

# INJURED WORKERS SPEAKERS SCHOOL

From Pain to Protest

By Oscar Vigil



ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

**J**OSE ESCOBAR WAS THE LAST TO come forward. He stood behind a makeshift podium, looking calm, and, with a measured voice, began to speak. His audience was made up of injured workers like himself, all gaining the confidence to voice and defend their rights.

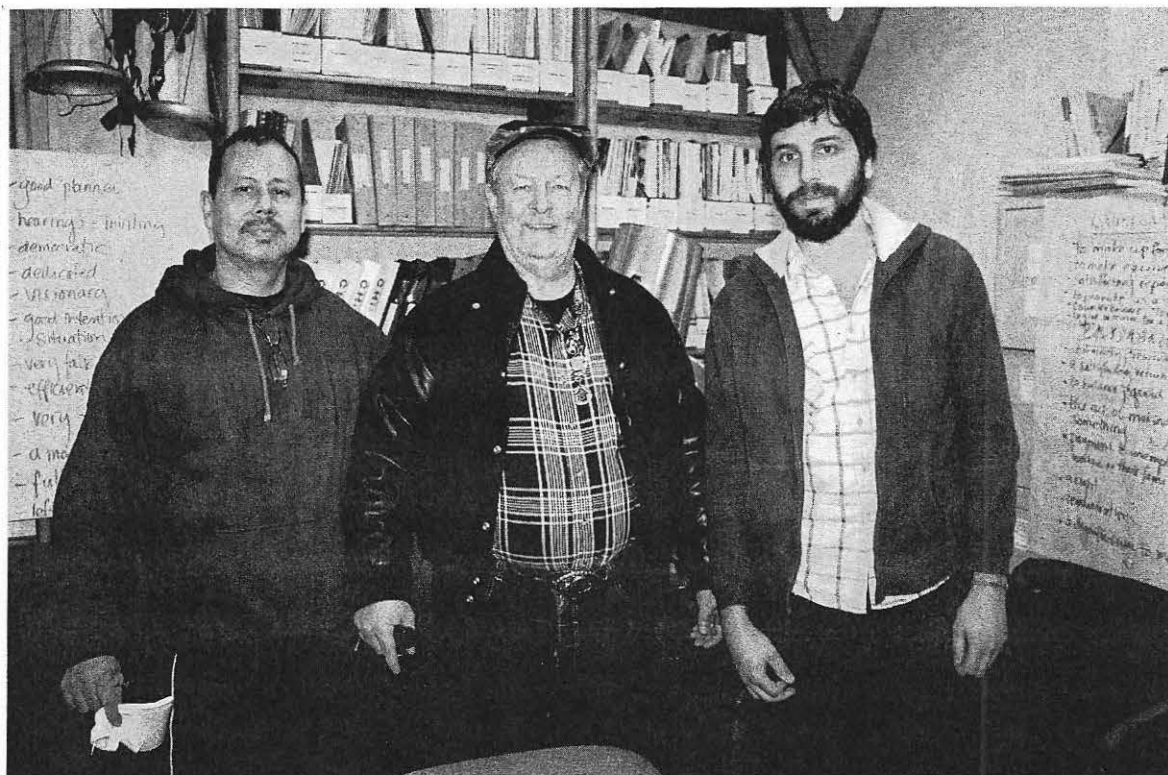
What Escobar did that night was something that, six months ago, the shy cleaner would have found almost impossible to do. "I've always been pretty timid," he says, "but here I have gradually been breaking those barriers, and they help you here. This course helps me enough that I can face the Board to let them know my situation."

Escobar is referring to the workers' compensation board (in Ontario, now called the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board). He is one of a growing number of workers injured in the workplace who are taking part in an innovative project called the Injured Workers Speakers School.

This project, rapidly expanding in its popularity, was born as a result of a combination of different experiments.

The Injured Worker Speakers Bureau was initiated in Toronto in 2006 by Steve Mantis, an injured worker advocate from Thunder Bay, Ontario. He is also the community leader of the Research Action Alliance on the Consequences of Workplace Injury, which has partially funded this project as part of its mandate to empower injured workers, and to work in collaboration with academic researchers.

