

BROCK UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



3 9157 00942965 8





and August

# **Production Under Glass**

## **Working Conditions and Class-Consciousness**

### **of the Niagara Greenhouse Workers**

By  
Karen Hofman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts

MA Program in Social Justice and Equity Studies  
Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario

January 2006

© Karen Hofman, 2006

**JAMES A GIBSON LIBRARY  
BROCK UNIVERSITY  
ST. CATHARINES ON**

# Introduction to the Course

Dr. [Name] is a [Title] at [Institution]

[Address]

[Text]

[Text]

[Text]

[Text]

[Text]

[Text]

## ABSTRACT

This study applies a Marxist theoretical paradigm to examine the working conditions of greenhouse workers in the Niagara Region, and the range of factors that bear upon the formation of their class-consciousness. The Niagara greenhouse industry represents one of the most developed horticultural regions in Canada and plays a prominent role in the local economy. The industry generates substantial revenues and employs a significant number of people, yet the greenhouse workers are paid one of the lowest rates in the region. Being classified as agricultural workers, the greenhouse employees are exempted from many provisions of federal and provincial labour regulations. Under the current provincial statutes, agricultural workers in Ontario are denied the right to organize and bargain collectively. Except for a few technical and managerial positions, the greenhouse industry employs mostly low-skilled workers who are subjected to poor working conditions that stem from the employer's attempts to adapt to larger structural imperatives of the capitalist economy. While subjected to these poor working conditions, the greenhouse workers are also affected by objectively alienated social relations and by ruling class ideological domination and hegemony. These two sets of factors arise from the inherent conflict of interests between wage-labour and capital but also militate against the development of class-consciousness.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 greenhouse workers to examine the role played by their material circumstances in the formulation of their social and political views as well as the extent to which they are aware of their class location and class interests. The hegemonic notions of 'common sense' acted as impediments to formation of class-consciousness. The greenhouse workers have virtually no opportunities to access alternative



perspectives that would address the issues associated with exploitation in production and offer solutions leading to 'social justice'. Formidable challenges confront any organized political body seeking to improve the conditions of the working people.



## Acknowledgements

This project is by no means a final word on the subject. The struggle to know, to understand and to apply such an understanding in praxis, with a purpose, is an enduring process.

Many people contributed to the creation of the following pages. I want to express many thanks to all the greenhouse workers who participated in this study and who were kind enough to talk about their workplace experiences and various other social and political issues. Although I was a stranger to them, they graciously offered their free time to spare for such an atypical undertaking.

The thesis was pieced together under the keen supervision of professors June Corman and Murray Smith. June, my primary advisor, excelled as a guide throughout the whole quest. She navigated me towards the completion of the mission with the equanimity of an experienced high seas captain. Additionally and most importantly, June expressed enthusiasm for the project at all times while I had lost not only enthusiasm but also the will at many occasions. Her optimism and patience uplifted me during these times and had the effect of a mental booster shot after our regular thesis meetings. For all of this and more I am eternally grateful.

The thesis rests cerebrally and intuitively on the fundamentals of classical Marxist theory. It would not be so if I had never met Murray Smith, of course. I would gravitate towards some forms of emancipatory theories but without the grounding and direction provided by scientific Marxism I would probably abandon the discipline altogether due to a dissatisfaction with other theoretical paradigms that do not provide me with the tools to make sense of my daily existence, life experience and the social metabolism in general. I am thus indebted to Murray Smith forever for introducing me to Marxist theory and the extension to it – Marxist emancipatory praxis. I am thankful for Murray's incisive suggestions, especially on the theoretical part of the thesis. In fact, both Murray and June made a great team of Marxist academics, an advisory committee I could only dream of at other universities.

There were many people without whose kindness, assistance, and intellectual challenge I would be consumed by the acid admixture of self-doubt and nefarious structural pressures. I enjoyed thoroughly the stimulating discussions and the atmosphere of mutual support with my SJES program 'co-imposters'. Where would we all be without our ontologies and epistemologies being shaped, formed, contrasted, challenged and resized in professor David Butz's methodology class? Really.

My continuous thanks also belong to the Administrative Assistants, Linda Landry and Jill DeBon because they not only keep the departmental clockwork lubricated with the essential oils of their competence and their friendly nature but are also saintly accommodating all people who charge into their office with all kinds of pesky, last-moment requests... And thank you very much, Viola Bartel, the Departmental Co-ordinator, for your support and empathetic understanding of my acrobatic feats (and defeats) when juggling the roles of a student, a single parent, and a poor worker on a tight rope above the precipice of an eternal economic/social damnation.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract.....  | ii  |
| Acknowledgements.....  | iv  |
| Chapter One: Introduction.....                                   | 7   |
| Chapter Two: Literature Review.....                              | 12  |
| Marxist Perspectives on Class-Consciousness.....                 | 12  |
| The Fundamental Impediments to Class-Consciousness.....          | 19  |
| <i>Alienation</i> .....  | 19  |
| <i>Ideology</i> .....  | 23  |
| Selected Canadian Studies of Class-Consciousness.....            | 26  |
| Chapter Three: Methodology.....                                  | 46  |
| Nine Preconditions to Working-Class Consciousness.....           | 47  |
| The Method.....  | 49  |
| Recruitment of Participants.....                                 | 51  |
| The Participants.....  | 53  |
| Chapter Four: Background of the Niagara Greenhouse Industry..... | 57  |
| Forces Influencing the Niagara Greenhouse Industry.....          | 57  |
| The Greenhouse Industry in Canada.....                           | 59  |
| Greenhouses in Ontario.....                                      | 59  |
| Niagara Horticultural Greenhouse Industry.....                   | 60  |
| Employment Prospects in the Niagara Region.....                  | 62  |
| Chapter Five: Working Conditions in Niagara Greenhouses.....     | 66  |
| The Work Process.....  | 67  |
| Occupational Health and Safety.....                              | 70  |
| Breaks.....  | 75  |
| Working Hours.....   | 77  |
| Hourly Paid Greenhouse Workers.....                              | 85  |
| Salaried Regime.....   | 90  |
| Size of the Greenhouse.....                                      | 91  |
| <i>Larger greenhouses</i> .....                                  | 92  |
| <i>Smaller greenhouses</i> .....                                 | 98  |
| Conclusion.....  | 99  |
| Chapter Six: Social and Political Views.....                     | 103 |
| Class.....   | 103 |
| Politics.....  | 113 |
| Unions.....  | 121 |
| Views on Non-Standard Workers.....                               | 129 |
| Can we Run our Own Production?.....                              | 134 |



|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter Seven: Conclusion..... | 140 |
| References.....                | 145 |



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In January 2002, my finances were rapidly diminishing and I was frantically looking for work. I needed to find a job quickly. The hospitality sector, with which I was familiar, was in the off-season and a search for a higher paying job required much more time than I could afford to spare. After another day of driving around and submitting resumes, I stopped at a greenhouse within walking distance from my home, spoke to one of the owners, and was hired on the spot. The record of my previous greenhouse work experience was not asked for and no further instructions were given. About two months after working at this particular place a friend found me a job at another greenhouse for a higher hourly rate. For a single parent of two children the increase from \$8 to \$10 an hour was a substantial improvement. In total, I worked for three greenhouses between 1999 and 2002.

Working at those three greenhouse operations was a valuable experience. The working conditions were very similar with only slight differences in the overall working atmosphere resulting from variations in the relationships between owners and their employees. The small greenhouse operated in a more paternalistic fashion, while the larger businesses evinced the impersonal management style particular to corporate structures. Regardless of the size, employers treated the workers as necessary but subordinate agents in the process of ornamental plant production. The worker's position closely paralleled the cheap tools used in the process of making a product which, once sold on the market, enriched the owners. The greenhouse workers were receiving only enough money to allow them to present themselves for another day of work.

The greenhouse workers in my study were involved in a variety of familial situations, and



were mostly women. Some drove their own cars to work, some car-pooled, and some biked. Some worked at the same place for many years; a few were transitory, like me. They shared one commonality: they lacked either marketable skills or established connections necessary to secure jobs with higher pay, benefits, opportunities for occupational advancement, or job security.

It is not my intention to make a case for more manpower training programs to counteract the ominous consequences of unskilled labour, low-paid jobs, and underemployment. Certainly, there is no need for more job gyms and other government-funded employment assistance agencies who promote the idea that getting a job is a matter of proper resume preparation and an employer-pleasing interview performance. Livingstone (2001) and Cote and Allahar (2001) have documented that unemployment does not result from lack of education. Rather capitalism in Canada is prone to creating apparently contradictory situations. On the one hand, the Canadian educational system is deliberately geared towards producing an undereducated, unskilled and manipulable population (Cote and Allahar 2001), a situation that causes the unemployed to act as a buffer against demands for higher wages. On the other hand, there is a culturally and ideologically driven emphasis on attainment of academic credentials to obtain meaningful and better paying jobs (Livingstone 2001). But education itself is far from being a solution in an economy that is structurally limited in its ability to provide decently paid jobs. On the contrary, Livingstone has found that in Canada this quest for additional educational credentials results in a structural underemployment in which workers are forced to accept lower paying jobs for which they are overqualified, and that the problem of unemployment and low wage earners is not due to an undereducated workforce but to “the shortage of adequate paid work” (Livingstone 2001:159).

It was due to my greenhouse experience and my training in sociology, and especially in Marxist theory, that I started to observe and to analyze the connections between the broader



economic imperatives of capitalism and the quality of working peoples' lives. The broader capitalist imperatives assume different forms specific to local structural conditions. Such variations and conjunctural specificities together affect workers' abilities to "make sense" of their experiences.

In their study of the impact of economic restructuring on workers in rural Ontario, Winson and Leach (2002) express the sincere hope that a research arising from, and motivated by, a dedication to the pursuit of social justice will contribute to its materialization. With a comparable motivation, yet with no illusions that a mere account of exploitative working conditions will lead to "justice" under capitalist economic and social relations, this study seeks to examine the specific conditions experienced by greenhouse workers in Southern Ontario and the range of factors bearing on the formation of their "class consciousness". My purpose is to show that the "common-sense" notions entertained by greenhouse workers are simultaneously framed by the objectively alienated social and economic conditions that form the material circumstances of their lives, and by their exposure to a hegemonic ruling class ideology that faces few if any challenges in their lived experiences. Informed by a theoretical approach grounded in Marxist historical materialism, I have approached this study with the following questions. What are the working conditions for people employed in the greenhouse industry in the Niagara region? What do the greenhouse workers think about their working conditions? Do they see themselves as members of a definite social class, and how class-conscious are they? What are the barriers that impede the development of their class-consciousness?

I have chosen to examine floricultural greenhouses because this industry illustrates many of the constraining structural conditions that are emblematic of other low waged workplaces. This study directs critical attention to capitalism, indicting it for incorrigible social and economic



practices that have direct and reprehensible consequences for working people. My point of departure is the observation that the wage-earning worker is unavoidably the victim of the exploitative relations of production inherent to capitalist society. This injustice stems from a mode of production in which a major part of the wealth that is *socially* created by the direct producers is subjected to *private* appropriation and control, which in turn is legally sanctioned and militarily protected. As a consequence of these exploitative “relations of production,” the actualization of the human potential of the direct producers as social beings is inhibited.

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. After a brief introduction, the second chapter surveys the theoretical literature and empirical studies that apply Marxist interpretations to the key concepts deployed in this thesis. The conceptual ensemble of class, class-consciousness, alienation, and ideology form the focal lens through which the conditions of the greenhouse workers as situated within the capitalist social relations are viewed. Parallels are drawn with studies of employment in similar industries in Canada, as well as studies on class-consciousness conducted in a unionized setting.

The third chapter of this thesis focuses on the methodological aspects of the research. I have chosen to follow Bertell Ollman’s formulation of the conceptual prerequisites necessary for a fully developed class-consciousness. The delineation of the research methodology is followed by a discussion of the employers’ reactions to my endeavors to recruit participants to the study that highlight the discomfort employers feel when faced with the possibility of their employees being exposed to information critical of the operations of the greenhouse industry. The chapter concludes with brief background information regarding each of the participants.

The fourth chapter describes the historical and economic development of the greenhouse industry in its wider, national scope, and then in its localized form in the Niagara region. Data



documenting the employment situation in the Niagara region are also provided to illustrate the limited employment prospects of people in the low skilled category.

In the next two chapters I outline the working conditions of the greenhouse industry and show that these conditions, combined with the hegemony of the commonsensical notions of capitalist ideology, have retarded the development of class-consciousness among the greenhouse workers. The conclusion outlines a number of the social justice issues suggested by the study.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical contributions to the body of literature addressing class-consciousness. The first part focuses on a theoretical orientation to the field of class-consciousness, and on Marxist-informed analyses of alienation and ideology that are integral to interrogating the barriers to the attainment of working-class consciousness. The second part lays out the field studies relevant to research on class-consciousness in working-class populations in Canada.

#### **Marxist Perspectives on Class-Consciousness**

Class-consciousness is a concept used to denote awareness of membership in a social class whose objective interests are diametrically opposed to those of another social class. Karl Marx, writing in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the principal thinker to give an impetus to the development of the concept of class-consciousness in the Marxist literature. Marxian philosophic works and socio-economic analyses of the relations of production in capitalist society delineate the antagonistic relations between two classes: the proletariat (the class of wage labourers), and the bourgeoisie who own and control the means of production, distribution and exchange. The particular character of this central class relationship under capitalism shapes the role of class-consciousness in the evolution and the eventual revolutionary re-structuring of society.

The social developments within the capitalist mode of production since Marx's time have generated considerable debate over the constitution of social classes and the conditions generating class-consciousness. As Fantasia explains: "[The] disparities between approaches to class-consciousness reflect fundamental differences in the conceptual status of class" (1995:275).



Marxist scholars tend to define social classes in terms of their location within a social division of labour shaped by historically-specific property relations. Although there are variations in the degree of conceptual incorporation of property relations in the formation of social class<sup>1</sup>, the elementary distinction between owners of means of productions and wage labour is retained by Marxist scholars.

Marxism grounds its method of inquiry in the real material world, where humans develop their cognitive processes through their *active relation* to their surroundings. Under capitalism, power resides with those who either privately own means of production or who play a role in managing the conditions of such ownership, as well as those who have a decisive say over who will be allowed access to work and therefore to means of subsistence. These structural limitations impose constraints on the free development of individuals and consequently on the free development of society in its totality. Only when this exploitative form of social production is negated can humanity create conditions objectively conducive to the egalitarian transformation of social relations.

Mészáros (1971) elaborates on Marx's idea of the historical necessity of the working class to liberate itself from its subordination to capital and on the concept of class-consciousness as an active component of human agency, which is subject to a change with no precisely drawn timeline. For him the question revolves around whether class consciousness arises from objective factors innate to the capitalist mode of production, such as economic crises, or whether class-consciousness has to be 'nurtured' through the means of one or another form of counter-

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, E.O.Wright's typology of classes contains composites of power, status, income and property ownership. While he starts his class analysis with the property relations, "power" is the decisive element of his class composites (Resnick and Wolff 2003). Resnick and Wolff make the point that since E. O.Wright rejects Marx's theory of labour value, where property relations determine the terms of class-based exploitation, the authority and power or the lack of it vested in various occupational positions are then decisive for him in determining who wields power over whom. The Marxist theory of labour value regards exploitation of labour as occurring in production between wage labour and capital. Managerial and supervisory occupations then, even if involved in maintenance of capital accumulation, are not in the position to exploit lower occupational strata since they are themselves subordinated to capital.



hegemonic enculturation (whether the classical social-democratic “party of the whole class,” the Leninist revolutionary vanguard party, or Gramsci’s “modern prince” of socialist “organic intellectuals”).

Mészáros suggests that the answer to this conundrum lies in grasping the difference between the pursuit of short-term interests (what he calls contingent or psychological class consciousness, including the interests of members of one class at a given moment in history) and the interests of the whole class in pursuit of a structural change. The latter, long-term interest, corresponds to what Lukács (1971) calls the imputed or ascribed class consciousness and is referred to as “necessary class consciousness” by Mészáros (1971: 115-120). The short-term interest is exemplified in actions initiated to promote the interests of a section of the working class, which does not lead necessarily to a fully developed class-consciousness. It involves satisfying momentary economic interests and it corresponds closely to what Lenin (1962: 98) called “trade union consciousness.” Even so, the struggle to improve one’s immediate, sectional working or economic conditions in no way vitiates the development of real (“necessary”) class-consciousness. The wage labouring class, or the proletariat, is composed of individual members reacting to social reality in various ways that are historically specific and sociologically contingent. On the one hand actions initiated in this “contingent” mode of consciousness cannot, by themselves, lead to structural changes. On the other hand the proletariat, under favourable conditions, has the objective capacity to beget a structural change owing to its strategic position in the capitalist relations of production.



Mészáros further explains that the incongruity between these two aspects of the proletarian condition reflects a contradiction between what Marx called the *existence*<sup>2</sup> and *being*<sup>3</sup> of labour, resulting in significant variations in the levels of class-consciousness in particular times and places. The key to a resolution of this contradiction lies, according to Marx, in developing a consciousness that corresponds to the state of *being* of the proletariat, and not merely to the existential interests of an individual or a group. While pursuing individual or sectional interests might provide an opportunity for developing consciousness that would affect the interests of the whole working class, the fully developed consciousness of the *being* of labour is necessary to the emergence of a class-consciousness befitting a “class for itself.” This task of transcending a partial group consciousness and achieving a consciousness of the whole class requires the presence of a mediating entity, an organization that would take as its aim the dismantling of the structural ties between labour and capital. Thus, Mészáros concludes, the decisive form of class consciousness, the consciousness of the *being* of labour, does not sprout automatically as a reaction to an economic upheaval, nor can it be achieved through spontaneous individual realization. Rather, such consciousness requires the intervention of a political organization that bridges the gap between the existential character of contingent class-consciousness and the necessary class-consciousness that sees the destruction of the capital-labour relation as its goal.

Subjective notions of social realities as played out in the background of the “complex determinants of social ontology” (Mészáros 1971: 86) do not constitute various “degrees” of class-consciousness, as consciousness of proletarian *being*. Workers’ subjective consciousness is

---

<sup>2</sup> Marx explains the *existence* of labour as its existence for capital, as wage-labour, where the extracted surplus value of the workers’ labour power becomes the source of capital accumulation and the workers thus become to represent means for this end.

<sup>3</sup> *Being* of labour refers to “the worker’s consciousness of his social being as embedded in the necessary structural antagonisms of capitalist society, in contrast to the contingency of group consciousness which perceives only a more or less limited part of the global confrontation” (Mészáros 1971: 101).



formed around issues such as income and level of control over the work process. Thus, the occupational differences of wage labourers are reflected in their specific experiences of the labour process that also inevitably extend into and affect their private lives. Mészáros asserts that this existential consciousness amounts to a proletarian consciousness that is not yet conscious of its *being*. The proletariat as a class existing under capitalist relations of production (as a *class-in-itself*) can only liberate itself from producing profits for the capitalist class by abolishing the conditions of its exploitation. A termination of these conditions is possible only when class-consciousness reaches the qualitative level of consciousness of its own class *being*, where the working class becomes and acts as a *class-in-and-for-itself*. Once the exploiting class ceases to exist, the proletariat will abolish itself as a class and with it the contradictions of the division of labour.

Such is the role of class-consciousness in the struggle between labour and capital as outlined in the writings of Marx and expanded upon by Mészáros. As Mészáros explains, for Marx the term class-consciousness refers to the degree of the state of social awareness where social actors are cognizant of their membership in a class subordinated to capital, and where they also understand that a total overhaul of the social order is necessary.

Ollman (1978b) presents a schema of nine sequential dimensions of working class-consciousness. These dimensions constitute the mediating links between objective structural conditions and the outcomes that arise from them. Together they comprise the principal requirements for a fully developed class-consciousness. For Ollman class-consciousness denotes a concept of purposive action. Mental states preceding the point of acquiring consciousness of the *being* of the proletarian class are not quantitative degrees of class consciousness that can be acquired in a step-by-step process, as known means to known ends, but are only gradational



approximations to class-consciousness. These gradations do not guarantee successful progression from one step to another in Ollman's scheme and their visibility to workers depends on the conjunctions, development and maturation of complex social determinants (organized labour victories, protracted economic crisis, etc.). Similarly to Meszáros, Ollman ascribes the final and decisive role to an organized and disciplined political body, whose existence is necessary to facilitate the realization by actual workers of all the steps necessary to becoming class-conscious.

Many of Marx's followers struggled with the conception of class-consciousness. Lukács (1971) for example regarded the concept as an ever-present, albeit unconscious mindset, embedded in the particular class position, to be eventually awakened by structural imperatives -- a sum of conditions acting as a catalyst -- which would prompt the workers to action to liberate themselves from their fetters. On one side, Marx's writing seems to place importance on the living conditions of the proletariat, assuming that these would play the crucial role in impelling workers to figure out what is good for them and thus realize their own interests. Further escalation of conflicts and economic crises would bring proletarians to the realization that their interests will never be addressed through reform or a simple change of governmental representatives. The system of relations of production would have to be changed and a different order established which would address working peoples' needs. Thus the proletariat will ultimately realize, as Marx seemed to conclude, that to satisfy its interests (wants, needs) it is in its *interest* as a *class* to struggle for the abolition of the conditions that prevent them from realizing these recognized shared interests. On the other side, Marx was cognizant of how the dominant ideology of capitalist society serves to conceal the contradictions of class antagonism:

*Political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production. It is true that labor produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels.*



It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines, but it throws a section of the workers back to a barbarous type of labour, and it turns the other workers into machines. It produces intelligence – but for the workers stupidity, cretinism. (Marx 1964:109-110)

Ollman (1978b) explains that bad living conditions alone do not alter or increase workers' class-consciousness to the point where they would take their fate into their own hands and do away with the abusive system. Quite to the contrary, Ollman cites Marx and Engels' comments on the English proletarians' complicity with their increasing abuses by the industrial barons; indeed they note that the worsening of living conditions does not guarantee an increased commitment to realize workers' class interests. "Objective conditions" are thus not the main factor in explaining proletarian submissiveness and the propensity towards conservative thought and acceptance of the conditions of their exploitation. Trotsky makes this point by declaring that if misery would cause revolutions "the masses would always be in revolt" (1961: 249). Irrespective of the degree of development of the forces of production, and even irrespective of the immiseration of workers worldwide, material circumstances alone cannot act as the catalyst for a transformation of the socio-economic order.

There are factors contributing to the preservation of the exploitative social order that extend beyond the structural inequality of productive relations. Neither inequalities arising from exploitation nor the powers of the owning class are limited to the economy:

where those who own the productive units can decide what to produce, how to produce it, and so on...(T)he power of ownership goes far beyond mere economic control, and those who own the means of production also come to have power in the political and ideological spheres as well. Indeed, no owning class could maintain its position for long if it did not effectively control all three spheres within a society. (Naiman 1996: 3)

The barriers to the understanding of class-based structural determinants of exploitation are only



visible if the mechanisms of control exercised by the ruling class are fully exposed.

### **The fundamental impediments to class consciousness**

The Marxist literature points to alienation and ideology as instrumental in preventing workers from realizing that their interests are subordinated to the interests of the ruling class.

#### *Alienation*

The Marxist theory of alienation asserts that the products of labour (human labour objectified) are appropriated by capitalists and used in the accumulation of capital. This process in effect compels labourers to produce social wealth in return for wages as they have no access to means of production. This wealth is being socially produced but privately appropriated, which results in the separation of the direct producers from the objects they produce. Wage labourers are thus effectively separated from the wealth they collectively produce and have only limited and constrained access to it. This situation means that the objects created by human labour, and converted through the process of capital accumulation into a money form, are used to purchase the commodity labour power. In essence, under the capitalist mode of production, the labour power (capacity to work) of the producers is objectified and commodified. The forced separation of producers from the products of their labour leads to a historically specific form of the condition Marx refers to as alienation (Mandel 1973: 17).

The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being *objectified*, but on the state of being *alienated*, dispossessed, sold  
[Der Ton wird gelegt nicht auf das *Vergegenständlichtsein*, sondern das *Entfremdet*-, Entäussert-, Veräussertsein]; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. (Marx 1993: 831)

Mandel (1973) stresses that alienation is not, and was not perceived by Marx, as a product



of capitalism only, but as a condition existing in societies characterized by the under-development of productive forces and/or by exploitative relations within the social division of labour. While alienation finds expression on the economic plane, it also has substantial psychological and social consequences.

The first form of economic alienation as outlined by Mandel (1973) pertains to the separation of producers from access to means of production, and therefore to means of generating subsistence. The second form of the alienated state of being stems from the necessity to sell one's labour power in exchange for a wage. Where, in order to survive, people have to sell their labour power, and where the means used to collectively produce are privately owned (an ownership protected by the legislative and judicial institutions of the state), the direct producers are also separated from the end product of the labour process. As a consequence, these economic conditions affect individual producers in various ways and are reflected in the social relations.

In order for capitalism to survive, Mandel maintains, "the system must provoke continued artificial dissatisfaction" (p.25). Only by maintaining a constant state of "systematic frustration" amongst producers caused by unfulfilled artificially generated needs can capitalism survive. In addition to describing the effects that alienation have on human beings both as producers and as consumers, Mandel also argues that alienation has an effect on the capacity to communicate. By way of example he refers to situations where workers holding various occupational positions are effectively prevented from coming to a mutual understanding of their position as wage labourers, especially if they defend the interests of capital for a living. Mandel gives an example of union negotiations where the representatives of the employer are hired wage labourers.

These social and psychological consequences of alienation can be subsumed under Rinehart's (1996) discussion of workers' self-estrangement and estrangement from each other.



For Rinehart, under capitalist social relations of production, human interactions are reduced to monetary calculations of the benefits such engagements with each other would bring.

Competition embedded in class-based relations of production hinders development of class consciousness and pits workers against each other in the labour market and in the labour process. Being separated from the means of production, from the products of their labour and from each other, workers are then separated from their own selves. Work no longer becomes an act of conscious expression of human creativity but becomes a compulsory activity necessary for survival.

Schwalbe (1986) is concerned with the cognitive and affective consequences of alienated labour. He notes that the concept of alienation should be recognized to mean a failure rather than a separation. He writes, “[the] failure is....to engage in fully human productive activity involving free association, conscious self-direction, imagination, and self-objectification” (p.11). Similarly, Ollman (1976) cites Marx as referring to alienation as “a mistake, a defect, which ought not to be” (p.132). This failure denotes the inability to utilize all available human capacities and means of expressing human creativity. Schwalbe shows that alienated labour stunts producers’ development and reduces them to instruments in the service of capital.

