

Interview transcript

Aude Langlois: Welcome everyone, thank for listening to RadioVoz. I'm here with Patricia Cazenave, who is in charge of professional development and training at IRMO, the Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation. First things first, thanks for talking to me today Patricia. And, well, I thought we could start off by talking a bit about you and your role within IRMO.

Patricia Cazenave: Nice to meet you, it's a pleasure to do this interview with you. What is my role within IRMO? As you mentioned, my specific role involves professional development and training. I help people to change from the sector they work in. For instance, I don't know if you're aware of this, I would imagine that you are given that you know the community; but the majority of Latin Americans in this country work in the cleaning sector. Only 2% of them have done this in the past, and they have training and experience in other sectors. But upon arriving here without speaking English, these jobs are the ones that are the most readily available to them to start working, and for various reasons, they end up stuck, they stay in this sector for a really long time and are unable to get out. So, the idea is to give them the tools that they need and help them get out of this sector, before anything else.

I help men who speak either Spanish or Portuguese, not necessarily Latin Americans, because IRMO now helps anyone who speaks these languages, so it's not just Latin America, they can come from Spain, Portugal, Angola, or well, you know... I help them return to the construction sector, in which most of them have already worked before, both in Spain, which was their first emigration destination, and in Latin America.

The other strand is primarily for Latin Americans, but as I said, for anyone who speaks Spanish or Portuguese, who have a university diploma or professional experience overseas, and who have a good English level. It's a fundamental requisite. And it's people who have been stuck in a job that they don't like for a really long time. And when you look at their curriculum and hear them speaking English, you think, there is no reason for them not to find a job that they like... but they can't. Because of a bunch of different situations and circumstances, they can't find a way to navigate the system in order to find something and understand the British labour system.

And well, these are the two strands of the project... that would be it essentially.

AL: You already talked about this a bit, gave some examples of activities when talking about your project. But maybe you could give some other examples of projects and services that IRMO provides more generally?

PC: For example, in terms of training, beyond what I do, we give English classes. It's called English for work. That's essentially the training bit... I also do employment, but in IRMO more generally, we do job hunting. We have someone here, we have an agreement with the National Career Service, and someone comes in twice a week and helps anyone who wants this help. We also have a volunteer who follows up with people for everything that is related to job hunting, CV writing, writing cover letters, doing mock interviews... And, beyond this, we have a bit that consists in giving advice, in immigration particularly, but also taxes, benefits...

AL: Yes, I think it's interesting, when I was checking out your website, that the organisation describes itself as "human rights oriented" or something like that, so you have a very legal

outlook, and that's what shows when you talk about the advice part, right? Making sure that people know their rights and are aware of how the legal system works here...

PC: Absolutely. On my side of things, particularly, given that my project has specific outcomes, I want to make sure that people are offered jobs where they earn the London Living Wage. Which is the bare minimum for people not to be poor. Strictly speaking, it's not a concept of mine, it's an economic concept. We're talking about in-work poverty... this concept doesn't exist in Spanish, but it's people that work fulltime, and still remains poor. Why is that? Because they earn very little. So, my main objective at the moment is to make sure they make £10.20. But IRMO, as an organisation, beyond my project, we don't want them to only earn £10.20, we want to take them out of this sector where they are exploited and abused, and this is a topic we can touch on in a bit.

I worry a lot about talking to them about their rights as workers, despite the fact that I'm not any sort of official counsel. Meaning that if they come to me with a work issue, I'm not going to tell them that they have to do this and that, I don't have the capacity to do that. However, I can tell them the basics, I'm going to read their contract, because of course, they have contracts in English, even though they don't understand it... It's the first time in my life that I've seen that a contract remains valid even though one of the parts doesn't understand what it says! I tell them that it's important for them to unionize, so that they can defend their rights, but not only when they have a problem. Of course, if you already have a problem, they can help you, but also, even when one doesn't have an issue, we have to be aware of the fact that we can have one in the future and that, even if we never have one, we have to show solidarity...

AL: Yes, of course...