The Speakers Bureau began weekly meetings in the winter of 2007 in Toronto, with volunteer teachers and a vision of teaching speaking skills through group participation. At the same time, another group had been studying injured worker history and activism in three all-day sessions spread over several months at Injured Workers Consultants (IWC), a community legal clinic that assists injured workers. "We decided to combine the two ideas,"



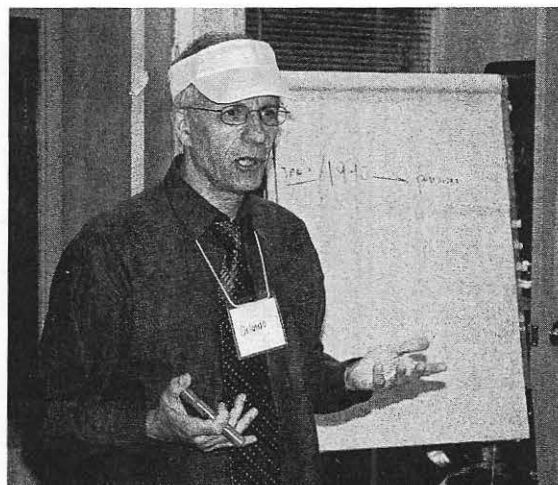
Jose Escobar (left), Eddie Tilley (centre) and Alex Cohen (right) were classmates in the Injured Workers Speakers School.

says IWC organizer Orlando Buonastella, who played a key role in the creation of the Injured Workers Speakers School. "A history school and a speaking school: one that gave injured workers the confidence to speak, while learning the principles and history of workers' compensation, and the history of the injured workers' movement."

Steve Mantis, who lost his left arm in 1978 in a construction accident, began working on injured worker issues soon after, when he realized how many people weren't being treated fairly by the public system. At the time, he looked around and thought, "Who's going to hire a one-armed carpenter?" So, he started a small construction company, to help support his family. In 1984, six years after he lost his arm, he happened to come across an ad in the local newspaper saying the government was planning to change the worker's compensation system, and, if anybody was interested, that there would be a public meeting.

Mantis was living in Kaministiquia at the time, a rural area just outside of Thunder Bay, and he decided to attend this meeting. Someone at the meeting said: "This is what the government is planning to do and we think there's real problems with it; we think it's not going to be fair to you guys and we think you should figure out more about it and make your own choice."

At the end of the meeting a local union activist said, "Hey, anybody that wants to get involved with this, come and sign up." Mantis signed up and has been involved ever since, working for the last 28 years to try and improve what happens to people



Orlando Buonastella, an organizer with Injured Workers Consultants, helped found the Injured Workers Speakers School, and is one of its volunteer teachers.

who suffer injuries at work, to make the system better for everybody. The Injured Workers Speakers School is the apple of his eye.

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Mariam Williamson was working one day at a factory when she slipped on a liquid that had been spilled on the floor, and she fell. She lost consciousness. At first, despite the pain in different parts of her body, she didn't notice she had been seriously injured. It took over two years and about a dozen medical tests to discover that she had dislocated her arm.

She is now unemployed, and believes the system is not fair to her. "First of all, they send me to train

## When I came here I found out that I can speak and someone listens

for a job. But if I move around a lot and then sit down, my left side swells and I end up in the emergency room. So, then I cannot go. My doctor says, 'Stop, you cannot go for training.' So I stopped. But workers' compensation is not fair; they always push you and push you. They don't remember that, before you were injured, you were working! When you get injured, they don't want to care."

Williamson says she didn't know what to do, so she went to the Ontario Labour Relations Board. "I asked them, 'What should I do? What's my compensation? Look at what happened to me with my employer!' They said, 'Go to the Injured Workers' office,' and gave me a number to come here."

It was the best thing that happened to her in a long time.

"When I came here I found out that at least I feel that I'm comfortable; I can speak, I can express myself and someone listens. Now I come here to learn how to talk and also so they can voice for me what I cannot speak for myself. They are there to help me learn to do this," she says.

