Recession, Plant Closures, and Older Racialized Immigrant Workers:

A case study of the workers of Progressive Moulded Products
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Preface

The sudden closure of PMP, a non-unionized auto-parts manufacturer in the north end of Toronto, on June 30, 2008 and the subsequent protest blockade by a majority of its 2400 workers generated considerable media coverage and public support. When I first met PMP workers on the picket line as they blocked machinery from leaving the plant, I was overwhelmed by their courage, collectivity, and above all, their generosity of spirit. Later I came to know them even better when I was appointed as the Chair of the PMP Adjustment Committee and assisted in the running of the provincially-funded PMP Workers Action Centre.

It has now been almost five years since the PMP closure, and over two years since the closing of the PMP Workers Action Centre which workers referred to as their refuge or second home.

The genesis of this research project comes from a desire to find out how this group of workers has managed and whether they have landed back on their feet. The study is not meant to re-victimize this group of racialized workers; rather it is a mobilizing and excavation project to expose the systemic and structural inequalities of race, gender, age and class which further the ‘invisibility’ of these non-unionized immigrant workers.

This report is a tribute to the resilience and resistance of the former PMP workers who were robbed of their jobs, severance compensation, and sense of security and pride as contributing members of the community. It is also a collective narrative that reminds us of structural inequalities and our collective responsibility in a project of social transformation which will lead to good jobs and decent lives for ALL. Let us have the audacity to hope, dream and work toward such a world.

Winnie Ng
Principal Investigator
CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy, Ryerson University
~ Dedication ~

The struggle of people (man) against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Milan Kundera

To the former PMP workers, the men and women who came to this land as immigrants and refugees, and who facing all adversities, continue to walk with such courage, grace and dignity.
Executive Summary

This study traces the trajectory of a sample of workers over the five years since they lost their jobs at Progressive Moulded Products, an auto-parts manufacturing company in Vaughan. A large majority of PMP workers are racialized immigrants and a significant proportion were over 45 years of age when they lost their jobs. The study documents their experiences with re-training and re-employment, accessing services, working through temporary employment agencies, dealing with barriers to employment, and living with unemployment and precarious employment. While there are a growing number of studies that document the increased prevalence of precarious work, vulnerable workers, and the working poor in southern Ontario, this study is unique in providing an account of the experiences of a group of workers who transitioned from relatively secure and well-paid standard employment to precarious work and poverty wages.

PMP workers were in a long-term, non-precarious, standard employment relationship for years, even decades, and, as such, might have been considered successfully ‘settled’ and ‘integrated’. However, research participants’ struggles to find appropriate training and stable re-employment in the years after the closure suggest that, for many immigrant workers, their immigrant status never disappears. An economic crisis can leave them worse off than they were when they first came to Canada. After more than half a lifetime of working in Canada, these workers find themselves faring worse than when they first arrived. In addition to the challenges that all older workers face in making a second career transition, these workers must struggle with the challenge of being ‘immigrants all over again’, without access to even the limited settlement programs available to new immigrants. We note, therefore, that both ‘settlement’ and ‘integration’ are long-term processes that require attention to the particular needs of heterogeneous immigrant populations in situations of economic crisis and restructuring. In a
highly competitive and precarious labour market, the systemic barriers of race, gender and age further marginalize such workers.

Key Findings

1. From Stable to Precarious Forms of Employment

- Only one third (34%) of participants have secured permanent full time employment (i.e. more than 25 hours per week). Fully two thirds of the former PMP workers were either in precarious employment or unemployed.
- Of those currently working, close to 40% are either in on-call/casual work or in some form of temporary, precarious work arrangement.

The shift to new forms of employment was found to be highly gendered.

- Out of those who have not secured permanent full-time or part-time employment, only one third of the women workers reported holding temporary short term contract work lasting less than one year while 75% of the male workers reported the same. Women seem to be more concentrated in the casual or on-call employment arrangements (42%) compared to 25% of their male counterparts.
- Out of those who were not working at the time of the interview, an overwhelming majority (80%) were women (13 out of 16).

2. From Secure, Living Wages to Poverty Wages

- 77% of our participants’ current wages are worse than at PMP.
- 36% of male participants and 37% of women participants reported a wage drop of $5 an hour or more.
- 52% of female participants and 42% of male participants reported that their household often found it difficult to make ends meet since the plant closure.
3. The Adverse Impact on Health and Wellbeing

- Over half of the participants (52%) expressed that the uncertainty over their work schedule has interfered with their personal and family life.
- Out of those who are working, 59% reported being anxious about losing their current employment.
- Almost half, 49.4% felt that their health has worsened since the closure, with women experiencing a higher degree of worsening health (54% vs. 41%).
- Stress levels are highest for women in the 45-49 age group, with 25% of women in that age group reporting that most days since the closure had been “extremely stressful.” This speaks to the impact that insecure employment and constant juggling of work and family responsibilities have on the quality of life and the health and well being of these workers.

4. No Guarantee of Re-employment after Retraining

- 51% of participants completed their Second Career training (40 of 78).
- Of those who completed the Second Career training, only 25% found employment in the new chosen career field while others have either returned to the manufacturing sector or are still looking for work.
- Age is a significant factor in determining success in getting employed in the new field after training. Despite the fairly even spread across the various age groups among those who completed Second Career training, the success rate in finding employment in the new career field diminishes as the age of participant progresses, from 40% in the 45-49 age group, 21% in the 50-54 age group to only 18% in the 55+ age group.

5. The Growing Prevalence of Temporary Employment Agency Work

- When asked about the multiple methods that they have used to look for work, 87% of the participants reported using temp agencies to look for work.
- 42% of the participants secured their current job through temporary agencies.
Participants shared a frustration with the exploitative and discriminatory practices of temp agencies, and described how these practices impacted their access to employment and workplace experience.

6. Discrimination in Accessing Work and Staying on the Job

- Close to 70% of participants believe discrimination has been a barrier for them in getting work.
- When asked about the specific factors that have posed the major barriers, the top three barriers to getting work are age at 85%, race at 67%; and language at 40%. Gender and religion trailed at 10%.

7. The Wider Repercussions of the Closure

The plant closure and related loss of good jobs had a ripple-effect. Community networks and supports were lost. There was a domino effect with the loss of income as participants struggled to keep their homes and families intact and to continue to contribute to their communities. There was a strong sense of betrayal by the company and the state.

Recommendations

**Monitoring and Regulation of Temp Agencies**

- A temp agency unit should be set up within the Employment Standards Branch with adequate resources and staff dedicated to take a pro-active approach in initiating investigations, monitoring, and enforcing regulations.
- Equal hourly pay should be implemented for workers who are in part-time work or temp work and who are performing the same work duties.
- There should be a requirement for temp agencies to guarantee a minimum number of weekly hours in order to reduce the precarity of workers who are on call 24/7.
- The Ontario Human Rights Commission can play a strong and proactive role in eliminating some of the discriminatory practices of some temp agencies and
employers. Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, there is provision for the Commission to initiate systemic review and/or systemic complaint on how work is assigned and who get transferred and gain access to permanent positions. It is timely that the Commission initiate a systemic review.

- When a pattern of discriminatory practices is detected, community based agencies who are providing assistance and support for workers should also play an active advocacy role in initiating a third party complaint to both ESB and OHRC allowed under the respective legislation.

**Childcare for Shift Workers**

- Consultations and policy reviews are required to develop more innovative publicly funded childcare arrangements in order to provide much-needed support for the health and well-being of families.

**Settlement Services**

- Access to settlement and other support services should not be restricted solely for newcomers (i.e. landed immigrants who are in Canada less than 3 years). Services should be extended to all users based on needs instead of being determined by the length of their stay in Canada.

**Retraining and Re-employment for Older Workers**

- An expanded targeted wage subsidy program should be in place to encourage employers to hire older workers and ensure they do not fall between the cracks.
- A commission on older workers should be set up jointly by the Federal and provincial governments to conduct a systematic review of policies and programs that will ensure older workers’ access to re-employment and their ability to retire with dignity and security.
- A bridging program at the latter part of Second Career training as a placement/internship program to support workers wanting to link up with potential employers
Since the government has already invested in the training for these workers, it will be prudent for policy makers to consider extending the wage subsidy program to encourage employers to hire older workers eager to contribute with their lived experiences and new skills. It will be a win-win situation for all parties.

**Equity in Access to Employment**

- It is urgent that the Ontario government re-introduce an equity hiring policy and legislation that will address the systemic barriers of race, gender and other forms of discrimination experienced by Indigenous workers, women, racialized workers and workers with disabilities.

**Bankruptcy Protection for Workers**

- Federal bankruptcy legislation needs to be revamped to ensure workers are the first in line for all payments owing including severance, termination pay and other compensation. As the most vulnerable victims of workplace closures, workers are the ones who need protection first.
- There is a need for a new policy framework that holds employers accountable and ensures full and fair compensation for laid-off workers.

**Income Support and Security**

- The Federal government should lower the eligibility criteria to enable more unemployed workers to qualify for EI and raise the benefit rate so workers can have decent income support when they are out of work.
- There should be a minimum EI benefit level to ensure that laid off workers can maintain some basic income support and well-being as they look for new work.

**Raising the Minimum Wage**

- There is a need to increase the minimum wage to $14 an hour and establish a 40 hour work week.
**Creation and Retention of ‘Good Jobs’**

- Recognizing that decent jobs lead to decent lives, the Federal and provincial governments should make it a policy and program priority to develop and implement a long-term industrial job strategy that will stimulate the creation and retention of ‘good jobs’ for all.

**Union Organizing Strategies**

- There is a need for a policy review of the Ontario Labour Relations Act to strengthen the protection of workers’ rights to organize.
- Labour unions should consider alternative and broader-based organizing strategies that go beyond the traditional workplace setting and find meaningful ways to integrate the equity agenda into their work.
Acknowledgements

The research study would not have been possible without the support and participation of former PMP workers. In particular, the research team wishes to express a deep gratitude to Fa Lim, the worker leader who served as the outreach member of the study.

Stacey Danis, Gurkiran Kaur and Khulud Zakaria were the research assistants who did the literature review and transcription. In addition, a number of volunteers also provided support at various times for the project: Gilary Massa, Sonia Meerai, and Justine Lilley.

We wish to acknowledge the contribution of Professor Andie Noack of Ryerson University with her expert advice and assistance with SPSS and Laurell Ritchie for her tremendous help with the layout and final production of the report.

A special thank you goes to the leadership and staff of the Canadian Autoworkers Union for their support of the project. During the interviewing process, CAW Local 112 provided the much needed office space and hall for interviews and gatherings.

A special thank you also goes to the CAW Worker Adjustment Tracking Project conducted by Sam Vrankulj of McMaster University for the inspiration it provided this project.

With the assistance of Professor Pramila Aggarwal (George Brown College) and Professor Purnima George (School of Social Work, Ryerson University), the Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) graciously supported us by providing free interview space for some of the South Asian PMP workers living in the Brampton area.

Lastly but not the least, we acknowledge the funding assistance of the Centre for Labour Management Relations, Ryerson University and the ongoing support of its co-directors, Buzz Hargrove and Dr. Maurice Mazerolle, as well as its coordinators, Eric Leclerc and Aman Rajwani.
I. Introduction

Five years ago, on Canada Day in 2008, the 2,400 workers in the eleven facilities of Progressive Moulded Products (PMP) in the Vaughan region north of Toronto found themselves thrown out of work without notice or warning when the company declared bankruptcy and closed abruptly. Ninety seven percent of the workers were immigrants to Canada and many had worked at PMP for over a decade. Though non-unionized, the workers responded by mounting a sixteen-day long picket of the plant with the aim of forcing the company to pay wages and other money owed them. This spontaneous militant and organized response from such a large group of workers received a good deal of media attention as well as support from the CAW and other sectors of the labour movement. With funding from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MCTU), the CAW helped to set up an Action Centre to assist workers with securing back wages, vacation pay, severance and termination pay; and with applying for unemployment insurance, training and job searches. The Action Centre partnered with educational institutions to enable many workers to go through academic upgrading and Second Career training. Some workers who received re-training in new fields are among those who have found decent long-term employment since the company closed. A large number, however, remain either unemployed or in various kinds of precarious employment.

This study traces the trajectory of a sample of workers over the five years since they lost their jobs at PMP, documenting their experiences with re-training and re-employment, accessing services, working through temporary employment agencies, dealing with barriers to employment, and living with unemployment and precarious employment. A large majority of PMP workers are racialized immigrants, and a significant proportion of them were over 45 years of age when they lost their jobs. A key aim of the study is to document
the particular barriers faced by older racialized immigrant workers in labour market (re)integration. We ask: What has the experience of these workers been in finding re-employment? What is the nature of the new jobs they have found? What kinds of barriers have they faced in finding good jobs, or any kind of jobs? What factors have affected their access to employment? What has been their experience with training programs such as Second Career?

In exploring these questions, the study, like a number of other recent studies on employment patterns in Southern Ontario, has focused on the prevalence and impact of precarious employment among immigrants in the Canadian economy. It also seeks to humanize and put a face on terms such as ‘economic crisis,’ ‘jobless recovery,’ and ‘retraining for the knowledge economy,’ that have become part of our everyday vocabulary. While the other studies document the growing prevalence of precarious work, vulnerable workers, and working poverty in the region, the unique contribution of our study in relation to the others is its attempt to provide an account of the experiences of a group of workers who transitioned from relatively secure and well-paid standard employment relationships to precarious work and poverty wages.

We also seek to go beyond questions of labour market re-integration to ask about the broader issue of immigrant settlement and integration. OCASI (2012: 11) notes that “settlement and integration have come to be viewed as a continuum, with settlement referring to the early stages of adaptation after arrival (e.g. referrals for housing, healthcare, and schools, and accessing employment, language training, recertification), and integration referring to the long-term, two-way process in which immigrants and refugees become full and equal participants in the social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of society.” We ask: Under conditions of employment insecurity and precariousness, is there any point when immigrants can be considered sufficiently “settled” and “integrated”?

