

NEW VOICES



Menonite
new life
centre

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**Working together to reduce poverty
and enhance newcomer voices!**

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AND MORE

Mennonite new life centre

Identity Statement

As a community-based settlement agency, the Mennonite New Life Centre is a place of welcome, friendship and community, where newcomers and neighbours gather to support each other, learn from each other, and take action together for a more just and compassionate society.

Vision Statement

The Mennonite New Life Centre envisions a society in which all people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds participate fully in all aspects of Canadian life. We will model an approach that brings together community engagement and community services, working together with newcomers to reduce insecurity and reach integration, strengthen voices and increase social equality.

Mission Statement

The Mennonite New Life Centre's mission is to facilitate newcomer settlement and integration through holistic services and community engagement, carried out within a gender justice and anti-oppression framework.

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NEW VOICES

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Full Integration: Voice and Vote

By Adriana Salazar,

Newcomer Skills Project Coordinator at the Mennonite New Life Centre

Immigrant success has traditionally been measured by looking at labour market outcomes. While labour market participation is a critical aspect of integration, so also is participation in social and political institutions. Such participation must have substance and influence. It is not enough for Canada to celebrate diversity through cultural activities that promote intercultural understanding. If our goal is full integration, we must facilitate newcomer participation in the democratic process. Newcomers must be able to exercise their political rights and gain access to core Canadian institutions at the municipal, provincial and federal level.

Formal political participation is available only to those who hold Canadian citizenship. However, even those formally excluded from the political decision making process can and do assert their right to participate. Through grassroots community organizing on issues that affect their daily lives, newcomers participate in the political community, voicing their proposals and shaping their environment. They bring to this task both their lived experience of the issues, and their international political experience. Refugee communities, for example, often bring a wealth of community organizing experience from decades of struggle for economic justice and political democratization in their countries of origin.

Dynamic participation in civic and political life, however, is far from effortless. Newcomers are eager to contribute. Many have a clear political consciousness as well as specific concerns and proposals. However, they often struggle to assert their voice, lacking the necessary knowledge of Canadian laws and socio-political structures, or the necessary connections in the halls of power. Effective advocacy work requires a clear understanding of power relations, both formal and informal. Successful social change efforts rely on solid partnerships with other advocates and stakeholders. Therefore, newcomer voices can only be enhanced by creating open spaces for political participation and partnership building.

Newcomers are now increasingly involved in the political community, voicing their proposals and shaping their environment.

Mainstream partners can help newcomers to overcome barriers to political participation. Settlement agencies, unions and churches, as well as municipalities and political parties, can all play an active and constructive role in empowering newcomer communities. They can provide training on the political process in Canada. They can create inclusive and accessible forums for dialogue, relationship building, and political strategizing. Above all, they can and must nurture the leadership and voice of immigrants and refugees in promoting their own public policy recommendations. In addition to supporting individual leaders, they can also support the development of organizational capacity in newcomer communities to advocate together for systemic change.

In this edition of “New Voices”, we have invited internationally trained journalists, newcomer activists, and members of grassroots organizations to share their experiences and reflections on participating in Canadian political life. Our contributors speak out on a wide range of issues from migrant rights and fairness for temp workers to municipal voting rights for permanent residents and immigrant representation at City Hall. Each of our writers points to the importance of collective action and solidarity among newcomers. Together, their voices give visibility to newcomer struggles and successes with civic engagement in Canada, and highlight the particular contribution of newcomers in linking local and transnational struggles for justice. Whether you are a newcomer or a potential ally, we hope that these reflections will motivate you – our reader – to take action for the inclusion of diverse voices in our democratic process.

VIEWPOINT: THE VOTE

Extend the municipal vote to permanent residents

By Bala S. S. and New Voices Creative Team



© Shan Qiao

Decision making at City Hall affects all residents of Toronto.

On Monday, October 25, 2010, 1.5 million Toronto residents will cast their ballots in 44 wards across the city to decide the positions of Mayor, City Councillor and School Board Trustee. Over 200,000 more permanent residents of Toronto, however, will be denied a say. You see, city residents who are not yet citizens are not allowed to vote.

Despite the challenges of integration into a new society, newcomers work hard to belong, making major contributions to the city, both economic and social. But it must go the other way, too: Toronto belongs to all its residents and its leadership should represent us all. That is why I support a campaign that aims to bring municipal voting rights to Toronto's over 200,000 permanent residents, all of whom are currently denied the right to vote.

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Nowadays, non-citizens enjoy voting rights in many cities around the world. In countries as diverse as Belize, the Netherlands, Ireland and Venezuela, residents who are not citizens can vote in local elections. Here in North America, in Cambridge, MA and Chicago, IL, non-citizens can vote in some school board-level elections. Campaigns to extend municipal voting rights are active in several states including nearby New York. Here in Toronto, a coalition of community-based organizations and individuals, called I Vote Toronto, is spearheading the movement for change.

Why the push? Well, voting rights evolve over time, with new groups fighting for the right to take an active role in civic life. Women won the right to vote in federal elections in 1918. Until 1960, Aboriginal Canadians had to give up

treaty rights in order to vote. Until 1972, you had to be 21 to vote in federal elections. Voting rights don't have to be restricted to citizens. Before 1947, any member of the British Empire could vote in Canadian elections. With our city becoming more and more diverse, it is time for local voting rights to evolve to reflect the importance of permanent residents to Toronto's civic life.

Indeed, permanent residents contribute in many ways. They live, work, and own property in Toronto (for the record, Canadian citizens who own property in Toronto—and their spouses—may vote even if they don't live here). Permanent residents use public transit. They send their children to school in this city—and according to I Vote Toronto, 130,000 Ontario students have parents who can't even vote for their school trustees. And, of course, permanent residents pay taxes here. Despite all this, it's a case of taxation without representation. As things stand now, permanent residents must spend at least three years in Canada and become Canadian citizens before they can have a say on civic matters that affect them from their very first day in Toronto.

I believe that if you contribute to the city, you should have a say in how it is run. Indeed, there is no justification for tying local voting rights to citizenship status. Rather than sidelining such a large percentage of Toronto's residents from assuming an integral role in civic life, why not follow the lead of jurisdictions around the world and allow non-citizens to vote in local elections?