PC: So, these would be the projects. Oh! And one for young people... to help young people, just like what I do, to retrain and get the capacities they need to study, not to get a job. There are also a lot of Latin Americans teenagers who come here, generally from Spain, and don't have a spot in school. So, to make sure they don't feel too isolated and all, they come here and they can do all sorts of activities together. And also, there are children who come here, who do not speak English, but attend school. So, they come here for afterschool support and we help them with their homework, help them with their reading and writing...

AL: So, this is linked to the Queen Mary studies you had mentioned to me... the topic of the Latin American community's invisibility. Meaning that, in spite of being a major group, especially in London, their contributions to the economic, social and cultural life of the city haven't been recognised. And well, I thought we could talk a bit about the causes of this phenomenon, and maybe also about whether this has gotten better over the past few years, or gotten worse with the economic crisis, or stayed basically the same.

PC: Going back to the fact that they work in the cleaning sector, yeah? Given the realities of this sector, I think that... well, I was thinking about this questions, why do people not see us, why are we invisible? I think it's because the majority works in the cleaning sector, in which they work at very antisocial times. It's done at night, or in the early morning, when they can't socialize with anyone, they don't see anyone. And also, the fact that they work so many hours, so many hours... and at such antisocial times, well, that means that their social life isn't very rich. They can't enjoy the things that we do, going out and all... not just because they don't have the time, or because of the antisocial working schedule, but simply because they don't have the energy.

AL: Of course, they're exhausted...

PC: Exactly! Some of them will work fulltime in a company, but that's a privilege... most of them, the most common situation is that they work 2 hours in different places. Just think about it. They spend their entire day travelling. Completely isolated. They go to one company, they clean, they go to another company, they travel by themselves, or in small groups among themselves. It's impossible to socialize. And then, they can't learn English.

AL: Of course, because of the antisocial working hours, as you said, and yeah, the issue of energy as well...

PC: Of course, it's just that there are no English classes that they can go to! Because they're in the daytime or... And here, a lot of them come here and eat during the class, some of them fall asleep. So, that too. They want to learn, they register to English classes, but no... they have to leave, or they skip class, because they're too tired, and yeah...

Their jobs are also generally unstable, of course, they don't have a contract, or they don't know what it says, and it's always precarious. It's part time or zero hours... all of them are zero hours. And so, sometimes they can go to classes, sometimes they can't, and well... they don't learn English.

AL: Yes, and that's how they end up quite isolated...

PC: And they socialize between themselves! First of all, as an immigrant, when you feel bad, when you are in a pretty precarious situation, working a job that you don't like, that you just don't feel good... it's a respectable job like any other, but they don't want it, because they've done other things in life! The women, before coming here and working as cleaners, generally in Spain, they were carers, for the elderly or for children, they were nannies... What else did they do? They were nurses...

AL: Yes, completely different.

PC: And as a result, they feel bad. And when you feel bad, I think it's natural... well, what do you need? You need to be with your people. And if you're not with your family, you need to be with your culture, in order to feel, just eat the food from your country, or speak your own language, I don't know.

And now I think that, well, when I read this question I started thinking, and now, what are we doing to be more visible? I think that topics like the campaigns related to the London Living Wage and outsourcing in such big companies, such shameless companies, well, that catches people's attention. "Oh, look! In the Daily Mail, the cleaners from the Daily Mail are Latin American! Latin American? We have Latin Americans here?" When you tell people that there are Latin Americans in this country, people look at you and go, where? They don't see us. We're not there. And so, I think that this can help bring visibility to the community. That the people that clean everything after you, well they're from Latin America. "Wow, Brazil, Colombia, so cool!" Yes, sure, very cool... They have no idea that we're here, it's quite funny. I don't know if we're really quiet, or... Even I can't find them!

AL: Alright, I wanted to ask you about the topic of language, even though we already covered this a bit...

PC: Yes, so we give classes, and also, on Tuesdays for example, from 3 to 6, during three hours, we do “chit chat” classes. And you don’t need to register for these.