The PMP workers were in long-term, non-precarious, standard employment relationships for years, even decades, and, as such, might have been considered successfully “settled” and “integrated.” Indeed, based on Statistics Canada data and
their own survey, the recent PEPSO report (March 2013) found that immigrants who have been in Canada for 20 or more years are more likely to be in secure employment relationships, along with white people and people born in Canada. In contrast to this, our participants’ struggles to find appropriate training and stable re-employment in the years since the PMP closure suggest that, for many immigrant workers, their immigrant status never disappears: an economic crisis can leave them worse off than they were when they were new immigrants.

In addition to the challenges that all older workers face in making a second career transition, these workers must struggle with the challenge of being “immigrants all over again,” without access to even the limited settlement programs that are available to new immigrants. Their health and well-being is affected by income loss and financial insecurity, and the associated stress. They are less able to support the education, leisure and well-being of their children and families, and to contribute time or money to their communities. This further hinders the stable social reproduction that is the hallmark of successful integration.

We note, therefore, that both “settlement” and “integration” are long-term processes that require attention to the particular needs of heterogeneous immigrant populations in situations of economic crisis and restructuring. Older workers, especially those who are women and racialized, require specific kinds of support to enable them to re-integrate into the labour market after losing their jobs. Re-training programs such as Second Career need to anticipate the specific needs of diverse (in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnicity) and marginalized workers. There should also be more scrutiny and regulation of temp agencies and employers who capitalize on the structural weakness of such workers. Importantly, we need to renew our demands for more childcare, especially for those with irregular working arrangements. We need to call, not just for a living wage, but also for ways of organizing work that accommodate family responsibilities.

This study also has another goal. It documents the courage, resilience and creativity of the workers, and their continued determination to struggle on, collectively and
individually, to make a better life for themselves and their children in the face of all odds. In the words of Salmaan Khan, one of the student researchers and co-authors of this study, “Though their dreams are modest, their spirit of resistance remained high. Through the process of interviewing the workers, it became even more evident that what we were participating in was more than just a research exercise and was developing into a project of resistance. The research project itself, it was clear, was becoming an organizing tool.”

II. The PMP Workers’ Story

Progressive Moulded Products (PMP) was a plastic moulding company that specialized, at the time of its closure, in the manufacture of interior plastic parts, such as the console between the front seats, dashboards, and air vents, for cars and light trucks in North America. Over two decades ago, it had also manufactured handsets for phones and other such products, but gradually came to specialize in vehicle parts which it supplied to companies such as Ford, GM and Chrysler. Workers who had been with the company for over a decade described how they had worked hard to help the company grow, putting in 80 hour work weeks when the demand was high (Juravich and Healy 2009; Ng 2011: 13).

Workers recalled that while the management was relatively supportive back then, health and safety conditions in the factory were always poor; and newer workers, many of whom were southeast Asian refugees with limited English skills and financial resources, were taken advantage of to get work done on overtime and without complaint.

As the company expanded and took on more business, the long-time owner and management team was replaced through two leveraged buyouts in 2004. In 2006, the company bought two new lines from another company that had gone bankrupt, with the aim of expanding further. They put further pressure on workers to produce more, faster, and with fewer people, while
cutting back on bonuses and health and safety measures. Several accidents occurred due to the terrible health and safety conditions, but despite complaints to the Ministry of Labour, nothing seemed to change, nor were injured workers given sick leave or compensation by the company (Juravich and Healy 2009).

There were several union drives at PMP, each one unsuccessful despite the issues PMP workers faced. In part, this was because for many of the new Canadians these were good jobs, particularly given their lack of English skills. Hourly wages were typically $13 to $15 per hour, significantly more than the minimum wage, which was $8.75 at the time the plant closed. The union drives were also unsuccessful because the company met any hint of a union with intimidation, emotional blackmail, and threats that unionization would raise costs and close down the company. Many workers did resist what some of them referred to as the “racist, sexist and exploitative behavior” of the management, but they did so without the backing of a union.

From 2006 to 2008 PMP launched seven new products for North American automakers. Through speeding-up of work and the use of sub-par materials and components, its sales went from $373 million in 2006 to $470 million in 2007 and hit a high of $540 million in 2008. As the company pushed its employees to the limit, it was reported to have “borrowed heavily to invest in new equipment and quickly bring on new business” (OESA 2009, cited in Juravich and Healy 2009). With its growing debt, the company’s economic position was severely weakened. On June 20, 2008 Progressive Moulded Products was placed in bankruptcy protection. It stayed in this legal limbo during the years that followed.
Profile of PMP Workers

Country of Origin
97% were born outside Canada

Mother Tongue
87% are ESL speakers
13% use English as their first language

Gender
59% are women

Age
57% are over 40 years old
22% are over 50 years old

Length of residency in Canada
11% have been here less than 5 years
71% have been here more than 10 years
28% have been here more than 20 years

Educational Background
13% attended to completed grade school
45% graduated from high school in their countries of origin
26% attended or received college diploma
22% graduated from University

Number of years worked at PMP
36% worked there less than 2 years
41% worked there for more than 5 years
22% worked there for more than 10 years

- Based on holistic needs assessment reports prepared by the Labour Education Centre between December 2008 and May 2009, Ng 2011: 27
At no point in the days between the bankruptcy protection filing and closure of the plants did the company care to inform the workers of its plans. Workers at the different facilities learned about it in different ways, when they found themselves locked out or told not to return the next day, or told to go on a week’s leave. Those who arrived at work were not allowed to go in to collect their belongings. As workers heard the news, they gathered at the company headquarters in the hope of meeting with the management to discuss outstanding matters. Many were still owed back-pay, vacation pay, as well as termination or severance pay (depending on how long they had worked at the plant). Many workers did not even have an officially-signed letter indicating they had been let go. Nor did they have a record of employment which they would need in order to file for unemployment insurance. Some had their drug coverage cut off even while they were still paying for their benefit plan. Instead of meeting with them, the management worked behind a wall of security and silence to load transport trucks with moulds to be shipped to new suppliers for GM, Ford and Chrysler.

The workers soon realized that once the moulds left, their struggle to keep the plant open or get what was owing to them would be lost. So they decided to act, to form a blockade to stop the equipment being moved out. As Fa, one of the worker leaders, tells it, “When we went there it was, you can say people were angry. They wanted to show their protest over there….That’s how we are not taking this injustice” (Juravich and Healy 2009: 33). Even five years later, workers still feel bitter and hurt about the dishonesty and betrayal by the company that they had worked so hard for. On the picket line their sense of betrayal grew to include the government, as they realised that the law, the police and the courts all worked against them and in favour of their employers. The police protected the management; and the courts ruled in favour of the company’s right to remove the workers from its property. To add to these injustices, bankruptcy laws placed all the other creditors ahead of the estimated $35 million owed to the workers in termination and severance payments.

But the militancy of the workers did pay off. The workers turned to the CAW for help, and the CAW, along with the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, brought unions from across the city to support the workers in their picket. In the month that followed, the
CAW worked closely with the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) to create an adjustment plan for the workers, and in October 2008, a PMP Workers Action Centre was set up as result of a partnership between the CAW and the MTCU. Between October 2008 and June 2008 when the Learning Centre that was part of the Action Centre finally closed, the Committee members, four staff and 58 peer helpers of the Action Centre helped workers with employer outreach, access to training, and information and resource development.

The efforts of the Action Centre provided several gains for the workers:

- Enhanced adjustment supports, which meant that 855 workers were able to obtain new employment (full time, part time, self-employment) by the time the Centre closed, despite a very difficult job market and the multiple barriers facing this group.
- Enhanced supports also meant 497 workers had completed or were due to graduate from Second Career Training by the time the Centre closed.
- 471 had completed upgrading or were near completion when the Centre closed.
- A special Partnership with Service Providers led to a genuine One Stop Employment Services Model. Key local providers participated in an orientation meeting with the Adjustment Committee and then assigned staff to offer services on-site at the Centre, a familiar and supportive environment for these workers.
- An innovative Partnership with Educational Institutions led to the establishment of an Adult Worker Learning Centre. It provided seamless ESL, LBS and Academic Upgrading classes in a single location with wrap-around support services from the Action Centre.
- With the support of MTCU and Educational Institutions, an Innovative Bridging Project facilitated Second Career registrations and the requisite upgrading, a form of pre-Second Career training. Peer supports were available throughout the whole process, contributing significantly to the unusually high participation and completion rates.
- An Advocacy Model supported workers’ efforts to win termination and severance payments owing to them. As a result of high profile cases such as the PMP one, a federal Wage Earner Protection Program was introduced in January 2009. The law provides for immediate payment of at least some of the termination and severance payments owing workers in a bankruptcy or receivership. Although the legislation did not apply to PMP workers because it was not retroactive, their campaign was instrumental to its introduction. (Ng 2011)
The experience of the Action Centre also resulted in many lessons being learned about the adjustment process, some of which are presented in the recommendations of this report. These include the need to: have supports in place to deal with sudden closures, take a holistic approach to job loss and needs assessment, provide more income support through the adjustment process, address diverse cultural and language needs in retraining, and have workers’ needs drive the process.

The PMP Workers Action Centre was a gathering place, a second home for workers going through the trauma of plant closure and transition. It was also the site of extraordinary courage, creativity and collectivity. For many workers, the experience with the Centre was a journey – finding their own voices, participating in rallies to defend their rights, and asserting their presence. Even after the closure of the Centre, workers have managed to continue their support for each other and move forward.

III. Establishing the Context – the Conceptual Framework

i. Identifying and Defining Precariousness

A number of recent reports (PEPSO 2013; Stapleton et al 2012; Law Commission of Ontario 2012; Wilson et al 2011) document the worsening employment conditions for growing numbers of people in southern Ontario. The term “precarious” is used to describe the new forms of employment, characterized by increased economic insecurity, reduced entitlement to ongoing employment, limited control over work schedules, low pay, limited benefits and few opportunities for career advancement (Vosko, 2006; Lewchuk et al, 2006). A recent study carried out by the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario research group (PEPSO 2013)
drew on data from their own large-scale survey as well as from Statistics Canada to conclude that across southern Ontario:

- Barely half of those working today are in permanent, full-time positions that provide benefits and a degree of employment security.
- At least 20% of all those working are in precarious forms of employment.
- Another 20% are in employment relationships that share at least some of the characteristics of precarious employment.
- Precarious employment has increased by nearly 50% in the last 20 years.

The study showed that precarious forms of employment can be found across the economic spectrum, but is greatest among low income people and also has the greatest impact on that group.

Compared to those in the secure cluster, people in the precarious cluster:

1. Earn 46% less and report household incomes that are 34% lower.
2. Have experienced more income variability in the past and expect to experience more in the future.
3. Rarely receive employment benefits beyond a basic wage.
4. Are often paid in cash and are more likely not to be paid at all.
5. Often don’t know their work schedule a week in advance and often have unexpected work schedule changes.
6. Have limited career prospects and are less likely to be satisfied with their job.
7. Have more weeks without work and are more likely to anticipate future reductions in their hours of work.
8. Are more likely to fear that raising a concern about employment rights at work might negatively affect future employment.
9. Are more likely to have their work performance monitored.
10. Are less likely to be unionized.
11. Often hold more than one job at the same time.
12. Often work on-call.
13. Rarely receive employer-provided training and often pay for their own training.
Precarity is as much a social as an economic condition. The PEPSO study found that precarious employment affects family life, ability to spend time with children and volunteer at their school or in community and even friendships and social life. It also found that employment precarity had a significant negative impact on the health of workers, a finding also reported by Wilson et al’s 2011 study of employment insecurity among racialized groups in the Black Creek area of Toronto, and even earlier by Lewchuk and others (Lewchuk et al 2006; Lewchuk et al 2008). This is partly due to the stress and uncertainty associated with such work, the lack of medical benefits, including sick leave, and lower incomes. Other trends associated with precarious employment also have adverse health impacts. These include cutbacks to government monitoring of workplaces for health and safety standards (LCO 2012) and the increased use by companies of temporary workers recruited through temp agencies to carry out hazardous or back-breaking jobs as a way of protecting the health and safety of their long-term employees (Institute for Work and Health, 2013).

In this study, we understand precariousness as produced by a set of factors which, when taken together, may act to accentuate the precariousness or vulnerability of some groups of workers over others. Economic recession and the restructuring of the Ontario economy away from manufacturing has led to a reorientation of the labour market from longer-term, standard employment relationships with decent pay and benefits, to a market where a growing number of jobs may be characterized as “precarious.”

This precarity has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of state regulation of the market, leading to weakened employment and health and safety standards, and the proliferation of temporary employment agencies. The state’s withdrawal is also felt in the form of weakening support for adjustment and retraining after job loss.

Social identity or location are further factors that help to explain the disproportionately high presence of racialized immigrants and women among the ranks of the precariously employed. We explore these factors in greater detail below.
ii. Factors Leading to Precariousness in Employment

Recession, ‘Recovery’ and ‘Bad’ Jobs

Ontario was hit particularly hard by the recession in 2008: 59% of the nation’s permanent job losses were in Ontario, and of these many were in the manufacturing and primary industries. In 2009 Ontario lost 201,000 permanent jobs, while only 15,000 new part time jobs and 20,500 temporary jobs were created (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2010). At the peak of the previous economic cycle there were 1.1 million manufacturing jobs in Ontario, yet in 2009 manufacturing jobs in total had fallen to under 800,000, more than 100,000 of which were lost in 2009 alone (Mackenzie 2010). Economists predict that the majority of jobs lost in the manufacturing and primary sector are unlikely to return (Mackenzie 2010).