Alienated labour does not imprint its negative effects on all producers in uniform ways. Some labour activities contain conditions that are more propitious to human self-actualization than others. Using G. H. Mead’s theory of the Act, Schwalbe (1986) argues that the essential components of human self-conscious action must be fulfilled to reproduce the state of natural labour. Natural labour is human purposive activity devoid of coercion, where producers are free to address their needs through aspects of natural action expressed as impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation (pp.29-52). This process of human self-conscious activity



contains a component of aesthetic experience acquired through the abilities particular to humans, namely: problem solving, role taking and means-ends comprehension. Under conditions of restrained development, either one or all of the aspects of the aesthetic experience of the natural human action is inhibited.

Schwalbe distinguishes between labour process and productive activities, arguing that though they both affect human activity, the former is a systemic, indirectly felt condition while the latter is workplace-specific. The lack of control over the labour process and the end product are expressed through various degrees of routinization and fragmentation of particular productive activities. The extent to which a workplace activity is routinized and fragmented into tasks separated from the whole process, reflects the deficiency of the aesthetic experience, because problem solving, role taking or means-ends comprehension are excluded from the process. Self-objectification, the realization that humans construct nature to their needs and that objects created by them do not enter into relationship between themselves independently of their relationship with their creators, is hence replaced with a reified consciousness.

These cognitive and affective consequences of unnatural labour are then compared by Schwalbe with Marx's concept of alienation. He concludes, "[these] are perhaps seen as failures relative to the potentialities represented by the consequences of natural labour. In short, to come full circle to Marx again, these failures constitute alienation" (pp.56-57).

The concepts of fetishism, reification and alienation, arise from the capitalist mode of generalized commodity production and affect all relations in all spheres of social life, including the direct consciousness of class-based relations of production. In an estranged mode of social relations the system of ideas produced by the ruling class is less likely to be scrutinized by the exploited class. For Marx (1963) "[the] same men who establish their social relations in



conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations” (p.109). Ideas conceived through a definite form of social structure help to promote, create and recreate the cultural realm of social relations.

### *Ideology*

Studies of working-class consciousness identify the barriers that prevent working peoples’ understanding of their collective interests as a class. In the classical Marxist tradition, “ideology” is understood “in terms of the concealment of contradictions” of a class-based society (Larrain 1983: 39). According to Eagleton (1991:202), the “classical concept of ideology” refers to the “process whereby interests of a certain kind become masked, rationalized, naturalized, universalized, legitimated in the name of certain forms of political power.” Ideology, in the context of class struggle, Marx explained, is the form of consciousness that has the capacity to obscure class antagonism on behalf of the dominant class (McCarney 1980). Marx considered as “ideological” only those forms of consciousness that served the interests of the dominant class. His main focus was on the process of ideological formation arising from practical, everyday activities and how the material base of social life, already distorted by the ruling ideology, is reflected in human consciousnesses (Larrain 1983). Ideas about the very reality humans encounter in their everyday lives reflect real, objective conditions. The problem of ideology concerns the veracity of “socialized” notions of what these conditions represent. To Marx, ideology “has a capacity to obscure the true significance of events” (McCarney 1980: 6), and it thus serves as an obstacle to illuminating the contradictions inherent in class-based social relations of production.

According to Marx, the only solution to overcoming ideological consciousness is to realize the contradictions immanent to the capitalist order and through conscious practice to



eliminate the conditions that give rise to them (Larrain 1983). Materialist social science characterizes practice as the source of conscious action, which, through a change of material conditions of living, can bring about changes in consciousness. To fight for a change of conditions within the sphere of production rather than merely agitating for a social change in the sphere of distribution is, for Marx, the revolutionary practice of “the simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change” (Lebowitz 2004: 23).

Mészáros (1989) discusses ideology in two ways. He refers to ‘ruling ideology’, ‘apologetic ideology’ or ‘pacificatory ideology’, highlighting ideologies that are used as buffers in conjunctures when constant readjustments are necessary to legitimize the status quo of the ruling class. But, in his view, ideology can also serve as a vehicle of working-class emancipation “since (ideology) is the inescapable practical consciousness of class societies, articulated in characteristic forms in which the members of the opposing social forces can become conscious of their materially grounded conflicts and fight them out” (p.257). But Mészáros warns against employing ‘critical ideologies’ to merely negate the established order, as these are doomed to fail due to their failure to offer a positive, workable alternative.

Lenin developed an openly positive conception of ideology<sup>4</sup> (Larrain 1983). Proletarian ideology for Lenin is defined as a true class-consciousness supported by science and developed by socialist intellectuals (Larrain 1983). Lenin (1962:98) characterized trade-union consciousness as a form of bourgeois ideology. He also saw intellectuals – bearers of the science of socialist ideology – as agents in the transformation of workers’ trade-union consciousness. He emphasized the need to introduce revolutionary (socialist) consciousness to the members of the working class from the outside.

---

<sup>4</sup> *The German Ideology* was written by Marx and Engels in 1845 but was first published in 1932, after Lenin’s death.



Lukács' notions of imputed and psychological consciousness are superficially similar to those of Lenin. The latter consciousness involves an awareness based on the immediate appearances of things in the everyday working lives of men and women, whereas imputed (or ascribed) consciousness corresponds to Lenin's scientific socialist ideology (Larrain 1983). According to Lukács, the working class must overcome false consciousness (the condition caused by internalizing various forms of bourgeois ideologies). Eagleton (1998) points out the idealist streaks in Lukács's ascription of the ultimate power of ideology to overturn the dominant form of political rule. Eagleton calls attention to the need for a perspective that is much more materially grounded (as was Lenin's). It is praxis that enables working women and men to overcome bourgeois ideological snares and to fight against their subordinate position.

In contrast to Lukács who did not focus on the role that institutions played in the dissemination and regulation of ideology, Gramsci developed a concept of hegemony that includes not only ideological but also other social aspects of consciousness formation (Eagleton 1991). Hegemony for Gramsci is the sum of various mechanisms employed in the social, cultural and the economic, which allows for the consent of the ruled to stay subsumed under the dominant class (Eagleton 1991; Larrain 1983). Such consent is secured through cultural venues, religious practices and political means. Ideology for Gramsci is "more than a conception of the world or a system of ideas; it also has to do with the capacity to inspire concrete attitudes and give certain orientations for action" (Larrain 1983: 80).

Gramsci puts special emphasis on ideology as a lived practice, where class members who recognize and point out the muzzling role of the dominant class hegemony ('organic intellectuals'), assist in fostering counter-hegemonic consciousness as a means to overturning ruling class hegemony and establishing the hegemony of the working class (Eagleton 1991).



While Marx saw ideology as exerting a “negative” effect on the formation of class-consciousness because it conceals contradictions of class-based society, the Marxist thinkers who further elaborated on the concept, also used the term ideology for a set of ideas revealing the mechanism and the sources of exploitation. Lenin’s socialist ideology, for example, is seen as the arena in which the contradictions of capitalist society can be fought out.

### **Selected Canadian studies of class-consciousness**

There are no studies on the class-consciousness of greenhouse workers in Canada. The research of Basok (2002) and Wall (1994) is somewhat relevant insofar as they examine the production of plants in the agricultural sector. The greenhouse operations in the Niagara region, where my research took place, concentrate on floricultural production. Both Basok (2002) and Wall (1994) studied the working conditions of migrant workers and local tomato harvesters working in the vegetable growing greenhouses around Leamington on the north shore of lake Erie in Southern Ontario.

Basok’s study of transmigrant harvesters in Canada describes the experiences of Mexican workers who came to the Leamington, Ontario area through the Commonwealth Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program. As foreign labourers, the Mexican workers were subjected to different terms and conditions of employment than Canadian employees. They were expected to be available for work on demand, unable to refuse employers’ orders, and they were subjected to racial discrimination. Being employed in the greenhouse industry, the migrant labourers experienced the same unwelcome aspects of greenhouse labour as did the participants of my study, such as exposure to extreme heat in the summer and to agricultural chemicals year round, with little if any protection through health and safety regulations.

Wall (1994) examines the impact of industrialization on the farm labour market in



Southwestern Ontario by focusing on the tomato growing and processing industry. As the industry changed to accommodate new market demands by introducing machinery into production, requirements for a stable, resident workforce grew. Wall argues that under the impact of major political and economic changes that precipitated the advent of agribusiness, tomato farmers switched from hiring contractual seasonal, non-resident workers as manual harvesters to resident workers, predominantly women who worked as harvester-operators. This change coincided with the push towards increased labour-productivity (decreasing labour time per task) and thus the reduction of labour costs. The floriculture industry in the Niagara region does use mechanized and electronic equipment but, as one of my study participants mentioned, there is a lower ratio of workers to square footage in the tomato greenhouse than in the ornamental plant growing business. (It is however not an objective of this study to compare the two greenhouse sectors.)

Academic research on the development of class-consciousness in the Canadian working class covers a variety of work settings. Here, I review in chronological order the research of Rinehart & Okraku (1974), Leggett (1979), Johnston and Baer (1993), Livingstone and Mangan (1996), Winson (1997), Seccombe and Livingstone (2000), Winson and Leach (2002), and Dunk (1991, 2002). After a discussion of each case study I will draw out some of the similarities and differences in the findings of these studies.

In *Rinehart and Okraku's* (1974) study of London, Ontario, the authors used a survey and applied multivariate statistical tests to determine the levels and "distribution" of class-consciousness among their participants. They examined a range of five class categories from lower to upper class, excluding the capitalist owners. Rinehart and Okraku operationalized class-consciousness as an attitude and a "state of mind" that reflects workers' subjective feelings about



the inequality and injustice experienced at work and in their private social lives. The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of low socio-economic status, religious views and ethnic background on class-consciousness. Rinehart and Okraku inferred from their previous studies conducted on class consciousness that ethnic and religious factors would not have an impact on the variation of class-consciousness, even though active religious commitment was found to have an augmenting effect on adherence to traditional and conservative attitudes.

Their measurement scale contained five items addressing subjective class location, perception of structure and political power, and the dynamics of power distribution. The questions falling under the latter item asked the participants to indicate their perceptions toward possible governmental favouritism or neglect of particular groups, and, if confirmed, to list the ethnic and demographic groupings affected by this government bias. The last question focused on to the extent to which the government responds to the needs of the participants themselves.

The findings of religious and ethnic influence on class-consciousness confirmed Rinehart and Okraku's hypothesis that religiosity had only a weak effect on class-consciousness. Unlike ethnic origin, which was unrelated to class awareness, occupation did affect class awareness.

The authors sought to challenge the mainstream notions and discourses on class in Canada involving "classlessness" or a "middle class society." Their study did show that manual labourers were more likely to evince a working class consciousness -- although the criteria of this class-consciousness was limited by the authors to participants' subjective identification with particular class locations and their perceptions of the existence of differentially privileged groups.

In Leggett's study (1979) of a Vancouver working class neighbourhood after the 1968 provincial elections, around 800 male manual workers were surveyed and some were interviewed to investigate the possible sources of class-consciousness and its implications in the sphere of



politics, primarily preferences in voting. Leggett rejected the mainstream sociological theories of a classless society. However, his findings supported the perspective that working class-consciousness is far from being either revolutionary or homogeneous. Workers who experienced economic insecurities and those who were members of militant labour unions showed a greater development of class-consciousness. Leggett emphasized that the development of class-consciousness depends on particular regional conditions.

Using the measurement criteria from his earlier study of working class consciousness of Black workers in Detroit, Leggett divided class-consciousness into three gradational levels: high, medium and low. The independent variables of ethnic origin, uprootedness, skill level, union membership and ethnicity were included to determine the likely sources of class-consciousness. To measure the possible effect of class-consciousness on political decision-making, Leggett asked participants about their attitudes toward the American involvement in Vietnam, American ownership of Canadian industry, and public ownership of industries. Additionally, he tabulated the distribution of votes in federal elections for each candidate by the level of voters' class-consciousness. A detailed account of his first five interviews is also included in the study to give depth to the accompanying tabular data.

His findings showed that belonging to a union and uprootedness both had a positive effect on class-consciousness. Unskilled workers' consciousness was slightly higher than that of their more skilled counterparts. The most important finding indicated that class-consciousness and political ideology are closely interconnected even though a high level of class-consciousness is not necessarily connected to supporting an apparently labour-friendly political party. Leggett stressed that historically the NDP in British Columbia did not act in the interests of the working class. In Leggett's view, class-conscious workers should establish a Marxist organization



corresponding to their working class objectives. Overall Leggett's interviewees expressed a need for their interests to be defended against the interests of the employers, but they revealed skepticism about the possibility of an egalitarian society where the productive process would be controlled by the producers.

*Johnston and Baer* (1993) utilized data from a comparative survey on class-consciousness of three nation states -- Canada, the United States and Sweden -- to examine the role of political and economic contexts in the consolidation of class-consciousness. They sought to explain the absence of visions of an alternative social order within the working class. The dynamics and development of class-consciousness are, according to Johnston and Baer, dependent on a sense of collective "efficacy" that is created within political organizations such as political parties or unions. The potential for power generation within an organization through its political activity is a decisive element in the formation of class-consciousness. The level of class-consciousness in Johnston and Baer's study was measured in relation to three dependent variables: class self-identification, oppositional consciousness, and alternative consciousness.

The results of quantitative testing suggested that Swedish workers displayed higher levels of oppositional consciousness (which involves positing working class interests in opposition to the interests of capital) and alternative consciousness (which involves awareness of possible alternatives to capitalist order) than either Canadian or American workers. Canadian workers who identified themselves as working class had significantly higher levels of oppositional consciousness than American workers. The scores measuring differences in alternative consciousness among the four social classes (workers, supervisor, managers and owners) showed that these differences in Canada were less polarized than in Sweden but the difference between workers and owners was more pronounced in Canada than in the U.S. The authors suggest that



the root of these differences can be found in the distinct politico-economic developments and distributions of power between organized labour and capital in the three nation-states after the Great Depression. The outcomes of the struggles for political recognition, Johnston and Baer conclude, play an instrumental role in assessing the relative strength of the working class.

*Livingstone and Mangan* (1996) analyzed data collected from a longitudinal study of class stratification and class and gender consciousness of workers and their families in Hamilton, Ontario. The surveys and interviews of this study began in the early eighties and ended with follow-up interviews in 1994. The authors specified a number of general requirements for a “developed class-consciousness” as found in various works on the topic in the sociological literature: an awareness of the existence of social classes, subjective class identification, and the awareness of a conflict between classes (or oppositional class-consciousness). Conforming to many other studies, there was a strong tendency for the participants in Livingstone and Mangan’s study, to locate themselves in the category of middle class. Over all, class position, together with membership in labour unions, had the strongest influence on workers’ attitude under the structural conditions of capitalist mode of production.

Livingston and Mangan posit a series of gradational stages of class-consciousness in which the first stage of proletarian class-consciousness develops as a consequence of the experience of living and working collectively under conditions of the subordination of labour to capital. The more advanced stage involves formation of oppositional class-consciousness that facilitates internalization of the irreconcilable conflict of interests between capital and labour. The authors emphasized that fully developed class consciousness has to include support not only for the cause of the workers but also for the rights of those who do not fit with the mainstream image of the “traditional worker.” The rights of women workers, either employed or working at



home, and workers of diverse ethnic backgrounds should be included in the struggle for emancipation from the rule of capital.

Livingstone and Mangan also employed two questions concerning an alternative to capitalism. Their findings were consistent with previous studies. Most participants supported a market driven economy, with only a slight minority preferring collectively owned and managed production. In assessing oppositional class-consciousness, the authors used a questionnaire measuring attitudes towards particular class interests, i.e., alignment with either workers rights or the interests of an employer. The findings correspond with some tendencies inferred from results of other studies: union membership affects oppositional consciousness, the class interests of the proletariat are not homogeneous and there is a sharp divide between capital and labour on issues involving defence of the interests of either class.

In 2000 *Seccombe and Livingstone* published the results of their longitudinal study of Hamilton steelworkers taking two couples, a generation apart, as a representative illustration of the general dynamics of workers attitudes toward a multitude of issues related to their well being. They sought to incorporate the discourse of the “politics of identity” into their Marxist materialist research program. They postulated that “awareness of belonging to a social class” is obscured by cultural prerogatives. In turn, these prerogatives help to define group identity. The authors argue that people’s propensity to act collectively is heavily conditioned by their perceptions of the probability of successful outcomes of their efforts.

Although *Seccombe and Livingstone* acknowledge the inherently conflictual relation between labour and capital, they also affirm the relations of mutual dependence existing between them. They argue that the “parties have rational reasons both to fight and to cooperate with one another. We cannot say, *a priori*, which will predominate” (p.51). They propose that workers and



employers in a capitalist economy are mutually dependent on each other and that while the actions initiated by workers in defence of their interests impinge on the interests of the employers, the latter also defend their class interests by using political and legislative tools to restrain workers' militancy. The desire of workers to retain their jobs and perform well within a company, the authors assert, predominates over the option of engaging in a battle with capital -- unless the workers see a potential for a successful outcome of such battles.

Seccombe and Livingstone noted that the recent restructuring of the production process to meet the challenges of increased competition within the steel industry impacted heavily on the workers' security. The imposition of an increased load of working hours and the introduction of multitasking are directly tied to the capitalist thrust to increase the rate of surplus labour extraction. Work under these conditions put strain on workers' lives that affects their view of their social role as members of the working class.

The concept of "conservative consciousness" is invoked by the authors to explore the interest of steel workers in maintaining their company's profitability. It is the performance of the company upon which the workers' jobs and livelihood depend, and it is the pragmatic adherence to the free market liberal ideology that these conservative attitudes are ultimately root in. The fact that, "mass consciousness" changes rapidly under circumstances of tumultuous uprisings, Seccombe and Livingstone explain, can be ascribed to lack of consciousness-raising opportunities during times of relatively low intensity of workers' struggle. Seccombe and Livingstone conclude that the more insecurity is introduced into workers' lives, the greater the chance there is that workers will express conservative attitudes. In particular, the fear of being unable to support their families brought to the fore in many male workers a renewed commitment to a patriarch "breadwinner" ideology that had been systematically promoted by their employer,



the Stelco corporation.

The authors critique postmodernist theory for its break-down of historically connected social relations into a decentralized and disjointed plethora of discourses as well as for its failure to offer any palpable solutions to the plight of subordinated and oppressed groups. Against the postmodernist view, Seccombe and Livingstone ground social oppression and exploitation in the historically determined social order and in the consent of oppressed members of the society who express their submission through cooperation and internalization of dominant class values. There is insufficient counter-hegemonic consciousness within individuals at this time, the authors conclude, to propel the collective push toward a transformation from capitalism to socialism.

Currently, the most effective strategy to engage workers in acquiring socialist consciousness, according to Seccombe and Livingstone, would involve applying pressure on labour leaders to form alliances with community groups and with strata of the working class that have been deemed historically as “outsiders” by more affluent workers. Only in this way can human agency be informed to a decisively greater degree by concern with the common lot of all exploited people. According to Seccombe and Livingstone, the resulting sense of connection and common purpose would then have a chance of instigating lasting social change.

Seccombe and Livingstone also argue against the post-structuralist notion that human agency is shaped by the discourses of the dominant ideology and is thus incapable of acting outside of the discursive frames of capitalist hegemony. The authors state that the apparent conformity to prevailing hegemonic discourses stems from the pragmatic need to adapt to the dominant regime in order to be able to use its institutional structures for survival. Pointing to the more critical social views of their study participants, they attempt to dispel and refute the notion of incapacitated subordinates whose subjectivity is decisively determined by a multiplicity of



discourses serving to defend the interests of the capitalist class. The authors acknowledge the role of media and the complexities of social life that impact on peoples' worldviews but insist on the primacy of human agency in critically evaluating the outcomes of direct experiences. In sum, Seccombe and Livingstone view workers as individuals whose subjectivity and consciousness are formed by the contingencies of direct experiences, who are able to detect manipulations of public opinion by the media, who are concerned about their economic security, and who thus consciously make choices that enable them to utilize existing social structures to their benefit, but who also know that the dominant political forces within society are not delivering what they claim to be delivering. According to Seccombe and Livingstone, workers' "compliance" to the system "is much more likely to be secured through a 'dull compulsion of everyday life' and a pragmatic aversion to taking imprudent risks, than by abiding faith in existing institutions and leaders" (p.190). The workers are credited by the authors with an accumulated reservoir of grievances and injustices committed against them by the exploitive socio-economic system. In periods of political upheaval the suppressed feelings of injustice can burst through and sweep up collectively many of those who had not previously believed that they had the potential for participating in an organized resistance.

Seccombe and Livingstone advocate connecting workers with groups of diverse identities who are politically active to form a community organization, horizontally linked to other communal organizations. The resulting movement would allow for the development of a national political organization capable of initiating structural changes in the socio-economic order. This suggests that Seccombe and Livingstone have confidence in the competence of workers to initiate and run a popular emancipation movement as the decisive vehicle for social transformation, without reliance on a vanguard organizational body to coordinate and execute the steps necessary



to achieving a worker-controlled process of production.

*Winson* (1997) draws upon data from three rural communities in Southern Ontario for his study of the impact of rural social environment on the class-consciousness of rural industrial workers formerly employed in three plants. All three plants (one Westinghouse Electric and two Canada Packers) had been unionized but had closed down as a result of the process of corporate restructuring. Hence, the 37 participants who provided the data used in the study were no longer employed as industrial workers.

The influence of rural social location on consciousness is not homogeneous for all work in rural settings. As *Winson* points out, most studies of rural workers' consciousness focus on the impact of workers from the countryside on workforces situated in urban settings rather than on workers employed within industries located outside of the urban areas. He also points out that the location of industries in the rural areas is not a new phenomenon. Relocations of industries to or from rural areas produce reactions from workers living in the rural settings that are peculiar to the prevailing ideologies of small town and agricultural areas. These ideologies bear the stamp of conservatism, the patronizing attitudes of rural authorities, and individualism, despite the fact that family farm communities also appear to espouse the values of mutual help and inter-dependence.

There were 13 participants from the overall sample of 37 who expressed discontent with the way corporations behave toward their employees. Only four of the 13 that *Winson* calls "the discontented few" (p.439) displayed an oppositional consciousness (regarding capital and labour as involved in a conflictual and oppositional relation) while six generalized the behaviour of their company onto the whole corporate structure of the Canadian economy. Only six expressed some feeling of injustice regarding corporate downsizing, but in most cases their criticism was limited to their own companies and little effort was made to articulate this injustice with other inequities.



Winson compares his findings with Mann's (1970) who concluded that the oppositional values expressed by workers are most likely to refer to issues that concern their immediate surroundings. Instances of inequity demonstrated elsewhere are most likely judged with a set of internalized hegemonic values.

Seven of the thirteen participants had an experience working in a unionized urban workplace. Winson argues that membership in a union and non-rural working experience greatly contribute to more militant attitudes toward corporate-implemented injustices. "The compliant majority" (p.442), as he calls those who met lay-offs and closures with passive submission to events seemingly beyond their control, subscribed to a set of values regarding work that allowed them to regard labour unions as promoters of "laziness." Of these workers, most had not worked in a unionized workplace before. Winson found that the most significant difference in opinion and attitude was not attributable to the specific histories and environments of the three plants studied. Rather the main difference cut across workers who had been employed at different plants: a minority with non-conforming attitudes toward restructuring and a majority who displayed complacency towards it. Seventy five percent of the latter group had grown up on a small farm or in a small town. The decisive factors impacting on particular attitudes toward work point to the historical role of religious influence upon the communal development of values. As Rinehart and Okraku (1974) found in their study, the internalization of religious cultural values promotes an adherence to traditional conservative values.

The role of ideology as a mediating factor between material conditions of social life and the perception of the meanings of such conditions in shaping workers' attitudes towards capitalist structural contradictions is undisputable. Winson shows that rural communities traditionally espouse views toward work that eschew unionism and approach the insecurities caused by



corporate restructuring with a certain passivity. Such resignation is not, however, unique to people living in rural settings. Winson stresses that this kind of passivity is still present in Canadian culture today, and that the organized labour movement is not offering the kind of outlet needed by the more conscious workers to further develop their discontents.

*Winson and Leach* (2002) conducted a multifaceted study of working people living in many rural communities in Ontario that extend over several years in the 1990s. Their theoretical approach acknowledges the role of region, gender, ethnicity and age in compounding the effects that the era of intensified profit extraction has had on the working-class, without compromising the salience of class analysis. The demise of the welfare state compounds the decline of living standards and the increase in insecurity. Winson and Leach focus on displaced workers who lost their jobs due to restructuring or had to cope with nefarious working conditions after they found a new job.

The hegemonic ideology and discourse address these changes by advocating flexibility and financial restraint. Management strategies further advocate the prostration of unions and a reduction in labour costs by establishing part-time work as a normative form of employment and by lowering the wages of new workers. Winson and Leach detail the impact of such economic adjustments, which are referred to as neo-liberalism, on workers in the rural communities who are especially hard hit by a dearth of employment opportunities that is amplified by relative geographical isolation. The principal driving force behind acquiescence to the neo-liberal agenda is an ideological framework that invokes the ineluctable and inexorable consequences of the drive toward “efficiency” and “competitiveness” (Winson and Leach 2002: 22). This ideology finds expression in legislation of new social policies that restrict public access to vital resources and services.



Winson and Leach document that the typical reaction of rural townships stricken with industry relocation has been an attempt to “diversify” their economic bases, a move that has not restored job security and economic well-being. The effects on workers provide further evidence for Winson’s earlier (1997) findings that “small town and farm ideology emphasizing hard work, the reluctance to question the prerogatives of management, and an ambivalent if not hostile attitude towards union organizations, dominates the rural communities of this region” (Winson and Leach 2002:164). Although the communities experienced the same phenomena of industry relocating and restructuring, accompanied by the emergence of contingent labour markets, the particularities of culture, history and geography of each community played a role in producing differential impacts on residents. Historically, agricultural communities of southern Ontario tend to adhere to a small town and farm ideology, and their proximity to larger urban centers creates an atmosphere of available job opportunities.

Winson and Leach found that northern communities affected by the threat of a single company closure, experienced greater resistance to corporate pressures to relocate. Supported by stronger unions, the northern workers were better equipped to confront the objective economic pressures in a solidaristic fashion. The authors also note that the geographic location of northern towns, built around a single industry that is weighted down by considerable fixed capital investments, posed difficulties for relocation greater than those faced by lighter industries in the south.

Winson and Leach recommend creation of social policies that ensure economic prosperity in the rural areas by providing young workers with employable skills and older workers with job retraining programs. A policy fostering public-private cooperation is recommended by the authors to provide desirable employment and child care for women living in rural communities.