It's time to demand that the provincial government revise the Municipal Elections Act to extend voting rights at municipal elections to permanent residents living in Toronto.

Extending the vote will be good for the city as a whole, signalling to newcomers that Toronto recognizes them and counts on them to contribute their share towards the city's prosperity. The city would reap the benefit of more active, greater and more vibrant participation by all its residents. We're all in this together—now we just need our voting laws to reflect that truth.

A Campaign for All Torontonians

I Vote Toronto is a community-based campaign to extend municipal voting rights to all permanent residents living in Toronto. The idea is that everyone who lives in the city—citizens and non-citizens alike—should have a say in how it's run. Voting in municipal elections is a step toward taking responsibility for what happens where you live.

Anyone—individuals and organizations—can get involved by endorsing and pledging their support for the campaign. So far, 67 organizations have endorsed the campaign, and six of the mayoral candidates have pledged their support to extend municipal voting rights.

The Mennonite New Life Centre is one of I Vote Toronto's endorsing organizations. We invite you to share information about the campaign with your friends and contacts. I Vote Toronto's website is a rich source of information on related issues like immigration, integration, civic engagement and the health of our neighbourhoods. For more information, contact:

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www.ivotetoronto.org



OUR CITY, OUR VOICE

Toronto City Elections are an opportunity for all city residents to have a say on issues that affect us. Only citizens can vote, but all of us can have a voice. One way you can get involved is by participating in all candidates meetings and asking questions about issues that concern you. This raises public awareness of your concerns and pushes candidates to take a stand.

In our last edition of *New Voices*, we explored newcomer employment concerns and policy proposals to improve access to fair and meaningful work. In this volume, we consider issues of civic participation and access to municipal voting rights. We encourage you, our readers, to raise these important issues in all candidates meetings and to ask prospective city councillors to commit themselves to concrete actions that would allow immigrants and refugees to participate fully in the economic and political life of our city.

What is an All Candidates Debate?

An all candidates debate is a public meeting where people can ask questions of all of the candidates running for office in their ward or riding. Anyone can attend, and anyone can ask questions.

This fall, watch out for an all candidates debate in your ward. Sometimes, community organizations will organize all candidates debates about a particular issue or theme. For example, a group of organizations are planning an all candidates meeting in North West Toronto to address immigrant and refugee concerns. For more information, contact Adriana Salazar at 416-699-4527 X 229 or asalazar@mnlct.org

Full Integration: Voice and Vote

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Newcomer Skills Project Coordinator at the Mennonite New Life Centre

Immigrant success has traditionally been measured by looking at labour market outcomes. While labour market participation is a critical aspect of integration, so also is participation in social and political institutions. Such participation must have substance and influence. It is not enough for Canada to celebrate diversity through cultural activities that promote intercultural understanding. If our goal is full integration, we must facilitate newcomer participation in the democratic process. Newcomers must be able to exercise their political rights and gain access to core Canadian institutions at the municipal, provincial and federal level.

Formal political participation is available only to those who hold Canadian citizenship. However, even those formally excluded from the political decision making process can and do assert their right to participate. Through grassroots community organizing on issues that affect their daily lives, newcomers participate in the political community, voicing their proposals and shaping their environment. They bring to this task both their lived experience of the issues, and their international political experience. Refugee communities, for example, often bring a wealth of community organizing experience from decades of struggle for economic justice and political democratization in their countries of origin.

Dynamic participation in civic and political life, however, is far from effortless. Newcomers are eager to contribute. Many have a clear political consciousness as well as specific concerns and proposals. However, they often struggle to assert their voice, lacking the necessary knowledge of Canadian laws and socio-political structures, or the necessary connections in the halls of power. Effective advocacy work requires a clear understanding of power relations, both formal and informal. Successful social change efforts rely on solid partnerships with other advocates and stakeholders. Therefore, newcomer voices can only be enhanced by creating open spaces for political participation and partnership building.

Newcomers are now increasingly involved in the political community, voicing their proposals and shaping their environment.

Mainstream partners can help newcomers to overcome barriers to political participation. Settlement agencies, unions and churches, as well as municipalities and political parties, can all play an active and constructive role in empowering newcomer communities. They can provide training on the political process in Canada. They can create inclusive and accessible forums for dialogue, relationship building, and political strategizing. Above all, they can and must nurture the leadership and voice of immigrants and refugees in promoting their own public policy recommendations. In addition to supporting individual leaders, they can also support the development of organizational capacity in newcomer communities to advocate together for systemic change.

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Why the push? Well, voting rights evolve over time, with new groups fighting for the right to take an active role in civic life. Women won the right to vote in federal elections in 1918. Until 1960, Aboriginal Canadians had to give up

Last summer, Newcomer Advocacy Committee members engaged in a Participatory Action Research process and two advocacy skills training workshops to address the structural barriers immigrants and refugees face in finding good work in Canada. The recommendations they developed through these sessions were then presented at the ground-breaking Refusing to Settle for Less forum that the group put on this spring.

“My voice, coupled with the voice of others—first in the Committee and then in the public forum—is what will eventually change our reality. This is how we are going to change history in this country,” says Mario Roque. Roque, a former radio broadcaster who came to Canada from Mexico in 2000, has been with the Newcomer Advocacy Committee since its inception. He says that the committee has been a space for expression and a resource for coping with the trials and tribulations of the refugee claim process and the challenges of building a new life in Canada.

Refusing to Settle for Less was put on by the Committee’s newcomer volunteer members, with support from the New Life Centre. The forum, which brought together over 150 people representing numerous sectors, marks the Newcomer Advocacy Committee’s boldest step to date in organizing for change. At the forum, immigrants and refugees joined community allies, employers, government officials and others to discuss the Committee’s policy recommendations and to consider more broadly the challenges of employment and civic participation by immigrant communities.

“We hope that politicians will listen to the experiences and proposals of newcomers. The experience of getting together and meeting other people who share the same concerns strengthens us to continue the struggle for change. We know that change does not happen from

one day to the next, but by joining forces we can move ahead,” says Molina.

It’s not only the newcomers who must become job-ready, though.

“It’s important that we’re also working to change the culture of employers and the behaviour of employers to make employers ready to accept these workers,” says Joan Atlin, Director of Operations of the Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council, a not for profit organization working with employers, government and other stakeholders for better integration of newcomers into the labour market, and a forum participant.