While the working-age population in Ontario continues to grow, the province’s labour force growth has generally been decelerating over the past two years, causing the labour market participation rate in Ontario to decrease to 66.5%, the lowest recorded number in over a decade (HRSDC 2012). In part this is due to the growing share of retirees in the population, but the 2012 Labour Market Bulletin also suggests that some of this drop is due to discouraged workers who have temporarily left the labour force after experiencing job displacement (HRSDC 2012). Long term unemployment is a growing concern for Ontario. In 2010-2011 the share of Ontario’s unemployed who have been without work for 27 weeks or more was the highest in Canada at 25%, which was well above the national average of 21.3% (MTCU 2012).

A significant percent of the jobs created in 2010 were part-time (19.3% in 2010), temporary (12.9% of all jobs in 2010), or self-employed (5.3% in 2010) (MTCU 2010). This is in keeping with trends that have been emerging since the late 1990s. While in the 1970s and to some extent the 1980s, many employment relationships were long-term, regular, regulated, and had benefits (standard employment relationships), since the 1990s, employers have responded to shifts in global competitiveness, market regulation and technology, and increasing economic volatility, by seeking ways to
increase their own "flexibility" vis-à-vis labour, resulting in employment relationships that are non-standard, or "precarious" (Lowe 2007; Vosko 2006).

**Employment Insurance, Adjustment, and Retraining Programs**

The impact of the restructuring of the economy is compounded by the nature of state support for workers facing job loss, in the form of employment insurance, adjustment and retraining programs. A major problem the PMP workers encountered when their factory shut down was in relation to payment of their severance and other outstanding wages. This is partly due to inconsistencies between the federal and provincial laws around bankruptcy. Juravich and Healy (2009) cite Toronto and York Region Labour Council President John Cartwright explaining that PMP workers were “facing a judge who on a Saturday night was looking at two sets of laws…The provincial laws that guarantee you your severance pay and the federal law that said that bankers were first. He chose to exercise only one law and issue an injunction” according to which all the other parties (creditors, subcontracting companies, etc) with which the company had transactions were to be paid before the workers were.”

The federal government’s employment insurance provisions are inadequate to meet the needs of workers facing job loss during a recession. They require workers to wait a two-week period before the payments kick in and then support them only for six months. The payments amount to only 55% of their earnings in the best twelve weeks of their employment. The requirement to have worked a minimum number of hours in a given period in order to qualify does not reflect the nature of the new jobs, which are increasingly short-term and part-time. Inadequate EI provisions thus contribute to increasing precarity, forcing workers to take poorly-paid jobs through temp agencies in order to survive (Ng 2011).

One of the most noted labour market trends emerging in recent years is that post secondary education is becoming a general requirement for employment (MTCU 2011). Traditionally, employment growth in high skilled jobs has been stronger, especially during economic downturns. Economists note how individuals with post-secondary
education credentials are more resilient during economic downturns and gain jobs more quickly during recoveries. Research indicates that those without post-secondary education accounted for almost 90% of the job losses in 2009, while job growth has been concentrated in positions requiring post-secondary education (MTCU 2011). Moreover, those without post-secondary education face higher unemployment rates compared to those with a post-secondary education: 9.1% versus 6.2% as of 2010 (MTCU 2011). As of 2011, employment gains for those with post-secondary education were 148,700 compared to the same period last year; in contrast, employment declined by 31,400 for those without post-secondary education (MTCU 2011). These figures do not help explain the precariousness faced by the ex-PMP workers, 48% of whom had a post-secondary education, as Lisa’s story in section V of this report illustrates.

While the demand for higher skill levels is greater, employers are investing less in the upgrading, training and retention of their own lower skilled workers. This puts the onus for training on the government. Thus, in response to post-recession demands for job growth and job creation, labour market development in Ontario has focused on investments in postsecondary education and training. One of the training initiatives included the launch of the Second Career program, aimed at helping thousands of laid-off workers in accessing training and finding jobs in growing sectors of the economy. Since June 2008, the program has served over 50,000 clients. An MTCU report claims that about 74% of surveyed participants reported finding employment within one year of completing their skills training (MTCU 2012), although this does not indicate the size of the sample surveyed, or specify whether the jobs were in the areas re-trained for, and whether they were secure or precarious jobs. However, despite continuing funding in 2011-2012 to support training opportunities to help Ontarians improve their knowledge and skills, including $44 million over three years for literacy and basic skills programs, the Labour Market Agreement Annual Plan predicts that there will continue to be below average labour force participation rates for specific groups including immigrants, older workers, and workers with disabilities (MTCU 2012).
The Increased Role of Temporary Employment Agencies in the Labour Market

Temporary employment agencies (hereafter referred to as “temp agencies”) have come to play an important role in an economy where employers see competitiveness as deriving from lower costs and greater “flexibility” with regard to labour. Since the profits of these temp agencies derive from filling labour shortages as they arise, it is not in their interest to allow workers to gain long-term employment within their assigned workplace. In section V, we document how the strategies used by these agencies contribute to the precariousness of our participants’ work, and consequently to their lack of control over their private lives and time outside of work.

A recent study by the Institute for Work and Health (2013; see also LCO 2012) highlights the serious health and safety implications of temp agency work. The temp agency industry is very difficult to regulate. Workers who are new on a job and have been sent in for a short contract rarely are given much training on the equipment and processes of the workplace, making them more likely to have accidents. The agencies do not see the working conditions of their clients, and the workers themselves are likely to hide injuries and not report problems because of their economic insecurity. The agencies are hesitant to jeopardize their relationship with their clients by raising health and safety concerns. Importantly, the Institute for Health and Work study suggests that the current legal framework in Ontario itself “ineffectively targets prevention of injury to temp agency workers and weakens employer accountability.” Worse, it creates a situation where employers maintain their health and safety records by hiring temp agency workers for arduous or hazardous jobs. The report notes:

*The Occupational Health and Safety Act allows for both clients and temp agencies to be held accountable for violations of the Act. However, in practice, this legislation is only enforced if a problem comes to the attention of a Ministry of Labour inspector. Even if a fine is applied, some small agencies run with little infrastructure and can avoid fines by closing down, declaring no assets and re-opening under another name.*

*The Workplace Safety and Insurance Act recognizes temp agencies as the sole employer, and so the ‘prevention incentive’ in experience-rated WSIB premiums is applied only to temp agencies. This means client employers*
who hire temp agency staff can maintain a clean WSIB accident record, even when accidents happen regularly to temp agency workers on their premises. The cost and risk of work accidents are effectively outsourced to temp agencies.

(Institute for Work and Health 2013)

iii. Who are the Precariously Employed? The Role of Immigration Status, Racialization, Language, Gender and Age

The Law Commission of Ontario (LCO 2012: 11) defines vulnerable workers as “those whose work can be described as “precarious” and whose vulnerability is underlined by their “social location” (that is, by their ethnicity, sex, ability and immigration status).” Vulnerability refers “not to the workers themselves but to the situation facing them, both in their work environment and in other aspects of their lives such as their health, their families, their ability to participate in their community and their integration into Ontario life” (LCO 2012: 11). Groups that they identify as likely to be more vulnerable include: women and single parents; racialized persons; newcomers and long-term immigrants; temporary migrant workers; aboriginal persons; persons with disabilities; youth; and non-status workers. In the following section, we review the literature that explores how immigrant status, racialization, programs affecting English language acquisition, gender and age interact to accentuate the vulnerability of groups such as the former PMP workers.

Immigrants have been identified as particularly disadvantaged in the current labour market (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2010). Studies indicate that while employment among Canadian-born workers was down by 1.6% between June 2008 and June 2009, employment among recent immigrants was down 5.7%, and employment among long-term immigrants—immigrants in Canada for more than a decade—was down by 3%, nearly twice the rate of decline of Canadian-born workers (Mackenzie, 2010).

Racialization is a further factor that can affect the outcome of racialized immigrants, but also operates independently of immigrant status. Canadian research has shown that
racialized and immigrant workers face particular barriers to incorporation into the labour market (Hiebert 1997; Pendakur & Pendakur 1998; Picot & Hou 2003; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi 2005; Reitz & Banerjee 2005; Block and Galabuzi 2011). Precarious employment is particularly prevalent amongst recent immigrants and racialized communities (Goldring & Landolt 2009a; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi 2005; Workers Action Centre 2007). Racialized families were three times more likely to live in poverty in 2005 than non-racialized families (Block 2010). The fact that both Canadian-born and immigrant racialized individuals have similar unemployment rates and economic outcomes indicates that there operates a “colour coded labour market” (see Block and Galabuzi 2011) within which access and quality of employment is segmented along ethno-racial lines (see also Galabuzi, 2006). A recent study of employment and income security for racialized groups in the Black Creek area of Toronto (Wilson et al 2011) found that discrimination, particularly race-based discrimination (based on socially produced ethno-racial features including skin colour, accent, religious or cultural affiliation), is a pervasive factor undermining racialized people’s search for stable employment. This is supported by a recent study that found that those with English sounding names were 35% more likely to receive call backs on resumes then applicants with Indian or Chinese names (Oreopoulos and Dechief 2011). Wilson et al further note that race-based discrimination also affects experiences within the workplace including the types of work that racialized people are given, wage, exposure to workplace injuries, occupational mobility, and job security. At the same time, they have little or no formal recourse to file complaints about or counter these experiences. They conclude that the Black community, the Arabic-speaking community (particularly the Muslim Arabs), and people with low English language fluency experience racism more frequently and more intensely in the labour market.

**Official language acquisition** can be a particular barrier faced by immigrants, and this is tied to the availability and design of language programs for different types of immigrants. Szwed (1981: 21) has suggested that the activities and practices involved in language training have consequences for and are affected by family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and several other factors. The
processes of language training for immigrants, particularly if they are newcomers, are not processes that occur in a vacuum but rather one that compete with other day-to-day obligations and responsibilities such as acquiring funds to maintain adequate subsistence. For this reason Cumming (1991) suggests that it takes people from two to seven years to develop fluency in second language skills, depending on the target level they aspire to. In the case of women even more than men, immigrants may take anywhere from three to ten years to establish themselves financially, socially and otherwise prior to engaging in formal language training. However, the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs, which are the dominant language programs for immigrants, only serve immigrants in their first three years after arrival to the country. This can pose a particular problem for groups such as the former PMP workers, most of who began to work full time soon after arrival and were not able to avail themselves of English language training. Decades later, they experience this as one of the major barriers when seeking re-employment.

**Gender** compounds the vulnerability of (immigrant) workers in multiple ways. Burnaby’s (1996) historical analysis shows the ways in which the explicit gender bias in prior language training programs, such as those in the 1970s which targeted the ‘head of household’ led to many women being excluded from formal language training. Although the federal program over the years has been refined to include women, for instance the “Settlement Language Training Program” and the “Language at Work Program,” these new programs have nonetheless denied women “the economic subsidy necessary for full-time study” (Burnaby, 1996 p 91).

Women across Canada continue to do the bulk of childcare: in 2010 Canadian women spent an average total of 50 hours per week caring for household children, double that spent by men (24 hours) (Milan et al, cited in LCO 2012: 20) The lack of adequate facilities or financial support for **childcare** is a particular problem for immigrant women
seeking to enter full-time language training, post-displacement re-training, as well as the labour market itself.

As with all women, immigrant women earn significantly less than immigrant men (Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson, 2011). The overall gap between women’s and men’s wages in Canada, which has been stuck at between 70 and 72 per cent for the last three decades, is larger for older and racialized women (Canadian Labour Congress, 2009). Moreover, immigrant women have higher rates of unemployment and less job security than both immigrant men and Canadian born women (Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson, 2011). Researchers have termed this situation a ‘double jeopardy,’ as immigrant women in the labour market experience a double disadvantage due to their immigrant status and gender (Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson, 2011). According to the 2006 Census data, while immigrant men experience similar unemployment rates as Canadian-born men, immigrant women experience higher unemployment rates and lower labour market participation rates than Canadian born women (Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson, 2011).

According to Mazerolle & Singh (2004), gender is used as an allocation strategy with respect to job opportunities. Evidence suggests that after experiencing a job displacement, women are less likely than men to become re-employed, and thus have higher rates of non-participation in the labour force following displacement (Abbott, 2008; Mazerolle & Singh, 2004). With regards to post-displacement wage earnings, evidence indicates that for Canadian workers who were displaced from their job due to closures or mass layoffs, both males and females experienced large and persistent mean earnings losses, and a similarly slow earnings recovery process (Abbott, 2008). Data indicates that for displaced workers on average, the drop in earnings is approximately 16-22 per cent for men, and between 22-31 per cent for women (Jones, 2011). The literature further reveals that women in Canada are much more likely than men to work part-time and multiple jobs, often under precarious employment arrangements (Canadian Labour Congress, 2009).

The gap in wages for older women, and especially for older racialized women, is significant in the post-displacement context because lower wages mean less adequate
benefits (Canadian Labour Congress 2012). Fewer hours of work make it harder to qualify for Employment Insurance, and it means that even if women do qualify, the average duration of benefits is less than that of men (Canadian Labour Congress, 2012). This is significantly problematic for older women in a post-displacement situation because, as previously indicated, women are less likely to return to the workforce following displacement. This means that they are more likely to be surviving solely on the benefits they are entitled to; however, in 2011 only 37% of unemployed women qualified for regular benefits as compared to 45% of men, and between 2006 and 2010 women’s average weekly benefits were consistently about $60 lower than men’s (Canadian Labour Congress, 2012).

**Age** is another variable that compounds workers’ vulnerability, as seen above. An important labour market trend that has emerged in recent years is the growth in the employment rate for both men and women over the age of 55 (Carriere & Galarneau 2011; HRSDC 2012). Specifically, from 1997 to 2010, the employment rate of men 55 and over grew from 30.5% to 39.4%, and that of women grew from 15.8% to 28.6% (Carriere & Galarneau 2011). However, the Expert Panel on Older Workers (2008) identified older workers, namely those over the age of 55, as a group who has been particularly disadvantaged in the labour market post-recession. MTCU (2011) indicates that the number of permanently laid off older workers rose 20% between 2008 and 2010. The Annual Labour Market Survey of Ontario for 2010 (MTCU 2010) shows that older workers 55 and over are disproportionately represented in long-term unemployment. While this group accounted for 12.8% of total unemployment in 2010, it made up 20.2% of the long-term unemployed. In 2010, about 40% of unemployed older workers faced long-term unemployment compared to 30% for prime-aged unemployed workers (ages 25-44) and 10% of unemployed youth. Further, older workers are more likely to be engaged in non-standard forms of work: non-standard forms of work now account for about one-third of all employment among older workers (Expert Panel on Older Workers, 2008).