That is the idea of the Injured Workers Speakers School: to give voice to injured workers so they can defend their rights. Buonastella, who has been working in this area for over 30 years, says at the school they teach the workers not only how to speak, but also

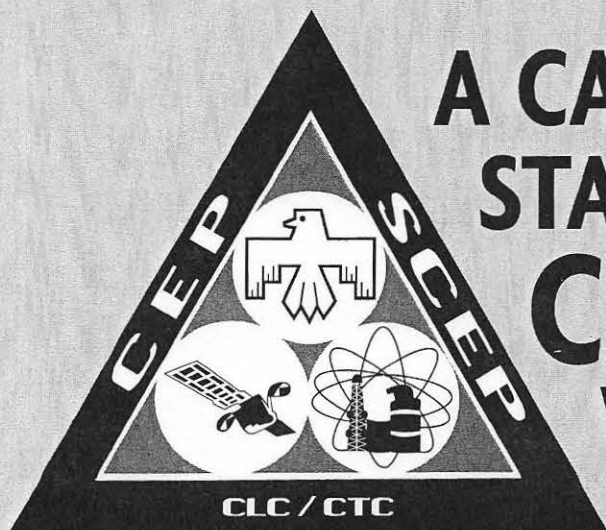


Miriamu Williamson (centre) graduated from the Injured Workers Speakers School, in Toronto, along with Felipe Santos (left) and Tewduda Ibrahim (right).

how to organize, and come together.

"We teach them principles of workers' compensation, that's one area; the history of workers' compensation, and the injured workers' movement would be the second area; and speaking skills would be the third area. We spend a lot of time teaching people the ideas of the founder of the workers' compensa-

PHOTOGRAPH: OSCAR VIGIL



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Left to right: Constanza Duran (IWC staff), Audrey Parkes (IWC staff, as well as speakers school student), Steve Mantis, Eddie Tilley, Alex Cohen, Mariamu Williamson, Orlando Buonastella. Standing: Tewduda Ibrahim.

tion system, William Ralph Meredith. He was the chief justice of Ontario in 1913, and the ideas contained in his report were ideas of a progressive government that was interested in social justice and avoiding class warfare."

Kate Lushington, a professional theatre director who came to volunteer to teach speaking skills for one night at the school in 2007 and remained working there, uses popular theatre techniques to teach history to the injured workers. In the third class of the program, the students are presented with a play put together by McMaster labour history professor Robert Story from the transcripts of the Royal Commission through which Meredith devised the principles of workers' compensation.

"People come in with costumes and props," says Lushington, "and show the true story of how workers'

compensation started." The play uses the real words of Judge Meredith and the actual people who gave opinions to him. There is Mr. Hunt, who lost an arm and can't get compensation; Fred Bancroft of the Trades and Labour Congress; and Mr. Wegenast of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association. He is the "villain" of the piece, making many of the arguments we still hear today: blaming the injured workers for their injuries, and declaring compensation will cost too much. But the most important thing about the play is that the judge listens to both sides, and then makes what is called the "Historic Compromise": injured workers gave up their right to sue employers in return for just compensation.

At the Injured Workers Speakers School, each course runs for 12-14 sessions and culminates in a graduation night where workers give speeches at a

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## People are often very frustrated by the bureaucracy and by the pain and isolation from the injury

public celebration, with feedback from a panel consisting of local MPPs, union activists, researchers, and sometimes journalists.

The final class is the graduation ceremony. "I've been to a bunch of them now and every time they thrill me," says Steve Mantis, "because you see the transformation that's happened in the last three or four months with these people — it's just amazing, and heart-warming."

All the injured worker graduates make a speech at the ceremony, and they are encouraged to not only tell their personal story, but to frame it in a larger, political context. Says Mantis: "We encourage people to address an issue they are faced with in their own life and set it within a larger context of the history that we provided earlier. So, the idea is to tell your story, but tell it in the context of a larger story so that people will hear it, and it will have an impact. This is not just about you, it's about a larger issue and it's one that we all need to be concerned about."

Earlier on in the school program, when Jose Escobar, whose first language is not English, first stepped forward to give a speech, he couldn't finish it. Halfway through, his voice broke and he simply said, "I cannot more," folding the paper on which he had written his notes and returning to his seat.



PHOTOGRAPH: OSCAR VIGIL

Left to right: Marion Endicott (IWC staff), Steve Mantis, Orlando Buonastella, Audrey Parkes. Steve Mantis is secretary of the Ontario Network of Injured Workers Groups (ONIWG).

His colleagues applauded him nonetheless, and the facilitators spoke of the normality of the situation. This was the sixth class, right in the middle of the course, and is what happens sometimes, with workers who have not only lost some of their physical abilities and their paid work, but have also lost much of their self-esteem.