Outcomes of the forum ran the gamut from agreement on a proposal to create more opportunities for paid internships, since they’re an effective way of helping employers and skilled newcomers to connect, to more political recommendations, such as bringing back employment equity legislation to require employers to make their labour force more representative of Ontario’s diversity.

Forum participants delivered formal recommendations and policy briefs to elected representatives from all three levels of government during a closing plenary. Finally, forum attendees considered the great potential of community organizing, much like the Newcomer Advocacy Committee itself, as a tool for newcomer communities to secure better outcomes for employers and new immigrants alike.

“There was good organization and good results,” reports Mario Roque. “What’s left now is to continue making more allies to achieve our goal [of more and better jobs for newcomers]. Many people were interested, and what we need to do now is continue what we are doing.”



Oscar Vigil came to Canada in 2001, bringing over 20 years of journalistic experience in Latin America. He is currently director of the online magazine *RevistaDebate.ca* and overseas correspondent for *La Prensa Grafica* in El Salvador. Vigil is also involved with *Journalists in Exile*, an organization that gives voice to journalists forced to flee their homelands.

PROFILE: ADVOCACY

Refusing to settle for less: newcomer policy recommendations for change

By Oscar Vigil



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Hon. Jean Augustine, Ontario Fairness Commissioner, opens forum for dialogue between newcomers, community organizations and government representatives to improve employment opportunities for the internationally trained.

Most are young professionals, but there are also labourers and seniors. The diverse group of newcomers who meet monthly in the basement of the Mennonite New Life Centre come from all walks of life. In this humble setting, they're working on a new model for improving the lives and outcomes of immigrants and refugees to Canada. As members of the Centre's Advocacy Committee, they're pioneering advocacy by newcomers for newcomers.

The New Life Centre launched the Newcomer Advocacy Committee in 2007 to add a community engagement aspect to their existing settlement services. Over the past three years, the committee has opened a space for immigrants and refugees to reflect and take action together on issues of employment and civic participation. The Committee brings together newcomers from many different countries, mostly Spanish-speaking.

"Newcomers face daily challenges. By sharing their experiences and strengths, they become agents of change. Many newcomers have community organizing

experience, such as union activism, from their country of origin. The Advocacy Committee offers them a new space for action in Canada," says Tanya Chute Molina, executive director of the New Life Centre.

Newcomer Advocacy Committee members support, motivate and empower each other to overcome the daily difficulties they face. More than that, they also work to confront the institutional barriers they have in common.

For some, the main challenge lies in mastering English. For others, it's accreditation of their qualifications or access to housing. No matter what the most pressing problem is in the beginning, in the end, the barrier that limits their true integration in Canada is the same: getting a decent and well-paid job.

"Individual efforts are important, but only by working together we are going to be able to overcome these barriers," says Adriana Salazar, community organizer at the New Life Centre, who advises the group.

treaty rights in order to vote. Until 1972, you had to be 21 to vote in federal elections. Voting rights don't have to be restricted to citizens. Before 1947, any member of the British Empire could vote in Canadian elections. With our city becoming more and more diverse, it is time for local voting rights to evolve to reflect the importance of permanent residents to Toronto's civic life.

Indeed, permanent residents contribute in many ways. They live, work, and own property in Toronto (for the record, Canadian citizens who own property in Toronto—and their spouses—may vote even if they don't live here). Permanent residents use public transit. They send their children to school in this city—and according to I Vote Toronto, 130,000 Ontario students have parents who can't even vote for their school trustees. And, of course, permanent residents pay taxes here. Despite all this, it's a case of taxation without representation. As things stand now, permanent residents must spend at least three years in Canada and become Canadian citizens before they can have a say on civic matters that affect them from their very first day in Toronto.

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EXPERIENCE: SOLIDARITY

Together with other temp workers, I made change happen

By Beixi Liu



Activists participate in a rally to expand Employment Insurance eligibility and benefits to help more workers affected by the recession.

Because I was a temp worker, the agency told me, I was an “elect-to-work” worker. According to the law, this meant I was not entitled to public holiday pay. There are 9 public holidays in a year so this means I lost almost two weeks’ pay. I had come to Canada in 2001, as an independent immigrant from China. After a few survival jobs and many unsuccessful attempts to get a job in engineering, I’d finally landed this temp agency job in 2007.

In 2008, after working for the agency for more than half a year, I finally got fed up with the injustice. I decided to challenge it. But when I complained, the agency simply said that I was not entitled to public holiday pay according to the labour law. I was furious with the law but felt powerless, helpless and very frustrated. I’d lost the first round.

In my desperation, an idea came to me - why not see if there is any help available for people like me? I knew there were many people working for temp agencies. I started to do some research online, looking for information. From there, the Workers’ Action Centre (WAC) came to my attention. I found they were talking about the issues temp workers were facing. It seemed WAC was a place for me to go to seek help.

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Through WAC, I learned what my rights are as a temp worker, what steps I could take to protect myself and what strategy I could use where the law does not provide protection to temp workers. I learned that many temp agencies were deliberately taking advantage of loopholes in the labour law. But because the agency never offered me any real “elect-to-work” opportunity, I should not be misclassified as an “elect-to-work” worker and, like other workers in my situation, I should in fact be paid on public holidays.

Equipped with the knowledge and information I got from WAC, I confidently went back to the temp agency to challenge them again. The second round of the battle, I won. I got most of the money they owed me and they had to pay me public holiday pay from then on.

Ontario’s hundreds of thousands of temp workers are very vulnerable to rights violations by unlawful employers. Besides that, our outdated labour laws offer little protection. If we can’t change the law to provide protection to all workers and make sure the law is enforced, more temp workers like me will suffer unfair treatment. I realized that while I’d won a small battle against the temp agency, my personal victory did not address the loopholes and outdated parts of the labour law.

worker labour. While some workers have permanent residence status, others have ‘temporary’ status or no status at all—which equals cheap, exploitable labour. Indeed, as I saw, farm labourers are among the most vulnerable and exploited workers in Canada. Migrant farm workers are excluded from many provisions of the Employment Standards Act. Their living and working conditions would be considered unacceptable to Canadian workers; however, their situation has been ignored for so long that it is considered normal by most Canadians.