The literature regarding older workers as a whole generally suggests that age discrimination plays a significant role in the allocation of jobs following displacement.
This discrimination is usually manifested in negative stereotypes held by employers about older workers, such as that they are less productive, less likely to retrain, more injury prone, and less likely to remain in the labour force for a long period of time (Mazerolle & Singh, 2004). According to Mazerolle & Singh (2004), empirical evidence supports the view that if an employer has to choose between an older worker and a younger worker, they will select the younger worker.

Older immigrant workers who have experienced involuntary job loss are also less likely to receive training that will allow them to re-enter the labour force. Evidence indicates that Canadian-born employees are more likely to receive job-related training than their immigrant counterparts, 35% versus 31% for men, and 37% versus 35% for women (Park, 2011). Furthermore, male employees who migrated as adults were 25% less likely to receive training than their Canadian born counterparts. However, one interesting trend with specific regards to older immigrant female workers, is that female immigrants, aged 45-64, were more likely to receive training than those from 18-24; this finding is consistent with research suggesting that women in general receive less training especially early in their careers (Park, 2011). Conversely, among men, older immigrant workers were less likely to receive job training than their younger counterparts ranging in age from 25-44 (Park, 2011). As well, immigrant employees were more likely to perceive the presence of barriers to training as compared to their Canadian born counterparts; among immigrant women, 35% reported barriers compared to 30% of Canadian born women, and similarly 31% of immigrant men perceived some barriers to training as compared to 25% of non-immigrant men (Park, 2011). Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson (2011) argue that as the age of immigrant workers increase, the odds of them pursuing additional education decreases, although both Abbott (2008) and Beach (2009) show that the completion of education and/or training post displacement, such as attaining a post-secondary certificate, had the potential to have positive effects on both the hourly and annual earnings of older displaced men. Similar effects were not seen for women in the same category.
IV. Introducing the Study: Methodology

The research methodology was grounded in the principles of community based action research where there is an active engagement between the researcher and participants in a process of dialogue, action and reflection. It is a collaborative research process with, and not on, the people (Reason & Bradbury 2006). For this study, the survey questionnaire, in-depth one-to-one dialogue, focus group discussion, and finally the reporting back session to the participants were all structured to share their lived experiences and encourage them to come up with alternatives. The collective inquiry became a journey of empowerment and solidarity building.

The research team took advantage of the Chinese New Year gathering organized by CAW in February 2012 to begin recruiting participants who were former PMP workers. A previous staff member of the Action Centre was employed to make the initial contacts and recruit potential participants. Potential participants were identified as any former PMP worker over 45 years of age. Care was to taken to recruit roughly equal numbers of men and women and to ensure diversity in the ethnic groups represented. A survey form was developed with the input of two workers and then pre-tested. Whenever possible, the research also tried to provide bilingual interpreters in Spanish, Punjabi; and Chinese during the interview process. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese and Punjabi to allow for more authentic discussion. A special outreach was made to the South Asian community in the Brampton area. A total of 78 participants were administered the questionnaire between the spring and autumn of 2012.
A further two focus groups were held in English consisting largely of participants who had expressed a willingness to talk further. A reporting back session was held in December 2012 to solicit participants’ suggestions for recommendations. This event was combined with a holiday party, in the same way that the research project had been introduced to potential participants at a Chinese New Year gathering. In these ways, the research project created occasions for the former co-workers to continue to meet socially and hold on to a sense of community. These occasions also served as opportunities for the research team to interact socially with the participants and share, even if in a small way, their journey toward a more just and secure future. The ways in which we as researchers grew through this project and deepened our own sense of community, solidarity and commitment to social justice is reflected in the pieces below by the two student researchers who worked closely on the project.
Sareh’s reflections

Four years after the closure of PMP, we approached former workers for interviews, limiting our sample to racialized workers--45 years and older. After calling over 200 workers, 78 workers (49 females and 29 males) agreed to participate in interviews that lasted anywhere between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

We were interested in seeing how demographic factors i.e. age, gender, race, and country of origin impacted whether participants sought a “Canadian” education or language training upon arrival to Canada, and after the plant closure how second career training influenced their prospects for re-employment in the labour market.

Given that we administered the questionnaires face to face, in the form of an interview, as opposed to surveys they filled out themselves, we are confident that the answers are reliable because the interviewer would clarify any uncertainty regarding the questions asked. We were careful to use simple language and refrained from using any academic jargon. When asking questions such as “How often do you feel the discrimination you experienced by supervisors/management was a factor in how you were treated at your current job? (that is, discrimination based on your race, gender, age, language etc.?)” we sensed that some participants were not familiar with the term “discrimination” in this context or were hesitant to talk about it because of the sensitive nature of the topic.

A key challenge was to explain to potential participants that their participation in this study was not going to result in any immediate or even direct personal benefit, but for a majority of people, the concern for the collective good resonated strongly and they agreed to participate based on the expectation that the final report would yield recommendations that would inform public policy intended to safeguard future immigrant workers from experiencing this kind of tragic loss.

We would also like to use this opportunity to discuss openly the limitations of our research and the challenges inherent to accessing participants who have been subjected to an injustice and later asked to recall their experience of struggle. Since nearly all of the former workers have familial responsibilities and still remain in various forms of precarious work (including on-call work) they could only give us very short notice on whether they were available for an interview, sometimes as late as the night before. We also experienced a high volume of cancellations at the last minute. Many citing work related obligations. So, we can only imagine how their precarious status in the labour market has impacted their daily lives.

In a few instances, the children of the participants translated for them, acting as ‘cultural brokers’...this may have not been ideal (things could get lost in translation), and in retrospect, we should have discouraged participants to sit in on the interview with their
Salmaan’s reflections

Even though there were limitations to the information we were able to gather quantitatively, the collective narratives of the workers gave us great insight into the intimate effects of economic and social marginalization.

As mentioned by Sarah, the data collection process, aside from the focus groups, consisted of one-on-one interviews that usually lasted a little over one hour. We had not planned for them to take this long, but as soon as we sat face to face with workers who could pass for our own parents - who too had made the journey across oceans in the hopes of a better life - the experience took on a much more personal and intimate dimension. Either before or after the interview process we would share with each other our experiences and thoughts. Sometimes our discussions would venture off into the state of the economy, or we would share our reflections on the stresses of migration. For many of the workers, these discussions were an opportunity to finally speak with someone about their personal experiences. Needless to say, there was much to be said, and much that we were eager to learn.

I will not try to convince you that the research process was carried out in an ‘objective’ and impartial manner with the respective ‘research participants’. Not only would this be impossible, but it would be wrong. To ignore the stories, the trials, the journeys, the tears, the anger, would be to re-commit the same wrongs that a capitalist state built on racial and economic exploitation continues to mete out on workers of colour. It is in fact the erasure of their collective lived experiences that makes it easier for the system to maintain its exploitative nature.

It is not in a piece of paper, or a statistic, but through the life stories of the mother who has to balance working night shifts and raising her family during the day (getting only a couple of hours of sleep) or the pianist from the Philippines whose hands once composed music, but are now chained to the assembly line, that we begin to understand the realities of racial exploitation and marginalization.

There is a strong narrative that poverty is simply a “newcomer” phenomenon or that all it takes is time – 10 to 15 years – for one to ‘settle down.’ This discourse holds that we were all immigrants once, and that over time, we will ‘catch up.’ From what we have recorded throughout this project, many workers living here for more than 20-25 years
still find themselves living in precarity and on the margins of society. For these workers, there never was a “Canadian dream”; and if anything, life is getting even more difficult.

During the interview sessions, one of the questions we asked was: “What are some of your hopes and dreams for the future?” It is no big surprise that with modesty, most of participants answered with: wanting to have a better job; a stable job; to get more hours for work; to find a job in my field; or even simply, to find a job. Some other responses included: wanting always to be a nurse; to be able to buy a house; to have my children live a normal life and be able to find work; hoping that life in Canada would get better; to finally be able to go on holiday; to live a stress-free life; to stop working and travel around the world.

Though their dreams are modest, their spirit of resistance remains high. Through the process of interviewing the workers, it became even more evident that what we were participating in was more than just a research exercise and was developing into a project of resistance. The research project itself, it was clear, was becoming an organizing tool.

At our first get together with the workers, many of whom were in the same room for the first time in a couple of years, the atmosphere was somewhat tense and uncertain. There was a level of hesitation on the part of everyone, and no one really knew what to expect. Yet by the time we had completed the research process, at our final get together, it was clear that the workers, and the research team, were energized with a renewed sense of solidarity and ready to take on the fight.
V. Key Findings and Analysis

In assessing the impact of closure for this group of workers, the study used a number of key indicators such as current employment status, wage and benefit level, job security; and the stress and anxiety level of juggling to make ends meet to sharpen the contrast between before and after the closure. Through statistical data analysis and participants’ own narratives, the study is able to draw some conclusions about the experience of PMP workers that may be generalized to older immigrant racialized workers in precarious labour market conditions. The trends revealed include:

- From stable to precarious forms of employment
- From living wages with benefits to poverty wages
- From job security to unpredictable work assignment and schedules
- Stress and anxiety for workers and their families
- A growing reliance on temp agencies as a source of employment.

The research findings are neither pretty nor encouraging. For these former PMP workers who are racialized long-term immigrants, systemic discrimination by age, gender, and race have presented additional challenges and contributed to a downward spiral of insecurity, and growing inequities in employment and livelihood.

1. Current Employment Status: from Stable to Precarious Forms of Employment

Figure 2 presents a grim picture of the former PMP workers’ current employment status four years after the closure.

- Only one third (34%) of our participants have secured permanent full time employment (i.e. more than 25 hours per week).
  
  Fully two thirds of the former PMP workers at the time of interview were in non-standard employment relationships or unemployed (20%).
• Out of those currently working, close to 40% have been on call/casual work, temporary/short term contract less than a year or other forms of temporary employment as agency workers.

The PEPSO study (March 2013) indicates that in 2011, only half of the employed people age 25-65 in the GTA Hamilton labour market were in a standard employment relationship (permanent full time employment with benefits). From our study of former PMP racialized workers between the age of 45 to 65, the percentage of those who have secured standard employment relationship is even lower at 34%.

The impact of the closure of the PMP plant has also been highly gendered. Women are disproportionately either unemployed or concentrated in precarious employment.

• Out of those who were not working at the time of the interview, an overwhelming majority (80%) were women (13 out of 16).

Which of the following best describes your employment relationship in your current (main) job?

- self-employed - work on my own: 3%
- fixed term contract, one year or more: 4%
- permanent part-time - less than 25 hours per week: 4%
- permanent full time - hours vary from week to week and could sometimes be less than 25 hours per week: 5%
- other: 8%
- casual or on-call: 9%
- temporary/short term contract lasting less than one year: 13%
- not currently working: 20%
- permanent full time - 25 hours or more per week: 34%

Figure 2
Figure 3 below provides a gender breakdown of those not employed in permanent work:

- 42% of these women are in casual/on-call work, as compared to 25% of men.

Figure 4 below shows the difficulty older racialized workers have with re-entry into the labour market. In particular, older male workers have had more than three jobs since the plant closure compared to younger participants who report working two or less jobs. Among males, a disproportionate number of those between 55-64 years have worked more than three jobs since the closure. In contrast, younger male participants aged 45-49 years reported working two or fewer jobs. Among female workers, older workers did better and were as likely as younger female workers to have worked one or two jobs. A much larger proportion of female participants across all age groups except those 55-64 years (as compared to males) reported that they have not found work since the closure.
2. Wages and Benefits: From Secure, Living Wages to Poverty Wages

We were also interested in any differences in workers' income between PMP and subsequent employment. Prior to closure, the hourly rate for operators at PMP was $15 and an average of about $18 for material handlers, quality control and team leaders. This would have been considered a relatively secure and decent wage for workers in 2008 when the minimum wage in Ontario was $8.75. The findings reveal a dramatic drop in workers' wage levels after the closure.
Current Wage Rate Compared with PMP

Figure 5 shows:

- 77% of participants’ current wages are worse than at PMP
- Only 10% of participants are earning a better wage rate. 13% remain the same.

How Much Worse in Terms of the Wage Drop?

Figure 6 provides a more detailed examination of the extent to which wages dropped among those reporting their current wages are worse as compared with PMP.
45% of male participants and 50% of women participants reported a wage drop of under $5 per hour; 36% of male participants and 37% of women participants reported a wage drop of $5 an hour or more.

The findings show only a minimal difference in the hourly rate drop between men and women. In retrospect, a question about monthly earnings and hours might have yielded a more accurate picture of income differences by gender. Given the significantly higher percentage of women in on-call and casual employment (42% compared with 25% of their male counterparts), the lack of stable working hours could greatly affect earnings on a weekly or monthly basis. It was not easy to delve
further into these matters as questions about earnings proved a highly sensitive topic to raise with the workers.

**Benefits of Current Job Compared to PMP**

In addition to the dramatic drop in wages, loss of benefits has also been a major blow to the former PMP workers and their families. Benefits such as prescription drugs, dental care, life insurance, etc. as well as pensions can represent between 30 to 35% of total employment remuneration.