Orlando Buonastella says, "one of our mottos is moving from venting — from being mad about things — to convincing. People are often very frustrated by the bureaucracy; they're frustrated by the pain and isolation from the injury. We want to help them become positive: to communicate and to

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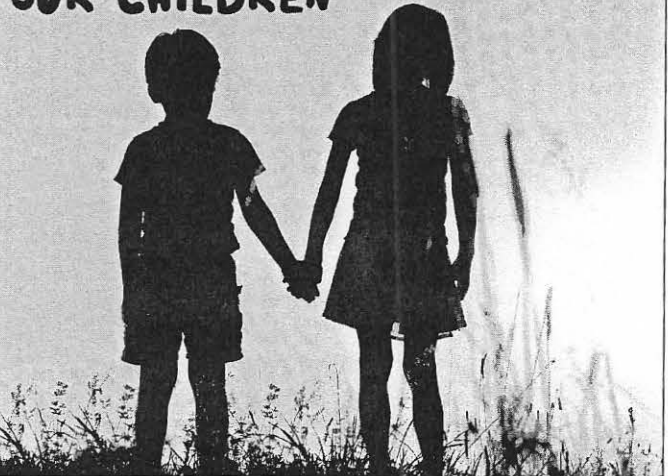


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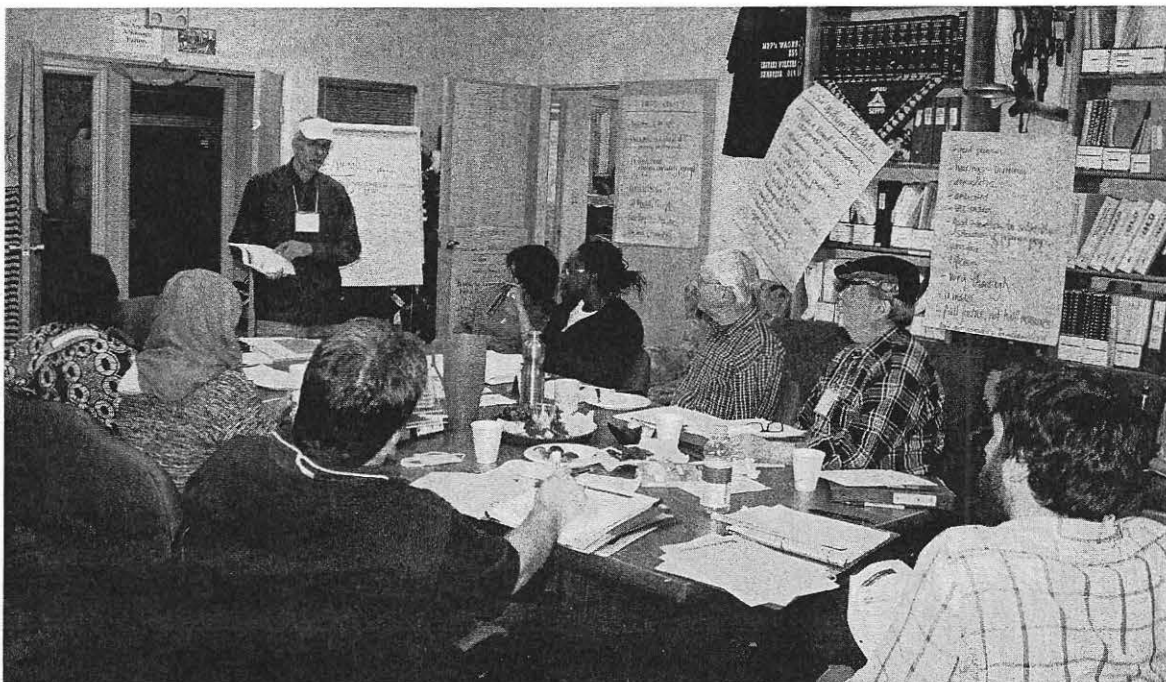
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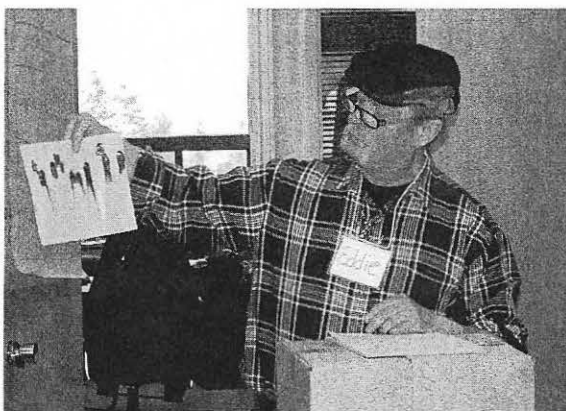
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Each Injured Workers Speakers School course runs for 12-14 sessions and culminates in a graduation night where workers give speeches at a public celebration, with feedback from a panel consisting of local MPPs, union activists, researchers, and sometimes journalists.