Studying working-class culture in Northwestern Ontario, *Thomas Dunk* (1991) conducted an ethnographic research into the cultural practices of younger white males living and working in the Thunder Bay area. Culture, Dunk argues, is the medium through which the structural position of the working class is experienced. He gives primacy, though not an absolute primacy, to relations of production in forming working-class consciousness. All that is cultural, Dunk asserts, is experienced and “organized around and in opposition to work” (p.153). The understanding of one’s class position is thus mediated through various hegemonic practices and discourses and because the ideology of such practices is rooted in ruling class interests, such an understanding is limited. The consent to hegemony is thus given not because of coercive measures exercised by the state but because of a lack of available alternatives unaffected by ruling class ideology.

Dunk uses Levi-Strauss’ concept of ‘bricoleur’ to explain the multitude of social and cultural expressions the working class has to utilize to make sense out of their experience. Being limited to using only these hegemonic tools, the working class has to use them for creating sensible solutions to their struggle against their subordinated position in production. These limitations in expression of resistance to class domination, Dunk maintains, easily transform into other forms of cultural expression that foster biases against other ethnic groups and women. He stresses the need to develop a socialist culture to provide an alternative medium for workers to make sense of their reality.

In his study of pulp and paper mill workers in Northwestern Ontario, *Dunk* (2002) outlines the factors that play the most important role in workers’ internalization of particular worldviews. Employment consulting agencies, he argues, contribute to the inculcation of a particular hegemonic view of the world of labour within individual workers after they have been laid off. The practices of these agencies consolidate the post-Fordist, neo-liberal ideology of



individual responsibility, and successfully prevent consideration of the potential power and efficacy of collective action by workers. Workers, who might have felt some degree of solidarity in their workplace while employed, are subjected to the hegemonic notion of personal responsibility for adjustment to objective circumstances. Their reactions to a loss of employment depend on successful adjustment to a new situation. According to the internalized ideological notions of personal strategies to be applied upon the loss of a job, one should accept the loss as a normal occurrence of life under the fast paced and fast changing conditions of the modern free market economy. Questioning this “fact”, grieving the consequences, or not ‘moving ahead’ is seen by those who have the economic and social reserves to establish an alternative source of living as a weakness and an inability to adjust. There is a bifurcation of laid-off workers between those who accept and then promote ideological explanations about the cause of the plant closure and their successful adjustment to it, and those whose life circumstances do not allow for ‘successful’ adjustment. This bifurcation reflects the explanatory power of ideology. When one’s life circumstances are auspicious and fit the imperatives of the dominant ideology then such an ideology is accepted as valid. But this is not always the case. Hence, Dunk points out some of the reasons for the non-homogeneity of working-class consciousness.

When looking for an explanation of such lack of solidarity Dunk expresses doubts that relying on personal experience, as defended in Thompson (1968; 1978), plays the decisive role in making sense of one’s position in the social world and in formulating appropriate responses to stimuli enveloping the immediate surroundings of the social actor. Experience, Dunk maintains, is composed of the multiplicity of cultural and historical factors that in turn condition responses and reactions to experiences. These factors are nourished by neo-liberal ideology and thus workers’ responses to situations will be drawn from the pool of solutions offered by capitalist



hegemony. These solutions are, according to Dunk's research, unwittingly disseminated even by the consultants of counseling agencies.

*Leach* (2002) discusses the explanatory factors responsible for the debacle of attempted collaboration between the trade unions and community groups during the 1996 Days of Action in Ontario. She draws on Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and "the organic intellectual" in this analysis of class-consciousness of unionized steelworkers in Hamilton, Ontario. A central concept incorporated into her analysis is the idea of discipline.

During the Days of Action of 1996, mass protests were organized by the Ontario Labour Federation and by community groups. As *Leach* indicates, the foundation of the Days of Action was the opposition of the labour movement to the provincial government's promotion of the interests of capital through legislative changes to regulations governing the workplace. However, a split developed between the labour leaders and the leaders of the community groups, and this split became more evident over time. "Class identity" was overshadowed by other forms of identity that were being articulated by the community organizations. Under such conditions, *Leach* noted, the sense of belonging to a class was undermined.

The pivotal point in *Leach*'s article revolves around how 'discipline' is used to maintain hegemony. She points out that Gramsci put emphasis on discipline as an important factor in countering ruling class hegemony. The conditions for development of counter-hegemonic consciousness could be maintained only under the leadership of disciplined intellectuals. At the same time 'discipline' has been institutionalized through the establishment of a legislated industrial relations framework subjecting labour to the ultimate power of the state. The relationship between the union leadership and management follows the rules of a reciprocal maintenance with the upshot that in the case of a labour dispute the union leaders have to align



with management against their own membership. This collaboration effectively precludes any threat that could be posed by a spontaneous uprising of the union members. Leach notes that the tendency for the labour union representatives in negotiating with the employer is to make concessions to corporate demands and in so doing they replace the historically larger goals of organized labour with instrumental demands more in keeping with preserving the status quo.

According to Leach, the current social character of Hamilton steelworkers is rooted in a history of discriminatory hiring policies and immigration regulation. The steel company hired immigrants of varied ethnic background as a labour-saving strategy, which contributed to segregation along the lines of skin colour by privileging 'white' males over workers of other-than-white ethnic background. The better jobs were reserved for white males who were subjected to a regime of Fordist labour process organization. The Fordist method of production by no means found its way into all workplaces in Canada. Where it was implemented, however, the workers enjoyed a relatively privileged status within the working class owing to higher salaries, benefits and the 'protection' offered by their labour unions from unbridled exploitation.

Leach argues, referring to Gramsci and following on other research on Hamilton steelworkers, that Fordism was a system designed to form a certain kind of a worker, disciplined and healthy, one that would subscribe to the culture of the sacrificing breadwinner. Conservative notions about gender roles were born from the application of the Fordist regime in which the male breadwinner was assigned the responsibility of supporting his family. This responsibility weighed heavily on the male worker's consciousness, to the point that the worker's allegiance to his workplace gained primacy over his solidarity with other workers, especially as regards issues relating to minorities. Male steelworkers exhibited a backward approach to issues of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, which were perceived as threats to their security and



their livelihoods.

Although Leach did not explicitly set out to measure class-consciousness, her analysis of the conservative political inclinations of workers clearly documents the complex material roots of reactionary rationalizations concerning the impact of intensified 'free market' competition. Defending their jobs and their standards of living, the steelworkers turned their heads away from the plight of particular groups who in addition to also being wage labourers face the additional disadvantage of being different from the mainstream representatives of the dominant culture -- the white heterosexual males. Similarly to Seccombe and Livingstone, she concludes that the worldview served up by the various agents of socialization of a bourgeois state can initiate conservative and protectionist responses to an increasingly tighter labour market.

There are several common findings in the Canadian case studies of class-consciousness. It is apparent that inadequate working conditions do not automatically stimulate workers to realize and promote their class-determined interests. The main thrust of the studies surveyed above is to highlight the problem of workers' exposure to a ruling class hegemony that in turn affects their consciousness. Exposing the contradictions of class-based society provides the only available tools of countering the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production. There seems to be a relationship between the ideology of the ruling class and the working class, where the former shapes workers' consciousness and the latter shapes the possibilities offered by such an ideology and in turn determines further ideological forms. Workers are not 'false-conscious' or 'dupes' but individuals who make sense of their surroundings as they attempt to modify them in ways that would reduce the detrimental impacts of the structural changes they encounter. The workers are deeply suspicious of politics and politicians in general because they have learned that political parties do not represent their interests. Workers can support conservative ideas for



the pragmatic reason of protecting their immediate economic interests. Religion was found to foster such conservative attitudes (Winson 1997, Rinehart and Okraku 1974). Workers who experienced membership in militant unions were more class-conscious than workers who had no history of unionized employment and workers whose unions were submissive.

Leach, Seccombe and Livingstone, and Leggett advocate the need for a political organization that would defend and promote the interests of the working-class. The absence of such a political force leaves workers especially vulnerable to a neo-liberal agenda that represents the ideological and political imperatives of capital in the current global conjuncture.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

...the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, [is that humans] must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Marx and Engels 1981: 48)

Marx argued that relations formed around the production of life necessities affect all social relations. The primacy of the production process influenced my focus on the particular working conditions of the Niagara region greenhouse industry, and the extent to which these conditions hindered workers’ awareness of their class interests as being inherently opposed to interests of the owning class. I chose to use Ollman’s (1978b) characterization of working class consciousness as a model for formulating my guiding questions, and as a measurement of the participants’ awareness of their class position. After outlining Ollman’s (1978b) preconditions that delineate the necessary aspects for fully-fledged working class consciousness, I describe the method of data gathering and the participant recruitment process. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the twelve participants whose identities are protected.

For a study of a particular phenomenon, Ollman advocates, it is necessary to start with observing and analyzing the whole of which the particular is a part. Proceeding from the whole to the part and situating the part back into the whole accounts for the realization that all parts are interrelated and bear within them the characteristics of the whole (Lebowitz 2003: 51-76). Some Canadian studies such as Willox 1980, Willis 1977, Winson and Leach 2002, and Dunk 1991,



have situated the subject of their study against a larger macro-economic background. Winson and Leach felt that this approach plays a central role in the comprehensive analysis of a research subject as people respond in their own ways to changing economic and political conditions. These current conditions suggest that “capitalism as a totalizing socioeconomic system is with us today more than it has ever been, and its impact on the lives of everyday people in rich and poor countries alike is ever-more profound” (Winson and Leach 2002:13). Placing my research participants against the background of the greater social totality, namely analyzing their working conditions against the particular socio-economic conditions of the underlying social order, follows Marxist the method of scientific inquiry.

### **Nine preconditions to working-class consciousness**

As a conceptual guide to class-consciousness I have chosen Bertell Ollman’s outline of nine preconditions that adopted altogether would form a fully class-conscious individual. He argues that an attitude survey or extensive questionnaire cannot cover the problematic of being aware of a potential and historical role of the working class (Ollman 1978a). Such studies, Ollman maintains, form conclusions about workers’ responses to questionnaires that are static and finite. Ollman acknowledges a need for a study of class-consciousness that searches not only for those aspects of class-consciousness that are demonstratively present in workers, but also for those aspects that are not there and for the reasons for their exclusion.

Ollman’s (1978b) scheme ranges from recognition of workers’ interests to the courage to act upon them. The first precondition is for workers to recognize that they have interests that are not addressed by their employers. Second, as well as being dissatisfied with their individual situations workers must be aware that, irrespective of their varied identities and occupational



statuses, all workers share the brunt of capitalist conditions of production. The third prerequisite stipulates that in addition of being cognizant of shared working class interests, it is necessary that workers distinguish between their immediate economic interests, such as demand for better wages, and the overall goal of working class struggle, which is to abolish capitalist productive relations. The fourth requirement stresses the need to transcend the identity of special group interests into interests of a whole class. A feeling of “rational hostility” (Ollman 1978a: 66) towards the system is a prerequisite of the fifth step. In order to find the confidence to instigate a progressive social change, workers have to feel resentment towards their employers who represent the embodiment of an exploitative force within a class-based system. The sixth step refers to the ability to envision the possibility of a different system of production that would answer the needs and wants of the working people. Workers must be convinced about the temporality of capitalism rather than conceiving it as a universal expression of human social development. The seventh prerequisite underscores the importance of workers’ confidence that they can carry out the change. That this endeavour must be based on Marxist theoretical understanding of social relations is the core of the eighth requirement. As the last step Ollman concludes that workers must have the courage to act when the opportunity arises.

This scheme is not meant to be ‘walked’ through in a sequence of consecutive steps until the last one is reached. Ollman (1978a) stresses that a study of class-consciousness is an assessment of the status of working-class consciousness under particular systemic conditions in a given time and space. Because of the influence of structural constraints (objective aspects) on either a group or an individual consciousness (subjective aspects), the findings of such a study cannot reflect definite and constant values. As history shows, class-consciousness is a very fluid phenomenon and can be gained very quickly, depending on a situation. Both Mészáros (1971)



and Ollman (1978a; 1978b) stress the dialectical importance of the interplay of objective conditions and human agency for social transformation. The decisive point in the transformation rests with the power of wage labourers themselves. To awaken this power, both authors emphasize the central role of a political organization in increasing class-consciousness and streamlining the working class interest towards a larger goal than a mere pursuit of satisfaction of immediate economic needs. They conclude that studies of class-consciousness should be able to investigate the social, cultural and psychological barriers to its full attainment.

### **The method**

The scope of a Master's thesis does not allow for a longitudinal design and problems with recruitment precluded focus groups. To compensate I have used semi-structured interviews in a manner recommended by Ollman, whereby I attempt to approach the participants with the emphasis on their membership in the working class and not as atomized individuals who distance themselves from the collective interests of all wage-earners.

The researcher-interviewee relationship mutually affects both parties. Patai (1991) stresses the need to maintain an ethical approach to qualitative studies. She cites the inherently unequal footing between researcher and her participant and is concerned about the more powerful figure, usually the researcher, exerting undue influence on the subject of the study. Additionally, it is not only the integrity of the participants that is at stake but also the integrity of the research if information given during an interview is affected by the tensions arising from power-imbalance in a researcher/subject relationship. In contrast, Mbilinyi (cited in Patai 1991) argues that it is necessary for the researcher to convey an explicit message during the course of the interview, in her case "consciousness raising" (p.148). Olson and Shopes (1991) also do not favour the model of the interviewer as an impartial role and defend the benefits of their interaction with study



participants by sharing their own personal experience with them. This practice, they claim, decreases tensions between the researcher and her participants, creating thus a supportive and relaxed atmosphere, which is conducive to sharing of information. The interviews are thus “highly framed encounters, not governed by the rules of ordinary interaction. The peculiar intimacy available to strangers who share an important experience seems to create in at least some interviews a social space where normal power relations perhaps get blunted” (pp. 195-196).

Ollman (1978a) advocates researcher’s active involvement in affecting participant’s view of class-based society. He maintains that the researcher’s presence in mediating the discussion on class-consciousness will either lower or raise participants’ class-consciousness. Choosing appropriate terms for categories that form the basic components of Marxist class analysis (capitalism, exploitation, class struggle) facilitates the participants’ thinking about their class position. Class-consciousness is neither a static frame of mind, nor can it be explicitly evident from a talk with an individual study participant. As Ollman (1978a) explained, the objective aspects affecting class-consciousness and the state of participants’ class-consciousness are of transitory nature and should be taken in consideration as such when studied. He also advises that working-class consciousness is not particularly an individual, subjective consciousness even though it presupposes workers to be consciously aware of the class-based social antagonism. Therefore, it is important to structure questions so as not to address the participant as an isolated individual but as a member of a group. For instance the guide question, ‘What is your relationship with your supervisor/the owners/your boss?’ was altered to, ‘As a worker, what is your relationship with your supervisor, owners or boss?’. I hoped that this alteration would encourage the respondents to think of themselves as a part of a whole group of concerned workers.



Interviewing each participant of my study did not proceed in a uniform fashion. Some participants elaborated on a particular topic more than others, and some of the prepared questions did not make it to the forefront of the discussion. Formulations of the questions had to be customized to each participant and tailored to the situation. When attempting to discuss the topic of “class”, for example, the question had to be clarified and even then some participants were not sure of their position. The issue of class was sensitive for many of the participants and I did not want to precondition the participants to a defensive state of mind. Although they were very nice and inviting, there was some tension between us stemming from the awkward situation of a stranger, inquiring about personal experiences and views on the political and social scene.

Similarly to Olson and Shopes (1991), I judged each scenario for appropriateness of disclosing my past involvement with greenhouse work. In some cases sharing this information did relax the atmosphere between myself and the respondent. On other occasions I decided not to volunteer this information because I was concerned it could cause alterations in responses.

### **Recruitment of participants**

The choice to use qualitative data for analysis was determined by the particular theoretical approach used in this study and the context of the inquiry. Initially, there seemed to be no problem in obtaining a sufficient amount of participants. Consideration was given to conducting research at one particular large greenhouse with the permission of the owners and management. This greenhouse declined the possibility of my interviewing their employees. The method of inquiry was subsequently changed to snowball sampling of greenhouse workers at many plants. Reaching an optimal number of participants within a limited amount of time seemed again easy to accomplish. I had a few contacts for my former greenhouse coworkers. However, I was not able to set up interviews with them as they were either too busy or uncomfortable to share their



impressions of their working experience with me, as I am now in a different relation to them. Having conducted only one interview with no prospects of further participants I then took the initiative of distributing study announcements seeking participants in the form of a flyer inserted behind windshield wipers of greenhouse employees' cars parked at three particular greenhouse operations. Within 24 hours two of the greenhouse establishments raised an alarm with the Brock University Research Ethics Office. They voiced concerns about my motivation for the study and my encroachment on private property -- the greenhouses' parking lots -- without permission. I had to meet with one of the owners and assure him that my intentions were motivated purely by a desire to fulfill the requirements of my academic program. After explaining the aims of the research as inconspicuously as possible they never called back with the decision of the directors to grant me the permission to interview their employees, as promised. As a consequence of the employers' interference I had to modify my research proposal and submit it to the Ethics Office for re-evaluation.

In the meantime, as the word of my need for research participants spread, I started to receive contact information on potential participants. Once I had a few responses, the snowball effect was successful. In total, twelve workers from seven greenhouses participated in the study. The participants were given a letter of information that acquainted them with the research and assured them of identity protection. As an incentive and a token for their time spent with me I offered to pay \$10 to each participant per each hour of the interview, which took between an hour and an hour and a half<sup>5</sup>. The interviews were tape-recorded and took place mostly in the participants' homes. A couple of interviews were arranged in two different public places. One of the participants had to be interviewed twice due to a recorder malfunction during the first

---

<sup>5</sup> This provision was included in the re-submission of my application to the Ethics Office and was approved as a reasonable amount that was not too excessive to influence the participants' motivation of entering the study.



interview, and one participant was clearly uncomfortable disclosing much of other information than a description of working conditions. To insure confidentiality, I chose to ascribe codes to the participants. I also took care to avoid the disclosure of places or events that would lead to exposure of the participants' identity. Female participants were given the letter F, males, M, and two female students are coded under FS. These upper case letters are followed by numbers denoting a chronological sequence of participation.

### **The participants**

**F -01** was a widow with two older children. She worked in a greenhouse for nine years before leaving for another employer in a different manufacturing field. During the times of her husband's illness she worked at the greenhouse; first as a manual worker and then in the office. At the time of the interview she has been employed by another company for five years. She fully owned her house.

**FS-02** and **FS-03** were both university students who worked at the same greenhouse in the spring/summer season (FS-02 worked there two consecutive seasons) to earn money for personal spending and to cover some tuition fees. They both knew each other and lived in a closer proximity to the greenhouse. FS-03 used bicycle to get there.

**F-04** was a single greenhouse worker with no dependants, in her late twenties, who lived with her parents. She had a light disability that did not disqualify her from greenhouse work. It was her first paid employment. She was originally looking for an office job. The interview with her did not extensively touch on the aspects of political consciousness because she was not sure where the conversation was going and she did not feel comfortable engaging in answering questions on other topics than working conditions. At the end of the interview she expressed concerns about the consequences of her involvement with the study. Although she was assured



there were no repercussions for her, this concern partially explained her discreteness during the interview.

**F- 05** was a single woman in her late twenties living with her parents at the time of her greenhouse employment. She worked in a greenhouse for two seasons. The first season was a welcome change to her precarious job as a waitress (greenhouse work was more physically demanding but, she said, at least she had her weekends free unlike when working at a restaurant). The second time she had returned to the same greenhouse prior entering a college. She was planning a different career and, at the time of the interview, did not anticipate going back to the greenhouse.

**F- 06** was a woman in her forties without children. She lived in a rented, modest apartment in a country with her husband who worked at a unionized factory. She worked five years for a smaller greenhouse with periods of seasonal lay-offs for approximately eight weeks in the summer, and a shorter break period in the winter. She filled the summer break with other agricultural, contingent type of work on surrounding farms. She accumulated enough work hours to qualify for Employment Insurance during the winter break. She had no car and was driven to the greenhouse by her two co-workers with whom she developed friendship. During her whole life, prior to her greenhouse employment, she performed seasonal jobs on farms. Comparing working conditions on farms she reported satisfaction with her job in the greenhouse.

**F-07** was a mother of five, married to an employed husband. Both were devoted Christians. Their children were grown up. Most of her life she was active at her church. After 21 years of homemaking and volunteering she started to work full time at a smaller greenhouse for economic reasons, to “augment my husband’s salary” and to help her children with university fees and other financial assistance. Before marriage she worked in administration. At the time of



the interview she has been working at the greenhouse for four years, doing mostly manual duties with the addition of some administrative work. Outside of her job she fulfilled the roles of a homemaker.

**F-08** was a mother of two younger children, married. She looked for work once her children started to attend school. She approached two greenhouses in the vicinity and was hired by a large greenhouse operation where she has been working for two years at the time of the interview. Before she started at the greenhouse she had worked couple of summer seasons as a sales associate. She does not work in the low growing season of the summer, which allows her to stay home with her children during the summer break. She resumes work in September.

**M-01's** productive activity differed from the eight previous participants. While they were performing general greenhouse labour doing a combination of repetitive, routine and fragmented jobs, M-01 handled motorized equipment and had a relatively greater degree of freedom to prioritize tasks and schedule his workday. He was single, in his thirties, and started to work in a large greenhouse after some thirteen years of working in a different field. At the time of the interview he had been employed at the greenhouse for about four years.

**M-02** was a man of retirement age, with two children. He was married to an employed wife with a professional occupation. This participant had a rich history of a diverse work experience. In the time of our interview, he worked for the last couple of years seasonally for a smaller greenhouse as a delivery driver and general help. He owned a house on large lot and raised recreationally a few domestic animals. It seemed that his diversity of past work experiences was at least partially responsible for his relatively advanced views. M-02 and M-01 were the most talkative participants. They seem to be free of inhibitions to share their opinions with a stranger.



**M-03** was an exception. As a son of a greenhouse owner, he did not belong to a working class. His father had established a successful, mid-size greenhouse operation. As an owner's son, M-03 had already progressed into an advanced position of a head grower after two years in the business. He was in his early twenties and did not have any formal education in his field. For those without familial ties to the business, to qualify for the position of a head grower, Bachelor of Science degree and between five and ten years of growing experience is required by employers (M-04). M-03 thoroughly enjoyed his job.

**M-04** was employed as a salaried assistant grower who worked at a larger greenhouse. He was in his late thirties, lived with a partner and her children in a rented apartment. His role in the study was to provide expertise on the working conditions, the dynamics of the working process, and the relations among different occupational positions at his greenhouse.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### BACKGROUND OF THE NIAGARA GREENHOUSE INDUSTRY

In keeping with Ollman's (1978a) proposition to observe a part in the context of the whole, this chapter situates the greenhouse industry and the respondents against the background of the particular spatial and temporal manifestation of the capitalist mode of production in Canada and in the Niagara region.

#### **Forces influencing the Niagara greenhouse industry**

Although the greenhouse industry in Niagara is characterized by its own industry-specific features of production, the influence of the development of larger economic imperatives is reflected in the greenhouse industry's applications of market securing strategies. Strategies used by firms to maintain and secure returns on investments affect the organization of production as well as all sectors of the economy. The necessity of capitalist corporations to accumulate capital through market preservation or expansion finds its particular articulation in the specific geographical and historical development of each region and industry. In recent decades, the essential features of the capitalist mode of production -- the struggle for market domination using labour saving strategies and increasing productivity -- are expressed through various ideological agendas of neo-liberal politics. The so-called lean approach to business management with its quality circles and just-in-time approach to production is both an ideological concept and a practical application (Moody 2001: 85-113).

The need to capture new markets in order to stay competitive generated implementation of 'lean management' strategies that enable high levels of output by combining Fordist forms of production of scale with production of scope (Moody 2001: 85-113). The rationale behind this



intensification of production is to stay profitable under intensified market competition. Since the source of profits is surplus labour, it is necessary for a capitalist to intensify production of surplus labour by extending the working day, intensifying the labour process, and reducing workforce (Marx 1967:193-225).

Within the Niagara greenhouse industry hiring temporary labourers, reducing staff, and replacing labour with technology are frequently practiced labour-saving strategies. The greenhouse industry always relied on cheap seasonal labour in the past but, with the expansion of the industry and with the pressure to capture markets under rapidly changing political and economic conditions, the larger greenhouse operations started to apply some of the techniques of new management practices to survive in the arena of sectoral competition and to maximize profits. Some smaller greenhouses with fewer employees operate with less structural adjustments as they are able to produce for a specific market; for example, one of the participants grew ivy topiaries. Others encounter intensified competition from abroad. A participant worked at a greenhouse producing cut roses whose owners countered cheaper imports from Central America by refocusing production onto a different rose variety. They have saved their business but faced a weaker market demand for their product (Brown and Murphy 2003).

Larger greenhouses are subjected to adjustments in production, especially in the area of human resources. Of the seven greenhouses in this study, four were large in size. Two participants of one of the large greenhouses pointed out changes in their workplace that indicated adjustments to the demands of the competitive market. Their employer had to resort to reductions in managerial positions, imposing extra responsibilities, and multitasking on existing permanent employees. The traditional practices of warehousing have also changed to respond to the need to free as much disposable cash as possible by not locking it into any stock that is not immediately



used. This just-in-time inventory strategy is to be efficient and cost effective but, as M-04 reported, unnecessary problems arise due to a lack of staff and a dissonant communication between direct producers and administrators. The mistakes arising from the lack of employees, an occasional disorganization in production, and unforgiving time pressures stress out the workers who face intensification of production and extended hours of work. Additionally, the chaos on the production floor occurs in conjunction with demands by big retailers who, as customers, dictate the design, size, and the final saleable form of the product. Consequently, to increase production, large greenhouses need to expand their facilities by investing in additional production areas equipped with advanced technology to save on year round labour.

### **The greenhouse industry in Canada**

Surprisingly, flower production is the world's fourth largest commodity in export earnings, following petroleum, coffee, and bananas (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands 2003). The biggest exporters of flowers are Colombia and Holland. In Canada, floricultural and nursery exports amounted to \$ 524.3 million in 2002, an 80% increase from 1997 (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands 2003). The sales generated in this industry in 2002 were \$1.4 billion (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands 2003). In comparison, world trade in floriculture in 2001 was estimated to be US\$ 7.9 billion (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands 2003). In the 20 years between 1977 and 1997, employment in this sector in Canada rose from 9,000 to 35,000 (Irving 1999).

### **Greenhouses in Ontario**

Ontario is the third largest producer of greenhouse floricultural products in North America, with California being the leader, followed by Florida (Brown and Murphy 2003). The industry's exports and production area in the whole of Canada have experienced a steady growth



with some variations due to economic slumps and crises (Brown and Murphy 2003). Fifty one percent of all greenhouses in Canada are in Ontario (Greenhouse, Sod and Nursery 2002). The province's floricultural production in 2002 also accounts for more than half (52%) of total Canadian production at \$ 745 million (Greenhouse, Sod and Nursery 2002). Although the biggest floricultural producer, Ontario's growth was lagging behind British Columbia and Quebec between 1977 and 1997 (Irving 1999). In the span of these 20 years, Ontario greenhouse production grew 2.5 times in comparison with Quebec, a smaller province with growth in the greenhouse sector nearly seven times greater (Irving 1999).