![Bar chart](image)

**Figure 7**

- Fully 80% of participants reported benefits at their current job were worse compared with PMP. Only 9% thought their current benefit package was better than at PMP.
Participants reported that other working conditions such as health and safety and shift schedules were also worse. This is captured in a comment by a participant who now works as an assembler in another auto-parts plant:

*For this job here it’s like $15 an hour, which was almost the same as PMP, but this job does not pay for my break and lunch. They deduct it from my pay so I work for 40 hours I only get paid for 36 hours, they even deduct my break time. So I don’t actually get paid $15 because they deduct my lunch and break time, so I get about $13.50 maybe.*

From Living and Participating to Struggling to Make Ends Meet

How often has your household found it difficult to make ends meet since plant closure?

![Bar chart showing the frequency of difficulty in making ends meet by age and gender.](image)

Figure 8
40% of women participants and 43% of male participants reported that their household sometimes found it difficult to make ends since the plant closure.

52% of female respondents and 42% of male respondents reported that their household often found it difficult to make ends meet since the plant closure.

When combined, 92% of women participants and 85% of male participants sometimes or often found it difficult to make ends meet since the plant closure.

With the drop in wages and benefits and the precarious forms of employment, the relative security that these workers and their families once enjoyed also collapsed. The difference is between having a sense of stability, and surviving and struggling to make ends meet. When we further analyze the data by gender and age, a more compelling picture emerges.

Women in the 45-49 age group have found it especially difficult to juggle financially, to make ends meet. In the “often” category, when compared to their male counterparts, the ratio is almost 3 to 1 (28% vs. 10%). The household duties and the juggling between competing demands to stretch the dollar often falls on the shoulders of women in their double and triple day roles as a worker, a wife and a mother. The fact that a higher percentage of them are on-call or in temp work might also be a contributing factor to the higher proportion of women who have challenges keeping the household finances afloat.

The reduction in income is more acutely felt by those in the 50-54 age group, with competing family demands - from children’s postsecondary education tuition to elder parent care. This is reflected in some of the interviews and focus groups.

_I find it hard to pay the bills, and my parents got sick too, so it is very hard and at those times, it is very stressful._

_Often, it’s very stressful when we don’t have enough with two kids. The worst time was when my husband also lost his job during the same time in the year, but he was lucky because he got a call back right before the unemployment finished._
I am worried, yes definitely because like I said I have two daughters going to college and university, I have a mortgage, daily routine expenses such as car insurance and groceries so yes, I’m worried about it. I believe in saving but I don’t know how long it will last.

For other older workers who have not found work since the closure and end up on social assistance due to recurring health problems, the situation is even more dire. The sense of frustration and despair is palpable from this male older worker who is between the age of 55 and 60. He was enrolled in Second Career retraining program but ended up having to quit due to health problems aggravated by the stress of the closure.

It is the biggest one I can think of. It is a tough time when you don’t even see $200 a week. It is difficult for people that cannot even find a good minimum wage job. I get $500 or $600 something a month, which is nothing, because my rent is $900 so you can imagine how I feel. And I have a car which insurance is a lot a month, so there is no food. So right now my rent is up to date, but it’s going to come again because I have trouble in between, you are on your own. But tell me what’s going to happen, because it is not enough to cover everything. ..My health has dropped way down and is big time worse because stress is a big factor. If you’re not working you don’t know where the next money is coming from!

3. The Adverse Impact on Health and Well Being

In Figure 9, the stress levels are highest for women in the 45-49 age group. Particularly alarming is the spike of 25% of women in that age group reporting most days since the closure as ‘extremely stressful’. It speaks to the impact that insecure employment and the constant juggling of work and family responsibilities can have on the quality of life and the health and wellbeing of workers.
"I'm very worried because it is car manufacturing; the factory could shut down anytime. Like last week, you are working away and all of a sudden the horn sounds and everybody gathers around and they say that Chrysler shut us down everybody go home."

- Over half of the respondents (52%) reported that the uncertainty over their work schedule has interfered with their personal and family life.
- Out of those who are working, 59% reported being anxious about losing their current employment
- Almost half, 49.4% felt that their health has worsened since the closure, with women experiencing a higher degree of worsening health (54% vs. 41%)
Juggling between Work and Family Responsibilities

The story of Hong (pseudonym), a midnight shift worker who sleeps at two hour intervals, is illustrative of the challenges of juggling life, family responsibilities and precarious work.

Hong is an immigrant woman who came to Canada in 1984 and worked at PMP for more than 10 years. Upon arrival, she only took ESL classes for a couple of months and then went to work. After the PMP closure, she worked at more than 3 jobs – a restaurant, car parts agency and a packing job - before landing in this position. Compared to many of her former co-workers, she considers herself lucky. She has found full time work as an assembler in a unionized plant. Due to her low seniority, she is working middnights without a shift premium. Hong has juggled her midnight shift and the responsibility of caring for three school age children for over a year. She has been denied uninterrupted sleep of more than two hours at a time.

It’s midnight shift from 11 to 7 and there are only two breaks, They say they pay the old people (the workers with seniority) because they signed a contract a year before and the new contract is different. The new contract gives you $15 but no premium for midnight shift and you don’t get paid for your break so you really only get like $12. The line is running very fast...last year they only did about 20, now they do 150. You can’t stop, you have to continue and continue. And also the wax that you smell, I have to use the mask. It smells strong.

I lost almost 20 pounds and now my knee is hard to bend. In the morning, after I come home from work, I prepare breakfast and take the kids to school. Then I sleep from 10 am to around 12 noon, I wake up to cook and prepare for my children; and then at nighttime, maybe at 7 o’clock I have to sleep again until 9.30 and go to work. So it (my sleep) does not continue and I am very tired. On the weekends sometime I work overtime, but sometime I don’t work because I don’t want to kill myself. But you cannot sleep that much on the weekends, my body schedule is different. So every night I ask my son to please give me a massage, only for two minutes! I just feel so sick!
One cannot help but wonder whether she is paying too high a price for her full time midnight shift work. Hong’s narrative reveals the dual and triple work day of many immigrant women who must juggle paid work, childcare and other household responsibilities. For many, there is little room to maneuver and few options.

**Differential Workplace Arrangements**

Some former PMP workers end up working side-by-side with others doing the same work but getting different pay and benefits. In Hong’s case, she is not entitled to the midnight shift premium that workers with more seniority enjoy. In a labour market where employers are demanding tiered wage concessions this is not uncommon. Speed ups and health and safety hazards become harder to monitor and enforce with a divided workforce and weakening union presence, particularly on irregular shifts.

Hong’s story also reflects the sorry state of a childcare system which is oversubscribed and underfunded. In addition, there are few innovative care arrangements that take into account the childcare needs of shift workers who are predominantly in low wage employment in both the service and manufacturing sectors. With more workers on irregular shift work and non-traditional jobs, this is an area that both policy makers and childcare advocates should further examine and address, helping to alleviate a structural barrier that impacts adversely on low wage women earners. This will contribute significantly to their overall health, well-being and the quality of life.

**4. Prospect of Re-employment after Retraining**

**The Benefits of Second Career Training**

One of the legacies of the PMP Workers Action Centre during its 30 months of operation was the development of innovative strategies and partnerships with community colleges and school boards. This was done to address the diverse training needs and supports required for these workers, many of whom had been out of school for more than 20 years. With flexibility and support from MTCU, service providers and the educational partners, an integrated and comprehensive training model and bridging
project on upgrading were implemented as part of accessing the Second Career program. Following academic upgrading, most workers were successful in completing their Second Career training program. The Second Career program was particularly effective as a response to the recession of 2008-09, providing workers like those from PMP with an opportunity to set new goals and work toward them.

From the PMP Labour Adjustment Committee Final Report (Ng 2011: 28): a total of 422 workers completed a Second Career program and 449 workers completed upgrading. These were astounding achievements considering the demographic profile of the workers. For many, the Second Career program was the first ever opportunity since their arrival in Canada to access upgrading and training that provided some tuition and income supports in the form of a training allowance. As a result, many gained new proficiencies and skills as well as a confidence that would serve them well in their future job search and interviews.

In Figure 10, a large majority (62%) of male participants enrolled in the Second Career program while less than 50% of female participants did. There is a gender differential in the enrollment.

Among those participants who did not enroll or complete the training program, many cited reasons relating to: income support while in training (most popularly reported); other costs associated with training; training program availability; and child care or other family related responsibilities.

When asked: “For those who did not enroll or complete the training program, how important was income support while in training in stopping you from enrolling in a training program of your choice since the plant closure?” 89% of males reported this factor as either very important or important, compared to 75% of females.

When asked: “how important was the costs associated with the training?” 82% of males reported this factor as either very important or important, compared to 67% of females.
When asked: “how important was the training program availability?” among males, 60% reported that it was either very important or important compared to 41% of females.

Finally, when asked: “how important was child care or other family related responsibilities while in training?” among males, 40% reported that it was either very important or important compared to 48% of females.

It is worth noting that among all the reasons that inhibited participants from enrolling or completing their SC training, child care or familial responsibilities were the only category where females reported the importance at a higher rate than males.
The Correlations to Success in Finding Work in the New Career Field

In our research study, 51% of the participants completed their SC training (40 out of 78). However, when asked whether they have found employment in their new chosen career field, the responses were far from promising.

Figure 11 confirms that the completion of Second Career training program does not necessarily translate into re-employment in the new career field. Out of 40 workers who completed SC training, only 11 (25%) had found employment related to their training. Others either returned to the manufacturing sector or were still looking for work. For those not fortunate enough to find work in their new field yet, the frustration and disappointment is palpable, reflected in the following quote from one of the older workers who went through plumbing training.
“I want to work. I went to school and gained knowledge and have no opportunity to use it. I just want a setting where I can see and talk to people...because I’m home now and am so depressed so I don’t even talk to anybody. I know that there are so many people just like me ...I feel sad for myself, sometimes, I feel like I’m not good enough. It doesn’t matter if you do so much or even if I send my resume out. You feel like what’s wrong with you. You send your resume and nobody calls you. I don’t know.”

We hear a similar story from a former PMP woman worker who came to Canada as an experienced teacher. She is now unemployed after re-training.

“I used to be a certified high school teacher back in my home country. When I came here, I could not use the skills. So I went back to school here but because of discrimination, I still cannot use the new skills here. I am grateful for what Second Career has done for me. I want to contribute back to society with my work, that was going to be my thank-you to the government for helping me out, but if I cannot find a job then what do I do? I have to survive one way or another and I have to look at the best way to survive.”

Finding Employment in the New Field after SC Training (by Age)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>45-49 yrs of age</th>
<th>50-54 yrs of age</th>
<th>55-64 yrs of age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
<td>2 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
<td>11 (79%)</td>
<td>9 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
<td>14 (100%)</td>
<td>11 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(didn’t do training)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the fairly even spread across the various age groups among those who completed Second Career training, the success rate of getting into the new career field diminishes as the age of participant progresses, from 40% in the 45-49 age group, 21% in the 50-54 age group to only 18% in the 55+ group. These numbers indicate that age
plays a role in determining success rates in securing employment related to training. Older workers are less represented among successful candidates.

The findings demonstrate that older workers face additional challenges in a highly competitive job market despite successful completion of a retraining program and their accumulated experience and knowledge of the labour market.

5. The Growing Prevalence of Temporary Employment Agency Work

![Figure 13](image)

Former PMP workers have had to resort to a variety of means to find employment in a difficult economy. When asked about the multiple methods that they have used to look for work, 87% of the participants reported using temp agencies to look for work compared to 13% who did not. It is critical to note that 42% of the participants secured their current job through temporary agencies.
Many employers now use temp agencies to screen potential employees and to maintain a more transitory workforce, subject to lower wages and few if any benefits. The following quotes from three workers highlight the exploitative and precarious nature of temporary employment:

*My last job is June 2010, and after that I applied with an agency working for Magna and worked there for two months, from July to September…with agency, you never know if you have job, you just wake up and they say don’t come to work today because there is no work, it’s unpredictable.*

*Since the plant closed, I have worked four jobs, all through agency. The agency could send me today, and then I stay home for the whole week. And then the other agency calls at the same time and I have to go to the other one. It is really annoying when you work with agencies because they don’t have jobs or two call you at the same time and you have to decide where to go, it’s not stable. I get so tired when I work with the agency. You never know what’s going on.*

*Recently I was working in a car part company through an agency, and after two months, I started surveying the agency people around me as to how long they have been there. They say ‘I’m working three years. ‘I’m working three and a half years’, some say ‘I’m working for 4 years through (the agency)’. This is crazy, and the pay is the same. They have yet to be made permanent. If I’m working at a company, I hate people coming from agencies because you have to train them. Well now I hate myself working through agencies but yah… I’m helpless. I have to go through it because I don’t have any job and opportunities.*

In this last, candid comment, it is easy to see how workers misplace their frustration over work arrangements, taking it out on co-workers referred to as ‘agency workers’.

**Discriminatory Practices of Temp Agencies**

One of the key themes emerging from this study is a common frustration with the exploitative and discriminatory practices of temp agencies. Our findings confirm these practices have impacted former PMP workers’ access to employment.
My frustration with agencies is because they are not regulated, the immigrant’s destiny is in their hands. They treat you anyhow they like because they know there is no regulation and nobody is coming in to check up on them…I know some agencies are paying people $8 because they know they (the workers) are so desperate to work that they will take any amount of money, they don’t even care about the minimum wage…they pay lower than minimum wage!

The agencies know that three months from the time of hiring you are supposed to be hired full time by the employer, that’s still the law. But maybe a day shy of you being three months with the employer, the agency will move you to another company so you don’t have a chance to be hired full time and you need to start all over again, just so they can get their $5 or $10 dollars off you.

I don’t want to work for an agency…for the future for my kids, myself, I want people to do something about agencies because they are sucking my blood and whoever’s. And if you come from somewhere else you have to go to the agency to work in a company. There is no future at the agency; there is no benefit or anything. They send you home but you are on call all the time. You can’t go to look for something else.

At the agency, you cannot make a complaint because no one will listen and you are not permanent and as a part time, they do not treat you good, they are not nice. When you go to work for 2 hours, then they send you home, and I said I took and paid for two buses and it took me an hour and half to get here, and after only two hours of work you sent me home. I had to wait for a call and they don’t call for another one or two weeks.”