Working alongside migrant farm labourers, I began to see that exclusion and racism are actually deeply entrenched in our immigration policies, labour legislation and social institutions. Another myth started to dissolve for me: the belief that not only should newcomers feel grateful to Canada because we come from poor and corrupt countries, but we shouldn’t even complain or agitate for our rights! I connected the struggle of my grandmother, a Bolivian migrant farm worker who laboured in Argentinean sugar cane plantations from childhood, with the struggles migrant farm workers face here in Canada today.

Each of my work experiences after the greenhouse helped me see how social justice struggles in the South are interwoven with struggles here in the North; whether it’s women of colour struggling against racism and sexism, migrant workers demanding labour

rights and living wages, or First Nations communities challenging occupation and destruction of their native lands.

Today, I am heavily involved in volunteer community organizing work. I am a founding member of a volunteer-driven organization in Vancouver called Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers – J4MW, and co-founder of a national network for solidarity with Bolivia. And I am part of other grassroots community organizations, all of which share the struggle for justice, equity and inclusion of systemically marginalized, and often racialized, immigrant communities.

Anyone can get involved in transnational struggles. But newcomers bring an important perspective: we have the ability to make the connection between injustices ‘back home’ and those we face here. We also offer knowledge, traditions of resistance and organizing skills that add richness, depth and meaning to the concept of ‘global citizenship’.

Since I moved to Canada, my identity has become a mix of many nationalities. I am no longer exclusively Bolivian; I am Salvadoran, Mexican, South Asian, Filipina, Palestinian, and Canadian. The richness of my new transnational identity lies in the way my struggles—and my ability to fight back and to organize—have become transnational too.

Protecting Migrant Workers in Canada

Rapid expansion of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program in Canada has raised serious concerns, since lack of oversight leaves these workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. You can make a difference by supporting unions and community groups in their efforts to organize and provide protections for migrant workers. Join advocates like Adriana Paz in calling on government to protect the rights of migrant workers and open up new channels to permanent status that are equitably accessible by all temporary migrant workers.

UN Migrant Workers Convention

Now in its 20th anniversary year, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families is an international legal framework to protect the rights of migrant workers. It includes the right to fair and safe working conditions, emergency medical care and education for children. While many migrant sending countries have ratified this agreement, Canada has yet to sign. Write to your MP and ask Canada to sign this important international convention.



Adriana Paz is originally from Bolivia and immigrated to Canada in 2003. She has a degree in Social Communications and Journalism, with her main interest being community radio and print journalism. She has worked as community radio producer and trainer of popular radio reporters in indigenous and peasants communities for over 4 years. She has been involved in diverse social justice projects working with Bolivian and Canadian non-profit and community-based organizations.

REPORT: REPRESENTATION

Why Toronto's diversity isn't evident on City Council

By Shan Qiao



Karen Sun has been the Executive Director of the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter. She seeks to build a stronger and more inclusive city by running for office in Ward 19.

Toronto is often touted as the world's most multicultural city. It's true that ethnic communities are growing in the City of Toronto, but the proportion of visible minorities on Toronto City Council actually shrank between 2003 and 2006.

"In [this] city with half of its population born outside Toronto, few councillors are from multicultural communities," says Ana Bailão, a Portuguese immigrant running for City Council in Davenport. Bailão came to Canada when she was 15 years old. Like many other newcomers, she once considered politics intimidating. But nearly two decades on, she's running for office.

If she wins her seat, she'll be one of very few visible minorities making decisions at City Hall. According to Better Ballots, an independent organization calling for voting reform in the city, the proportion of visible minorities on City Council has dropped from just 13% in 2003 to 11% in 2006. And yet, in 2006, according to

Census figures, 47% of Toronto's population, or about 1.16 million people, considered themselves part of a visible minority. For example, 11.4% of Torontonians described themselves as Chinese. However, only one City councillor of Chinese descent was elected that year. South Asians, the largest visible minority group in Toronto at 12% of the population, have never had an elected representative on Council.

Why is Council so un-representative of Toronto's famous diversity? One reason might be who is voting. The current electoral system allows only Canadian citizens to cast a ballot and be elected. This excludes all non-citizen residents of Toronto – or some 15.4% of the city's 2.47 million population. With more than one in seven residents barred from casting a ballot and running for office, it's not hard to understand why low voter turnout is as severe a problem in Toronto municipal elections as the lack of diversity in the results (see related article, page 2).

Even those who do have the right to cast a ballot often don't show up on voting day. Only 41% of eligible voters participated in the 2006 local election--significantly less than the already historically low turnouts in recent provincial (52.6% in 2007) and federal elections (59.1% in 2008). Through his 2001 study, "Integrating Community Diversity in Toronto: On Whose Terms?", Myer Siemiatycki, of the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University, found that low-income areas of Toronto with high immigrant populations tended to have much lower voter turnout. Marginalized communities often feel that they have no real voice or representation in electoral politics, so the right to vote loses meaning.

The City of Toronto has an important role to play in reaching out to immigrant communities and raising awareness of how to get involved in civic affairs. The City already has a variety of civic engagement initiatives, from developing educational materials and the Toronto Civics 101 Learning Series, to organizing information sessions for prospective municipal candidates. Newcomers, however, remain largely unaware of these opportunities, or lack the English fluency to take advantage of them. Targeted initiatives are needed to engage immigrant communities in municipal affairs, and to support emerging leaders.

Ethnic candidates who decide to run for office face many challenges.

"Many ethnic candidates face racism, stereotypes and racial profiling. In addition, ethnic candidates are seen as only able to represent their own communities," says Neethan Shan, a Tamil Canadian who plans to run in Scarborough Rough River.

Karen Sun, a Chinese-Canadian running in Trinity-Spadina, concurs.

"People think that you will only advocate for people who are from your ethnic background. This is unfortunate and untrue," says Sun, the Canadian-born daughter of Chinese parents. Most white candidates, she says, would not be questioned about their ability to appeal beyond their own ethnic group. Bailão also notes the difficulty of launching a campaign for candidates who lack a strong network of wealthy and influential contacts.

Encouraging all residents of Toronto to get involved in civic life, says Sun, is one of her motivations in running for City council.

"It would be great to see a better reflection of the city's multiculturalism on council, because having decision makers with backgrounds, perspectives and life experiences that better reflect the city will result in policies that better meet the needs of [all] our communities," she says.