Most of the Ontario floricultural production (75%) is concentrated in two locations: around the western end of Lake Ontario, the Niagara area, and on the north shore of Lake Erie, the Leamington area (Brown and Murphy 2003). The greenhouses around Leamington concentrate on growing vegetables while the Niagara region greenhouses focus on production of flowers, seasonal potted and bedding plants.

### **Niagara horticultural greenhouse industry**

Although the greenhouse industry in Niagara is affected by the larger economic picture, it is also shaped by its particular spatial and historical character. The geographic, geologic, and climatic conditions and the strategic demographic position of the Niagara region on the main transportation route to United States, are favourable to growing grapes, fruit, and greenhouse plants. The specific latitude of Southern Ontario allows enough daylight hours to sustain growth of ornamental and tropical plants in a controlled environment of the greenhouse. In 2001, the revenues of the Niagara floricultural operations amounted to 43% of the total agricultural receipts in the region (The Regional Municipality of Niagara [The Regional Municipality 2003]).

As in the rest of the country, the Niagara floricultural industry is expanding. It represents



35% of Ontario's floriculture (Brown and Murphy 2003). In 2001, there were 215 floricultural greenhouse operations in Niagara, an increase of 9% from 1996 (The Regional Municipality 2003). The greenhouse area in the region also grew larger by 30% since 1996 (Brown and Murphy 2003). In comparison, the number of vegetable producing greenhouses in Niagara decreased by 34% between 1996 and 2001 (TRMN 2003).

In 2004, the Consul Economic Affairs Netherlands, the Niagara Economic Tourism Corporation, and 17 businesses, sponsored a publication of a semi-promotional nature, chronicling the genesis of the Dutch greenhouse owners who have been largely responsible for the establishment of floriculture in the Niagara area (van der Mey 2003). In the photograph-rich publication the author presents an account of historical and current business development of over 100 Dutch-owned greenhouses in Niagara. The book was created with a double purpose -- to recognize the economic importance of those Dutch immigrants who started flower-growing business in the Niagara region in the post-WWII era, and to publicize the greenhouse industry as an important regional economic player. Van der Mey's explicitly stated goal was to cast a spotlight on an industry that has been traditionally excluded from featuring in the promotional undertakings of the regional tourism industry (even though, in revenue, it surpasses the much more vigorously advertised and marketed grape and wine industry (The Regional Municipality 2003).

In his book, van der Mey draws on biographies of the founders of the floriculture industry, who were overwhelmingly Dutch, and on profiles of their current family-owned businesses. The historical projections of the Dutch family-owned businesses show an uninterrupted pattern of patriarchal transfers of the ownership and management of the greenhouse operations from fathers to sons. The Dutch greenhouse owning community in the Niagara region



is fairly religious and many accounts of owners featured in van der Mey's book cite life-long reliance on the moral and ethical teachings of their church. Some of the Dutch floricultural pioneers experienced rough times when establishing their greenhouse operations in the Niagara region. They lost their relatively fragile wooden constructions to fires or windstorms, yet their experience in the field and support from the agricultural business and church community impelled them to secure loans and rebuild their businesses (van der Mey 2003). The resilience of the greenhouse owners, as recorded in the chronicles of the Niagara greenhouse industry, is eulogized as a "traditional, Dutch-based commitment to excellence" in the Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation promotional website (Niagara Economic A)). The domination of the Dutch in the ownership of the industry is acknowledged to such an extent that some insiders of the business informally and genially refer to themselves as the "Dutch mafia" (M-03).

### **Employment prospects in the Niagara region**

The Niagara region is populated by over 410, 000 people, with slightly more than half of them in the labour force (Niagara Economic B)). The employment prospects for the Niagara population with limited educational opportunities or without specialization in trade are bleak. In the past few decades, greenhouse "help" has been provided by women and men who did not have the skills demanded by employers elsewhere or who sought a seasonal type of work, and by immigrants. As the industry expanded the need for labour also increased, yet wages remained at the same low or below subsistence level. To keep their competitive edge in the market and to keep with the high demand for labour during peak seasonal periods, the greenhouse employers seek less expensive, but reliable labour on an "as needed basis" (The Regional Municipality 2003). This need is serviced by temporary agencies, which readily supply labourers to employers on demand. The availability of temporary workers who are provided in the Niagara region by



international staffing agencies, such as Manpower, Kelly Services, and LabourReady, addresses the pressing labour requirements during periods of intensified production. Because of the disadvantaged economic position of the people who register with local temporary staffing agencies, such as Farm Labour Pool, the Regional Study outlines a problem that the agricultural employers face when ordering labour power over the phone. Often, the Farm Labour Pool registrants do not have the financial means to provide their own transportation and public transit in the region does not cover locales outside of the city boundary (The Regional Municipality 2003). This poses a problem for the employers who often cannot use their own resources to transport employees to and from work. Additionally, for an agricultural worker, to advance from the level of general labour to a farm operator, an apprenticeship program is required (The Regional Municipality 2003). This program is expensive and requires a grade 12 diploma, a document many of the workers signed up with staffing agencies might not have. These socio-economic factors reduce the availability of steady, flexible, and reliable workers for the greenhouse employers seeking labour power. Contingent upon this situation of the labour market, the Regional Study revealed that a request had been made to government officials seeking alternative sources of farm labour (The Regional Municipality 2003).

Initiated by farming business owners whose primary interest is to stay competitive, the federal government has addressed the owners' concerns by creating the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program [SAWP]. In the Niagara region employers can apply to hire foreign workers through the SAWP. This program is an agreement between Human Resources and Development Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and Mexico and the Commonwealth of the Caribbean countries. Employers have to fulfill one requirement: to justify their inability to hire local labourers (Human Resources and Development). The expenses specified in the guidelines of



the SAWP program mandate the employers to cover immigration fees and airfare, and to provide free housing but these expenses are partly recoverable by the employer through payroll deductions. Migrant labourers' wages do not differ too much from those received by local labour; saving labour costs is therefore not the prime attraction of the SAWP for the employer. Rather, it is the permanent availability of labour on the premises: "what most greenhouse growers want is not necessarily cheap labour but captive labour" (Basok 2002: 18).

The Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services [F.A.R.M.S.] has issued a report in 1995 titled "The Quest for a Reliable Workforce in the Horticultural Industry" (The Regional Municipality 2003). Perhaps the reliability hinges upon the wage rate, which for 2004 Ontario flower workers was \$ 7.90, according to Service Canada (2004). This rate was a mere 75 cents higher than the general minimum wage in 2004 (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2004b). Only one greenhouse in my study employed Mexican workers under the SAWP. Others employed full time permanent and seasonal workers and the big greenhouses relied in to a large extent on workers from the temporary staffing agencies. My participants were either permanent full time or seasonal greenhouse workers.

The Niagara greenhouse industry is subjected to pressures of the capitalist competition for markets. The historical patterns of the Dutch immigrant settlement helped to create the particular character of the Niagara greenhouse industry. The greenhouse employers seek a reliable and cheap source of labour. This demand was addressed by the federal government in the form of a program providing foreign, inexpensive, and reliable workers to the Canadian agricultural businesses. Nevertheless, to justify the preference for foreign workers over domestic labour force is still problematic for the Niagara region greenhouse employers. Majority of the Niagara greenhouse industry labour force is composed of full time or seasonal local workers and workers



who come through temporary staffing agencies.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### WORKING CONDITIONS IN NIAGARA GREENHOUSES

In this chapter I explore the physical conditions of the workplace: the work process, health and safety standards, breaks, working time, remuneration arrangements, and the effects of the size of a greenhouse operation on class-consciousness. I argue that despite the poor working conditions of the greenhouse workers, both the way production is organized and the way labour force is utilized, hinder the development of class-consciousness.

Poor working conditions, characteristic of a non-unionized, low-skilled labour force, are typical of the greenhouse environment. Such conditions affect workers' satisfaction at work and their life outside of the workplace. Jobs that fail to provide workers with security display correspondingly highly unsatisfactory remunerative conditions and are not confined only to non-standard (precarious) employment (Chaykowski 2005). Cobble and Vosko (2000) note that the characteristics of nonstandard work arrangements (part-time basis, lack of benefits, and low pay) also extend to contract and agency labour. While the contingent or insecure nature of these arrangements is being contemporarily highlighted as a deviation from the standard, full-time labour arrangements, the authors make a point that, historically, these conditions are not an exception. My study participants were not working part-time or for an employment agency<sup>6</sup>. Seven out of the total twelve did work on a seasonal basis which, coupled with the vulnerable category of agricultural work, fulfilled the criteria of precarious or contingent jobs.

---

<sup>6</sup> Large greenhouses rely on instant supply of labour from staff providing agencies. In fact, in times of a higher volume of product being handled in the greenhouse, staffing agency workers form almost half of the labour power required.



## **The Work Process**

Production of ornamental and bedding plants for seasonal events and holidays requires precision in timing and regulation of plant growth. Each crop is tailored to meet very specific requirements of size and number of blooms by a predetermined date. While it is the grower's responsibility to deliver the best possible results by planning and controlling the technical procedures, the actual handling of the plants is the job of the greenhouse workers. Taking cuttings, planting, pinching, spacing, cleaning, labeling, coding, selecting, and packing plants for shipping are just some of the tasks falling within the general job description of a greenhouse labourer.

The actual production area of a greenhouse is divided into sections that are separated by walls and passable through gates that open either manually or electronically. Each section is divided into zones and, depending on the growing method, each zone has numbered floors or benches. Production workers in large greenhouses are divided into groups or crews, with each crew working in a different block on various job assignments. Workers may be "borrowed" from a crew to lend a hand to another crew if a particular job needs to be finished within a limited period of time. Each crew is headed by a 'lead-hand' or 'crew-leader', who insures that her (lead-hands are mostly women with mostly female crews) people carry out the assigned jobs efficiently. Should a problem arise the lead-hand will either try to solve it herself or communicate it to her immediate supervisor who is, in most cases, an assistant grower.

The larger the place, the more automation and special machinery is used: for example, forklift trucks, specially designed forklifts, spacers, bail breakers, and automated planting and potting lines. Workers operating forklifts have to be certified and their hourly wage rate is usually



higher reflecting this special skill. The greenhouse employers are aware of the forklift operators transferability to other workplaces and, thus, try to match the remuneration the operators would get elsewhere. Planting and potting lines are designed to increase output and do not require special skills but manual dexterity and patience.

In M-03's greenhouse, the implementation of benches with computerized irrigation systems and the application of a tow motor reduced the time spent hand watering. Other technology, such as specialized vehicles designed to lift and transport potted plants, saves labour time:

*It obviously cuts down on the general labour...people having to physically move things around.*

*Yeah, it used to be [working long into the night]. I hear the horror stories: hundred billion hours a week, you know. You started at 3 a.m. and finished at 11 at night. Business has slowly been changing so we are actually working less on weekends, not doing so many more nights. Also there's a huge change in management and how many labourers they have. (M-03)*

Since the development of automated greenhouse equipment is relatively new, problems may arise due to its weaknesses in design. In larger workplaces, such as M-04's greenhouse, where automated potting machines and snap hangers inserting machines are used, equipment breakdown or malfunction caused frequent stoppages of production. There were times when workers had to manually snap hooks on hanging baskets due to a hooker failure. Even though the equipment is very costly and may perform unsatisfactorily, it seemed to M-04 that the employer gave preference to its usage over hiring extra workers in order to save on labour. The purpose behind relying on automation is to reduce the use of labour power and, thereby, reduce labour cost.

Some greenhouse operations are equipped with rolling tables, or benches, and some with flooding floors where the potted plants are placed directly on a concrete floor. Irrigation systems,



an overhead misting systems, and ventilation are all computerized. Growers operate the irrigation system and also hand water (this task is sometimes delegated to a crop technician) with a hose if the situation demands it. General greenhouse workers are not delegated the responsibility of watering the crop, such a task is considered to require a special skill and knowledge.

Above either benches or floors are suspended hanging baskets. The space is thus utilized to maximum holding capacity by being divided horizontally into two planes containing the product. Some greenhouses combine both benches and flood floors. Because greenhouses grow a variety of plants at any given time during the year, they are divided into sections, each designated for growth of a different crop with its own specific temperature, air, and water requirements. When working in a section equipped with benches, the workers stand on their feet the whole day and the only chance to sit down is during regulated breaks. They process the plants while standing at a conveyor belt or slowly progressing towards the end of the bench while planting or spacing pots. Where there are flood floors, workers repeatedly bend down or crouch when handling the plants. M-02 commented on the physical aspects of greenhouse work: “*Yeah you’re tired bending over. My back won’t take it any more I’m doing delivery now.*” M-02 took the opportunity to switch to a position of a delivery driver thanks to a combination of two factors that are not available as an option to the rest of the greenhouse workers: being a male worker and a friend of the owner. For other workers, like F-08, the greenhouse work is

*very physical. And mental. You’ve got to make sure that those orders are right or that the UPC symbols are on the right package. And it’s physical because you’re doing a lot of sleeving [inserting big potted plants into protective plastic cover] all day. So it’s a bit of both, it’s stressful and physical.*

The stress on the job is positively correlated to the size of the place. The larger the greenhouse operation the more pressure is placed on the workers who have to deal with the consequences of



the wrong decisions of the management and the miscommunication between different departments.

Only two facilities in this study provided workers with plastic stools to sit on while working on flood floors. F-08 reported that, even though at her large greenhouse workers have stools available if they need to use them, *“nobody really uses stools because if you got the line running, you gotta plant so many pots, it’s not worth sitting to do it”*. The speed of the line requires certain movements that would be inhibited in a sitting position, therefore, standing is the best option for complying with the demands of the job. With the exception of the greenhouse operations that provided plastic stools, it was forbidden for the participants to sit down:

*They were very lenient, the only thing that they said was when you’re picking [cleaning and selecting plants for shipping] don’t sit. Because if you sit then you just [get lazy]. You can kneel, you can squat [but not to sit down]. (F-05)*

Sitting down or talking with a colleague while working could be seen as a sign of idleness or slowing down the pace of the work process, and therefore, a direct threat to productivity.

Greenhouse operations that grow perennial garden plants keep them outdoors on the ground, which forces the workers to crouch and bend repeatedly while handling every single pot.

### **Occupational health and safety**

Besides enduring conditions of long hours and low wages, the greenhouse workers also encountered adverse environmental conditions. Exposure to toxic agricultural chemicals, unsafe use of equipment or haphazard storage were not uncommon. Until June 2005, workers who were employed by farming operations were excluded from the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act [OHSA] (Farm Safety Association 2005). Before this recent advancement in agricultural workers protection, the employer was only required to make a mandatory contribution to the



Workers Safety Insurance Board (National Union). The exemption of agricultural labourers from OHSA was addressed by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union who challenged the Ontario government on the grounds of violating equality rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The new regulation will come into effect in June 2006 (Ontario Ministry Of Agriculture 2005). Under the OHSA, paid agricultural labourers including the greenhouse workers, are mandated to receive health and safety instructions, and have the right to refuse work under hazardous conditions without fear of retribution.

This study took place before the inclusion of farming operations into the OHSA and the interviews reflect the previously existing absence of coverage. Before the new regulations come into effect, greenhouse operations have to register with the Workers Safety Insurance Board [WSIB] and contributions to the insurance program are the sole responsibility of the employer. The only requirement mandated by federal and provincial legislation binding employers to protect their employees is to inform them about the presence and safety storage of hazardous substances at their workplace. This requirement is administered by the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System [WHMIS]. Moreover, the scope of the application of the OHSA and the WSIB within the premises of a greenhouse operation is unclear. According to an Ontario Ministry of Labour official from the Office of the Employer Adviser, (email conversation on April 29, 2005) the legislation is ridden with grey areas. Greenhouse space can be classified differently depending on the nature of the operation that takes place within its premises. A space designated as a farming operation where production takes place is not covered by OHSA, but the premises of a warehouse or shipping docks within the greenhouse premises could fall under the category of manufacturing, which is covered by OHSA. These complications impede workers' understanding of their rights and give the employer power when handling cases of injured



workers under the WSIB.

Workers in the Niagara greenhouses have experienced working in unsafe conditions. Their hands are exposed to wet conditions and soil. The latex gloves most employers provide are not sufficiently protecting workers' skin because they break easily. Participants reported that they either had to bring their own gloves, or that working with gloves only served as an impediment to the fine and dexterous work required when planting small, delicate seedlings.

While the two participants who were growers and one participant who was trained as a health and safety liaison said they either sprayed after all workers went home or on Saturday night if no crews were scheduled to work on Sundays, application of chemical treatment to the crop was an issue in some of the greenhouses. The participants doubted the practices or were not assured that the exposition to chemical fumes was as harmless as they were told.

*Yeah one thing I definitely wasn't sure about and asked many people who worked there about it because guys were dressed in these white suits with masks on for their breathing. So they wear these white suits with breathing apparatus so they're not inhaling it and we are working beside them, four feet away from them, with nothing except for our shorts and t-shirts . So I thought that was very unsafe and what they explained to me was 'as long as it was dry and you're breathing it in it's not a problem. It's just when it's wet that it can harm you' . So this is their explanation and like, both me and my friend, we're holding our breath in five of these areas and didn't want to work in these areas at all. Because it's scary. (FS-02)*

Drawing on my own experience, this practice was not uncommon in the greenhouse business. In fact, I have been exposed to chemicals in the exact same manner as FS-02 when working for two other greenhouse operators in the region. The rationale behind the lackadaisical approach to protection and the failure to follow regulations was an apparent absence of any symptoms caused



by exposure to horticultural chemicals:

*There were some things that were probably a little questionable, nothing serious. Maybe some of the chemicals you don't know what they were, they weren't spraying while you were working. But what's on the plants... nobody really knew what's on the plants. But I don't think that was a big problem. Nobody has had rashes or anything like that. (M-02)*

Only those employees holding positions of growers or crop technicians are designated to handle chemical applications. They have to hold a pesticide license that is subjected to renewal every 2 years upon completion of a pesticide course administered by the Ministry of Environment. Although there are standard procedures regulating the application of pesticides, they are not always followed. Only in F-07's greenhouse the use of pesticides was largely circumvented by application of biological pest control. The decision to switch from synthetic pesticides to biological means of pest management is not so much triggered by the owner's concern for the well-being of his employees as by the increased resistance of persistent pests to commercially made pesticides, which leads to alternative and viable sources being sought and applied.

Pointing out concerns over safety in the greenhouse does not necessarily lead to addressing the problem. Workers learn from reactions of their superiors. When workers inquired about a safety issue they learned that their concerns were not answered. F-08 cited other safety issues regarding the potential risks surrounding a cluttered work area. She disclosed that she saw her supervisor ignore the potential hazard in the area in which she works, and that her concerns about the safety of her working environment were not addressed. As such, F-08 does not raise the issue anymore, she "avoids it":

*As far as safety goes it's pretty sloppy. There will be crates that are almost tipping over. As far as safety goes, it's not safe per se,*



*but I mean it's just a common sense, you know. If you just walk in and see something, you just kind of... avoid it. (F-08)*

In the summer, temperatures in the glass and plastic structures can rise to unbearable levels. Some participants worked through these periods making frequent stops for a drink from a water bottle they keep nearby their workstation. Another option they have is to come to work very early in the morning to avoid the peak early afternoon heat, but this decision is subject to a consensus from all involved. Ultimately, whether the plan to avoid heat exertion will be implemented hinges on the decision makers in management. For the most part, the workers just keep working without taking extra breaks, *“obviously, because no work would get done”* FS-02. The pressure to fill orders arriving unpredictably during the day in the shipping season is too great to allow workers to come in early and leave early.

Similarly, referring to greenhouse workers' health and safety conditions, Basok (2002) mentions that the agricultural workers in her study were also exposed to extreme temperatures and dangerous, often untested, chemicals. Her participants, Mexican SAWP workers, reported that their employer failed to provide protective gear, and that chemicals were sprayed in a close proximity of the workers. Ironically, the employers in van der Mey's (2003) portrayal of Niagara greenhouse operations were concerned that the media inflates negative consequences of pesticide use (p. 31).

This lax approach to workplace health and safety is not limited to farming operations only. Luxton and Corman (2001) reported that Stelco workers in Hamilton, Ontario, who are unionized and covered by OHSA, revealed exposure to serious workplace hazards. Unsafe working conditions are egregious but not an exception *“[i]n a capitalist economy, [where] the livelihood of workers is tied to the investment decisions of companies whose priority is*



maximizing returns for owners or shareholders, not the standard of living of employees” (p.95).

## Breaks

In Ontario, greenhouse workers face several legislative hurdles. As agricultural workers, they are excluded from The Labour Relations Act and are subjected to several exceptions from the Employment Standards Act, 2000 (ESA). There are several subcategories of agricultural labour and the rules applying to each differ. The greenhouse workers are categorized as near-farmers and are excluded from the provisions of the ESA that regulate hours of work, eating periods, overtime pay, and public holidays (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2004a).

Even though their daily breaks are not subject of the Employment Standards Act regulations, the greenhouse workers get regular periods of rest in the form of a short break, 10 or 15 minutes each in the morning and in the afternoon, and a half hour for lunch around noon. Breaks are announced by a loud buzzer, which prompts workers to immediately stop their activity and start walking towards their lunchroom or premises where they store their belongings. The area of the greenhouse is so large that it may take a few minutes to get to the designated lunchroom.

*As a leader, it was seven o'clock for a meeting, and at 7:30 we started work. We would get as many orders as possible. They just give you a stack of orders and then there was a bell, everything was run by the beeping bell, and you knew when was break one and break two. So break one was [imitates a sound], you see people walking past, we keep working. And then there is also two lunches; there was a lunchroom there so you can either take a break in there or you can go outside, sort of behind the greenhouse. (FS-03)*

Some participants, in fact, did not share the lunch area with others as it was too crowded or stuffy inside, or they preferred to sit outside “behind the greenhouse”, or they ran home for lunch if they



lived nearby. In some instances management shared the same premises for lunch with the workers because of the availability of fridge, microwave, coffeemaker, and sink. Besides appliances for meal preparation there is often also a television in a lunchroom that is switched on at all times. During her experience as a Wal-Mart employee, Ehrenreich (2001) saw the installation of televisions in staff rooms as an obstacle to communication; the television in her staff room was loud and distracted from conversation.

Bigger greenhouse establishments have more lunchrooms for different kinds of employees. Where premises allow, general labourers eat separately from administrative employees. Although the buzzer signals time off for everyone in the greenhouse, some employees might skip lunches or eat later. This 'choice' depends on the relative occupational autonomy of the employee. Salaried workers, like M-04, hardly ever take regular breaks as they are too busy coordinating the process of production.

The participants either chatted at lunch about matters unrelated to work or ate lunch quietly without communication with others.

*I know in the lunchroom it was always very quiet. Everyone just sat there and minded their own business eating their lunch, there were, you know, few groups that would chat at that time. (FS-03)*

As reported by the participants from bigger greenhouses, the workers usually formed groups according to shared commonalities: time spent together at the workplace or shared ethnic background and language. These separations discourage socialization among workers and effectively prevent development of class-consciousness. Reiter (1991), who worked in the fast food service field, also noted that her co-workers socialized at work according to their common interests pursued outside of work and not along their interests pertaining to shared class identity.



A seemingly contradictory situation arises in smaller greenhouses with fewer employees where ethnic or linguistic differences play a little role as workers share the same working and resting space but where the proximity of owner(s) precludes sharing workplace related concerns. The two smaller greenhouse operations I worked at had only one TV-free room shared by the workers, managers, and owners during all breaks. In the lunchroom of the bigger greenhouse where I worked, there was a TV continually turned on. As a consequence, the work-free time in greenhouses is not conducive to building a mutual understanding of shared experience.

### **Working Hours**

Inherent to the greenhouse ornamental flower industry is a periodic need for intensification of production where requirements for labour and for an extended workday, place further demands on workers' time and energy. When new cuttings or seedlings arrive to start a new seasonal crop, the priority immediately is to plant them as soon as possible. The same situation arises when the already finished product needs to be packed and shipped out. In many instances particular to large greenhouses, planting and shipping occur simultaneously. As the finished product leaves the floor or benches, trays of newly planted material are filling the vacant spaces left behind.

The peak times occur prior to public holidays and in the spring when production of bedding plants is in full season. Springtime, for example, generates intensified demands for many large greenhouses. The workers fill flats with plants, label each container with an appropriate UPC barcode sticker, load them onto multi-leveled carts and transfer them to a shipping area where they load them on trucks. Any extra space left after the shipment is gone is filled by new incoming trays with seedlings of new plants, or by the rest of the incumbent plants that need to be spaced to allow them to expand.



Many greenhouse labourers, including five participants of this study, work in the greenhouse only during the seasonal peak production. For some, it means returning to work twice a year for 3 months each time. They work during spring production from April to June and during winter production from September to December. The two student participants worked only in the spring term during their academic breaks, while one of the other three participants, who worked seasonally, accumulated enough hours to qualify for the collection of Employment Insurance in between seasons. However, M-02 who worked only about 3 months during the spring season was not collecting Employment Insurance because he was retired and claimed he did not need the money.

The number of hours to qualify for Employment Insurance benefits in the Regional Municipality of Niagara is currently 665 (Human Resources and Skills B)). These hours must be incurred within the qualifying period of 52 weeks preceding the claimant's application. One participant, F-05, who worked at a greenhouse for two summer seasons did not collect Employment Insurance herself because after the last seasonal stint, which lasted only one month, she went back to school. She mentioned that:

*So many of [the workers] have been there for years and they keep coming back, but I guess it's because they work so many hours in those few months that they're eligible for the EI and this is kind of comparable to what they're making there anyway. It's not that much of a change. (F-05)*

When I asked two other workers who work on seasonal basis whether their amount of hours worked suffices to qualify for Employment Insurance they answered positively, but briefly, without volunteering any further reflections on their situation. The shyness associated with disclosing information on collecting Employment Insurance suggests that it is not an information



to be shared with an inquisitive stranger.

Most greenhouse workers also work on Saturdays and, depending on the religious beliefs of the owner or on the different forms of production of the greenhouse operation, they are often scheduled in on Sundays. The hours spent working on Sundays vary and depend on the task at hand; mostly, the workers would stay only until noon or early afternoon hours.