I went and worked some contract at the bread factory through some agency. They had bread baking and coming out of the ovens which is very hot. They have gloves for you but when you wear the gloves you still feel the burning sensation in your hands. The regular employees do not touch the hot bread; it’s the people from the agency that touch the bread. When you dump the bread upside down and touch the mold you feel the burning sensation because the heat goes right through the gloves.
6. *Discrimination in Accessing Work and Staying on the Job*

![Pie chart showing responses to the question: Do you believe discrimination has been a barrier for you in getting work?](image)

- **20%** believe discrimination has been a barrier.
- **12%** are unsure.
- **68%** do not believe it has been a barrier.

**Figure 14**

Close to 70% of participants believe discrimination has been a barrier in getting work. Below we discuss the particular forms of discrimination that the workers claim have impacted their opportunities. When asked about the major barriers, the top three were age at 85%, race at 67%; and language at 40%. Gender and religion trailed at 10%.
Oh yes, a big yes. My name sounds so good on paper. You take my resume and I get a call and then ok...you see the Canadian politics, they are nice but because my names sounds like an English name, and then you get a call and they say are you sure it’s you? And then they will cancel the interview, or if I go they say that they will call you back and they never call you back.

In addition to the discrimination experienced in getting work, workers also report discrimination in workplace practices such as racial slurs, differential treatment by management in work assignments and promotion opportunities. These forms of discrimination do not occur in isolation of each other. Rather they are likely to be intersecting and compound the experience of marginalization and alienation.
This job I’m currently in, I feel discrimination based on race and age. They know I am the oldest one there, on my shift, I am the oldest. But they could not figure out what my age is, but like I said, they called me in and told me they needed to talk to me, it is not that I made mistakes they only said I am not good at my job. I applied for team leader but then they said I am not good enough for my job. But I have been there as a team leader for 8 months now.

Sometimes some people would call me “china men” but that’s a racial slur. I see that it is a person from another country and probably learned it from someone else, but he does not know how hurtful it is. I know he is not from here either because he has an accent but racial comments make me go crazy.

Yes, when they (supervisors or management) see a white person or a black person they have a very different attitude. When they see black people they are scared, and I think I am very right in this observation. When they see white people they believe that they belong in the community with them, and even if they do something wrong, they never say anything against them, a lot of frustration.

Yes, definitely. One of my supervisors made fun of my English, and even sent an email to one of my customers asking to please correct. And in a high-pressure environment you don’t worry about grammar and things like that… the most important is that the customer understands what is going on… but my supervisor keeps sending me emails about this. After a few times, my reaction is slower and slower because I have to concentrate on the grammar. But the customer never complains, it is just my supervisor. Race, even though I can’t see it, I’m sure it exists. I have a feeling. And at work, I’m sure I am no less than everyone else, it is just appearance!

The low ranking of gender as a systemic barrier is puzzling. One explanation could be that in an already ‘feminized’ labour market – that is, one that produces more low-paid, part-time, insecure, typically ‘women’s jobs’ than better-paid, full-time, secure ones—women do not necessarily feel that they fare much worse than men, who are also experiencing similar conditions. Another explanation is that gender determines
expectations about the labour market, and is therefore taken for granted as a factor. It is possible that for many immigrant women workers whose first language is not English, race and language proficiency appear as the more obvious and immediate factors limiting their opportunities and shaping their working conditions.

Interviews revealed a wide range of experiences of discrimination and harassment:

*I think age, though the management are not showing it, the company I think discriminate older worker. They make you pick heavy parts, parts as heavy as the engines of the cars, and they old people on really parts. If you complain and say that it’s too heavy, she will ask why you didn’t bring your husband to help you. For us women, it is not fair. For some women she is fair, and she says ok. For other she does not recognize that they are women. We tried to talk to the union but the union is failing to recognize that she does these things. We feel the supervisor is being discriminatory based on race or colour. She has a hatred for black, she hates anything black.*

*Once where I worked, I saw the supervisor harassing someone by touching her back. She is through the agency too. She said nothing. I asked her, I said I saw with my eyes and that was not right. One time he passed by. I looked at him and he said what are you going to do and I said I am going to do something. But too bad I have no camera or I would tape it. But only one mistake and he let me go, because I am agency I cannot say anything. If I say something I am afraid I would lose my job, if I was full time it would be a different story. If I was full time I would not be scared and would report to human resources.*

7. *The Wider Repercussions of the Closure*

One of the recurring themes in the research interviews and focus group discussions has been the sudden plant closure and its devastating impact. The issues of outstanding compensation, severance and termination pay and the lack of recourse and concrete redress have been a lingering reminder of the betrayal.
Loss of Community Networks and Support

For many workers, the sudden plant closure was a shock and a traumatic experience. Not only had their PMP position provided job security and a livelihood, the work also helped define their role and value as a contributing member of society. The workplace was very much their source of social network and community outside the home, built up over the years – a place where they could socialize and draw support from each other. The closure meant a dismantling of that community. For many workers, there was a grieving process over the loss of that sense of belonging. As expressed by one worker in a focus group discussion:

“Losing your job is like a divorce. People need counseling to ease the stress. Losing a job is like losing a loved one.”

The Betrayal by the Company and the State

These immigrant workers felt betrayed not only by the employer but also by the state. There continues to be an absence of a legislative framework and options to hold the employer accountable for the compensation owed to the workers. Instead the company hid behind federal bankruptcy protection laws that place workers who are owed severance and termination pay last on a list of so-called secured creditors.

“When you work for a company for 20 or 30 years, you try and save… then you realize that there is nothing there because the company goes bankrupt. So who protects you and those years of working? I want to complain about them because that’s not fair. Service is service and there must be something that can be done! …For all the time I put into work, we get enough abuse where we are working, and then they just tell you ok we don’t need you anymore. They just said bankruptcy and move on. They just don’t want to pay. The prime minister needs to think about the people who work there because when you work there for so many years, it is difficult to throw everything away.

The government should not allow them to file for bankruptcy and not pay their employees for what they are entitled to. Workers need to be paid first. Legislation should not allow employers to take advantage of
the workers. That’s what they are doing. They put the money in their pocket and walk away and the workers are the victims. When students take out loan under OSAP, government makes them pay back with interest. So why can’t there be some legislation in place to make the employers pay? Government is smart and they should come up with some rules, not indulging employers who walk away.”

In addition to the lack of government recourse regarding compensation, many participants also felt let down by the state upon their arrival in Canada. Some had come to Canada with international credentials and work experience but ended up working at PMP. The plant closure triggered a sense of bitterness and disappointment after years of under-employment, discrimination, and sacrifice. Retraining as a security guard after 15 years at PMP suggests a twist of fate to this participant who was a trained engineer:

“When I came to Canada, I came on the points system. I was not a refugee or a sponsored relative. They assessed my education and work history and after the interviews I got the immigration. And then they I came to Canada and there is nothing. Due to my qualification and work experience they say you will get a good job over here, but no. I would understand if I was not skilled but I am skilled. A couple of weeks ago I went to apply for security license. When I got there was a dental assistant and an assistant professor in Pakistan...he is only qualifying as a security guard. This country is about luck.”

The Domino Effect of Income Loss

Even though PMP workers were earning a living wage, most of them lived from pay cheque to pay cheque with little room to maneuver. The following experiences shared by two workers speak to the desperation and hardship that workers were subjected to.

“When the PMP workers got laid off, the company denied us of money that we are entitled to. So then our bills cannot be paid. I was unable to meet my other obligations and pay my debt. So I filed for bankruptcy, and because I filed for bankruptcy, OSAP will not finance
my education and will not give me money to continue. It is a chain reaction.”

I have to use up all my RRSP. I work and I get laid off. I got laid off three times. It is not stable. And all my savings are gone now; I don’t have any.

The domino effect of sudden job loss and income was particularly drastic for families where both spouses or multiple members of the household were employed by PMP. The impact on the educational opportunities of children can be acutely felt by the next quote from a South Asian woman participant whose husband also worked at PMP:

I have never faced this situation in my life, it’s so horrible. When PMP was there my daughter was studying in Vancouver, but when PMP went bankrupt I had to bring her back. She was over there studying fashion design because there was limited opportunity here but she had the opportunity there and I had to bring her back. It was a horrible situation. It is very hard for us to survive. It is really, really hard. I had to make my daughter do a job of her own and study on her own.

For some workers, the loss of job and income represents the beginning of the unraveling. Some workers ended up borrowing from credit cards to pay their mortgage and then eventually lose their homes, while others ended up losing their marriage. This is seen poignantly in Lisa’s story told at the end of this section.

8. Hopes and Dreams for the Future

For most respondents, when asked about their hopes and dreams for the future, the desire for secure employment is the constant refrain. Many of them defined a good job as simply having enough hours and some sense of predictability.

I hope to take care of my daughter and have good children. I hope to have a good job. I am looking for a good job every day and wait for the call but nobody calls. I said I can do morning shift but the company needed me for afternoon and midnight but I could not, so I could not go to work.
I hope for a job with security and a steady career so I don’t have to look anymore. I worked a lot of jobs for three weeks and then I’m laid off and then I get another job and I’m happy, and then I get laid off again. So a job is very important for me. I have some job offers for minimum wage but I cannot do it because I have loans and things.

I would like to pay off my mortgage, but there is still a long way to go. And I really don’t like working with agency. I would like it if there was no agency and the company would just hire, it would be better for everybody. I feel like the agency is a rip-off because they pay us minimally and we actually get paid more if we get hired straight from the company, instead of getting a couple of dollars deducted from the agency.

I want to work Monday to Friday, 40 hours, and on weekends work part time for my second career. I can do it at home, my hairstyle part time on Saturday and Sunday, but I want Monday to Friday stable 40 hours. That is what I wish for my future. Just get a better job, that’s my dream. Doing something like PSW (Personal Support Worker) would be good.

My hope and dream is just to take a vacation with my kids. I have not taken them anywhere after PMP.

The above quotes, in particular the last quote, speak to a collective desire for decent work and a decent future. In the grand scheme of things, being able to take a short vacation with the children has become an unattainable goal. The presence of stable employment is the difference between survival and full participation in a country they call home.
Narratives of Migration, (Un)Settlement, and Precariousness

Lisa’s Story

My name is Lisa and this is my emigration story. I came to Canada in 1995 from the African country of Ghana. As at the time of emigrating I had graduated from Teacher’s College with a certificate and had taught for almost 8 years. Though life was not perfect, I considered myself as a professional who was climbing up both the social and professional ladder without any thought of myself as a woman or a second class citizen. Having arrived here with high hopes and dreams of continuing my education, I couldn’t believe the hardships and disappointments of friends and families I met here. The stories told were many and unbelievable, but it did not take long for me to live my own experiences.

First, it was about getting my certificate evaluated by the Ontario College of Teachers so I would know how and what to do to get into the profession I much loved. My first disappointment came when I was told I have to pay five hundred dollars and get my transcripts sent directly to them from my home country. After that, I had to wait for about a year before I could get any feedback. Mind you, I had arrived with my two young children ages seven and nine, and my husband had used his credit card to pay for our passage here. Being an immigrant himself had its own disadvantages. Why you may ask? Being an African man to us means being a provider, protector and mentor for our son especially, so not being able to spend much needed time with him meant neglecting his duties as a father and that is not acceptable. Working long hours and being discriminated against at work meant humiliation to him and so coming home also meant terror for us. As a young wife, I did not find time to understand why my once loving husband was becoming a tyrant at home towards the very people he claimed to love. It was only recently that I began to realize how much emotional pain he was suffering. With the stress of marriage pushing me down, I decided to forgo my interests and ambitions and help raise my kids to the best of my abilities so that they could become who they were meant to be. My focus totally shifted from becoming the same career woman and mother I was back home to working any job to support my husband so his stress would go down. This is how I found myself working from one employment agency to the other, until a friend told me of Progressive Moulded Products.

I vividly remember that fateful day when I was told I was hired fulltime. It was one of the best days of my life in Canada. As a new employee starting at a new plant, ex-coworkers and I became pioneers of the 21 Granitridge plant. We worked hard to please the owners and they were happy with the production we were giving. They even promised and gave us part of the huge profits they made in those days and this
prompted us to even work harder. There were lots and lots of overtime and I quite remember some of the workers sleeping in their cars for a few hours so they could start the next shift. A lot of sacrifices were made to make huge profits for the company but as time went on we noticed rapid changes in ownership and people were going and coming as new owners and partners. There were lots of rumors going on concerning the financial health of the company but through it all we were assured that all was well.

About six years into my service there, I noticed lots of changes and conditions going from bad to worse. The profit sharing was stopped and a flimsy excuse was given. Then came the stoppage of pay increases and job evaluations. No one cared anymore as senior management became hostile and started firing people left and right for complaining about issues of health and safety and non recognition of senior employees. Everybody was regarded on the same level no matter how long one had worked for the company. No salary increase or vacations were given according to service time and, by late 2007, we were told that whoever did not like the way the company was being run, could quit. It was either you take it or leave. Since most of us were immigrants and had families to feed, we kept quiet and took the abuse and bullying for the sake of the money. Just as most of us had adjusted to the bad conditions and were still working hard for this company, we were rudely surprised on the 30 of June, 2008 that the company had closed down due to bankruptcy. This unexpected behaviour and disappointment threw all of us into a state of shock, misery and anger. It was after the closure of PMP, that Fa and a few other co-workers decided not to give up and go away just like the employer had wanted us to do. They underestimated us, thinking because we were immigrants and most did not speak good English, we did not know our rights and therefore they could just vanish without any consequence.

