen faucet that can be turned on and off according to labour market fluctuations. Even Trump's notoriously xenophobic immigration policies were aligned with a large section of the political class. The Canadian migration regime separates migrants' access to status by class and is thus often idealized by labour-importing states: permanent residency and the rights of citizenship are awarded mainly to higher skilled and higher class immigrants, while those low-skilled workers coming from the Global South remain temporary, hyper exploited and disposable. The need for cheap exploitable labour in tandem with increased migration requires the management of migration, reintroducing temporary migration as a key function of borders and the development of capitalism.

Migration, which supplies employers with a vast, low-wage, flexible workforce, undermines wage pressures from unions. Migrant labour has become crucial for filling the need for workers in new service-based industries and labour-intensive sectors which could not be offshored. Migrants as precarious workers have thus become essential to the rise of precarious work. Chapter 5 explores the structural role of temporary placement agencies as a mechanism for employers to effectively utilize precarious and racialized migrants, ensuring a flexible, low-cost labour supply to critical sectors of the wealthiest countries' economies.

Chapter 6 examines how migrant workers are integral to every part of our food supply chain, fuelling the mass profits within global agribusiness and for multinational food retailers. Chapters 7 and 8 consider the place of migrant workers in global capitalism's chokepoints: logistics, warehouses and distribution. These critical sectors and corporations rely on the same strategies in the Global South as they do in the Global North: when the industries cannot be offshored, they rely on a precarious workforce of migrants. Some of the largest employers are fuelled by low-wage, racialized migrant labour. Powerful platform corporations like Uber and Amazon share a common trait: a high concentration of low-wage, temporary and racialized workers who embody the various ways migrants have been stratified by their immigration status to ensure

their vulnerability. Through restructuring of labour migration from the Global South to the Global North, the composition of the working class has been profoundly transformed.

Migrant workers are building new movements, organizations and trade unions. These formations are critical to any renewal of the left. The demands of migrants for status show that mass movements among working people exist and, crucially, that these demands are working-class. Chapters 9 to 12 look at migrant worker organizing from the 1990s to today, focusing on what left movements can learn from these new forms of organizing. I explore a range of examples, including worker centres in the US and Canada; union-migrant worker solidarity in Italy; the *sans-papiers* strikes in France; the historic organizing of refugees in Berlin; self-organized communities fighting for status in Montreal, including Algerian and Palestinian refugees between 2001 and 2006 and Guinean refugees since 2017; and the historic moments in 2006 and 2017 when migrant workers in the US called for a general strike. These moments and campaigns are particularly central to the intersections of migration and class — and to rebuilding a strong left. This organizing is rooted in long, rich traditions and histories of migrant struggle.

From the Margins to the Centre

This book is an extension of my own organizing and experiences over the past two decades. The analysis and understanding I express within are shared by the people I have organized with, from whom I have learnt so much about the ways in which capitalism functions and about how they, despite all the challenges and barriers, fight both individually and collectively for dignity. This book is part of an ongoing attempt to always connect those day-to-day realities to the larger structures of power that keep migrant workers vulnerable and forced to struggle constantly to survive, whether this struggle be for status, decent work, the ability to live with dignity or against deportations. These people who are always deemed invisible are never in fact marginal but are central to global capitalism. These women and men live and work on its fault lines, whether they are garment workers, taxi drivers, warehouse workers or healthcare attendants. They are essential *despite* their disposability, and this is why “A Day Without an Immigrant,” on May 1, 2006, remains one of the largest migrant justice mobilizations in history. Over a million people took to the streets to de-

nounce anti-immigrant reforms in the US when migrant groups called for a general strike of migrants on International Workers Day.

As a long-time organizer at the IWC in Montreal, the “Day without an Immigrant” sent shivers down my spine, as I saw the possible outcomes of day-to-day organizing. This mobilization showed in concrete terms that working people from the most exploited and marginalized sections of society had immense power to bring the economy to its knees. Justice for migrants is not a far-off dream but can happen now if we organize along class lines where people have the power to fight for their status and dignity. The movement in Montreal and across Canada has been critical to building vibrant organizations and communities of struggle for the last twenty years. In the xenophobic aftermath of 9/11, organizations such as No One Is Illegal (NOII) sought to confront growing Islamophobia, racism and Canada’s war on terror while supporting the self-organizing of migrants for status and against deportations. As the movement grew, new coalitions such as Solidarity Across Borders emerged, focusing on the struggle for status for all. As the book highlights, workers’ centres, like the Workers Action Centre in Toronto and the IWC in Montreal, grew out of the context described above. These centres organize those deemed unorganizable by building membership-led organizations that develop leadership, educate workers and organize across race and immigration status.

I illustrate the possibilities and potential for those who seek to rebuild a working-class project against capitalism. A growing section of the working class — migrants — has taken action despite the conditions they face, and they are continuing to organize on a day-to-day basis. I argue that organizing to challenge neoliberal capitalism must take up the struggle of migrant workers and their campaigns, whether for the minimum wage or status, or against precarious work, deportations or racism. These are central working-class demands. In our moment, “no borders” and “status for all” are working-class demands, not liberal or humanitarian ones. The broader left must acknowledge migration and its root causes as central to the movements of the working class; we need to learn and act in solidarity — not just for their dignity and freedom but for all of ours.

This conclusion can only be drawn by placing migration in the context of global capitalism and understanding how the working class has changed, how it is formed today and how these workers are central to

the process of neoliberal capitalism. A properly anti-capitalist left must abandon the temptations of protectionist and nationalist conceptions of class struggle, which pit the global working class against itself. The challenge is to find common unity among a diverse and multi-racial working class. By making the connections between migration and capitalism, we can forge links on the ground, understanding that the forces that dispossess and compel people to migrate are the same ones that have robbed working people of their livelihoods. The struggles of migrant workers connect worker dispossession with broader struggles for freedom against colonialism, part of a rich history in North America, where I live. By building and creating new forms of organization and solidarity along class lines, not disconnected from the root causes of the conditions migrants face, we can transform society. The urgency of our moment demands it.