The regular working day is not uniform for all greenhouses and sometimes not even for workers from the same greenhouse. Work can start at 6 a.m. for some, and at 7:30 a.m. for others and ends between 4 and 5 p.m. depending on a particular employer. When starting at a greenhouse, the workers are told the “usual” hours and days worked. Yet, these ostensibly stable regular hours are hardly regular for most. While the day starts at a fixed time (except in some cases during sweltering heat of the summer), dismissal time can vary. The irregularity of work hours is common to all greenhouse production. For example, F-05 and her coworkers in the shipping section of the greenhouse worked only 4 days a week.

*We started at 7. First month and a half we worked till 10 o'clock at night, 10:30, because I started at the end of April. And April until the beginning of June was the busy BUSY season. After that we'd be done usually by 8 or 8:30. Some days on Thursdays, because we only worked Monday to Thursday, we'd get off at 5 or 4 but not very often. (F-05)*

The work hours for the workers in the propagation section of F-05's greenhouse were stable Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. However, when a situation required to increase production, the employer called in temporary workers to continue the job of the propagation workers after they left at 4 p.m.

The rest of the study participants, whether they worked in production or shipping, reported extended hours during the peak production periods as an integral feature of the business.



During shipping periods the length of stay at work is unpredictable. It is not uncommon to work until 10 p.m. at night or even longer. M-02 claimed that the working day could be extended up to 18 hours. As one worker remarked, she worked

*five days a week, Saturdays are optional. I go in when they're busy, Easter is much, much more hours. I come home and then I have something to eat like supper and then I go back. Until 9 - 10 o'clock at night. (F-08).*

Another expressed, in an almost apologetic way, that, although her working hours fluctuate, it is possible to get work done ahead if shipping orders for the next day are finished in advance:

*Some days we work from 6 to 3, 4 some days till 9 o'clock. So usually, maybe 10, 12 hours a day. But if we get ahead we get the order ready for the next day. (F-06)*

The nature of the greenhouse industry is to accept orders as they come in, which effectively prevents planning a regular working days. This regime renders workers to stay at work packing and shipping until orders are filled. Although the participants who worked in a greenhouse have accepted the irregular workweek as a feature intrinsic to the greenhouse business, a student participant was not as complacent:

*You have no idea at all and you never know how long the day's going to be. Because they keep taking in orders until 3 o'clock and you are supposed to be leaving at 4, so how are you supposed to fill in an order of fifty racks when you find out at 3 that this is what you are doing. As students there, we would be like 'why don't they just stop taking orders at noon so we know what's going on'? (FS-03)*



The whole process of shipping could be hectic as orders are not regulated and any time during the day a customer can call in to order several tens of racks<sup>7</sup>. The management does not refuse to fill any orders even if they came later in the day and their execution would mean for the workers to stay in for several more hours. Only experienced workers who have spent at least one full year in the greenhouse and are familiar with the pattern can anticipate longer hours looming ahead. Among the incumbent workers, agreeing to stay longer is a matter of compliance and understanding of the needs of the business. They have far more at stake than a student who lives with his/her parents and earns money to be used for purposes other than life necessities.

The urgent need to process a greenhouse product in a limited amount of time is an intrinsic feature of the greenhouse business. Workers are never pressured to stay overtime; employers emphasize that the commitment to stay longer and “helping out” is voluntary. The question ‘who can stay longer tonight?’ is not meant to sound compulsory but it does evoke a certain sense of obligation, which the employees seem to accept without reservations. Often the decision to stay is complicated. There are several reasons for agreeing to work late and it is the combination of these factors that influence the workers’ decision to stay after their regular hours. One of the pressures to stay longer is fuelled by the fear of being replaced:

*We get nothing, or I get nothing [overtime pay]. Some days I feel guilty if I phone in and say I'm sick I can't make it to work because then they'll think okay, well you don't wanna work, lets get someone else. And that's just...that's what they'll do, you know. That's exactly what they do. (F-08)*

Another worker explained:

*If you don't comply with what they're saying they just fire you and hire someone else, because there's tons of people that need work.*

---

<sup>7</sup> A greenhouse rack is a wheeled, metal cart with usually five meshed shelves onto which plants, contained in flats, are being loaded for transportation. The shelves are removable and their number on the rack is determined by the height of the crop.



*Lot of people who work there are from South America, Colombia, Germany, Hungary. (FS-02)*

Some of those who stay longer upon request do so with a feeling of solidarity with their fellow co-workers. It appeared to M-01 that the people who stayed after hours to “help out” were of the same group:

*There is only a core of people who is willing to do that not everybody is willing to do that. You know, they have lives outside of the greenhouse, and kids or husbands, wives, whatever you have.*

Some workers who stay after hours know that their departure would pose extra time and work for their co-workers. Reiter (1991) documented the feeling of obligation and pressure to conform that accompanied workers’ decision-making when they were called at home by their manager to come in for an extra shift. What prompted Reiter’s study participants to conform to their boss’ request was not their concern about the company losing business by inadequate staff coverage but they felt that they would leave their coworkers in trouble. A greenhouse worker, M-01, commented on management’s reliance on the workers’ good will and fear of reprisals if they did not conform:

*I think that sometimes they rely on you, knowing you stayed and got the job done. They ‘kinda’ rely on you to do that and they hope that people see you staying and giving that extra little bit, you’re a team player and they ‘kinda’ hope that’s contagious, infectious, and will spread onto people.*

Feelings of collegiality might be evoked among those who can afford to stretch their working day several more hours, but as M-01 mentioned, those who have familial obligations may not allocate scarce time to the well-being of their employer’s business. For the rest of the respondents who were not paid overtime, working after hours without the financial incentive was



not always desirable even though it could contribute to a slight income increase. This was the case for a participant who was a wife and a mother of five children:

*It would be good for us to have someone else there if there is need for more hours because we just get[paid] regular time. That's not worth for me to stay there until seven o'clock every night, not spending any time with the family, never cooking for the family... not that I always like so much to cook... (F-07)*

Another factor leading to agreement is simply to maintain a confirmation of one's own self-worth by completing a job under adverse circumstances. Under the alienated conditions of production in capitalism, the satisfaction of seeing one's job completed or feeling pride upon successful resolution of a problem do not equal, in their importance, to the necessity to earn a living. M-01 reflects again: *"There's a certain amount of pride and satisfaction of getting that job done but for the most part it's for the money. And we need the money to survive"*. In the end, at least for some, the greatest pressure responsible for working past the regular hours is posed by the material need to accumulate more hours to augment one's pay.

*Like I said, people have lives.... Work isn't their life [explaining why some people leave after hours and some stay]. [But] there are lots of people out there who need to work. So usually that's the main reason why they stay. (M-01)*

The consent to work extended periods of time is thus motivated by existential concerns. On one side, the participants feared being fired if they did not comply with the employer's demands and, on the other, they needed to work longer because of financial reasons. Feeling solidarity with co-workers was perhaps the second strongest incentive. To confirm their self-worth by completing a task and thus sacrificing their time outside of work seem to be the least pressing reason for staying overtime.

Greenhouse workers who stay after regular hours may be treated to a pizza to substitute



for a supper at home but they are not entitled to be paid for the extra time. The Ontario Employment Standards Act [ESA] (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2004a), exempts greenhouse employees from certain minimum standards that apply to most employer–employee relations. The ESA provisions of receiving overtime pay, hours of work and public holidays do not apply to the category of near farmers. Paid overtime is an unusual feature of the remuneration pattern of greenhouse employment. F-01 commented: *“We did get time and half for overtime so that was a plus. Lots of places don’t have to do that”*.

Neither did F-07 receive a payment for overtime:

*We don’t get overtime, it’s an agricultural work. We put in hundred hours in two weeks but with no overtime. He gives overtime if we work on statutory holiday. My boss says if you need more – to put in 10 to 12 hours a day, he’ll hire someone else. That’s his model. (F-07)*

Only two of the seven greenhouses in this study pay their employees overtime. This ‘feature’ is limited to employees who are paid per hour and are hired on permanent full time or permanent seasonal bases. However, the staffing practices of M-01’s greenhouse were centered around avoidance of having too many of their employees working after regular hours:

*I was fortunate to get this weekend off. Sundays you get off most time. It just depends if the orders are there and they absolutely have to get done. They’ll bring you in but they don’t like to do it because it’s your only day off in a week that you’re getting and they want you to be rested. But on the other hand it’s time and a half and that always hurts. (M-01)*

Since the production imperatives of the greenhouse business generate a demand for a larger number of workers during particular periods, and not in other times, employers apply two labour saving strategies: they hire more workers only during these peak periods, and/or they stretch the hours of their existing staff.



### Hourly paid greenhouse workers

The hourly pay received by greenhouse workers is low because greenhouse work, with the exception of horticultural technicians and growers, is generally considered low-skilled. At least five participants of this study “walked in from the street” and were hired on the spot. Others knew someone working there or knew the place was seeking ‘help’. The qualifications for a general greenhouse work are good physical health, ability to lift heavy material, and willingness to work long unpredictable hours for a wage that, in many cases, does not exceed \$ 8.50 an hour even after years of service. The participants were aware that they entered a workplace which was labour intensive and financially not rewarding.

The Canadian labour market does not offer many opportunities for low-skilled labourers to earn a living wage (Maxwell 2002). Some have few options. Earnings under \$10 an hour are not uncommon or limited to low-skilled workers only. Maxwell demonstrates that every sixth Canadian worker earns less than \$10 an hour and only 28% of these low-income workers have a post-secondary diploma or certificate.

According to the Ontario Wage Survey, the average wage for St. Catharines nursery and greenhouse workers in 1999 was \$10.10 (Ontario Wage Survey). In Ontario, the average for this category of workers was actually lower at \$ 9.01. The wage rates in the occupational category of sales and services of the Ontario Wage Survey are comparable with the wages offered in the greenhouse labour market. Another publication by the HRSCD, The Niagara Wagebook 2003, reports the average wage of nursery and greenhouse workers category to be \$ 8.99 with low and high rate at \$ 7.50 and \$11.73 respectively (Human Resources and Skills A)).

The Ontario Coalition for Social Justice’s (2003) Backgrounder on Minimum Wages in Ontario documented wage disparities among Ontarians and illustrated the inadequacy of low

the following theorem: *If a function  $f$  is continuous on  $[a, b]$ , then  $f$  is bounded on  $[a, b]$ .*

The proof of this theorem is based on the fact that the interval  $[a, b]$  is compact, and the continuous image of a compact set is compact. This is a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is closed and bounded.

The following theorem is also a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact. *If a function  $f$  is continuous on  $[a, b]$ , then  $f$  attains its maximum and minimum values on  $[a, b]$ .* This is a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact, and hence it is closed and bounded. Therefore, the function  $f$  attains its maximum and minimum values on  $[a, b]$ .

The following theorem is also a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact.

*If a function  $f$  is continuous on  $[a, b]$ , then  $f$  is uniformly continuous on  $[a, b]$ .*

The proof of this theorem is based on the fact that the interval  $[a, b]$  is compact, and the continuous image of a compact set is compact. This is a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is closed and bounded. Therefore, the function  $f$  is uniformly continuous on  $[a, b]$ .

The following theorem is also a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact.

*If a function  $f$  is continuous on  $[a, b]$ , then  $f$  is Riemann integrable on  $[a, b]$ .* This is a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact, and hence it is closed and bounded. Therefore, the function  $f$  is Riemann integrable on  $[a, b]$ .

The following theorem is also a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact. *If a function  $f$  is continuous on  $[a, b]$ , then  $f$  is differentiable on  $[a, b]$ .* This is a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact, and hence it is closed and bounded. Therefore, the function  $f$  is differentiable on  $[a, b]$ .

The following theorem is also a consequence of the fact that the continuous image of a compact set is compact.

wages to secure a living above poverty line. For the Backgrounder, even minimum earnings of \$10 an hour would only closely approximate the poverty line for a single person. Not only that \$10 would present a barely adequate income, but between 1995 and 2002 the real minimum wage actually declined one fifth due to a combination of inflation and an increase in prices of consumer goods, fuel, rent, and utilities (Dean and Papp 2003).

Between 1995 and 2004 the general minimum wage in Ontario has not changed from its constant \$ 6.85 (Dean and Papp 2003). A minimum wage increase came into effect in Ontario in 2004 but was legislated to be installed in increments until it reaches \$ 8.00 in 2007 (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2004b). By 2005 the rate of the general minimum wage in Ontario rose to \$ 7.45 (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2004b). Facing a job market offering only jobs hovering barely above the minimum wage, \$ 8 an hour can be seen as relatively advantageous. FS-03 observed: *"It's 8 dollars when you're working there which is good because minimum wage was \$ 6.80 at that time."*

With the exception of M-03 (the head grower who had familial connections with the owner) the rest of the participants reported the pay was unsatisfactory. A student, FS-02, who worked for extra money to cover her personal expenses realized that the rate of pay was poor: *"It doesn't give you a disposable income, it gives you like minimum...survival"*. This 'survival' income commanded the need for a second income generated either by another family member or by the greenhouse worker herself. The two student participants, who were both single, held a second job. They worked as waitresses on the weekend. Most of the other participants had spouses with a job. They reported that some of their co-workers did hold second jobs to increase their earnings by working in the hospitality industry or a call centre.

For F-07, working in the greenhouse was a matter of securing a supplementary income in



addition to her husband's larger income:

*For myself it augments my husband's. We send our kids to a Christian school which is not government supported so, you know, with the church and the school and all the other charities we support it just really helped. We have two kids at a university and one just bought a house and one finished university. And we help our kids too, we bought a car that's being used by one of our kids. This way we can do it .It just augments you know.... Basically if I make an extra \$ 20,000 a year it helps us, it helps our family. (F-07)*

F-01, who did not seem as financially secure as F-07, also commented on the necessity for a second income brought home by another family member. Her husband had collected disability benefits during his illness.

*The industry is not very well rewarded anyway, it's probably one of the lowest paid industries. That work you were doing, you basically make a minimum wage or shortly, not much. And you put a lot [of hours] in it. But, no, you're not getting compensated really very fairly for the amount of work that's involved with what you're doing. But then in that industry you are not very well paid overall. No, it wasn't anything anybody could survive on without a second income . (F-01)*

While F-01 evokes "fairness" when talking about pay, she seems to justify the inadequacy of financial compensation for greenhouse work by the general inability of the industry to provide decent wages. The explanation for low wages stems from the logical conclusion that, although greenhouse business is labour intensive, it does not generate marked returns on investment.

Greenhouses applied labour cost saving strategies. One was observed by a student who worked at a greenhouse between April and June:

*I think it's cheaper for them to make me a crew leader because they just offered me 50 cents an hour more, whereas somebody who's been working there for 12 years if they become a crew leader they'd have to get paid the same as [the crew leaders]. Some of the crew leaders were making \$12 an hour and they've been there forever. Which is silly because I was doing the same work as them. (FS-03)*



FS-03 was reflecting on the opportunity her employer took when giving her the position of a crew leader while bypassing other workers with greater seniority and experience to avoid labour cost. At the same time, she was comparing her new job title and its corresponding lower pay with the higher hourly wage of other crew leaders. This situation is easily justifiable by the employer who has an “explanatory” rationale to diffuse potential complaints from both sides: because it is a temporary position and so the rate of pay reflects inexperience and, as such, precludes any incumbent worker from being promoted to this position.

There was one study participant, F-06, who based her evaluation of greenhouse pay on a comparison with her past experience with even lower paying farm jobs. She considered the remuneration appropriate because greenhouse pay was in line with pay given to other unskilled labour and maybe even slightly better. She has worked in agricultural production most of her life and acknowledged that the type of farm work she was doing for a living in the past was not sufficiently remunerated.

*See, the farm work don't pay enough. For the labour you're doing for the farmers, they don't pay enough. No matter what I had been through it doesn't pay enough. The greenhouse... I think it's reasonable for the greenhouse. I think no matter where I worked the greenhouse it's about right. Yeah, I know it's a lot of hard work but I don't think you can get anything more out of the greenhouse people, I doubt it. (F-06)*

Saying that the work performed by greenhouse workers is hardly worth being paid more made this participant an exception among all study participants. Although her assessment of the equity of greenhouse pay was based on a comparison of pay received by other non-skilled workers, she hinted at an additional factor that reconciled her to her low pay. The labour market offers her



little choice of alternative occupations with better pay. It is, therefore, more reasonable for a worker to justify a low wage based on various limits of productivity ostensibly inherent in greenhouse work.

In addition to low wage rates, most greenhouse operations do not provide their workers with benefits. Only one large employer of the seven involved in my study offered dental and medical benefits for their workers who fit into the category of permanent, full time employees. F-05's employer presented their employees *"once a month with a bonus of being on time, working, you know, doing your job properly, never much, 30 or 40 dollars."* She also disclosed that she worked for \$ 8.25 an hour and that *"\$10 minimum would be nice"*. Pay increases were rare and, should they occur, were almost symbolic rather than of any substantial value.

*I started there I think five years ago. It's gotta be five years now, and I started from....I was only part-time. And I was getting I think it was eight dollars. But for every year I got 50 cents raise. I never had that before that I'd have a raise every year. (F-06)*

For low waged workers even a 50-cent raise per year is appreciated. Other workers were not as lucky. The very greenhouse offering limited benefits and paying overtime had a bad reputation for wage increases. When asked if he gets wage increases M-01 adamantly and quickly replied: *"No. No. No. Not there."* Further prompted as to whether he is happy with what he makes led to another negative answer: *"No. Absolutely not."*

Either the absence of a raise or only minor hourly wage increases ranging from outrageous 2 cents to 50 cents per year (with the exception of salaried M-03 and M-04 who worked in a semi-management position) were the norm among the study participants. Even though the participants were not satisfied with the pay, there is little recourse. Being confined to *near farmers* sub-category of the agricultural labour, the greenhouse workers are covered by the



Agricultural Employees Protection Act 2002, which effectively prohibits them from organizing a union for the purposes of collective bargaining (Agricultural Employees). The Niagara region's latest community profile on its labour force documents 7.4% as the annual average unemployment in 2004 (Labour Force 2005). According to the Niagara Wagebook 2003, out of the total of 215 occupational titles, 71 occupations earn an hourly rate that is less than \$ 9. Average hourly rates lower than \$12 are paid to 43 occupations in the Niagara region. Together with the legislated ban on union organizing, the lack of alternative, decently paid jobs create an atmosphere of acquiescence or resignation among the greenhouse workers.

### **Salaried regime**

The only way that employees who are paid on an hourly basis can increase their income is to "volunteer" to work extra hours in peak production periods. Salaried workers do not receive overtime pay under any circumstances. Salaried workers hold positions requiring technical expertise, planning, and supervising. Their positions of high responsibility for the quality of the end product demand spending an excessive amount of hours in the greenhouse. Although their working hours exceeded the normative 44-hour week, their salary is constant irrespective of number of hours worked. M-04, a salaried employee, accumulated well over 400 hours of overtime a year but his salary does not increase to reflect this additional labour, neither was he financially compensated for it in any other way. The employer's only suggestion to remedy this situation was to encourage M-04 and employees in similar situations to take increments of paid time off that would equal the accumulated overtime. This proposition creates an impossible dilemma for the M-04. Due to the great degree of responsibility for the crop, which is inherent to the position of a grower, there are not enough days in the annual cycle of the greenhouse production that the grower could take off in lieu of accrued overtime. It is a no-win position with



implications that are well known to non-salaried personnel. As M-01 exclaimed when discussing wages: *"The salary thing too, I don't like it, because believe me the salary people, they rack the hours upon them, real good, oh yeah."*

The hourly rate of the waged participants ranged from \$8.25 to \$ 11, with the most frequently occurring number in the eight-dollar range. For the two salaried participants the hourly pay situation looked different. For example, when salary before taxes is calculated per hour, based on regular 44-hour week, M-04's hourly rate would be \$ 20. Since this participant never worked only 44 hours a week because of the pressure to work overtime, the hourly pay was reduced to \$16 when his actual work hours were accounted for.

### **Size of the Greenhouse**

In the course of this study it was found that the working conditions associated with different size of a greenhouse inhibit, yet in different ways, the development of workers' class-consciousness. The tasks carried out by the workers of any greenhouse remain essentially the same, but the conditions of work differ somewhat in respect to size of the establishment. While large greenhouse operations provide an environment based on sharing similar working conditions by larger amount of people, which can foster solidarity, they also provide conditions accentuating alienation intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production due to more detailed division of labour and greater layers of hierarchy than is needed in smaller greenhouse operations.

In some smaller greenhouses, owners work with their employees sometimes side by side although the content of the work of the former differs from the work of the latter. The visibility and the extent of an engagement in similar activities lend themselves to identification of the employee with the employer. Even in a large greenhouse the owners and management carry an aura of admiration for their capability to start up and run a business. M-04, who worked for the



largest greenhouse involved in this study, reported that the view of some of the greenhouse workers at his workplace adhere to traditional values of deference to authority, the boss, because of his special skills and abilities.

The overall perception of deservedness places great emphasis on the central role of education in attaining better jobs, and on courage as a personal attribute that allows the owner to undertake the risks associated with running a business. These two main characteristics separate the workers from the owners because they are present for the owners and absent for the workers. Since education is practically out of reach for ordinary workers and courage is an admirable personal trait thought to be reserved for just a few strong personalities, ownership of a business is seen in the eyes of many workers as a special post open only to those whose personal attributes are strong enough to withstand the responsibility attached to a business. When asked whether the inequality between employers and employees is fair and inevitable feature of employment, F-01 replied:

*I think it's something you have to put up with, ...just because .....you know you are not in the position, you don't have the education, you don't have the experience that these other people have. And sometimes when you are in work and when you achieve a certain amount of success, yeah, you deserve to have that. I mean I have seen at (a workplace) the amount of hours that the owners did put in, to making their company a success. And they were putting in as much hours as everybody else. So yeah, you know, they're the ones who have everything to risk, if something happened. Is it fair? I don't know...(F-01)*

### *Larger greenhouses*

With a size up to 800,000 square feet, the bigger operations employ around 60 to 150 employees (M-04). Under these conditions workers of larger greenhouses experience more conflicts than workers in smaller greenhouses. The division of labour becomes greatly polarized



not only between workers “on the floor” (production workers, workers in the warehouse, shipping area, or maintenance), but also between workers on the floor and those who work in the administration. M-04 reported frequent battles between different sections of the greenhouse production as each grower is responsible for his own section and the amount of work done hinges on the availability of crew members. The number of crew members is determined by the Human Resources Department which is guided by the labour saving rationale, thus causing labour shortage and frustration for the growers as they struggle to complete work with fewer employees than needed.

Divisions into work crews create competition by instilling animosity among the workers when they perceive that their crew is being given jobs of varying difficulty or when they see other crews performing at a lesser speed and are “getting away with it”:

*The stuff the crew had to do was like sorting the cyclamen which is on benches so you're standing up. Where it's on the floor you're bending over so you're breaking your back for hours because you're in the same position and there is no way around it. There's no comfortable way to [work with the plants]. And they [the other crew] would never had to do it because they couldn't do it properly. They couldn't do it fast enough and the people who couldn't do it fast enough were the ones who wanted to do the work for them. Yeah, those of them who don't loose their job. They just give them an easier task to do like the four inch ones that are on the bench. (FS-02)*

This expression of competition among workers is fuelled by their alienation not only from the process of production and the end product but also from each other. Marx brought up the contradiction embedded in the workers class position : “Competition makes individuals, not only the bourgeoisie, still more the workers, mutually hostile, in spite of the fact that it brings them together” (cited in Ollman 1978b: 12). Workers are not aware of this paradox if they do not



identify themselves as workers – as members of one exploited class.

In addition to accusations of slowing down work, there was also a suspicion that one crew leader was deliberately causing hardship to another crew.

*The second year I just noticed silly things the crew leader would do like leaving stuff out in the middle of the lane knowing that our group had to go through and use it and there would be like a whole set of racks sitting there, there was no buggy to pull them, it made our work to go slower. (FS-02)*

Class structure escapes the attention of those workers who are focusing on preserving their own dignity through hard work and on blaming others for not doing the same. Sennett and Cobb (1973) explain that the ideology of the class-based system is pitting workers against each other by promoting competition and judging individual moral standards on grounds of personal responsibility. The structure of the class system, therefore, becomes invisible to people who “enthralled by the enigmas of its power battle one another for respect” (Sennett and Cobb 1973:150). A complaint from F-02 illustrates the point:

*So it was almost like a punishment to be a hard worker because you get more of the work and you see people not doing the work and getting paid the same as you. People who have work ethic are working hard and there is people who don't. You know, you wonder why they are still there. Like they just follow instructions and they suck up to the bosses.*

The question of work ethics deserves special attention because it plays a central role in the work-related script of ruling class ideology. The capitalist mode of production is constitutive of class-based social relations, which are to a greater extent mediated and maintained by an ideology that defends the interests of the class in power. One of the principal ideological doctrines of the ruling class ideology is the notion that ‘hard work’ is not only correspondingly financially



rewarded but also reflects a greater moral integrity of the worker and, as such, endorses their greater worth as members of society. This ideological dictum is a part of capitalist hegemonic class-consciousness, which expresses “an acceptance of a distinct class interests as universally valid, and a readiness to act to maintain (or achieve) a definite form of society based on this class interest” (Livingstone and Mangan 1996:28). Sennett and Cobb (1973) stress that working people have no illusions about the benefits of hard work and the sacrifices that accompany it. They are well aware of their subordinate class position but the role of the ideological emphasis on “ability or ...sacrifices is to divert men [sic] from challenging the limits of their freedom by convincing them that they must *first* become legitimate, must achieve dignity on a class society’s terms, in order to have the right to challenge the terms themselves” (p.153). Therefore, an absence of confidence in one’s own evaluations of a situation from a subordinate class position contributes to doubting one’s legitimacy (authority) to critique the class-based system and results in conformism to the prevalent hegemonic paradigm. In addition to the ideological imperative to legitimate one’s worth, Secombe and Livingstone (2000) pointed out that for those who already “legitimized” their status it is easier to think in self-serving ways. The higher social status is more likely to be successfully defended if people believe it was achieved due to a personal deservedness -- diligence, risk-taking, and hard work.

The belief that managers and decision-makers are smarter and more knowledgeable due to their hierarchical position in production suspends workers’ trust in their own experience of being exploited. For example, F-08 worked at a large greenhouse and she held the work ethics of her bosses in high regard.

*They do actually physically go in and they [handle] the plants or they will actually work work., They just won’t sit up in their office and have everybody do their work for them, they will actually get out there and they will work, you know, like everybody else. (F-08)*



Internalization of this version of work ethic is inimical to building solidarity among workers. It further contributes to intensification of alienation and, consequently, prevents any effective communication of work-related mutual concerns and interests.

The strength of this ideological form of self-worth evaluation based on the doctrine of hard work valorization is apparent in the contradiction expressed in the statement of F-02. Even though hard work is supposed to be a desirable personal trait subjected to positive social sanctions in the form of financial compensation, the greenhouse workers, no matter how hard they work, do not see the remuneration reflective of the effort expended. Yet, the notion of hard work as a measure-stick of morals and human worth is not abandoned by the workers. It can project itself as a deliberate self-validation in the eyes of one's co-workers.