Maytree Foundation - DiverseCity in Civic Leadership

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Shan Qiao is a Chinese Canadian journalist based in Toronto. Qiao has covered municipal, provincial and federal elections, as well as the Chinese Head Tax redress campaign and official apology by Prime Minister Harper. On a lighter note, she has reported on the Toronto International Film Festival and the Beijing Olympic Games. Also a freelance photographer, Qiao has worked for several media outlets such as CNW Group, the Toronto Star, and Xinhua News. Her work and portfolio can be viewed at www.qshan.com

REFLECTION: STRUGGLE

The fight for social justice knows no borders

By Adriana Paz



Linking struggles: Adriana Paz, migrant rights community organizer, participates in a demonstration in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In my first week of work at a tomato greenhouse in South Delta, British Columbia, I was put in charge of posting the schedules. Farm workers checked the schedules each day to find their names assigned to a particular job and section of the greenhouse for the following day. A worker whose name didn't appear on the schedule no longer had a job at the greenhouse—they were fired without notice, reason or consideration. So every day at around 3 pm when I posted the schedule, groups of workers would gather around me in a circle, asking me half in English, half in Punjabi why they were not in the schedule. Most of the workers I 'fired' in this way were either old men or pregnant women—the slowest, least profitable workers.

I'll never forget the eyes of those workers. Injustice was nothing new to me—but I never thought I'd find it here in Canada. I felt both outrage and impotence, and the bitter taste of injustice deep in my soul. Ultimately, though, my experience working alongside migrant farm workers in the tomato greenhouse became my first step away from feeling socially uprooted and politically alienated in Canada, my home since emigrating from Bolivia in 2003.

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It might be because we have one foot here and the other back home, our hearts and spirits having had to learn to live in two places at the same time. Or because home and family are 'here' as much as 'there'. For these and other reasons, many immigrants, migrants and refugees in Canada are deeply engaged in transnational struggles for social justice.

When I came here, seeking reunification with my Mexican-born husband, better social and economic opportunities, and a sense of home, I did not speak English, and I struggled with great feelings of isolation and loss. Not only had I left behind my family, language and career, but I'd also lost something equally important: the social struggles I was involved in, struggles that shaped my sense of community, justice and solidarity when I lived in Bolivia. But after my greenhouse experience, I began to join my fellow newcomers and Canadian-born activists to challenge injustices that cross national borders and to draw the links between local and global struggles.

The vast majority of farm workers in Canada are people of colour, and Canadian farms and greenhouses often have long histories of exploiting immigrant and migrant

I became a member at the Workers' Action Centre and have been involved in WAC's campaign, "Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal." Through this campaign we are trying to improve outdated labour laws to give more protection to workers in unstable jobs, like temp agency workers, and to make sure our labour laws are enforced. Along with other members, staff, and allies from other community organizations, we organized rallies and launched a "Bad Boss Tour" to expose bad bosses who owed a lot of unpaid wages to workers.

I learned a lot about raising my voice and working for change as a member of the Worker's Action Committee. As part of our collective struggle to change outdated labour laws, I had the opportunity to speak with reporters and give speeches at conferences on our experiences working through temp agencies, to meet with the Minister of Labour and speak with MPPs about the changes we wanted to see, to provide the Ministry of Labour with my opinions in a consultation on temp agency legislation, and to read my testimonial at the Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly.

When we organize and work together, we are strong. The collective efforts of workers, acting together through the Worker's Action Centre, ultimately resulted in significant amendments to the labour law, so as to provide better protection for temp workers (see sidebar).

I know it's not the end of our struggle. There are still a lot of issues and problems that need to be addressed—such as better enforcement of the law. We have not gotten everything that we asked for. We need to keep on working for change.



Beixi Liu is an intern-organizer with the Workers' Action Centre (WAC), a worker-based organization committed to improving the lives and working conditions of people in low-wage and unstable employment. WAC brings workers together to fight for fair employment and to provide leadership in our struggle for fairness and dignity at work.

New Rights for Temp Workers

Many newcomers find work through temporary employment, or temp, agencies. They can be a good way to find a first job in Canada. However, temp workers are vulnerable to being treated as 'second-class workers'. By working together as members of labour rights organizations like the Workers' Action Centre (WAC), workers like Beixi Liu have been able to make important changes. "Here was some of my job description," he says: "be ready anytime waiting to be called in to work but without any compensation for 'being ready anytime'; low pay – not a surprise; precarious work – what else could I expect; no benefits – I stopped thinking about benefits a long time ago; be vulnerable to violation of my rights - I knew but I felt powerless. It seemed labour laws did not protect temporary workers. We were being mistreated."

There are about 700,000 temp workers in Ontario. After years of organizing by WAC and other allies, in November 2009 the provincial government finally updated the labour law to provide more protection for temp workers. Now, temp workers are entitled to public holiday pay and may be entitled to termination and severance pay. The temp agency can't charge fees to workers for finding them a job and can't stop temp workers from getting hired directly by a client company. Furthermore, the temp agency can only charge a client company a fee for hiring a temp agency worker in the first 6 months. Finally, Beixi and his fellow temp workers have won the right to stand up for their rights: neither the temp agency nor the client company are allowed to punish workers who ask about their rights.

EXPERIENCE: SOLIDARITY

Together with other temp workers, I made change happen

By Beixi Liu



Activists participate in a rally to expand Employment Insurance eligibility and benefits to help more workers affected by the recession.

Because I was a temp worker, the agency told me, I was an “elect-to-work” worker. According to the law, this meant I was not entitled to public holiday pay. There are 9 public holidays in a year so this means I lost almost two weeks’ pay. I had come to Canada in 2001, as an independent immigrant from China. After a few survival jobs and many unsuccessful attempts to get a job in engineering, I’d finally landed this temp agency job in 2007.

In 2008, after working for the agency for more than half a year, I finally got fed up with the injustice. I decided to challenge it. But when I complained, the agency simply said that I was not entitled to public holiday pay according to the labour law. I was furious with the law but felt powerless, helpless and very frustrated. I’d lost the first round.

In my desperation, an idea came to me - why not see if there is any help available for people like me? I knew there were many people working for temp agencies. I started to do some research online, looking for information. From there, the Workers’ Action Centre (WAC) came to my attention. I found they were talking about the issues temp workers were facing. It seemed WAC was a place for me to go to seek help.

