

Injured Workers Consultants, Min Sook Lee Labour Arts Award, February 28, 2016

I'm so happy to have been invited to present the Injured Workers' Consultants with this Min Sook Lee, Mayworks award for their use of the arts to engaging the injured workers they represent.

Injured Workers' Consultants is a legal clinic.

The name prepares you for an office of lawyers and para-legal workers dedicated to fighting on behalf of people injured on the job - people routinely denied compensation by the WSIB. That's the Workplace Safety Insurance Board, as they so like to call themselves these days.

But from the name alone - Injured Workers' Consultants - you'd be hard pressed to imagine the passion, humour, and rage which motivates and sustains these folks. Nor does the name prepare you for the surprising forms of protest they employ in their struggle for justice.

At one of their demonstrations - depending on the season - you'd likely enough find a bunch of elves, complete with tasselled caps, out on the street advertising a Christmas bake sale on behalf of the poor WSIB which, as we all know, is totally broke when an injured worker needs compensation. Or you might see a golden toilet on display to represent the obscene bonus a provincial government appointee was offered for cutting off the compensation due to thousands of injured workers.

Over the years - and they've been at this for decades - Injured Workers' Consultants have become masters of satire.

But that's not all. It's not all satire. You might also hear the Justice Singers, a choir made up of injured workers, IWC staff, and a professional performer or two, singing a song as like as not composed by an injured worker.

And, if you're lucky, you might be invited to the IWC office to witness the speeches given by injured workers graduating from their "Speakers' School," - workers telling their own personal stories as well as the collective story of the injured workers' struggle for justice over many years. Story telling, of course, is at the very heart of the arts.

On top of all this, IWC commissioned the professionally-produced play, "Easy Money," a satirical piece, developed with Equity Actors by Kate Lushington in consultation with IWC, and premiered in 2005 right here at the Steelworkers for the Mayworks Festival.

In fact they've involved a number professional artists from various fields in their schemes. As well as Kate and me, there's Wally Brooker who co-nominated them for this award, Mike Constable, Kevin Barret, Marcello Puente, the late Arlene Mantle, among others.

In 1939 Bertolt Brecht wrote this poem.

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“In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.”

Injured Workers' Consultants represents workers who have been pushed into one of the darker corners of our own very dark times. And what do we find them doing? We find them singing - singing in many compelling ways as part of a passionate fight back. Thus they create light in the dark to encourage, not only those sisters and brothers who have been injured, but, through them, all of us.

And with that thought I want to introduce Orlando Buonestella, here to receive this award for the Injure Workers Consultants'.