Michael Burawoy (1982) suggests that a particular organization of labour process structures the way workers approach their work. In the two manufacturing firms he studied workers were maximizing their earnings by creating their own rules to their productive activities. These alterations to the prescribed work requirements were called 'making out on the shop floor', or 'games', by Burawoy. These 'games', although appearing as a progressive step towards workers autonomy and control of production were nevertheless subjected to larger, objective dictates of the capitalist mode of production. Within the labour process, however, the workers created games that allowed them to pursue their interests to maximize their earnings by arranging their work to exceed their minimum daily quota and/or to complete tasks within a shorter time than officially allotted for them and, thus, generate some free time. Burawoy concludes that the acceptance of these rules parallels with the acceptance of the rules of capitalist social relations



because the game originates as a response to the capitalist productive process. The needs of the workers are being satisfied through winning the game and any dissatisfaction arising from being subjected to capitalist hegemony is then directed towards making the rules work or blaming those who are part of the game for breaking these relations. Thus, Burawoy maintains there is a “link between individual rationality and the rationality of the capitalist system” (1982:92). This leads to consenting to the rules of the larger game--the capitalist relations of production.

M-01 provided some evidence that games at a workplace are a way of coping with alienated relations of production in greenhouses. Unlike Burawoy's participants who structured their 'making out' strategies around their particular remunerative arrangement (rate of output), most of the greenhouse workers are paid by an hour. This difference in the pay scheme contributes to a different game 'played' at work but the individualistic character of the game has not changed. Moreover, M-01 realized that the workers' competing among each other, trying to compensate for unfulfilled needs, played to the advantage of the employer:

*“If there is any competition, it's between the workers to show that you know what I did more than you did today. Oh yeah...well, I'm gonna do more than you tomorrow. And that's the way it goes. It's benefiting the company because we're making a game of it”. (M-01)*

The ways workers show their resistance to adverse conditions of capitalist relations of production are complex. One group can be more aware of their role as an exploited labour power and could intentionally engage in a slow down which can implicate them in a conflict with another group of workers who may not understand the motivation behind the actions of the first group. In another instance, workers may not be aware of the structurally antagonistic employer-employee relations, which may lead to competition in their ability to do the best job with the



unintended consequence of intensified exploitation of their labour-time.

### *Smaller greenhouses*

In smaller sized greenhouses there are different issues at play that affect workers' class-consciousness. The number of employees working at the smaller greenhouse operations in my study did not exceed 14 people. The working conditions at smaller greenhouses, with their greater owner-workers ratio, can help workers to see some of the problems the business owner faces, which obliterates realization of class-based relations of production. Some of the greenhouse workers identified with their bosses or sympathized with their business situation if they heard the greenhouse is not doing well. When F-07 and her co-workers felt they deserved a raise they approached their employer but with considerations: "*The greenhouse is not a profitable business at the moment he has had a few setbacks basically operating at a loss so we don't want to push too much.*" After all, this thoughtfulness is based on perceived mutual amenable relations that conceal the antagonistic divide between the workers and the employers: "*We get along well with my boss manager. The wife of the manager she makes us coffee everyday, that's very nice*" (F-07). Similarly, M-02 befriended the owner of the greenhouse he worked at and expressed their relationship as being "good friends now". The differences between the owners' and the workers' relations to the mode of production are, thus, rendered superficially indistinct.

The Niagara greenhouse industry traditionally takes on the form of a family business where the members of the owners' family are also being employed in the greenhouse. Smaller greenhouses employ less people and the administration is handled by the owner and his immediate family members. At a larger greenhouse this situation is somewhat similar: the owner's family members occupy key positions at the greenhouse (managers, head growers, payroll and human resources administrators) and function as effective buffers for potential



discontent that could arise among the workers. As one of the student greenhouse workers observed:

*[The daughter of greenhouse owner] did the hiring and all the public relations for us as the workers. Any problems that we had we could talk to her. The crew leaders would be talking to her constantly. (FS-02)*

Solving work-related problems with relatives of the owner precludes any development of class identity. The workers get bogged down by immediate problems arising from the structure of the production process at their workplace, which may create alienated feelings among them and strain collegial relations, but this 'distraction' is effectively precludes them from the opportunity to realize the causes of objective, structural alienation.

Basok (2002) mentions that one of the largest obstacles to working class solidarity among agricultural workers is not only the fact that they live scattered all over the regional area, but that the workers are subjected to a paternalistic environment in which the owner patronizes his employees if their number is not too great. These paternal relations are difficult to overcome, especially when members of the owner's family hold positions at the greenhouse.

## **Conclusion**

The account of the greenhouse workers' productive process and their working conditions points to two factors that influence their consciousness. The first factor is the objective capitalist class-based relations. Because greenhouse workers have to become employed as wage labourers, they do not control the process of production and they do not own the means of production. They are exposed to all cognitive and affective consequences that such relations of production create for them. Most of the participants are engaged in routine work with no autonomy of decision making.



Only M-04, due to his particular occupational position, has some maneuvering space allowing him to solve problems and, therefore, the opportunity to connect the means of his working activity to its desired end. Their occasional problem solving requires seeing the situation at hand from different angles and, therefore, forces them to take roles and conceive of solutions based on these various positions. Even though he had more freedom of movement attached to his positions at the greenhouse he did not stand outside of the structural conditions causing alienation. M-04, whose occupational position of an assistant grower not only forced him to solve problems but also envision the end product in the process of growing plants, admitted to looking for his greenhouse logo on UPC codes on plants in supermarkets to see what conditions they arrived in and to compare them with plants from other suppliers. However, M-04 and M-01 both reported frustration with how their respective workplaces are run by the management, how their inputs are not being heard unless they benefit the owners, and how their ideas are appropriated by top management and credited as their own. As a result, neither M-01 nor M-04 planned to expend their cognitive and physical capacities beyond what was absolutely necessary.

Quite contrary to the above was the position of the rest of the participants who held fragmented jobs and performed routine activities. They did not control the working process and were only subjected to directives from above. Whether or not the end product of their activity satisfies their expectations was utterly irrelevant to them. Under alienated conditions of social existence, workers consider their productive activity only as a means to secure livelihood. The end product, an object of the workers' labour, is separated from them and appropriated from them. This situation is eloquently expressed in F-08's response to a question asking whether she checks the wellbeing of the plants she knew she produced, once they sit on supermarket shelves:

*No. No. Not at all. No. No. I'll just see if we were the ones that shipped it that's about it though [laughs]. [If the plants did not look good] I would*



*just feel that something has gone wrong like the store is not watering it.... I don't feel that way, I did what I had to do and that's all there was to it. Once it leaves [the greenhouse] I have no control over it. (F-08)*

F-08 worked as a general greenhouse labourer in the shipping department, helping out in other parts of the greenhouse if needed. Her job was confined to a specific set of tasks, which seemed disconnected from the overall production. Moreover, F-08 worked there to make money, not for the aesthetic experience intrinsic to natural labour because that is what work becomes for producers under alienated conditions of production--a vehicle for making a living. Her situation was emblematic of the systemic alienation experienced by majority of workers in Canada. The productive activity particular to the greenhouse industry's general workforce fosters conditions of alienated social relations. The waged participants did not relate to the end product once shipped out of the greenhouse gates, and both the waged and the relatively more autonomous salaried workers experienced competition for recognition of their merit. These daily struggles conceal class relations of production and thus do not provide conditions for development of class-consciousness.

Interestingly, my tentative findings suggest that both small and large greenhouses inhibit class-consciousness albeit in different ways. Large greenhouse operations use productive structures common to other large manufacturers, which leads to formation of a class-based distance between workers and their management and owners. The very nature of production at large workplaces encourages competitiveness and as such, stifles the development of class-consciousness. Smaller greenhouses also deflect conscious awareness of systemic division of society into classes based on relations of production due to a proximity and ubiquitous presence of owners in the workplace. This visibility and the frequent contact during the productive process



cause blunting of the class antagonism when the objective class locations of the owner and the workers appear to merge.



## CHAPTER SIX

### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL VIEWS

It is not surprising that none of the people interviewed expressed a highly developed class-consciousness given the distinctive features of the 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalist hegemony that is affecting workers' lives in the labour process and at home. This part of the thesis discusses the participants' reflections on the questions that pertain to some of Ollman's prerequisites for fully formed class-consciousness. The first two steps are discussed in the sections on "Class" and "Politics" and the third requirement, the ability to distinguish workers interests as a class from immediate economic interests, is covered in the section on "Unions". The fourth step, outlining the need to prioritize class interests over interests arising from belonging to an identity-based group, is taken up in the section on the participants' relations to temporary and migrant workers who are not part of the regular employees. The last section of this chapter looks into the potential of managing a greenhouse without bosses, a point inspired by Ollman's step seven – the confidence of workers that their own actions can bring about profound social change.

#### **Class**

With regard to the first two, and most basic, requirements Ollman explains that workers should recognize that they have interests to pursue not only as individuals but also as a class. To measure this aspect of class-consciousness I asked whether the participants use the concept of social class when referring to various situations in their daily encounters; whether the class they identify with differs from some other class; and what criteria they use to measure class membership.

Being placed in a position to speak in class terms was not comfortable for a majority of



the participants. Their answers were diffuse, and only on a few occasions did I ask directly, after a prelude leading to this topic, 'in what class would you place yourself'? Although they were very nice and inviting, there were degrees of obvious tension between us stemming from the awkward situation of a stranger, inquiring about sensitive personal experiences and their views on political and social issues and events. The problem with the discussion of "class" seemed to stem from the negative connotations associated with membership in a "lower" socio-economic class, defined in terms of access to material wealth. Material representations of "lower classes" reflect conditions of poverty, which are, in turn, more or less attributed to personal shortcomings. In other words, there was a tendency for greenhouse workers to associate their low income with membership in a 'lower class' and this in turn was construed as a personal fault in their work ethic or motivation.

Smith (1996) refers, among other things, to social-psychological factors contained in the concept of "reference group" in trying to explain the general inclination of people to subjectively identify with the "middle class". This inclination is evident in six "developed" countries (Kelly and Evans, 1995, cited in Smith 1996) where the majority of people associate themselves with the "middle" levels of a hypothetical class structure. The image of a "middle class majority," Smith argues, serves three ideological purposes: first, it creates a reference group with which people will identify and measure themselves against; second it conceals the inherently conflictual relationship between the fundamental social classes of capitalist society, the capitalist and working classes; and third, it obstructs a scientific view and analysis of the dynamics of such a society.

Most of the greenhouse workers appeared trapped by such ideological snares, and displayed only a limited understanding of their interests as members of the working class. Their



conception of “class” was a mixture of rather vague notions, recalling a Weberian perspective in which social class position is based on “individual life chances” in relation to labour and commodity markets, as well as an ethic that attributes success or failure in “class” terms to personal merit and individual willingness to work hard in order to succeed.

Those study participants who self-identified as a class at all generally referred to the “lower middle class”. Only one participant used the term working class, although she did not conceptualize class in terms of a relation to means of production: *“Somewhat I guess most people I know are working class, I don’t see the middle upper too much”* (F-05). She attributed determinants of class differences to particular levels of education. Manual labourers, like greenhouse workers, do not require specialized education and this socially less valued work is reflected in their salary: *“I think it’s about the education. You get educated you get paid more”* (F-05).

For some, material possessions symbolizing status and wealth formed the basis of class identification. Class, thus, took on a meaning denoting economic inequality expressed through a level of conspicuous consumption embodied in a showcase of personal property.

*I don’t really speak in those terms they don’t really talk about that sort of thing but if I was to judge I’d say yeah, I could pretty much guess what everyone’s house looks like. I think I could picture all sorts of things just from how they’re speaking I know where they shop and I know what sort of things they do for fun. I know a lot about those sorts of things so I guess with the stereotypical, you know, lower class income, I’d categorize it as that. And for myself... well, it’s kind of funny because you [don’t categorize] students as a working class or middle class or anything. They are just students and they’re just taking what they can get.* (FS-03)

This student expressed a great deal of cultural conditioning which promotes judgemental attitudes towards others that are based on their ability to afford commodities which represent symbols of



wealth. Here, class is totally stripped of its structural, socio-economic and political context. Dunk (1991) contends that those who exercise a certain degree of control over their schedules or who only engage in a working class occupation temporarily, such as the two student participants, cannot fully understand relations of exploitation: “The working class perception of its own conditions of existence, and the limitations to that perception, are necessarily related to the experience of the relations of production” (p. 42), and this perception can arise only when survival depends on the availability of wage labour.

In the spirit of Ollman’s (1978a) advocacy of a pro-active approach to the investigation of class-consciousness, and as a means to plumb some of the deeper meanings of class, I asked FS-03 whether the classes share some commonalities in the sphere of production and whether there are differences between those who work for a living as opposed to people who employ them. Her answer articulated awareness of those who are severely disadvantaged in the competitive arena of the labour market. But no connection between labour market competition and unemployment in depressing wages and the capitalist imperative to keep wages down was made. The student greenhouse worker remarked:

*I see people trapped in the cycle of working just because they have no other choice. Lot of people... they don't want to go on welfare [so they work for little money]. And there is the opposite thing when some people just go on welfare because it's easier than working. Because when you're working you're making less than when you are on welfare. And you're spending all your time and effort, so I mean it's not a very good situation. (FS-03)*

She went on to explain:

*I also worked in other places with immigrant workers and I found that the most hardworking jobs that I've ever had paid the least. (FS-03)*

The term social class was evocative of differences in income and concerned only those



participants who were materially least secure.

Class position was not seen as a polite way in which to view someone. F-06, the woman participant in her forties with a life time experience in farm work, also understood class as an economic indicator of an income level but she claimed that, even though there could be variations in income among the group of her friends, they would not allow these differences to jeopardize their friendship.

*We wouldn't even say just because she is making more money she is high class, you know, we never go that way. We never try to get that into our friendship or into conversation. I don't have any friends who are rich or middle class. I know there are some people who are lower [class] like on mother's allowance but I wouldn't say that she is any different than I am. It's the way her life is, or whatever she's done or happened or health-wise... We still have the same thought. (F-06)*

On the one hand, F-06 makes the point that the economic discrepancies amongst her friends do not interfere with their friendship, yet, on the other, she implies that their different “points of view” can produce unwanted frictions: *“A lot of people do have different points of view. And so we try not to get into that. We try to keep it to ourselves, we might get into it little bit but when it gets to the point when somebody's going to scream loud, we say, okay, quit.”* A discussion that might have the potential of revealing commonalities, despite their expressed differences, and, thereby lead to a greater “social” (as opposed to personal) solidarity among the friends, is effectively precluded in the interests of avoiding acrimony.

A major barrier to a conception of class as an antagonistic social relation is the ideology of bootstrappism, in which individual agency and the will to succeed supersede all obstacles of a social or economic nature. F-08, a wife and a mother of two, did think *“that there is the working poor, there is the working **working**, you know, and there is the working rich. I do believe that.”*



She also believed that, while some circumstantial conditions of upbringing can impede an auspicious starting point to life, there are ways out of inauspicious economic situations even if such conditions were not initially within the control of the individual:

*I think if people are, say, in a lower class bracket, again they may not have that choice because they weren't given that family opportunity or they weren't given that wealth ...where they weren't given a lot of this stuff. But I mean if they worked for it they would get out of that position. They can absolutely get out if they work for it. No one wants to be in the lower class of society but sometimes you're just put in that position. But I think it's choices, it's a matter of choices. (F-08)*

This perception meant that, irrespective of one's objective social position, it is subjective choice and individual will that determine the drive to succeed, which in turn enables individuals to lift themselves out of precarious economic situations. Class position then was viewed as subject to a high degree of mobility, suggesting that the transition from a lower to a higher ranking class position only requires an exercise of free choice combined with the right amount of effort and the will to achieve.

Placing themselves in class locations was not easy. For example, F-08 chose not to place herself within a social class category. There are three apparent reasons for this: first, a perception of the very ephemerality and changeability of class membership suggested that current membership in a social class does not preclude an intention and an effort to transfer to a higher rank later; second, it was important for her psychologically to affirm the supremacy of agency because it sustained an aspiration to change her own situation and/or the future situation of her children; and third, to a certain extent, her belief in the primacy of free choice and the power of individualism was ideologically conditioned.

Another example of the ideology of individual free will and meritocracy was evoked by



the responses of F-01. She did not volunteer to elaborate on the existence and social character of class. Her answers were very short and only outlined the distinctions in occupational stratification that corresponded with common notions of class. F-01 placed herself in the lower middle class, her supervisors in the middle class, and described the owners as “probably upper class.” She started to work in a growing greenhouse operation as a general labourer. When the place expanded and was in need of an administrative position, she applied and was hired. F-01 projected this experience onto her concepts of socio-economic mobility:

*People have to look for those benefits. If I was spending all my life potting [planting] you know, you were never gonna make that kind of money. And if that's what you wanna do and you want to take it and leave it, then that's great. If you are not wanna be doing that then you have to look for avenues - it's a choice. (F-01)*

Related to notions of free will and hard work are religion-influenced views of work ethics.

F-07 was intensely involved with her church and stated that the topic of socio-economic class is never discussed at home, in the greenhouse, or at church.

*We don't talk about so and so is a higher class and so and so is a lower class. Like that's white trash and this guy is royalty ...I suppose this kind of a thing is around but .....most of the people that I do know that have done well have done it through hard work and not through inheritance. Basically all the ones I know have done well that was through their own hard work. (F-07)*

The ideology of virtuous hard work that rewards workers in proportion to their effort is clearly evident in the biographical accounts of van der Mey's (2003) promotional piece on the Dutch contribution to Niagara floriculture. The Dutch emigrants brought with them Christian beliefs derived from the early doctrines of Protestantism. The tenet of “hard work” originated with Reformation doctrines (of “calling” and “predestination”) in which asceticism was exalted as central to behaviour aimed at the glorification of God (Weber 1958). The ethic of hard work has



separated itself from its religious roots in the era of advanced capitalism but it remains deeply entrenched in neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologies.

For the participants, the concept of hard work as an ethical code involved a curious double standard. On one hand, workers tend to internalize this ideology as a basic commonsensical view and use it as an argument when the topic of personal agency and deservedness is broached. On the other hand, the concept of work, as “production,” is largely regarded as the unique activity and contribution of the employer. In popular, journalistic or scholarly parlance the verb *produce* is associated with the name of the company or owner (e.g., Ford produces, not the workers whom Ford employs). Similarly, van der Mey’s popular account of the achievements of male Dutch greenhouse owners does not mention those who laboured for them and without whom the exalted patriarchs and their families would not enjoy their status and wealth.

Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998) points out that the ideology that surrounds the work ethic of the capitalist labour process conceals the key role of workers as producers and instead ascribes the act of producing to the employer. She traces conceptions of the roles of labour and capital as these developed in the work of Locke to its further elaboration by Max Weber in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Using a historical materialist approach, Wood concludes that this ideology has its roots in the particularities of the capitalist mode of production and its relations of production.

In an economic system where commodity production is generalized, where all production is production for exchange, where all production is subordinated to the self-expansion of capital, where all production is the production of capital, and where surplus labour is appropriated not by direct coercion but through the mediation of commodity exchange, the activity of production becomes inseparable from the activity of market exchange. Exchange, not productive labour, is likely to be defined as the



essence of economic activity. (Pp. 375-376)

Under these conditions, it is not uncommon for the direct producers to internalize this ideology and to see the final product of their labour as separate --alien -- from themselves. Furthermore, since the producers are hired by owners of means of production for a wage to perform an act of labour, they have no control over either the productive activity or the product of which they are the direct creators. Such a productive process leads to an attribution of all that is produced to the capitalist firm, or the employer, who disposes of it on the market and distributes to the producers only a fraction of the new value they have created.

Although a prevalent concept among the participants, willpower and free agency as the key determinants of individual destiny did not figure as the sole determinant in the formation of classes. External, social, influences were acknowledged as a source of individual wellbeing. M-01 commented that one's class location is *"definitely a matter of economy, you know, your life and all the things you have with it are direct sign of the outside world; how successful and how unsuccessful you are"*. But instead of acknowledging the inherent inequalities between wage-labourers and capitalists, he expressed his belief in the corruptive power of money and blamed the wealthier section of the population for their lack of generosity towards charities. A money-dominated society seemed to be the chief cause of inequalities: *"To eliminate money, to eliminate government and all that, ... maybe [then] the playing field would be leveled"*. Yet, when our discussion concerned the actual relations between owners and workers, M-01's conception of these relations pointed to an understanding of the existence of structural divisions between the direct producers and those who control production. His understanding of the social division between classes was clear and succinct:

Q.: So the workers in the greenhouse produce all the wealth; they produce the final product.  
A.: Yeah.



Q.: Yet the majority of the wealth they produce ends up in the hands of the guys who own the place...

A.:...*the people who don't work. Yeah.*

Q.: So then I would translate it into a systemic class of workers and class of owners.

A.: *Yeap. Absolutely. With management as the middle layer.*

Q.: It's the management who is protecting the interests of the owners, right?

A.: *That's right. Always, always. Even human resources. I'm sure it's not just in the greenhouse, I'm sure it's wherever there is human resources.*

The focus of M-01 was on a smooth process of production, unencumbered by a stifling, self-aggrandizing managerial interest. Management itself was not the only occupational position that needed to be reformed. Its ally, the Department of Human Resources, worked in cooperation with the management and, therefore, against the interests of the workers:

*There are not human resources. I mean human resources if you break down the phrase, it's humans are your resources, right? So when somebody comes to you with a complaint that your manager is pushing you around or bringing you down and they just brush it under the carpet and you get in trouble for it, then the manager comes down at you twice as hard and makes you scared to go to Human Resources . (M-01)*

In capitalist market economies, management of production and management of human resources share a common function: to control the production process. The hired wage labourer--the target of control by the Department of Human Resources--represents a commodity (labour power) that is structurally under the control and ownership of capital. The system is propelled by its inherent imperatives to maximize profits and capture markets, to seek out labour saving strategies and to increase the productivity of labour. M-01's insight into the role of the Department of Human Resources was quite correct. What he did not see was that the Human Resources employees are also hired wage labour, subject to control and manipulation by the owners who, in turn, try to simultaneously combat and adapt to the ever-fluctuating dictates of the market.



The basic criterion of Ollman's concept of a fully formed class-consciousness is an awareness of workers' interests as workers and as members of a working class. The participants were asked to express their awareness of and opinions about their own class position. There was reluctance to elaborate on the topic and, where discussion moved beyond mere acknowledgement of the existence of social classes, the responses touched upon other issues associated with class formation and the source of uneven power distribution between workers and managers. The expressions of the participants' interests as workers and as a class ranged from ideologically conditioned notions of the central role of individual agency and hard work in securing better class standing, to a view that material possessions themselves constitute class differentiation, to a notion of class as determined by control over and access to money. The participants manifested only marginal understanding of their collective interests as a class of workers opposed to a class of capitalists, and therefore there was little indication of a developed class-consciousness.

### **Politics**

One of the questions asked in studies on class-consciousness concerns workers' confidence in their governmental representatives. Workers, who think that their interests are not addressed by their governmental representatives and who think that the government favours a different social group (e.g., business owners), display an understanding of the existence of class struggle as the underlying factor of structural conflict between labour and capital. For example, some of Seccombe and Livingstone's (2000) study participants, showed adherence to some points of the conservative political agenda, such as immigration control and reduction in social assistance benefits, because they appeared to address workers' fears generated by the insecurities inherent to the capitalist social relations. The unionized workforce of private sector also displayed conservative attitudes that prevented formation of a popular front with other interest



groups against the attacks on workers' interests during the failure of the Ontario labour leaders to cooperate with community groups during the Ontario Days of Action between 1995 and 1998 (Leach 2002).

According to the prevailing ideological canon of neo-liberalism, democracy, the freedom to choose one's own destiny and, therefore, prosper through organized selection of civil representation, is safeguarded by the mechanisms of free market economy. Democratic governance is championed as an indispensable feature of 'advanced' and 'civilized' nations. Under these conditions, the dominant ideology insists that all citizens have a chance to select a representative who would promote, to a greater or lesser degree, their respective interests. Langford (1994) argues that bourgeois parliamentarism is an element of dominant ideology and that such a form of political representation assist the state in fragmenting workers' collective interests into private, subjective interests. "Electoralism does not require solidaristic action and, indeed, passes the responsibility for doing anything onto the political parties." (p.131).

Marxists maintain that the state does not act in accordance with the interests of the majority of its citizens but promotes the interests of the minority – the ruling class. At the same time, the state acts as a mediator between the working class and the bourgeoisie and, as such, manages to apply strategies that avert direct consequences of intensified class struggle. Rinehart (1996) contends that in Canada the state and private business interests intersect in many important ways and that, political parties receive heavy support from the business community. As Lenin remarked in *State and Revolution* (1998): "According to Marx, the state is an organ of class *domination*, an organ of *oppression* of one class by another; its aim is the creation of "order", which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the collisions between classes" (p.9). This moderation of conflict is being 'assisted' to a considerable degree by the



ruling class ideology, which dominates the political, cultural, and economic spheres. Marchak (1988) casts a shadow on the myth of a citizenry being equitably represented by government and its institutions. She cites three reasons to debunk this ideological illusion: first reason addresses the problem of financial support political parties receive from private interest groups; second reason concerns the tendency of elected officials to protect the interests of their own social strata because they cannot relate to problems of other socio-economic sections of society, and a third confirms the previous two--capitalist governments advance the interests of business leaders (pp. 77-78).

In this political environment it is not overly surprising that the greenhouse workers' approach to political representation ranged from deliberate ignorance to cynicism. Some participants did not vote and those who did were not sure what would their vote mean or if it could effect any change. They appeared to exercise their civic duty with little faith in the effectiveness of the electoral process. Few were vocal. For example, M-02 established a firm line between the interests of the business and the state on one side, and the working people on the other. For him, the interests of businesses and the state are mutually supportive. Politicians, M-02 reasoned, who form the active part of the state apparatus are essentially financed by businesses because a citizen running for a parliamentary position cannot amass such a large sum of money required to finance a campaign promotion. Although M-02 did not explicitly talk about class-based relations of production he rightly critiqued the state as being a tool in the promotion of capitalist interests.