With the help of the Action Centre, a few of us took an evaluation test and it was determined that though we had passed, most of us had been out of school for more than twenty years and so throwing us in the middle of college without prior preparation was not a good idea. For me, this was a moment of opportunity to go back to the dream I had put on the back burner for so long. As our academic level was beyond upgrading, we were admitted into the pre-community services program in George Brown College to slowly integrate us into the college system here. Though this was very challenging for me both academically and emotionally, I was determined to do what I had set out to do many years prior. The challenge of being a mature student and having difficulty understanding how the grading system works here as well as not having enough money to help my kids as I used to, threw me into a deep depression that I have never discussed. I struggled with my grades as they were not impressive, but through it all I promised not to give up and let the hard work of the kind counsellors at the Action Centre go to waste.
With George Brown behind me, I applied and gained admission to Seneca College where I trained as a social service worker with a specialization in immigrants and refugees. The decision to do this was a no-brainer to me at all because I was inspired by the counsellors at the Action Centre and I promised to pay back to society the kindness and care I had received from them. This really helped me excel in Seneca academically but personally, my life was falling apart. Without the two incomes at home, the pressure on my spouse became too much and at some point he decided to bail out on me since the kids were grown and moved out now. I never gave up on my education since that was the only dignity I had. I persevered through the depression and managed to graduate with honours.

All indications at the time showed that the prospects of finding a job in the field were there, but unfortunately things did not go according to plan. I thought I was the only one in this situation but upon meeting a few of my ex-coworkers and listening to their stories, I found out that ninety percent of those who trained in second careers did not find work in their respective fields. I did all I could to find work i.e. through volunteering in community agencies, helping out in events and applying for over a hundred jobs, but none was willing to give me a chance to even prove myself.

The stress of uncertainty and the pressure to cater for my family led me to go back to temporary employment agencies to do menial jobs just to put food on the table, and that has been the situation for most of us. We went from making a decent living as workers of PMP to living on charity from family, friends and the government. Utilizing resources in the community is not something most of us rely on since we are proud workers. Unable to find work and realizing that the Ontario works I applied for was not enough ($329.00 per month), I decided to go back to school for my degree, since most of the jobs require at least a Bachelor or Master’s degree. By the grace of God, I made it to York University in the fall of 2011 and hopefully, will graduate by June 2014. As much as I am proud of this, I would not be quick to celebrate yet, because remember I have put myself into debt from the OSAP I collected. I am frustrated because this debt could have been avoided if I had found work after the second career training.

Coming out with two certificates from the Second Career program should have helped, but unfortunately the systemic racism and the need for younger workers these days have made my dream a nightmare. Though I am in school, I find myself depressed all the time and this has affected my grades again. I have kept this a secret and almost afraid to discuss this because I have been the support for most of my ex-coworkers. This is killing me but I always pretend in front of people that all is well, especially my family and friends. I am the one they look up to when they need help so I cannot afford to show weakness. My main fear now is the uncertainty of a future job. I am constantly thinking of the huge amount of debt I am incurring; about $40 – 45,000 by the time I graduate. How am I going to pay this debt, not to talk about saving for pension?
The so-called Canadian dream of owning a house is out of reach for me now so all I pray for is to find work after graduating so I can begin to pay the debt in front of me. My kids joke about my collection of certificates and how they are collecting dust because none of them have helped give me the job I so desperately needed.

This same desperation led me to try out any job I can find and that is how I recently found myself in a chicken farm in Bradford, Ontario. Here, I was willing to work for both the satisfaction of self-reliance and also for my self-esteem but unfortunately, after going through the interview and verifying my credentials, I was told that I was overqualified. Though it was refreshing to hear the comforting words of being overqualified for a job for the first time, I also felt sad for finding myself in limbo. The future is becoming more precarious and I am afraid of how so many of us from PMP will survive. Though I am doing my part not to be a burden to society, I wonder if that is good enough.

Thank you all for listening and reading my story but one thing I need from you is to join me to tell the Minister of Education and those in charge of the Second Career program that there needs to be more done that just the training. Courses with internships should be made to accommodate students’ professional assurance at the end of their school, or the wage subsidy program can be attached to all Second Career programs so students will be assured of some type of jobs in their field of training after they graduate.

Tom’s Story

I was here twenty-six years ago. I came here to Canada in 1987 when I was twenty-six years old. I am fifty-two now. When we first came to Canada it was easy to find a job, even though I didn’t speak English as good, when I came I still got a job. They needed more workers, they needed more labour, so it was very easy to find a job twenty something years ago. Then since the company I worked for closed, I worked for PMP. It was 1997. So I thought I would stay at that company [PMP] until I retired because it seemed like the job was good for me. It was not a good job, but it was reasonable for me. Another reason is that I don’t speak good English, so it’s hard for me to find a job. Everywhere you go they require like a high school diploma. And that time when I applied for this job [PMP] I didn’t even speak good English. PMP was easier at that time and they were willing to hire, so I was okay with that. I didn’t have good English speaking skills at that moment so I thought, okay, stay here. As long as I have income.

About twelve years after, the PMP closed. They had announced that we will be shutting down for two weeks, and so we should come back after the two week shutdown. At the second week I got a call from my friend who told me: “hey, they are moving all the machines from the plant. Something is going wrong”. And all these trucks had come to pick up the, whatever, from the factory. So we all ran there and we saw the people had
come but we did not know what to do. So someone said we should all go to the park. I forget the name of the park. But we went there and we met as a group and then we all went back to the PMP company and we began to rally and we started a picket line, you know, even without any knowledge. And we were treated like not a human being you know, and the police came and they kicked us out. And someone called Winnie Ng, and she came with John, and the next day all we see is all the union flags in the front of the company. And things changed from that day. We had more dignity, more respect. The people came and helped us and showed us what to do since I lost my job, I have been having my own problems too. Since I didn’t have income, and there was too much stress, and my family now…. I don’t say who’s wrong or who’s right, but because there was no income, and with all the financial problems, finally we saw that we just cannot live together. So finished my married life.

I tried to find a second job, and even went to Second Career. I went for hair stylist. But I didn’t go into the field because it’s not easy to find a job. You know, you have to wait for the customer, and if the customers don’t come in, then no job. It’s not like a salary. It works on commission.

So I applied for a job in New Market, and they hired through an agency. And they said you have to work here for four years or three years to get hired as a full time. So when we asked about the salary, they said its only basic pay- only minimum wage. So I had no choice but to work there and I worked there for five months. And when the job slows down they start cutting people. And I jumped from New Market to Concord through another agency. When I went to that company they said they were going to be hiring people. Then I applied for a job, since 2011 I’ve been working in the factory. Till now it’s been two years. I didn’t get hired full time because they say that “everything is slow”. And it’s not only me, it’s all the people working through the agency. Some people even more than two years. More than ten or twenty people have been working there like me – for a long time – and they still don’t get hired. So we’re just waiting and waiting and we don’t know what we’re going to do. We don’t know when they’re going to hire. We just go. I went to ask the human resources, and they just say “I don’t know, I don’t know. Soon soon soon”. This has been for almost two years. So this is the problem. I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I need the benefits. I need a stable job.

We have to work more than the full time people. The full time people are hired; they don’t care. We don’t get hired; we care. We are afraid because a lot of people have been kicked out if they are not working good. They even sent me home for two months, but then they called me back because there was work.

There is a lot of stress. . You know, the boss push you too much. And plus my family problem. It all gives me a lot of stress. I think I’ll go crazy. It’s not easy this life. Because I lost my job, my marriage… what do they say… no money is no marriage. We started
having too much problems. I think it was because I didn’t have a job. If I had a job I would have income and maybe the story would be a different story. We had too much stress you know, when I didn’t have a job I had too much stress; she had too much stress. I couldn’t find a job. I have very simple hopes. That all the people have full-time jobs; stable jobs. That they have some food on the table and shelter. That’s it. I’m not a greedy person. I’m a very simple person. And everyone should get a job.

People working through the agency, maybe they come one day or two days, then they disappear. They don’t come back again. Maybe the boss don’t like them or maybe they don’t have a job for them. So it’s hard. It’s very hard. When you go through an agency to get work, they don’t have any limit. Like some people they say you work 6 months, 7 months and you get hired. But like me, I’ve been working more than two years and I haven’t been hired. If you like their performance, you should keep them. We are working good for them. We are working even harder than the permanent workers.

The agency pays minimum wage. For two years minimum wage. After they deduct, you have nothing left. Nothing. So we want to find a better job, but the thing is, we don’t know what kind of job to go to. We don’t have any skills. If we have some skills maybe we can do an office job or whatever, and get a better income, but we don’t… like my verbal English skill. How can I go now and get an office job? If you were the boss you would never hire me speaking broken English like this. And another thing is our age. With our age it’s not easy to go back to school. I’m 52 now. The memories go down, everything goes down.

The boss could be standing right behind you so you don’t know. You don’t even have time to talk because they put too many things in front of you. You just try to finish, or look at the clock. In one hour they expect you to make 45 pieces. And you have no time to talk to anybody. You just work work work! You know, just go fast fast fast! No talking. Even if the boss talks to you, you have to talk and still move your hands on the machine. Even when you go on break time, you have to walk from the line to the break room. Already 3 minutes have gone. And when you walk back, another 3 minutes. When the first bell rings you have to go from here to there and when the second bell rings you have to already be back in your workplace. And when the third bell rings you have to touch the pile already. If sometimes you’re behind, you don’t even get to go to break. You have to finish them. If you don’t finish then you get into trouble. They will come to ask you why why why. The older workers there, they can talk and give some explanation. But we.. no. Because we are through the temp agency. So you have to work to make them happy. They know you’re working good, but they still don’t care. They can send you home.

A lot of people have been sent home. They work one month, two month and they go home. I am one of the lucky ones. They kept me. About twenty people have been
working there for more than two years and they still don't keep us full time. They haven't even hired us yet. I don't know why they don't hire us. They need the labour. And we work for them so well. And they still don't keep us. We've been there for a long time already.

I learned a lot from the PMP action centre. I took part in all the training and I learned from them. I learned from them how to work together to help. And how the people are in solidarity together to fight for some idea. To fight for your own rights. I learned a lot. Before I didn't know what that was for, but since I came from that I learned that this world is so big. It's so big and the people they should live with dignity you know. Why should we live like chickens and be scared.

But I still can't find a permanent job. That's the problem. Even though my English is getting better. I am very very worried. It's very stressful I tell you. We need the benefits and we need the stable job. Now I have to pay for everything, even for my dental. I pay by myself. Nobody pays for me.

At Christmas they shut down the company, we don't have any work and we don't have any income. They shut down for two weeks, and we only get two days vacation pay. And for the other 8 days you have nothing. And plus I have my teeth problem and I have to pay money for that. And I have to buy gifts and all that you know…. what a wonderful life!

My physical, all my body is aching. All my shoulders are stiff. That's why I need the benefits for the massage or acupuncture. But I don't have the chance to use them. I work there for two years I should have got those benefits. Because I'm a temp worker… temp agency, nothing I have. So even the drugs, even the dental, everything you have to pay by yourself. Sometimes if I'm sick I just don't see the doctor otherwise the doctor will ask for prescription so I just don't go. I stay home until my sickness is gone.

It's hard for us as temp workers. We don't have any chance to explain. They don't want you they don't have to explain to you. They just call the temp agency and they say this person we don't want, we want someone new, so tomorrow you're gone. We have no value; we have no chance to explain. If they don't like you they call the agency then the agency calls you. Last time they laid me off for 2 months and they didn't even talk to me. The agency called me and said Tom, you're not going to work at that factory again, and when we get another job we'll call you. I was waiting four weeks, five weeks and I called them again and again, and they said we have no job for you. And then after almost three months they called me back and said go back to work. They don't explain anything to you. You have no chance. If some people make a mistake they have no chance to explain. We have no rights. No nothing. No human rights there they want you or they don't want you, you have no chance. It's happened to a lot of people. It's very very stressful. I've changed a lot these few years.
Now twenty years after,. I speak English better, a thousand times better than when I first came to Canada but I still don’t get a full time job. I tell you it’s a funny thing that when I don’t speak English they hired me at that time. I tell everybody and everyone laughs at me, but it’s true. Now I know more English, but I have no chance. I thought if I learned English it would be easier to get a job, but I found out it’s even worse. I’ve been working through temp agency for two years; can you believe that?

VI. Discussion: The Realities of being (Un)settled Immigrants

The key findings in numbers and in workers’ own words graphically illustrate some of the unsettling realities facing these long tenure immigrant and racialized workers. Our initial hypothesis coming into this study was that, despite their years of working and settling in Canada, these workers had reverted back to the ‘status’ of newcomers as a result of the plant closure. However, the research has revealed something even more unsettling about these long term immigrant workers who experienced the unmitigated circumstances of plant closure through no fault of their own. We have come to the sobering conclusion that these racialized workers are actually faring worse than when they first came to Canada. These workers are actually in a class of their own, operating like newcomers. Many are at an age where they experience age discrimination along with the types of challenges associated with new immigrants – language skill deficits, social/cultural capital, and competing in a highly precarious labour market where they are vulnerable to a range of risks, intensified by their age. They are the unsettled immigrants with precarious futures and dashed hopes.

This can be seen in their responses to a question during the focus group discussion about their current situation as compared to the days when they first came to Canada.
Almost all of them agreed that it is much worse now than when they first came.

The stress comes from knowing that they are growing older and the responsibility of raising a family, putting children through universities, etc. has also grown heavier. Then as newcomers, they were filled with hope and anticipation to work hard and buy into the Canadian dream. Now, having gone through the traumatic plant closure experience and coping with the aftermath and the new realities of precarious employment, there is a shared sense of bitterness and profound disappointment among the participants.

“When I came to this country in 1986, it was a pride just to see every woman and every man going to work every day and every morning. They did not have any hardship facing them. Now everyone is trying so hard in their houses, crying so hard, they wish they could turn back the clock.”

“It is even worse than before. It is like you are a brand new kid again, falling down and now having to learn how to walk. It takes a lot more to get back up now.”

“40 years ago, when I first came I didn’t even have a SIN number and didn’t speak English and I was hired immediately. These days you can get so many diplomas, so many references and still not get hired.”