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Through WAC, I learned what my rights are as a temp worker, what steps I could take to protect myself and what strategy I could use where the law does not provide protection to temp workers. I learned that many temp agencies were deliberately taking advantage of loopholes in the labour law. But because the agency never offered me any real “elect-to-work” opportunity, I should not be misclassified as an “elect-to-work” worker and, like other workers in my situation, I should in fact be paid on public holidays.

Equipped with the knowledge and information I got from WAC, I confidently went back to the temp agency to challenge them again. The second round of the battle, I won. I got most of the money they owed me and they had to pay me public holiday pay from then on.

Ontario’s hundreds of thousands of temp workers are very vulnerable to rights violations by unlawful employers. Besides that, our outdated labour laws offer little protection. If we can’t change the law to provide protection to all workers and make sure the law is enforced, more temp workers like me will suffer unfair treatment. I realized that while I’d won a small battle against the temp agency, my personal victory did not address the loopholes and outdated parts of the labour law.

I became a member at the Workers' Action Centre and have been involved in WAC's campaign, "Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal." Through this campaign we are trying to improve outdated labour laws to give more protection to workers in unstable jobs, like temp agency workers, and to make sure our labour laws are enforced. Along with other members, staff, and allies from other community organizations, we organized rallies and launched a "Bad Boss Tour" to expose bad bosses who owed a lot of unpaid wages to workers.

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REPORT: REPRESENTATION

Why Toronto's diversity isn't evident on City Council

By Shan Qiao



Karen Sun has been the Executive Director of the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter. She seeks to build a stronger and more inclusive city by running for office in Ward 19.

Toronto is often touted as the world's most multicultural city. It's true that ethnic communities are growing in the City of Toronto, but the proportion of visible minorities on Toronto City Council actually shrank between 2003 and 2006.

"In [this] city with half of its population born outside Toronto, few councillors are from multicultural communities," says Ana Bailão, a Portuguese immigrant running for City Council in Davenport. Bailão came to Canada when she was 15 years old. Like many other newcomers, she once considered politics intimidating. But nearly two decades on, she's running for office.

If she wins her seat, she'll be one of very few visible minorities making decisions at City Hall. According to Better Ballots, an independent organization calling for voting reform in the city, the proportion of visible minorities on City Council has dropped from just 13% in 2003 to 11% in 2006. And yet, in 2006, according to

Census figures, 47% of Toronto's population, or about 1.16 million people, considered themselves part of a visible minority. For example, 11.4% of Torontonians described themselves as Chinese. However, only one City councillor of Chinese descent was elected that year. South Asians, the largest visible minority group in Toronto at 12% of the population, have never had an elected representative on Council.

Why is Council so un-representative of Toronto's famous diversity? One reason might be who is voting. The current electoral system allows only Canadian citizens to cast a ballot and be elected. This excludes all non-citizen residents of Toronto – or some 15.4% of the city's 2.47 million population. With more than one in seven residents barred from casting a ballot and running for office, it's not hard to understand why low voter turnout is as severe a problem in Toronto municipal elections as the lack of diversity in the results (see related article, page 2).

Even those who do have the right to cast a ballot often don't show up on voting day. Only 41% of eligible voters participated in the 2006 local election--significantly less than the already historically low turnouts in recent provincial (52.6% in 2007) and federal elections (59.1% in 2008). Through his 2001 study, "Integrating Community Diversity in Toronto: On Whose Terms?", Myer Siemiatycki, of the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University, found that low-income areas of Toronto with high immigrant populations tended to have much lower voter turnout. Marginalized communities often feel that they have no real voice or representation in electoral politics, so the right to vote loses meaning.

The City of Toronto has an important role to play in reaching out to immigrant communities and raising awareness of how to get involved in civic affairs. The City already has a variety of civic engagement initiatives, from developing educational materials and the Toronto Civics 101 Learning Series, to organizing information sessions for prospective municipal candidates. Newcomers, however, remain largely unaware of these opportunities, or lack the English fluency to take advantage of them. Targeted initiatives are needed to engage immigrant communities in municipal affairs, and to support emerging leaders.

Ethnic candidates who decide to run for office face many challenges.

"Many ethnic candidates face racism, stereotypes and racial profiling. In addition, ethnic candidates are seen as only able to represent their own communities," says Neethan Shan, a Tamil Canadian who plans to run in Scarborough Rough River.

Karen Sun, a Chinese-Canadian running in Trinity-Spadina, concurs.

"People think that you will only advocate for people who are from your ethnic background. This is unfortunate and untrue," says Sun, the Canadian-born daughter of Chinese parents. Most white candidates, she says, would not be questioned about their ability to appeal beyond their own ethnic group. Bailão also notes the difficulty of launching a campaign for candidates who lack a strong network of wealthy and influential contacts.

Encouraging all residents of Toronto to get involved in civic life, says Sun, is one of her motivations in running for City council.

"It would be great to see a better reflection of the city's multiculturalism on council, because having decision makers with backgrounds, perspectives and life experiences that better reflect the city will result in policies that better meet the needs of [all] our communities," she says.



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The fight for social justice knows no borders

By Adriana Paz



Linking struggles: Adriana Paz, migrant rights community organizer, participates in a demonstration in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In my first week of work at a tomato greenhouse in South Delta, British Columbia, I was put in charge of posting the schedules. Farm workers checked the schedules each day to find their names assigned to a particular job and section of the greenhouse for the following day. A worker whose name didn't appear on the schedule no longer had a job at the greenhouse—they were fired without notice, reason or consideration. So every day at around 3 pm when I posted the schedule, groups of workers would gather around me in a circle, asking me half in English, half in Punjabi why they were not in the schedule. Most of the workers I 'fired' in this way were either old men or pregnant women—the slowest, least profitable workers.

I'll never forget the eyes of those workers. Injustice was nothing new to me—but I never thought I'd find it here in Canada. I felt both outrage and impotence, and the bitter taste of injustice deep in my soul. Ultimately, though, my experience working alongside migrant farm workers in the tomato greenhouse became my first step away from feeling socially uprooted and politically alienated in Canada, my home since emigrating from Bolivia in 2003.