*... say you wanna to be a federal politician, just you, just the way you are right now, how much money do you make? All right... but theoretically you can get elected. How much it costs you to run a campaign? Where does it come from? Businesses. Right? And when a business is paying for you to get elected whom you going to look after ? The people that paid for your election campaign. And when*



*you get higher up, who pays for that? Big, big companies. (M-02)*

His interest in politics has developed throughout his diverse working history. By working for others in unionized and non-unionized workplaces, and running his own business, M-02 was able to critique the social and political scene. M-02 worked through the sixties, which he considered the last decade of relatively favourable conditions for the working people. At the time, a grade 12 education was sufficient to secure a decently paid job. Currently, he argued, a degree in an engineering or other technical field is required to have a chance to get a better rate of pay. The government

*basically put us as far as the labour force into the third world type of a situation where you are working in the greenhouse, you're working at McDonalds, you're working in all the industries that don't pay too much money. (M-02)*

M-02 did somewhat idealize the gendered division of labour in the three decades of the relative post-war prosperity. He reminisced that at the time the male's wage was sufficient to take care of the financial needs of the whole family. Compared with the current economic demands a family faces, the economic unit of a working husband and home-making wife was a sign of prosperity. But he admitted that the political situation had changed and, with it, a change in prosperity.

*...and the government has just allowed all the benefits to deteriorate, pension plans have gone down the windows as companies fold up, take off, leave the country. So as far as looking after the workers, the general population, - no, they don't... The difference between the wealthy and the poor has gone up 22%, you know, they're making a lot more money we are making a lot less. (M-02)*

While this mistrust of the intentions and motivations of political representatives was shared by most of the participants, M-02 offered the most articulate views. During the interview he expressed his profound dismay with the political and economic deterioration of the Canadian state. For him, the system was unalterable and his outlook for a change was rather pessimistic:



*There is no party to vote for because you're still going to get stiffed. That's democracy... Once in a while it allows you to vote. That's it. Well... unless you go like the Soviets did in 1917 or you know, what happened in Poland... Unless you do something like that you're not gonna change it. I'm not the type of a guy to pick up a gun and start shooting people but we're not gonna do anything about it, we are gonna take it. Forever and ever. (M-02)*

M-02 indisputably expressed the highest level of working class-consciousness of all the participants. Nevertheless, since he was not involved in any political organization that would programmatically differ from the mainstream political parties, M-02's political outlook developed in isolation, which seemed to predispose him to such fatalistic conclusions.

Dunk (2002) discusses the effects of the capitalist ideological framework on workers experiences. Experiences and their interpretations are mediated and shaped by the particular historical and cultural context, which, in a class-based society, is largely manipulated by the set of ideas and interests of the ruling class. Winson's (1997) notes that his participants' views of the consequences a corporate restructuring had on their lives were formed not only by internalization of the dominant ideology but also by their direct experiences. Winson contends that the results of his study appear to be indicative of workers' oppositional values being expressed "in areas directly related to their own experience and hegemonic values in areas more distant from the reality of their everyday lives" (p. 441).

The internalization of hegemonic values is illustrated on F-01's view how well government represents workers' interests. Due to her experience with a long-term illness of her husband, F-01 was critical of the Canadian health care system and it was precisely in this area that she expressed her concern. In her view, the defense of the public health care is important enough to warrant people's active engagement with the issue. *"I don't think they [citizens] realize*



*if you are really sick that there are people who are going to take care of them. They don't know what it's like to be someone who's really sick."* While hesitant to express her confidence in the sincerity of politicians' electoral promises she, nevertheless, relied on the democratic version of bourgeois ideology, which suggests that concerned citizens can steer their parliamentary representatives in the right direction on an issue in dispute. Because she had no experience in politics or with the electoral system, F-01 was inclined to trust in the effectiveness of parliamentary democracy. She suggested that a remedy to the attack on the public health care system was a matter of *"get[ting] enough people together and hopefully the right people will listen to them"*.

Personal experience also played a decisive role in the way F-08 judged the situation in the labour market. When her two children reached preschool age, she looked for a job. She said she did not consult any employment advertisements, but rather approached two greenhouses in a close proximity of her home and was hired on the second try. Although she did admit that her job might not be "the greatest", this experience seemed to be convincing enough to maintain a belief in the availability of jobs for everybody who would attempt to look for one.

F-08 also expressed concerns about health care and education. Not surprisingly, having young children, these two public services were of a paramount political interest for her. She disclosed that she votes during provincial or federal elections but also admitted she distrusted electoral promises of the candidates. She saw problems with undelivered promises rooted within respective political parties, not within the character flaws of their individual leaders. F-08's great concern was the feasibility of access to public health care: *"I don't really want to wait three hours in the emergency room where they should have in more nurses, more doctors..."*. However, she aimed her blame for this worrisome situation at the wrong target – the unemployed. In her



view, adequate servicing of health care was a question of the right disbursement of a limited amount of money, and financing health care was certainly superior to investment into job creation.

*As far as, ah... these people who are collecting the welfare or taking an advantage of the system... It's like there's jobs out there, so you put the money into health care. I mean you can see it in the newspapers, it may not be the greatest job but for students... not students but someone who's..., no, students, grade 10 and... you know, there's jobs out there. You know: greenhouse work. (F-08)*

Porter (1983) noted that class-conscious workers would never turn against themselves in acts of deprecation but workers who lack the awareness of collective interest as a class use condemnation, suspicion, contempt, and scapegoating against each other. The absence of class identity prevents workers from realization of their common interests as a class-for-itself and leads to self-victimization and animosity, “[i]ndeed, this individualism is at the root of working-class powerlessness” (Porter 1983:150).

Two of the participants, FS-02 and FS-03, were not interested in politics but voted by simply taking the easy route of consulting with their parents. For F-06, who was not a student, the issue of trusting politicians was laughable even though she disclosed a marginal involvement through her former partner in campaigning for the NDP. In F-07's life, secular politics had reserved little space as she was a devout Christian. F-05 was not interested in politics and neither was M-01 but, unlike F-05, he had an explanation why:

*They're not telling you the truth. The way I look at it is that a good politician is somebody who'd probably be paid at the end of their term. And that's remunerated by how many promises they kept and how much money they saved and many of the taxpayers and the voters, they made happy. Apart from that it doesn't really interests me because that is to say that one person can make the difference but that's not what I believe, so I'm not that one person. (M-01)*



When discussing politics with M-03, a grower and a son of a greenhouse owner, any critical analysis of the relationship between wage-labour and management was excluded by the very nature of his location within this relationship. In the public-political sphere of interest he rather focused on problems that disguised the nature of the class-based antagonism:

*I'm looking for natural environment, something that is neglected and we have lots of problems with: the health and safety of others... And politicians... it's a really difficult subject, I look for someone who's got to be really human, really honest, really straight forward, even when we don't want to hear it. Better to say it because you get respect for that. (M-03)*

In sum, most greenhouse workers distrusted the motivations of individual politicians and their respective political parties. Some also opted out of involvement in electoral politics at all because they had learned the state's legislative and institutional apparatus neglects to address their needs. From the discussion about political attitudes of the greenhouse workers, it is apparent that their general scepticism about a just political representation is indicative of the failure of the political system to truly represent their interests. Seccombe and Livingstone (2000) confirm that there is a widespread perception of scepticism among the working class about politicians' promises and their adherence to them. Dunk (1991) also maintains that workers have no illusions of how the political system works but are without alternatives that would challenge the capitalist social structure. Workers' access to public means of communication is restricted by the private control of the media outlets, which serve and promote the interests of the ruling class. Although the greenhouse workers do not consciously see themselves as a class opposed to capital they do feel that their interests are not addressed by the political apparatus of bourgeois democracy, albeit they display limited understanding of the way the system works.



When these observations are contrasted to Ollman's conception of class-conscious workers there is still not enough evidence that the greenhouse workers were conscious of their class interests. So far they have displayed interests as individual workers only. The involvement in bourgeois electoral politics is individualistic by nature as each actor should ideally approach a representative who would be the closest in addressing his or her interests. The realization that individual interests could represent the interests of the class-in-itself is the essence of Ollman's second requirement of fully developed class-consciousness. Ollman acknowledges that "[t]o be able to see one's interests as an individual in one's interests as a member of the working class under these conditions is no little achievement" (1978b:13).

## **Unions**

To see whether the greenhouse workers display any inclination towards solidarity with each other's position as workers and, therefore, view themselves as a class, I saw necessary to ask the participants about their opinions on labour unions. The initial impetus behind the formation of workers' associations was the need to defend against exploitative conditions the workers faced under capitalist relations of production (Heron 1996). The workers' objective structural position points to a realization that they form a class, qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from the class of their employers, and that the only tool capable of affecting their working conditions and their position in this class-based structure, is to organize collectively. Union representation is, thus, based on a defence of collective interests of all members of the bargaining unit against the interests of the employer. The level of workers' class-consciousness and therefore, the defence of their collective class interests can be substantially facilitated by the presence of a union but it can also be stifled if the union leadership acts as a mere mediating body between its membership and



the employer. Labour unions, thus, assume a paradoxical role in the sphere of production: they are indispensable in organizing workers, raising their consciousness and leading them to defeat capitalism but they can also act as bureaucratic bodies stifling workers emancipation from the exploitative social order (Rinehard 1996). When workers pursue only particular economic interests within their workplace, they have not yet reached the consciousness leading to the understanding of their shared objective conditions with other wage labourers. Their consciousness at the level of collective bargaining for wages and better working conditions is limited to “the conviction, that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation” (Lenin 1962: 98). Lenin maintains that this “trade union consciousness” is not yet politically informed and active. Workers who do not mobilize their power as a class against capital act only on the basis of their immediate interests particular to their working conditions which Marx identifies as consciousness of a class-in-itself.

The increased mobility of capital, for example, threatens workers’ employment security and effectively undermines the potential of organized labour in their struggle against their exploitation. Since at least the 1980s, organized labour in North America has been subjected to pressures generated by a neo-liberal agenda that has sought to promote higher levels of capitalist profitability and accumulation. Burawoy (1987) regards this decline in labour’s strength as a transition from a period characterized by capitalist concessions to labour to a period of hegemonic despotism in which labour has been forced to make concessions to capital. In Canada, union density is not declining at the same alarming rate that it is in the United States. Even so, neo-liberal politics target unionized workers in both the private and public spheres (Heron 1996).

Facing a conjuncture of organized labour in retreat, individual workers draw their own



conclusions based on experience, hearsay or media representation. However, it remains the case that only politically organized workers can effect qualitative changes in the sphere of production. Livingstone and Mangan (1996) argue that the relationship between class position and labour consciousness is mediated by the presence of a labour union. As we have seen, Leggett (1979) found that the experience of membership in a militant labour union had a positive effect on Vancouver workers' class-consciousness. Unions, Yates (1998) maintains, are capable of deflecting and reversing the effects of labour-saving strategies imposed by the new managerial paradigm of "lean production." Organized labour, thus, has the capacity to raise workers' class-consciousness. The greenhouse workers find themselves in a particularly disadvantageous position because they have faced legal barriers to organization and, consequently, have no history of being unionized.

It would be a step up from defending one's interests as an individual to seeing one's interests as common with interests of other workers, and there is no doubt that unionization facilitates such a realization. Yet, the greenhouse workers are classified in the agricultural sector as near-farmers and, as such, are legally prevented from forming a union. Unless they had previous experience with union membership in a non-agricultural industry, the participants shared the common trait of having been excluded from the opportunity to come into contact with unions and the experience of being organized as workers "for themselves."

In Canada, only British Columbia has legal provisions for agricultural workers to form labour unions (Basok 2002). The BC based Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) was established in 1980 after a decade long struggle by mostly East Indian immigrant agricultural labourers who were largely women (Canadian Farmworkers Union).

The Ontario greenhouse workers face a great obstacle to organizing collectively. They



were excluded from collective bargaining rights until 1994 when the NDP government legislated Bill 91 -- the Agriculture Labour Relations Act [ALRA] (United Food and Commercial Workers Union A)). Under ALRA, non-seasonal agricultural workers could form unions and bargain collectively, but the right to strike was withheld. In 1995, with the advent of the Mike Harris government, the ALRA was repealed. Subsequently, the exclusion of agricultural workers from the Labour Relations Act (LRA) was challenged in court by Rol-Land Mushroom farm workers, who were represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. In 2001 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that exclusion of the agricultural workers from the Ontario Labour Relations Act is unconstitutional and requested that the provincial government "draft an appropriate legislation" (United Food and Commercial Workers Union B)). This met with a condescending reaction from the provincial government of Ernie Eves who enacted Bill 187 -- The Agricultural Employees Protection Act, 2002 (AEPA). This Act effectively clawed back the pro-labour provisions of the ALRA and returned the agricultural workers to the labour rights status they occupied before 1994. The AEPA guarantees workers the right to assemble, to form associations, and make representation to their employer through these associations while "respecting the terms and conditions of their employment".

The fundamental tools that give meaning to independent labour organization -- the right to bargain collectively and to strike --- have been denied to Ontario agricultural workers. The workers of Rol-Land Mushroom farm continue to struggle to improve their working conditions and for union recognition even though the provisions of the AEPA do not require farm employers to recognize a union. Panitch and Swartz (2003) describe the wording of the Bill 187 as "ironic" because it does not "protect" agricultural workers; it merely guarantees them the right to "associate," which is already provided in section 2 (d) in the Canadian Charter of Rights and



Freedoms. The Act recognizes that agricultural workers constitute a vulnerable group and therefore that their right to associate must be protected by the state; but it also recognizes the right of the employer to ignore the efforts of a majority of their employees to establish a union (Panitch and Swartz 2003).

The objective behind the Supreme Court's decision was to appease both parties. It successfully dodged the challenge of exclusion from LRA by simply agreeing that the agricultural workers should enjoy the Charter's right to associate (under the premise that they are vulnerable), while leaving employers free to super-exploit them. According to a Marxist analysis of the state, the relationship between business, government, and the judicial system is such that the latter does not act as a neutral third party functioning independently. Panitch and Swartz (2003) conclude that the courts' decisions are guided by the interests of employers and therefore certainly do not include the interests of the working class.

To broach the issue of unions with the study participants, I used a prop in the form of a brief scenario depicting a teachers' strike during the school year. The student participants, SF-02 and SF-03, reacted similarly. SF-03 reluctantly condoned a teachers striking during the school year as a necessary means to make a point, but she quickly added that she might be biased because her parents were teachers. SF-02, who aspired to be a teacher, was hesitant to support a teachers' strike during the school year but admitted that teachers striking during the summer is not an effective way to achieve any objectives. However, the teaching profession proved to be less "essential" for her than greenhouse work. She drew the parallel herself and disapproved of a strike in a greenhouse on the grounds that it posed the danger of spoilage of the whole product, thereby endangering the workers' jobs: *"I don't think it would go because if greenhouse workers strike then all the stuff is spoiled and it's such a seasonal type of job... I mean if you strike you're*



*more like ruining your job for the rest of the season”.*

F-01's and M-01's views on class solidarity were limited to individual worries about the future of children. Both condemned teachers as victimizing innocent children to advance their selfish interests by striking during the school year. On the overall opinion about labour unions F-01 was unsure about the need for organized workers' representation. For her, all necessary labour regulations were achieved through the struggles of the past because currently the sometimes “unrealistic” demands of a trade union, especially one situated within a smaller company, could jeopardize the existence of the enterprise.

*I know, I've been in that situation, and we ended up not voting it in. A union can cost the company a lot of money. And if you are working for a smaller organization, and that difference can be huge for the company and it may cause a lot of problems. (F-01)*

F-01 identified with the employer but her personal experience prompted her to leave a space for a certain type of employee representation. While working for the greenhouse she was subjected to bullying from a wife of the greenhouse owner who was also her immediate superior. The person was acting at times violently towards F-01 who had no recourse but to put up with the abuse.

*...but it's nice for people to be represented by people who have the information and the education and the experience if there is a grievance to be able to put it through somebody, as to whether you need a union to do that or whether you can have a party of people within an organization do that I think the unions have seen their place in society now I don't know whether they are needed anymore. (F-01)*

Individual experiences shaped a view about organized labour for other workers as well. For example, F-07, being actively involved with her church, had internalized her denomination's religious canon that preached against labour unionism. She was adamantly opposed to a teachers'



strike:

*I think it's very wrong, very irresponsible of the teachers. But I don't know, we're against...[we] oppose the union. We wouldn't be working for somebody that has a union; we wouldn't even apply just for a job there. We wouldn't try to get a union in our places of employment at all. (F-07)*

The control of the Church over the minds of workers is a particularly enduring barrier to working class consciousness. The rationale for the refutation of the labour unions effectively precludes the possible consolidation of workers' solidarity and, thus, serves to strengthen the primacy of the religious doctrine. Interestingly, F-07's religion did not denounce the useful role of labour unions in the past when organized labour battled unacceptable working conditions like "*child labour*" but this role is seen as "*sort of forced*" in the present. The view of organized labour that F-07 articulated referred to two different concerns. The first was a religious concern about the imposition of an external will on the Christian mind: "*Some authority which is not Christian authority tells you what to do, opposing to your own wishes. We don't want to do anything with that.*" The other concern corresponded with conventional anti-union notions about unreasonable demands by organized labour (leading to possible company bankruptcy) and the essentially corrupt and opportunistic motives of organized labour leaders. The second concern calls into question the efficacy of unions to workers, and therefore religious opposition to organized labour is reinforced by the actual failures of contemporary unions in advancing workers' interests.

The "conservatizing religious force" was pointed to by Winson (1997) in his study of the role of small town ideology in the lives of displaced workers in rural Ontario as having a substantial impact on workers' political views and their attitude toward unions. According to Winson, workers who grew up and were socialized in the particularly conservative backdrop of a



rural community embraced individualistic attitudes, strong work ethics, and pro-private enterprise and anti-union sentiments.

Among the participating greenhouse workers there was only one with past experience of working in a unionized workplace. His views on labour unions, thus, reflected an actual encounter with organized labour. M-02 was unionized twice in his past work history and once he had been involved actively as a steward. Yet this experience did not persuade M-02 that a trade union could play any decisive role in addressing the “*flawed system*”. An ineffectual labour union can be as useless to its members as the electoral system that M-02 critiqued: “*The system is flawed. Like in the States they could reduce their debt with the amount they spent on their campaign. So how can you win? You can’t afford to get elected*”.

The consciousness of whether unions can lead to labour emancipation depended on how the participants perceived the role of the union. Reflected in their view of trade unions was either personal experience or objectionable accounts about the practices of particular labour unions they have heard from external sources. It was only F-05 who was positive in her outlook on unions. To the question ‘If someone attempted to organize a greenhouse, what would you think about it?’ F-05 very briefly, and without further elaboration, declared “*I think it would be great*”.

The findings resemble Winson’s (1997) study, in which the very few respondents who were the most militant have had previous experience with unions. The rest of Winson’s participants displayed various degrees of complacency, deference or outright opposition to unions, blaming them for driving companies out of business. In this study, some workers (F-01 and F-07) have also displayed the tendencies to hold organized labour accountable for unrealistic demands of the employer. The most “militant” participant of this study was M-02 and he was the only one involved with a union in his past work history.



In a society where the ruling class ideology attempts to hide contradictions, such as the one between social form of production and private appropriation, workers are subjected to contradictory realities. On the one hand, they are socialized to espouse a philosophy of possessive individualism with its field of equal opportunities freely available to every individual to exploit and on the other hand, their experience in the labour market and in the process of production does not reflect these ideological dictates.

In the absence of any alternative explanatory discourse, to make sense out of this conflicting existence, the greenhouse workers have assumed pragmatic solutions to these contradictions that range from laying blame onto the entity of closest proximity (union or a person) or simply adapting to the situation in a deferential mode. Workers spend a substantial part of their daily lives in the workplace and this living experience, the “sphere of direct influence”, gives meaning to people’s lives (Yates 1998). It is not only the lack of greenhouse workers’ past experience with unions, but also the legislative barriers to union organization and recognition, and the absence of pro-union environment that renders most of them indifferent to unions. Ironically, it is the unions, especially those who are more ‘militant’, that raise class-consciousness. The greenhouse workers are locked in a situation where they are effectively prevented from approaching the consciousness of a class-for-itself which would facilitate their struggle for better working conditions.

### **Views on non-standard workers**

Up to this point it is apparent that the participants have not evince any conclusive signs that would correspond with Ollman’s third precondition of class-conscious workers. It stipulates that mere economic interests of class-in-itself have to be secondary to the interests of a class cognizant of its historical role as a class opposed to capital. This is followed by the fourth



requirement, which outlines that once workers realize they share interests by virtue of their class membership, they should also see these interests as overriding all national and ethnic interests.

It was difficult to introduce this topic to the participants in a way that would ensure a smooth flow of our conversation. The questions involved asking whether there are migrant workers at the participants' greenhouses, and how they view temporary workers. The latter question was intended to serve as an introduction to this topic. The participants who touched on the subject noticeably struggled to choose the right words. For instance, F-08 worked at one of the two greenhouses involved in this study that used Mexican migrant workers:

*That's why they bring in the Mexicans. Because they work hard. I know... at Easter last year I've put in 111 hours in two weeks, and the Mexicans they'll think nothing of putting 145 hours in. Nothing, you know... And that's why they hire them because they take advantage of them. They take advantage of them, they live on the premises. They're right there and you know, they'll work 7:30 in the morning right to 2 o'clock in the morning the next day. But I mean they're in the position for the company to take advantage of them and the Mexicans are here to make money. (F-08)*

F-08's concern for the migrant workers' exploitation was tempered by a conclusion of mutual need between the workers and the employer. In her view, when Mexican workers voluntarily enter the Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program they give consent to all ensuing consequences. Additionally, it is the employer's right to maximize the utilization of this contingent labour while the Mexican workers' purpose is to accrue as many hours as possible because their goal is to earn money. Therefore, the means, however unpleasant, are justified if they lead to the expected end – for the employer to utilize the labour and for the workers to be paid more than in their home country. This view reveals the commonsensical notion supported by of ideological structure of the capitalist political economy that the worker sells his or her labour



(a commodity) in a negotiated deal with a buyer--the employer.

The other participant whose greenhouse employed Mexican workers through the SAWP expressed her view in a similar way. When discussing her worries about pesticides being freely applied in a close proximity of the greenhouse workers, FS-02 added:

*The Mexican immigrants would do that as well [work around horticultural chemicals]. Because these people can work and need to get a certain amount of hours apparently for the program that they're in Canada for... I don't understand it all but they need certain amount of working hours and that's what there're all getting paid for. They are also getting some place to stay like a house, that isn't of very good quality, from what I hear, at all.*

All greenhouses are in need of labour power during planting and shipping periods. Only a few greenhouses in the Niagara region specializing in floriculture use Mexican Seasonal Agricultural workers. Most of the greenhouses solve this problem by relying on staffing agencies providing temporary relief, such as Kelly Services, Manpower or LabourReady. Temporary workers comprise up to 45% percent of total labour force at a given period of time in M-04's greenhouse. Using workers employed by staffing companies is very advantageous for the greenhouse sector employers for three main reasons.

First, the temporary workforce is extremely versatile--only a phone call away. The agency's commitment to customer satisfaction provides the employer with a relief from costly and time consuming hiring practices. Should a need for extra "help" arise, the customer (greenhouse employer) simply places a phone call to the employment service agency requiring a number of labourers for a specified date. This order can be expedited as soon as the following day. The temporary workers are also subjected to instant recall by a manager who would for any reason not like a particular employee. From his experience, M-04 confirmed that "*it's a matter of*



*simply pick up the phone, call the agency and say tomorrow don't send me so and so".*

Second, the presence of temporary labour force is disruptive of any attempts to organize the permanent employees. The temporary workers have to be trained for the particular job and they may not relate to this type of a work. They are introduced to the job in a very short time and have a hard time connecting their job-task with the whole work process that must be successfully coordinated to be efficient. As a result, the workers brought into the greenhouse by a temporary staffing agency may feel out of place because their level of alienation is higher in comparison with regular greenhouse workers. Their lack of confidence and understanding, together with a feeling of alienation, may manifest as a careful approach to the task at hand, which is seen in the eyes of managers as deliberate stalling. This situation is likely to present the temporary workers as people who are oblivious to the imperatives of the greenhouse productive process. For instance, M-03, expressed his suspicion of the indolent attitude of temporary workers:

*Father hires people, he has to do that in a pinch. If you hire four of these people, you know, one person wants to work the other three want to sit down. Which is a bit tough, especially when everyone else is running around and trying to push the product out the door. Because during shipping it's huge, it's truck load after truck load. We just need people in the field collecting the plants, making the orders.*

This need for a 'disposable' labour power reduces the temporary workers to mere tools necessary to execute particular tasks of the production process. The availability of these 'human commodities' is facilitated by the maintenance of systemic unemployment, which renders workers without a profession or a trade expendable.

Their lack of experience increases the workload for established employees and the burden of training the temporary workers falls onto the shoulders of crew leaders who can assume a rather apprehensive position towards the temporary workers:



*The crew leader, complained about that because she doesn't know whom she is going to be working with so she is upset about it because she doesn't know whether they are going to be hard workers, whether they are going to smell bad, like things like this. It sounds terrible but those are the things that she worries about.*  
(F-02)

It follows that a crew leader's satisfactory performance depends on the abilities of the crew members. The uncertainty of who will be on the crew tomorrow leads to a concern for the possible difficulties arising from such a situation. The working arrangements of the permanent employees differ from those of the temporary workers and, therefore, the opportunities to build solidarity between the two different elements of the labour force are diminished.

The third advantage of ordering labourers through temporary employment service is directly tied to a financial benefit – all the necessary requirements mandated by labour law are paid by the agency. Although Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, and Workers Safety Insurance Board contributions are calculated at the rate of hourly cost for the end user (employer who uses Agency workers), the employer is thus freed from the administrative cost of processing these contributions.

The 12 participants interviewed in this study were white and ethnically homogeneous while many of the temporary workers who come to work at the greenhouse are of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This difference, coupled with alienated social relations, often creates a situation in which the temporary workers are viewed as the "other". F-01 mentioned a "*few incidents that mostly had to do with their... I'm not sure what to say here, but ... ah, ...like their cleanliness. Like that kind of a thing. People from other nationalities... there were a few incidents where we were going to the bathroom and there was a mess*". Subsequently, when our conversation turned to the topic of possible shared interests by all the workers at the greenhouse, she admitted that the



work performance of the visibly different workers at her greenhouse did not differ from the rest of the workers and that, in the end, *“they all want to belong there... they just come in to do their work”* (F-01). While this realization does not preclude racial bias, it is a small step towards the understanding of shared working class interests.

This fragmentation of the workforce is very useful to employers because it reduces the chance that workers could organize. Instead of being united in their common position as waged greenhouse employees, the workers are separated along the lines of their differences, such as nationality, skin colour or terms of employment. This reasoning, void of the realities of the social structural context, presents a barrier to working class solidarity.

### **Can we run our own production?**

Supported by Seccombe and Livingstone's (2000) view that “subordinates have a unique vantage point from which to observe functioning of the organizations in which they toil” (p.80), I found it appealing to ask the participants about their confidence in their skills and abilities to run the whole enterprise of ornamental plant production without their bosses.