Professional theatre director Kate Lushington (front, centre, with May 2011 speakers school participants and teachers) uses popular theatre techniques to teach history to injured workers.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY IWC

LEFT: Injured worker Eddie Tilley attended the Injured Workers Speakers School this year.

make alliances; we want to help bring people around to the cause of justice."

Jose Escobar fell at work in 2005 while going down some steps, and broke his shoulder. He says he has always been shy, but argues that his self-confidence is "in process." "We are halfway in the school. Here, they help me feel self-confidence; to talk, and to express my problem and my situation. The fear is going slowly. As they say, practice makes perfect."

Escobar's frustration not only comes from a sense of loss, and from dealing with bureaucracy, but also in his sense that his own people turned their backs on him. "Mine is a sad story because I am fighting against everything," he says. "I belong to a union, but they said I had no case." And he didn't find the labour board, nor his employer of 23 years, supportive. "It hurts, it makes me feel horrible," says Escobar. "And when you have physical problem — your pain, your disability, can make you no longer able to speak fluently, like a normal person."

"A large proportion of people who have a permanent injury are suffering really significantly, financially, spiritually, emotionally, physically," says Steve Mantis. "In the surveys we do with our membership, two-thirds of the people say they're depressed; they admit it."

Still, the Injured Workers Speakers School is precisely working with the unions.

"Actually, it's a union that pays the cost for this year's program," says Buonastella. "And a union rep was part of the school." He says injured workers' experience with their unions is mixed. "Unions do a good job with injured workers, but injured workers who can't return to work are isolated from the union, so there's a whole section there that needs attention. Still, they are supporting the school because they see a need for this."

Buonastella says that "many unions are critical of themselves because there's a whole sector of workers that lose connection with the union. But, we need



to work with the unions in solidarity. And, I tell you, some unions are now adopting the Injured Workers Speakers School."

Accordingly to the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada, the number of claims reported in 2010 was 774,611 and in 2009 were 799,296. That means, according to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, that one in every 65 employed workers in 2009 was injured or harmed on the job and received workers' compensation as a result.

Following the Toronto model implemented in 2007, an Injured Workers Speakers School was opened in Thunder Bay in 2008, and another one was opened in Hamilton, Ontario, in 2010. By 2011, schools were being held in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Sarnia, Niagara, St. Catharines and Muskoka. And Canadian Auto Workers Local 444 is opening a speakers school in Windsor, Ontario, this year.

Mantis says the core format of the school remains the same, wherever it is held: "the leadership training, the public speaking training, the history component, and the atmosphere of doing it in a peer-supportive environment." But as the program expands, it is also changing all the time, depending on the people involved. "I just learned today there's going to be a program offered in Chinese in the fall," says Mantis. It has since, in fact, started, in Toronto.

Once school ends, Buonastella says many of the injured workers remain involved. "They don't just finish the school and go home. They speak up, and,

you know what? They speak up with knowledge, which is something that the compensation board officials have noticed. Our students know their history better than some of them do, and it challenges them."

The schools help the workers break through their isolation, and they continue to talk with each other after graduation. "And some of them become leaders of the injured workers movement," says Buonastella. "They become mentors to other injured workers; they become spokespeople for the injured workers movement." And some of them come back to lead the speakers schools.

That's the idea of the school, Mantis says. "To train activists, to train people to take more control over their lives, and be active participants in the future."

Oscar Vigil is an internationally trained journalist from El Salvador living in Toronto. He came to Canada in 2001, bringing over 20 years of journalistic experience in Latin America. He is currently director of the print and online magazine *RevistaDebate.ca*, and is involved with Journalists in Exile.

For more information about the Injured Workers Speakers School and how to start one up, contact Orlando Buonastella at Injured Workers Consultants: (416)461-2411. Email: [buonasto@lao.on.ca](mailto:buonasto@lao.on.ca).

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