Despite their years of working hard to gain even the semblance of a foothold in Canadian society, when the “rug was pulled underneath them” through the plant closure, this group of older racialized workers - already marginalized to begin with - never stood a chance. The foundation of a seemingly secure future that these workers built for themselves, and their families, over the years – through hard work, resilience, and many sacrifices; and in a society that has never hospitable in the first place - collapsed like a house of cards.

In the context of a genderized and colour-coded labour market (Galabuzi and Block, 2012), the foundations that took years for this group of workers to build were never strong enough to withstand the onslaught of the global recession that further excluded those who were already at the bottom rung of the labour market. The systemic barriers
of age, disability and other forms of discriminatory practices further complicated the successful outcome of landing back on their feet through securing stable employment. These workers were “used, and discarded like scrap materials” as described by Winnie Ng when she was Chair of the PMP Adjustment Committee (Dugale 2009). They are the collateral damage in this era of corporate globalization, with neither the state nor corporation being held accountable for the legalized theft and abuse.

Compared to newcomers, these workers have little access to settlement services as many community service providers are only funded to serve landed immigrants who have been here less than three years. As well, the trend in the admission of newcomers has dramatically shifted in the last six years. Newcomers are now of a more professional class, receiving their landed status on the basis of the point system, whereas the PMP workers came during a period of family reunification and granting of refugee asylum.

The status of “unsettled immigrants” implies not only a succession of temporary jobs but also precarious futures for workers and their families. The domino effects triggered by the permanent job loss is more than an issue of poverty, as poignantly demonstrated in the PEPSO study on precarious employment (2013). From these findings, there is a sense of resignation and a loss of hope and confidence in the context of such a precarious future. The initial coping strategies learned in the previous era of settlement are not working due to the changing nature of the labour market and growing presence of Temporary Agencies. For some of these workers, not only have they lost their jobs, but their marriages and their homes too; the latter are often the only representation of their years of sweat and labour.

There is a difference in terms of the expectations between newcomers and long term workers who have gone through the closure and navigated the maze of retraining. In relative terms, hope is a more accessible resource for newcomers who are still dazzled by the possibility and potential of life in Canada; while it only gets dimmer for those who have already made the sacrifices and ‘paid their dues’, only to find themselves having to compete back at the starting line with younger job applicants. It is a particularly
distressing situation for these older workers whose children are expecting more support as they enter into universities.

There is a further need to examine the impact of plant closures and job loss on the health and wellbeing of workers and their families. While the research has focused on the workers and the impact of the plant closure on their families in general, there is need for a more in-depth study of the impact of the closure on the health and wellbeing of the children of the affected workers. This is a health equity issue that requires further investigation into the effects and the exploration of possible policy options.

At the same time, there is an incredible sense of resilience that is shared by these workers who, against all odds, are fighting back on a daily basis by just not giving up. These are individual and collective acts of resistance against the emergent neoliberal agenda. In the reporting back session, when posed the question on how the PMP experience has changed them individually, some of the responses included:

- **Following the PMP closure I learned how to stand up for myself.**
- **I’m more afraid to talk now since before because I am now a temporary worker and don’t have job security.**
- **It depends on the amount of job security that one has. Before I could talk, but now have to be careful to secure my job.**
- **PMP changed me in that I have learned how to fight for my rights and not let people step on me.**
- **What happened to us at PMP was a consequence of us being silent… being afraid to talk.**

The above comments reflect the resilience as well as the increased politicization of workers as they walk together through such a traumatic journey. They reflect the emergence of class consciousness, the realization, in retrospect, that had the company been unionized prior to the closure, they would have been more aware of the company’s financial situation and, as well, the employer would not have been able to be so callous and dismissive in their actions.
VII. Recommendations

For most of the former PMP workers, the impact of the sudden plant closure and the recession has been devastating. Their collective narrative is a collage of unpredictable and precarious employment and therefore, unsettled lives. Their resilience, courage and sense of communal responsibility have made this project far from a tale of woe and oppression. Through the participatory research process, workers were able to share their suggestions and ideas for social change. Many said they were doing so because, quite simply, they hoped that other groups of workers would not have to repeat the PMP experience. Collectively, workers involved in the reporting session expressed the desire to stay together to support each other in their respective journeys of ‘re-settlement’ in Canadian society.

Monitoring and Regulation of Temp Agencies

This study found a strong consensus among workers concerning the frustrations of working as a ‘temp’. Workers feel trapped in such work yet, ironically, they have no job security. The unscrupulous practices of temp employment agencies also cause workers considerable financial and emotional distress. There were persistent complaints of discriminatory practices on the basis of gender, race, colour, age and other systemic barriers, often masked as needing someone who is the ‘right fit’ for the job.

Equally troubling, most of these practices go unchallenged and underexposed. Former PMP workers say they are too frightened to come forward. Advocacy groups like the Toronto Workers Action Centre have found these fears to be widespread and have repeatedly called, to little avail, for stronger regulation and monitoring of temp agencies.

Workers employed in this form of precarious employment are often doing so because there are few, if any alternatives. This makes them doubly vulnerable. Stronger policies and enforcement are required to ensure they
are not further exploited and marginalized. In February 2012 the Law Commission of Ontario called for a comprehensive provincial strategy to address the growing phenomenon of precarious employment and the lack of protection for temporary agency workers. The following recommendations should be considered as part of any new strategy:

- A special **Temporary Help Agency Unit** should be established within the Employment Practices Branch and provided with dedicated resources and staff to initiate investigations and pro-active monitoring and ensure proper enforcement. When a short-term Temporary Help Agency blitz was conducted by the Ministry of Labour, ending in August, 2012, they found there were fewer violations upon re-inspection as compared to the initial inspection. Such efforts are needed on a permanent basis.

- Employment Standards should be amended to require **equal pay** on an hourly basis for workers performing comparable work duties, regardless of their full-time, part-time or temporary status.

- Employment Standards should be amended to require temp agencies to **guarantee minimum weekly hours** and reasonable job opportunities. This would help reduce the precarity of workers who are on call 24/7 and subject to highly erratic schedules and assignments.

- The **Ontario Human Rights Tribunal and Commission** can play a stronger, proactive role in curtailing the more discriminatory practices of some temp agencies and employers. The Ontario Human Rights Code has provisions that allow the Commission to initiate systemic reviews and complaints that look at work assignments, transfers and who gets access to permanent positions.

- **Community based agencies** providing assistance and support for workers employed by temp agencies can play a more effective advocacy role if they are allowed to initiate third party complaints to the ESB and OHRC when a pattern of discriminatory practices is detected.

**Childcare for Shift Workers**

- Given the growing number of working parents who are on non-standard shift work arrangements, it will be critical to conduct consultations and a policy review to develop **innovative publicly funded childcare** that responds to the needs of shift workers and provides support for the health and well-being of families.
Settlement Services

There is a need for holistic and comprehensive services for newcomers as well as long-term immigrant workers who are in precarious employment situations.

- Access to settlement and other support services should not be restricted solely to newcomers (i.e. landed immigrants in Canada less than 3 years). **Services should be extended to all users based on needs** rather than the length of stay in Canada.
- Funding should be provided to agencies to provide more group support services. The PMP Worker Action Centre model of a peer helper-based centre should be replicated in communities that need support for non-unionized workers going through plant closure and/or permanent job loss.

Retraining and Re-employment for Older Workers

The study confirms that age is a major barrier to finding work. These older PMP workers are too young to retire but not young enough to compete with new entrants in the workforce. With the pending legislative changes that will delay access to public pensions, and as benefit levels are gravely affected by diminished pension contributions during periods of unemployment, there is a great need for an overall strategy to integrate older workers back into gainful employment after job loss.

For older workers who went through Second Career retraining but who did not find jobs in their new chosen field, there is an urgent need to provide additional supports. They have already invested their time and energy in learning new skills. A strategic policy direction should be pursued to provide a special component in SC training with specific supports for older workers to transition from training to employment.

- **A joint commission on older workers** should be set up by the Federal and provincial governments to conduct a systematic review of policies and programs with the goal of ensuring older workers’ access to re-employment and their ability to retire with dignity and security.
- **A bridging program at the latter part of Second Career training** as a placement/internship program that assists workers to link up with potential employers. We are in support of the recommendation proposed in the final report of the PMP Labour
Adjustment Committee (Ng 2011) for a 10-12 week bridging program; it will make a world of difference.

- The government has already invested in the training for these workers. It will be prudent for policy makers to consider extending a targeted wage subsidy program to encourage employers to hire these older workers who are eager to contribute with their lived experiences and new skills. It will be a win-win for all.

**Equity in Access to Employment**

Our case study of PMP workers has also illustrated the systemic barriers of race and gender in accessing employment. Our study, along with numerous others, documents the enduring employment gap and poverty experienced by marginalized groups. Breaking the cycle of racialization of poverty and discrimination will require an overall shift in policy and public education - and systemic solutions.

- It is urgent that the Ontario government re-introduce an equity hiring policy and workplace legislation that addresses the additional systemic barriers of race, gender and other forms of discrimination experienced by Indigenous workers, women, racialized workers and workers with disabilities.

**Bankruptcy Protection for Workers**

- Currently federal bankruptcy legislation puts workers at the bottom of a list as “non-secured creditors” when companies file for bankruptcy or bankruptcy protection. The law needs to be revamped to ensure workers are the first on the list for severance, termination pay and other compensation owing. As the most vulnerable victims of workplace closures, workers are most in need of protection.

- The current legislative framework does not address and provide solutions for situations when employers file for bankruptcy protection as a convenient way to restructure the operation or move the production offshore. There is a need to devise a new policy framework that will hold employers accountable to the larger community and ensure fair compensation for laid-off workers.
Income Support and Security

One of the most devastating impacts of the plant closure for workers and their families has been the challenge of making ends meet with the loss of income and benefits. During the initial period, EI benefits based on 55% of their previous wages provided some minimal support for workers. However, subsequent employment with lower wages and unpredictable hours has made it almost impossible to cover even basic necessities with EI benefits during periods of unemployment. Former PMP workers previously endorsed a call by the labour movement and community for EI reforms. They also suggested a minimum EI benefit, like the minimum wage, for workers on temporary layoff. The latest EI changes and the penalty imposed on ‘frequent’ and ‘occasional’ claimants do not address these concerns but rather, further weaken EI, especially for these workers who are frequently on short-term or temporary work assignments.

- The Federal government should lower EI eligibility criteria to enable more unemployed workers to qualify for EI and raise the benefit rate so workers have basic income supports when they are out of work.
- There should be a minimum EI benefit to ensure that laid off workers can maintain some basic income support and well-being as they look for new work.

Raising the Minimum Wage

The dire need for more income to cover basic living expenses has prompted workers to take on multiple part-time jobs to augment their low wages. The research participants called for both a raise in the minimum wage and the need for adequate working hours.

- Support a minimum wage increase to $14 hourly and a 40 hour work week.

Creation and Retention of ‘Good Jobs’

While the latest job figures released by Statistics Canada for May 2013 shows an increase in employment, there continues to be a downward trend within the manufacturing sector – a loss of over 90,000 jobs (5.5%) from April 2012 to May 2013.
(Statistics Canada, June 2013). For this group of former auto-parts workers who were concentrated at the bottom rung of the labour market, the recovery has yet to come.

- Recognizing that decent jobs lead to decent lives, the Federal and provincial governments should make it a policy and program priority to develop and implement a long-term industrial job strategy to stimulate the creation and retention of ‘good jobs’ for all.

**Union Organizing Strategies**

During the interviews and focus group discussions, participants reflected on the two failed union organizing attempts in the past decade. The company was able to exploit worker’s fear and set up different facilities/plants to further divide the organizing capacity of workers. One participant jokingly reminisced that the last union organizing drive failed because the company ordered pizzas for the workers to create a ‘family atmosphere’ – “We were bought by pizzas!” There was a shared sense among the workers that had PMP been unionized, they would have been better informed and the employer would have had a legal obligation to follow a contractual process on closure.

With the dramatic increase in the number of workers in precarious forms of employment, there is an urgent need for collective representation and collective bargaining to improve workplace benefits and working conditions. It has been well documented that unionization is a great equalizer in reducing poverty and the wage gap, particularly among equity-seeking group members (Jackson 2006; DiCaro, Johnston and Stanford 2011).

- There is a need for a policy review of the Ontario Labour Relations Act to strengthen the protection of workers’ rights to organize.
- Labour unions should consider alternative and broader-based organizing strategies that go beyond the traditional workplace setting and find meaningful ways to integrate the equity agenda into the work of unions.
VIII. Implications for Future Research

The PMP case study has provided a glimpse into a group of courageous workers who struggle to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of a plant closure. It is a narrative that speaks to the persistent inequalities of a labour market that discriminates and differentiates on the basis of race, gender, age, accent and presents other forms of systemic barriers. It calls for a larger scale study that can compare the experiences between racialized and non-racialized workers in their experiences of retraining and re-employment.

Our research has shown that the impact of job loss has a domino effect on the quality of life, health and well-being of the affected workers and their families. The impact is particularly dramatic when more than one adult in the same household worked in the same place. The health impact of closure among immigrant workers should be further examined.

In addition, it will be instructive to conduct a study on the impact of closure on the children who stand as witnesses and are caught in a downward spiral of change and unpredictability. Their perspectives will add much richness to the full picture on health equity in relation to precarious employment and plant closure.

A large scale study needs to be conducted with temp workers on the recruiting and assignment processes devised by various employment agencies to examine the scope of the discriminatory practices.

Last but not the least, this initial study has detected some evidence of anti-black racism in terms of a disproportionately higher number of unemployed Black workers within the research sample and participants’ own narratives. However, the sample size is too small to make any substantive claim. A larger scale research on this particular focus will be critical in deepening our collective understanding and policy solutions for systemic change.
- Politicize
- Mobilize
- Power for Workers
~ Bibliography ~


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