The participants expressed some difficulty in imagining themselves controlling and managing production in the greenhouse. Therefore, this topic required some contextual clarification. Even so, the inquiry yielded two kinds of answers: the unsure answers pointing out the importance of education as the precondition for the ability to manage a greenhouse production, and the confirming answers endorsing the idea of running a productive operation without owners.

F-06 was one of those who had trouble to conceptualize the scenario: *“I don't know how that would work because ... that's a good one, I'm not sure”*. The scenario was clearer for F-01 whose thought centered on the role of education in achievement of occupational goals. For her,



greenhouse workers could manage their own production “to a certain point” beyond which it was necessary to apply control of the overall production by management. Workers could manage their greenhouse to

*at least keep things moving for certain time but I mean management comes with experience and education, there is only so far you could go without that. But I certainly think certain people could walk in and take over to a certain point. (F-01)*

It was education, according to F-01, that set the abilities of workers and management on unequal footing. F-01 expressed the idea that correlated ability with education and by extent, with prosperity. Moreover, F-01 not only saw an unbridgeable disparity in power between manual and mental labour but also suggested that the experience intrinsic to manual work does not necessitate any knowledge and expertise. This mode of thinking is emblematic of the commonsensical ideology of capitalist hegemony, which promotes the qualitative division between manual and mental labour, thus minimizing the cost of the labour power of manual labour. Ironically, the greenhouse industry started and is still run by many managers and owners without a post-secondary education (van der Mey 2003). M-03 for example, a high school graduate, being a son of a greenhouse owner, progressed quickly to the title of a head grower without having to produce any qualifying credentials.

Two respondents voiced less doubtful answers. M-01's disfavour of management was conspicuous throughout the interview. It was not surprising then that he had no difficulty with the idea of management by workers. The question was put “do you believe that workers can manage their own production without bosses?” to which he replied:

*Absolutely I believe that. You can fire half of the people in the office, replace them with the people who work in the greenhouse and they'll do better job, because they are the ones out there [who] have been through all the worst of it, they've been through all the*



*best of it, they've got the best work experience. They [management] always talk about having the right people in the right place, I believe the people who do all of the physical work are the right people. (M-01)*

This view was not based in the context of a conscious struggle of labour against capital. Rather, it expressed M-01's encounters with conflicting situations arising from interferences of the job process stirred up by individual managers who were less than competent at their job. For M-01 management was polarized into either being corruptible, inept and abusive, or proficient in human skills and knowledgeable of the particular business' needs. The latter positive managerial trait was valued by M-01 as he had his own stake in worker-management cooperation: work-life was more satisfactory for him if his ideas were acknowledged and possibly applied. He saw the prosperity of a company going hand in hand with the manner in which workers are addressed by management:

*Look at any good company, people, say, over in Japan they take people's ideas, they don't just let them sit on a box and rot, they look at them, they say what if it works, get that guy in here. They come in there and next thing you know the guy saved the company like one or two million dollars. And they benefit from that. If you listen to the people who are doing a good job you are standing a good chance of making yourself better, absolutely. (M-01)*

This struggle to get acknowledged as a worker suggests a propensity towards equalization of powers and inclusiveness in the working process. It does not yet represent a consciously aimed effort to emancipate workers from their servitude to capital because M-01 appeals to a call for an improvement of managerial skills rather than for a collective ownership and cooperative management of all employees. Yet, it indicates that the degree of an aesthetic experience (Schwalbe 1986) at work depends on the conditions of each occupational position. M-01's job allowed for a small degree of independence and room for decision making, but an



implementation or even the consideration of creative ideas still hinged on their acknowledgement and approval of the management who, according to M-01, was frequently guilty of taking advantage of such ideas for themselves.

The greenhouse workers share their opinion about management with workers of other studies. In Luxton and Corman's (2001) study, the steelworkers' opinion about their management was not favourable. Management was viewed as deliberately out of touch with shop floor realities and only interested in extracting profits for shareholders. Ehrenreich (2001) observed that workers in her participatory observation study dealt with crisis and regular job problems in an efficient way while management was perceived by workers as an obstacle to job completion. "In fact it was often hard to see" Ehrenreich concluded, "what the function of management was, other than to exact obeisance" (p. 212).

The other positive outlook on the question of workers' control of production was articulated by F-08. Once explained, F-08 was eagerly in favour of the possibility of such a concept:

*If, like, you talk all the departments together? Oh yeah, we can run that place with no bosses, yeah, absolutely. The bottom line is that we don't need the bosses but they are just the ones that sign our checks. Yeah, if we have the greenhouse with no bosses we can run the place.*

As with the other workers, answers to this question were not coming from a conscious political stance on the exploitative nature between labour and capital. F-08's enthusiasm manifested genuine confidence in the possibility of an all workers cooperative effort to control and operate her greenhouse. Yet, even though this vision was not grounded in a socialist theory her belief in workers' ownership of production is significant.

M-02, who demonstrably showed the highest level of class-consciousness among the



participants, had no doubts about the origins of wealth:

Question: Where is the money coming from? Who creates wealth....?

Answer: *You did! I did! You work for me, I take advantage of you; and I take the money and do what I want.*

Albeit his analysis was not expressed on the grounds of workers' relation to the ownership of means of production, the realization that it is the workers (and not money or owners who by sheer position of ownership and risk taking "deserve" to be control production) who create wealth is valuable to the development of class-for-itself consciousness. M-02 saw that management and control of direct producers would be the solution to inequality arising from class-based social structure but could not envision the structural shift to socialism because of the unwillingness of Canadians to collectively engage in the struggle. This indictment of Canadians deliberately and passively participating in a dysfunctional system was reinforced by his reply to "and where do you think then, it's all going?" M-02 replied: *"Down the toilet. There won't be a revolution in Canada because everybody in Canada is too laid back and just let it happen"*.

Here, the role of progressive political organizations whose absence or invisibility is reflective of the Canadian ideological structure, comes into question. Political representation is crucial for workers to acquire consciousness of their class membership (Porter 1983). Because people's experiences are mediated by national policies that support the underlying social structure, Porter argues that without a venue that would build up socialist consciousness the workers are exposed to capitalist hegemony in all spheres of their lives with limited opportunities to develop their class-consciousness from a *class-in-itself* into a *class-for-itself*. Schwalbe (1986) argues that, "[s]ocialist consciousness must be instilled among the working class so internal divisions can be overcome" (p.166). He also maintains that the further the productive activity is



from natural labour<sup>8</sup>, the less likely are the workers to challenge capitalist control. The greenhouse workers are exposed to working conditions that do not approximate the conditions auspicious to natural labour and their access to other means of raising consciousness is severely limited. The workers have to make sense of their experiences acquired in the sphere of production and outside of the workplace against the background of the tenets of the ruling class ideology.

The particular working conditions characteristic of precarious employment, the absence of the legal provisions to organize collectively, the constant exposure to the multifaceted tools of capitalist ideology, and the lack of access to information venues that would seriously question such an ideology, are the factors impeding the greenhouse workers from developing any advanced level of working class consciousness.

---

<sup>8</sup> Schwalbe's aspects of natural labour are role taking, ends-means comprehension, self-objectification, problem solving and control over production. "Natural labour perspective tells us " that under capitalist mode of production "the effects of alienated labour retard both individual growth and social change" (p.161).



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

I set out to explore how the working conditions of greenhouse workers, who are subjected to the capitalist process of production and to the intricacies of ruling class ideology, affect their class-consciousness. The greenhouse workers' position in capitalist production and the corresponding social relations renders them economically vulnerable. Their working conditions typically include long hours, low pay, poor or no benefits, poor health and safety standards and exceptions from labour regulating legislations. In addition, the relatively low skill requirement of the job makes the greenhouse workers easily replaceable. This condition contributes to workers' adherence to the normative notions of the dominant ideology about the value and benefits of 'hard work'. Of the 12 greenhouse workers participating in this study, 10 were waged employees whose job position was economically vulnerable. One participant was a salaried employee in the middle of the occupational hierarchy of his greenhouse, whose position was less easily replaceable and who collected benefits and received higher pay than regular greenhouse labourers. The other participant, as a son of a greenhouse owner, did not share the same class location with the rest of the respondents.

Ollman's (1978b) conception of fully formed class-consciousness served as a measurement of the greenhouse workers' approximation towards an awareness of class-based exploitative relations of production and to a vision of, and a willingness to instigate an alternative social order. At the time of the interviews the participants' class-consciousness varied but none of the participants developed consciousness of class-for-itself. While poor working conditions may be expected to draw attention to their subordinate position, most of the workers internalized



various forms of ruling class hegemony and did not criticize the economic system based on private property ownership and the profit motive. The capitalist class' interests were protected and promoted via social institutions, such as the press, and embedded in the legislative apparatus, which gave them legitimacy.

The dominant ideology, as the cover of class-based contradictions, is manifest in the norms and commonsensical notions found in the expressions of the greenhouse workers, such as in their beliefs (although subtly doubted in some cases) in the ethics of hard work. In addition to ideological precepts, alienating social relations posed as major obstacles to workers' solidarity. Same greenhouse workers even expressed their alienation in the form of displaced anger towards other members of the working class.

A great influence on the participants' opinions was their own experience. They were either not interested or skeptical about being represented by politicians because they have never encountered or even approached a parliamentary representative. From what they have seen the political scene is rather contrived and in pursuit of other agenda than promoting the interests of the working people. Hearsay about unions or a brief encounter with a union drive structured their opinions in either negative or positive way about the role of unions in the workplace. Religion, at least in one participant's case, hampered even the thought of a class division and as in Winson's (1997) study, appeared to function as the opiate of the masses.

Alienating working conditions intrinsic to capitalist relations of production and the ubiquitous ruling class ideology inhibited the greenhouse workers' class-consciousness. Their views on workplace relations and their own class location was influenced and enforced by ideological notions of common sense and supported by their own experience. The participant who displayed the greatest class-consciousness had experienced a greater number of previous



employments, was engaged in labour unions and was interested in media debates in the area of economics and politics. However as agricultural workers, the greenhouse workers were in a particularly difficult position because the statutory and labour relations regulatory framework excluded them from forming labour unions. Thus there are limits of exposure to alternative views of the social structure.

The concept of class-consciousness takes on a form of a process contingent upon the opportunities to expand and manifest in a fully developed form. Yet the workers face a great barriers to develop their consciousness because they have no access to alternatives. Bryan Palmer (1983) lists numerous radical, left-wing periodicals published by the burgeoning labour councils in the Toronto, Hamilton, and Niagara regions in the mid to the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, that were available to workers and circulated within the workers organizations. Currently, in the Niagara Peninsula there is virtually no publication issued on regular basis that would raise working-class consciousness. Additionally, workers have the option to get involved in an organized political body that would address their interests. As a consequence of limited alternatives, Secombe and Livingstone (2000) argue that a cooperative relationship develops between labour and capital with roots in labour insecurity. This insecurity leads to conservative views and to a support of the conservative political parties (Livingstone and Mangan 1996; Winson and Leach 2002). If action or a struggle is to be successful the victory must be anticipated (Leggett 1979). The absence of a political party that would enunciate such anticipation thus hinders the development of class-consciousness.

This study of greenhouse workers' working conditions and class-consciousness is only partially following recommendations of Bertell Ollman's (1978a) suggestion that class-consciousness must be studied longitudinally and using interviews conducted with groups of



workers rather than individuals. To address this concern I followed Ollman's suggestions for conducting interviews with individual workers in a way that would address the respondents as members of a class. Unfortunately, because greenhouse workers are not unionized, I could not acquire access to research subjects through a list of employees provided by the local union. Greenhouse workers were guarded by their employers against any undue exposure from an outside source. My intentions were scrutinized by two employers; one of them required to meet me in person and still did not grant me an access to his employees. Contacting participants outside of the workplace was awkward and lengthy. It was not feasible within the premeditated framework of this study to manage the coordination of greenhouse workers to meet in groups. Scheduling a meeting of more than two participants would prove next to impossible as they all had very busy lives.

Since all my participants were white and only one born outside Canada, in Holland, I do not have an ethnically diverse sample. Some of their views of the "other" showed during the discussion of their opinions about migrant workers or the temporary agency workers who are often new to Canada. The size of my sample does not permit generalizations about whether a person's marital status or a gender role has consequences for class-consciousness. Undoubtedly these various aspects of social or individual identity affect workers experiences. Ultimately an expanded and more inclusive study would have to take these facets of working class identity into consideration.

This study has several points of significance for social justice. First, not only part-time and contingent jobs expose workers to poor living conditions. Workers in permanent jobs are also vulnerable due to poor working conditions, remuneration and health and safety provisions. The greenhouse workers in this study were mostly full time employees with the



exception of the student workers, and yet they were working at a subsistence level<sup>9</sup>. Second, with the absence of alternative social analysis, the power of ruling class ideology exerts vital influence on workers' views of the social, economic and political matters. Their decisions, based on the hegemonic normative notions of desired and proper behaviour, are not challenged by the state of their working conditions or by their exposure to exploitation. To the contrary, this exploitation is concealed. And third, although the participants did not offer any alternative visions of social order, most of them could see themselves collectively controlling and managing production. Those participants whose work history and experience predisposed them to be critical of social arrangements were, however, skeptical of the possibility of a change instigated by the workers. Thus similar to Leggett (1979), and Livingstone and Mangan (1996) the greenhouse workers could not envision an alternative to the present social order.

It is important not to underestimate the potential of the working class to suddenly progress towards advanced levels of class-consciousness. The presence of a counter-ideology which provides a critique of capitalism as an inherently exploitative social order, in conjunction with a political organization which outlines a viable socialist alternative, could increase class-consciousness among the greenhouse workers in the Niagara Peninsula.

---

<sup>9</sup> The son of the owner and the assistant grower were exceptions in remuneration. The former was a prime example of nepotism and his salary was not disclosed to me. The latter, though not paid more than subsistence level wages, was on a salaried regime, working more than 60 hours a week.



## REFERENCES

- Agricultural Employees Protection Act, 2002, S. O. 2002, c.16.* Canadian Legal Information Institute. Retrieved May 12, 2005  
(<http://www.canlii.org/on/laws/sta/2002c.16/20050211/whole.html>)
- Basok Tanya. 2002. *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Brown, Wayne and Graeme Murphy. 2003. *A Profile of the Ontario Greenhouse Floriculture Industry*. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Retrieved June 6, 2005  
(<http://www.gov.on.ca/omafra/english/crops/facts/greenflor.htm>).
- Burawoy, Michael. 1987. *The Politics of Production*. London: Verso.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1982. *Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Canadian Farmworkers Union. *A History of the Canadian Farmworkers Union*. Retrieved June 6, 2005  
(<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/>)
- Chaykowski, Richard P. 2005. *Non-standard Work and Economic Vulnerability*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.
- Cobble, Dorothy Sue and Leah F. Vosko. 2000. "Historical Perspectives on Representing Nonstandard Workers." Pp. 291-312 in *Nonstandard work: The Nature and Challenges of Changing Employment Arrangements*, edited by Francoise Carre et al. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.



Cote, James, E. and Anton L. Allahar. 2001. "Youth: The Disinherited Generation."

In *Canadian Society*, edited by Dan Glenday and Ann Duffy, Don Mills,  
Ontario: Oxford University Press.

Dean, Terry-Lynn and Peter P. Papp. (2003) "*Climbing Up*": *A Living Wage, Sustainable Income for Niagara*. Discussion Paper. Opportunities Niagara.

Dunk, Thomas. 1991. *It's a Working-Man's Town. Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "Remaking the Working Class: Experience, Class Consciousness, and the Industrial Adjustment Process." *American Ethnologist*. 29 (4): 878-900.

Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London; New York: Verso.

Eagleton, Terry. 1998. "Ideology." Pp.228-246 in *The Eagleton Reader*, edited by Stephen Regan, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2001. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*.  
New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Fantasia, Rick. 1995. "From Class Consciousness to Culture, Action, and Social Organization." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 21: 269-287.

Farm Safety Association Inc. 2005. *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) to be Extended to Protect Agricultural Workers*. Retrieved June 13, 2005  
(<http://www.farmsafety.ca/ohsa.shtml>)

*Greenhouse, Sod and Nursery Industries*. 2002. Catalogue no. 22-202-XIB. Statistics Canada. Agriculture Division: Ottawa.

Heron, Craig. 1996. *The Canadian Labour Movement. A Brief History*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, Publishers.



- Human Resources and Development Canada. *Hiring Foreign Agricultural Workers in Canada*. Retrieved June 6, 2005  
(<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/epb/lmd/fw/seasagri.shtml>)
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. A) *Niagara Wagebook 2003*. Retrieved February 01, 2005  
(<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=en/on/offices/2003wages/niagara.shtml&hs=on0>)
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. B) *Characteristics for the period of January 08, 2006 to February 11, 2006 Employment Insurance (EI) Program*. Retrieved January 7, 2005  
([http://srv200.services.gc.ca/iiws/eiregions/uirates.aspx?eiecon\\_nu=29](http://srv200.services.gc.ca/iiws/eiregions/uirates.aspx?eiecon_nu=29))
- Irving, Elizabeth. 1999. *The Canadian Greenhouse Industry: a Growing Concern*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved March 6, 2005  
(<http://www.statcan.ca/english/kits/agric/green.htm>)
- Johnston, William and Douglas Baer. 1993. "Class Consciousness and National Contexts: Canada, Sweden and the United States in Historical Perspective." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. 30 (2): 271-295.
- Labour Force*. 2005. St. Catharines Business Database. Economic Development and Tourism Services. Retrieved May 2, 2005  
(<http://www.st.catharines.com/forbusiness/ecodevt/resources/FEB2005%20Labour%20Force.pdf>)
- Langford, Tom. 1994. "Strikes and Class Consciousness." *Labour/Le Travail*. 34:107-137.



- Larrain, Jorge. 1983. *Marxism and Ideology*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press Inc.
- Leach, Belinda. 2002. "Class, Discipline, and the Politics of Opposition in Ontario." Pp.191-205 in *Culture, Economy, Power*, edited by Winnie Lem and Belinda Leach. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2003. *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leggett, John, C. 1979. "The Persistence of Working-Class Consciousness in Vancouver." In *Economy, Class and Social Reality. Issues in Contemporary Canadian Society*, edited by John Allan Fry. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Lenin, V. I. [1962] 1989. *What is to be done?* London: Penguin Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *State and Revolution*. New York: International Publishers.
- Livingstone, D.W. 2001. "Public education at the Crossroads: Conforming Underemployment in a Knowledge Society." In *Canadian Society*, edited by Dan Glenday and Ann Duffy. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Livingstone, D. W. and J. Marshall Mangan, eds. 1996. *Recast Dreams: Class and Gender Consciousness in Steeltown*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Lukács, Georg. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness*. London. Merlin Press.
- Luxton, Meg and June Corman. 2001. *Getting by in Hard Times. Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Mandel, E. 1973. "The Causes of Alienation." Pp. 13-31 in *The Marxist Theory of Alienation*, edited by E. Mandel. and G. Novack. New York: Pathfinder Press.
- Mann, Michael. 1970. "The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy." *American Sociological Review*. 35 (3): 423-439.



- Marchak, M. Patricia. 1988. *Ideological Perspectives on Canada*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
- Marx, Karl. [1963] 1982. *The Poverty of Philosophy*. New York: International Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: International Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. [1967] 1992. *Capital, Volume 1*. Edited by F. Engels. Translated from third edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New York: International Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique to Political Economy*. Translated by M. Nicolaus. London: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1981. *The German Ideology*. Part One. Edited by C.J. Arthur. New York: International Publishers
- Maxwell, Judith. 2002. *Smart Social policy - "Making Work Pay."* Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- McCarney, Joe. 1980. *The Real World of Ideology*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc.
- Mészáros, Istvan. 1971. "Contingent and Necessary Class Consciousness." Pp. 85-128 in *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness*, edited by Istvan Mészáros. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Mészáros, Istvan. 1989. *Power of Ideology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. 2003. *An Overview of the BC Floriculture Industry*. Retrieved May 12, 2005 from [http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/ornamentals/overview\\_floriculture.htm](http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/ornamentals/overview_floriculture.htm)



Moody, Kim. 2001. *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*.

London, New York: Verso.

Naiman, Joanne. 1996. "Left Feminism and the Return to Class." *Monthly Review*. 48 (2): 12-29.

Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation. A) *Niagara Canada: North America's Third Largest Greenhouse Floral Producing Region*. Retrieved March 08 2005  
(<http://www.niagaracanada.com/agri-bus/index.cfm>)

Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation. B) *Unemployment*. Retrieved February 15, 2005  
(<http://www.niagaracanada.com/LabourDemo/labourForce/unemployment.cfm>)

National Union of Public and General Employees. *UFCW Canada Wins H&S Protection for Agricultural Workers*. Retrieved June 13, 2005  
(<http://www.nupge.ca/news%5F2005/n07jy05b.htm>)

Ollman, Bertell. 1976. *Alienation. Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1978a. "How to Study Class Consciousness, and why we Should." *The Insurgent Sociologist*. 14 (1): 57-96. Retrieved January 15, 2004  
([http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/class\\_consciousness.php](http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/class_consciousness.php)).

\_\_\_\_\_. 1978b. *Social and Sexual Revolution*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Olson, Karen and Linda Shopes. 1991. "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History among Working-Class Women and Men." Pp. 189-204 in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.



Ontario Coalition for Social Justice. 2003. *Backgrounder on Minimum Wages in Ontario*.

Retrieved June 6, 2005

(<http://www.ocsj.ca/campaigns/>)

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. 2005. *Farming Operations to come under the Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Retrieved November 29,

2005

(<http://www.omafr.gov.on.ca/english/busdev/facts/ohsa.htm>)

Ontario Ministry of Labour. 2004a. *Agricultural Workers Fact Sheet*. Retrieved June 13, 2005

([http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/factsheets/fs\\_agri.html](http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/factsheets/fs_agri.html))

\_\_\_\_\_. 2004b. *Minimum Wage*. Retrieved February 15, 2005

([http://www.gov.on.ca/LAB/english/es/factsheets/fs\\_wage.html](http://www.gov.on.ca/LAB/english/es/factsheets/fs_wage.html))

Ontario Wage Survey – 8432 Nursery and Greenhouse Workers. 1999. Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. Retrieved February 15, 2005

([http://www.onestep.on.ca/ows/Ows99\\_Eng/welcome\\_e.html](http://www.onestep.on.ca/ows/Ows99_Eng/welcome_e.html))

Palmer, Bryan D. 1983. *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980*. Toronto and Vancouver: Butterworth & Co.(Canada) Ltd.

Panitch, Leo and Donald Swartz. 2003. *From Consent to Coercion : the Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press.

Patai, Daphne. 1991. "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" Pp. 137-153 in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge.

Porter, Marilyn. 1983. *Home, Work and Class Consciousness*. Manchester: Manchester



University Press.

Reiter, Ester. 1991. *Making Fast Food. From the Frying Pan into the Fryer*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Rinehart, James W. 1996. *The Tyranny of Work: Alienation and the Labour Process*. Third edition. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada.

Rinehart, James and Ishmael O. Okraku. 1974. "A Study of Class Consciousness." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. 11 (3):197-213.

Secombe, Wally and D.W. Livingstone. 2000. *Down to Earth People: Beyond Class Reductionism and Postmodernism*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press

Schwalbe: 1986. "The Psychological Consequences of Natural and Alienated Labour." Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, SUNY Press, Albany.

Sennet, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. 1973. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Vintage Books.

Service Canada. 2004. *Agricultural Programs and Services: Prevailing Rates*. Retrieved May 5, 2005 ([http://www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=/en/on/epb/agri/wage\\_rates.shtml&hs=on0](http://www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=/en/on/epb/agri/wage_rates.shtml&hs=on0))

Smith, Murray, E.G. 1996. "Rethinking 'The Middle Class': Ideological Constructions and Contradictory Structural Locations". *Brock Review*. 6 (1/2): 56-73.

The Regional Municipality of Niagara. 2003. *Regional Agricultural Economic Impact Study Profile of the Niagara Greenhouse Industry*. Retrieved October 29, 2004 (<http://www.regional.niagara.on.ca/living/ap/pdf/Figure%204.40%20->



%20Profile%20of%20the%20Niagara%20Greenhouse%20Industry.pdf)

Thompson, E. P. 1968. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1978a. "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History." *Indian Historical Review* 3(3):247-66.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1978b. "Eighteen-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" *Social History* 3(2): 133-65.

United Food and Commercial Workers Union. A) *A History of Discriminating Against Farmworkers*. Retrieved June 8, 2005

([http://www.ufcw.net/articles/docs/history\\_of\\_discriminating\\_against\\_farm\\_workers.html](http://www.ufcw.net/articles/docs/history_of_discriminating_against_farm_workers.html))

\_\_\_\_\_. B) *Agricultural Workers take Ontario Government to Court*. Retrieved May 12, 2005

([http://www.ufcw.ca/cgi-bin/full\\_story.cgi?story\\_id=1212&from\\_page=6](http://www.ufcw.ca/cgi-bin/full_story.cgi?story_id=1212&from_page=6))

Van der Mey, Albert. 2003. *Floral Passion*. Welland, Ont.: J. Van Kooten.

Wall, Ellen. 1994. Farm Labour Markets and the Structure of Agriculture. *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. 31 (1): 65-81.

Weber, Max. 1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charlie Scribner's Sons.

Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Willox, Paul. 1980. *The Capital Crisis and Labour*. Ph.D. dissertation, Uppsala University, Stockholm, Sweden.

Winson, Anthony. 1997. "Does Class Consciousness Exists in Rural Communities?

The Impact of Restructuring and Plant Shutdowns in Rural Canada." *Rural Sociology*. 62



(4): 429-453.

Winson, Anthony and Belinda Leach. 2002. *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1998. "History of Teleology? Marx versus Weber." in *Early Modern Social Theory*, edited by Murray E. G. Smith, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Yates, Charlotte. 1998. "Defining the Fault Lines: New Divisions in the Working Class." *Capital & Class*. Autumn (66):119-148.





---

**Brock University**

---

**Senate Research Ethics Board**

**Extensions 3943/3035, Room AS 302**

---

**DATE:** May 11, 2004

**FROM:** Joe Engemann, Chair  
Senate Research Ethics Board (REB)

**TO:** June Corman, Sociology  
Karen Hofman

**FILE:** 03-372, Hofman

**TITLE:** Working in the Greenhouse: Mapping Production Under the Glass

---

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION: Accepted as Clarified**

This project has been approved for the period of **May 11, 2004 to December 30, 2005** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The approval may be extended upon request. *The study may now proceed.*

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to [www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html](http://www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html) to complete the appropriate form **REB-03 (2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application**.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **REB-02 (2001) Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.