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It might be because we have one foot here and the other back home, our hearts and spirits having had to learn to live in two places at the same time. Or because home and family are 'here' as much as 'there'. For these and other reasons, many immigrants, migrants and refugees in Canada are deeply engaged in transnational struggles for social justice.

When I came here, seeking reunification with my Mexican-born husband, better social and economic opportunities, and a sense of home, I did not speak English, and I struggled with great feelings of isolation and loss. Not only had I left behind my family, language and career, but I'd also lost something equally important: the social struggles I was involved in, struggles that shaped my sense of community, justice and solidarity when I lived in Bolivia. But after my greenhouse experience, I began to join my fellow newcomers and Canadian-born activists to challenge injustices that cross national borders and to draw the links between local and global struggles.

The vast majority of farm workers in Canada are people of colour, and Canadian farms and greenhouses often have long histories of exploiting immigrant and migrant

worker labour. While some workers have permanent residence status, others have ‘temporary’ status or no status at all—which equals cheap, exploitable labour. Indeed, as I saw, farm labourers are among the most vulnerable and exploited workers in Canada. Migrant farm workers are excluded from many provisions of the Employment Standards Act. Their living and working conditions would be considered unacceptable to Canadian workers; however, their situation has been ignored for so long that it is considered normal by most Canadians.

Working alongside migrant farm labourers, I began to see that exclusion and racism are actually deeply entrenched in our immigration policies, labour legislation and social institutions. Another myth started to dissolve for me: the belief that not only should newcomers feel grateful to Canada because we come from poor and corrupt countries, but we shouldn’t even complain or agitate for our rights! I connected the struggle of my grandmother, a Bolivian migrant farm worker who laboured in Argentinean sugar cane plantations from childhood, with the struggles migrant farm workers face here in Canada today.

Each of my work experiences after the greenhouse helped me see how social justice struggles in the South are interwoven with struggles here in the North; whether it’s women of colour struggling against racism and sexism, migrant workers demanding labour

rights and living wages, or First Nations communities challenging occupation and destruction of their native lands.

Today, I am heavily involved in volunteer community organizing work. I am a founding member of a volunteer-driven organization in Vancouver called Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers – J4MW, and co-founder of a national network for solidarity with Bolivia. And I am part of other grassroots community organizations, all of which share the struggle for justice, equity and inclusion of systemically marginalized, and often racialized, immigrant communities.

Anyone can get involved in transnational struggles. But newcomers bring an important perspective: we have the ability to make the connection between injustices ‘back home’ and those we face here. We also offer knowledge, traditions of resistance and organizing skills that add richness, depth and meaning to the concept of ‘global citizenship’.

Since I moved to Canada, my identity has become a mix of many nationalities. I am no longer exclusively Bolivian; I am Salvadoran, Mexican, South Asian, Filipina, Palestinian, and Canadian. The richness of my new transnational identity lies in the way my struggles—and my ability to fight back and to organize—have become transnational too.

Protecting Migrant Workers in Canada

Rapid expansion of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program in Canada has raised serious concerns, since lack of oversight leaves these workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. You can make a difference by supporting unions and community groups in their efforts to organize and provide protections for migrant workers. Join advocates like Adriana Paz in calling on government to protect the rights of migrant workers and open up new channels to permanent status that are equitably accessible by all temporary migrant workers.

UN Migrant Workers Convention

Now in its 20th anniversary year, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families is an international legal framework to protect the rights of migrant workers. It includes the right to fair and safe working conditions, emergency medical care and education for children. While many migrant sending countries have ratified this agreement, Canada has yet to sign. Write to your MP and ask Canada to sign this important international convention.



Adriana Paz is originally from Bolivia and immigrated to Canada in 2003. She has a degree in Social Communications and Journalism, with her main interest being community radio and print journalism. She has worked as community radio producer and trainer of popular radio reporters in indigenous and peasants communities for over 4 years. She has been involved in diverse social justice projects working with Bolivian and Canadian non-profit and community-based organizations.

PROFILE: ADVOCACY

Refusing to settle for less: newcomer policy recommendations for change

By Oscar Vigil



© Mennonite New Life Centre

Hon. Jean Augustine, Ontario Fairness Commissioner, opens forum for dialogue between newcomers, community organizations and government representatives to improve employment opportunities for the internationally trained.

Most are young professionals, but there are also labourers and seniors. The diverse group of newcomers who meet monthly in the basement of the Mennonite New Life Centre come from all walks of life. In this humble setting, they're working on a new model for improving the lives and outcomes of immigrants and refugees to Canada. As members of the Centre's Advocacy Committee, they're pioneering advocacy by newcomers for newcomers.

The New Life Centre launched the Newcomer Advocacy Committee in 2007 to add a community engagement aspect to their existing settlement services. Over the past three years, the committee has opened a space for immigrants and refugees to reflect and take action together on issues of employment and civic participation. The Committee brings together newcomers from many different countries, mostly Spanish-speaking.

"Newcomers face daily challenges. By sharing their experiences and strengths, they become agents of change. Many newcomers have community organizing

experience, such as union activism, from their country of origin. The Advocacy Committee offers them a new space for action in Canada," says Tanya Chute Molina, executive director of the New Life Centre.

Newcomer Advocacy Committee members support, motivate and empower each other to overcome the daily difficulties they face. More than that, they also work to confront the institutional barriers they have in common.

For some, the main challenge lies in mastering English. For others, it's accreditation of their qualifications or access to housing. No matter what the most pressing problem is in the beginning, in the end, the barrier that limits their true integration in Canada is the same: getting a decent and well-paid job.

"Individual efforts are important, but only by working together we are going to be able to overcome these barriers," says Adriana Salazar, community organizer at the New Life Centre, who advises the group.

Last summer, Newcomer Advocacy Committee members engaged in a Participatory Action Research process and two advocacy skills training workshops to address the structural barriers immigrants and refugees face in finding good work in Canada. The recommendations they developed through these sessions were then presented at the ground-breaking Refusing to Settle for Less forum that the group put on this spring.

“My voice, coupled with the voice of others—first in the Committee and then in the public forum—is what will eventually change our reality. This is how we are going to change history in this country,” says Mario Roque. Roque, a former radio broadcaster who came to Canada from Mexico in 2000, has been with the Newcomer Advocacy Committee since its inception. He says that the committee has been a space for expression and a resource for coping with the trials and tribulations of the refugee claim process and the challenges of building a new life in Canada.

Refusing to Settle for Less was put on by the Committee’s newcomer volunteer members, with support from the New Life Centre. The forum, which brought together over 150 people representing numerous sectors, marks the Newcomer Advocacy Committee’s boldest step to date in organizing for change. At the forum, immigrants and refugees joined community allies, employers, government officials and others to discuss the Committee’s policy recommendations and to consider more broadly the challenges of employment and civic participation by immigrant communities.

“We hope that politicians will listen to the experiences and proposals of newcomers. The experience of getting together and meeting other people who share the same concerns strengthens us to continue the struggle for change. We know that change does not happen from

one day to the next, but by joining forces we can move ahead,” says Molina.

It’s not only the newcomers who must become job-ready, though.

“It’s important that we’re also working to change the culture of employers and the behaviour of employers to make employers ready to accept these workers,” says Joan Atlin, Director of Operations of the Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council, a not for profit organization working with employers, government and other stakeholders for better integration of newcomers into the labour market, and a forum participant.

Outcomes of the forum ran the gamut from agreement on a proposal to create more opportunities for paid internships, since they’re an effective way of helping employers and skilled newcomers to connect, to more political recommendations, such as bringing back employment equity legislation to require employers to make their labour force more representative of Ontario’s diversity.

Forum participants delivered formal recommendations and policy briefs to elected representatives from all three levels of government during a closing plenary. Finally, forum attendees considered the great potential of community organizing, much like the Newcomer Advocacy Committee itself, as a tool for newcomer communities to secure better outcomes for employers and new immigrants alike.

“There was good organization and good results,” reports Mario Roque. “What’s left now is to continue making more allies to achieve our goal [of more and better jobs for newcomers]. Many people were interested, and what we need to do now is continue what we are doing.”



Oscar Vigil came to Canada in 2001, bringing over 20 years of journalistic experience in Latin America. He is currently director of the online magazine *RevistaDebate.ca* and overseas correspondent for *La Prensa Grafica* in El Salvador. Vigil is also involved with *Journalists in Exile*, an organization that gives voice to journalists forced to flee their homelands.

OUR CITY, OUR VOICE

Toronto City Elections are an opportunity for all city residents to have a say on issues that affect us. Only citizens can vote, but all of us can have a voice. One way you can get involved is by participating in all candidates meetings and asking questions about issues that concern you. This raises public awareness of your concerns and pushes candidates to take a stand.

In our last edition of *New Voices*, we explored newcomer employment concerns and policy proposals to improve access to fair and meaningful work. In this volume, we consider issues of civic participation and access to municipal voting rights. We encourage you, our readers, to raise these important issues in all candidates meetings and to ask prospective city councillors to commit themselves to concrete actions that would allow immigrants and refugees to participate fully in the economic and political life of our city.

What is an All Candidates Debate?

An all candidates debate is a public meeting where people can ask questions of all of the candidates running for office in their ward or riding. Anyone can attend, and anyone can ask questions.

This fall, watch out for an all candidates debate in your ward. Sometimes, community organizations will organize all candidates debates about a particular issue or theme. For example, a group of organizations are planning an all candidates meeting in North West Toronto to address immigrant and refugee concerns. For more information, contact Adriana Salazar at 416-699-4527 X 229 or asalazar@mnlct.org

The Issue: Access to Employment

Newcomers struggle to find fairly paid and meaningful work – work that allows them to use their training and expertise. Often they face a double bind: they can't get a job because they don't have Canadian experience, but they can't get Canadian experience because no one will give them a job. According to Statistics Canada, two thirds of university educated immigrants are underemployed.

Both employer incentives and legislative changes are needed to improve employment opportunities for newcomers.

The Question

Many newcomers in our city can't find jobs that allow them to contribute their skills and experience.

As City Councillor, what will you do to improve access to fairly paid and meaningful work for newcomers?

Incentives: Paid Internships

Paid internships can provide internationally trained individuals with an opportunity to demonstrate competency, acting as a bridge to permanent employment. Existing programs are highly successful, with up to 80% of interns moving on to full time employment in their field. However, eligibility criteria are often restrictive and opportunities limited.

More internship opportunities are needed to allow newcomers to contribute to the economic vitality and prosperity of Toronto. The City can show leadership by participating as an employer, issuing a call to action to the private sector, and providing funding for non-profits wishing to offer internships for internationally trained individuals.

The Question

Existing programs show that paid internships can help many newcomers find employment in their field.

As City Councillor, what will you do to increase the number of career track internship opportunities available to newcomers in Toronto?

Legislative and Policy Change: Employment Equity

Employment equity legislation mandates employers to ensure fair hiring practices and equitable representation of diverse groups in the workplace. Employment equity legislation has had some success at the federal level, but most employers fall under provincial jurisdiction. Ontario's Employment Equity Act was overturned in 1995.

Some employers will not change until the law tells them to. The City can show leadership by practicing employment equity in its own hiring practices, by giving priority to equitable employers when contracting out city services and by calling on the provincial government to bring back employment equity legislation.

The Question

I believe employment equity is needed to ensure fair hiring practices.

As City Councillor, what will you do to bring employment equity policies and legislation to the City of Toronto and the province of Ontario?

The Issue: Municipal Voting Rights

I Vote Toronto is a community-based campaign to extend municipal voting rights to all permanent residents living in Toronto. The idea is that everyone who lives in the city—citizens and non-citizens alike—should have a say in how it's run. In countries as diverse as Belize, the Netherlands, Ireland and Venezuela, residents who are not citizens can vote in local elections.

So far, 67 organizations have joined the campaign, and several mayoral candidates have taken a position in favour of extending municipal voting rights to permanent residents. It's time to ask the provincial government to amend the Municipal Elections Act to allow permanent residents to vote in Toronto elections.

The Question

The I Vote Campaign is calling for municipal voting rights to be extended to all permanent residents in Toronto.

As City Councillor, will you lend your support to this proposal and call on your provincial counterparts to make the necessary changes to the Municipal Elections Act?

New Voices is a bi-annual publication featuring articles written by internationally trained journalists and immigrant writers. Our contributors explore the political and social factors that affect the lives of immigrants and refugees, expose injustices and propose solutions.

New Voices connects readers to the original perspectives and penetrating voices of writers new to this city.