You have to take into account how they perceive themselves within society. The way you perceive yourself... we’re talking about people who aren’t just immigrants, they’re also from the third world, they’re poor, some of them, not all of them since we come in all sorts of shades over there, but a lot of them have quite dark skin, they’re women... So, each aspect adds itself on top of the others, and that affects how they feel, how they’re perceived, and their perception of themselves is affected by what people have told them. A lot don’t feel this way, but a lot of them do. And you can see that in their self-esteem. If you have low self-esteem, if you don’t feel confident... why? Because you’ve been through all sorts of things throughout your life, and people have told you a bunch of things, that you can’t, that you shouldn’t, that you have no right, and so these sorts of things, that we personally can’t understand, but that they have gone through... For instance, when they take English tests, to know their level for example, they do great on the tests! But then they don’t speak a single word. It’s super important to work on that. I work on it in my mentoring program. Here, I’m talking about people who have studied, who have a good English level... But of course, after going through so much stress and all the other things they have faced when coming here, for whatever reason, not necessarily because they had a major need or because of some huge catastrophe, but... it’s hard to be an immigrant!

AL: Yes... I thought maybe we could talk a bit about Brexit. Well, of course, it affects mainly Europeans.

PC: A lot of them are European...

AL: Yes, exactly, that’s why I thought it’d be relevant. Because, of course, a lot of Latin American people also have Spanish passports, or from Portugal maybe as well. So, with this, I would imagine that it created some real anguish, just like for other immigrants here, and so... are there specific topics that IRMO considers to be particularly important? I would imagine everything that is linked to immigration...

PC: It’s a really important topic. In 2016, the day after... I wasn’t there, but the day after Brexit, this place was full. It was extremely difficult for us to say something, because there was nothing that could be said, the entire world was on edge! You have to start working and keep yourself updated, it was a really hard time for everybody. We tried to advise people... We handled it as best we could, obviously, the requests for meetings regarding immigration quadrupled. Why? Because we have a lot of Latin Americans with mainly Spanish passports, but also some with Portuguese, Italian ones. So, of course, they’re affected on that side of things. What can be done?

Specifically, in my project, in my personal experience, the guys started saying “now that they don’t want us here, that they’re going to kick us out, I don’t want to learn English. What’s the point? I’m going to keep working a lot, even more in cleaning, I’m going to get more work so I can save more money, so I can go back to Spain. Or go back to Latin America.” It makes sense. They feel rejected, they were never really welcome in the first place... Why would they learn English, grow and bet on this place in the long-term if you don’t know? Total uncertainty. We have no idea what’s going to happen...

AL: Exactly, you have no vision...

PC: Yeah, long-term vision. That's my experience. Then, we've seen people leave already, people are leaving. A lot of communities are leaving; Polish people are going away... And, yeah, people are going away, but there are also people that are coming in. Why? Because we don't know what's going to happen, but since it hasn't happened yet, let's go in now.

AL: And we'll see later.

PC: Yeah, we'll see what happens. So, what we're seeing in IRMO, it's both things. People who have been here for a while, they're leaving because of what happened, because of the uncertainty, because they don't want to get kicked out and they just want to find a solution right away; but also, people who are coming in now, a lot of new people, before they, well... put up the wall. So, that's what's been happening because of Brexit. And we keep them updated constantly, whenever the Home Office, because the Home Office sends to all the organizations that are signed up as immigration advisors official updates on what is going on. Real updates, not what's being said on TV. Real updates on all the changes and all the news that are going on, we get them. So, if they're important, not if they're very technical legal issues, but if they're important news, we analyse them, we translate them, and we send them out to everyone.

Ever since it happened, we've hosted several talks on Brexit. That way, we get rid of doubts because people say all sorts of things. So, what we do is that we have official conferences, where either we or people who know more on the topic talk about it. And the requests for meetings regarding immigration really went up, because people are trying to become permanent residents. That's what we advise. Permanent residency. But, who knows, it's possible that it'll have to be ratified again when we leave. Nothing is sure yet. But regardless, that's what we recommend to people, if you meet all the criteria, do it, and then we'll see once Brexit happens – if it even happens – we'll see what happens, but we tell people to take care of it so they can have some certainty. Yeah, these are the consequences...

AL: Great, I think we're going to start wrapping up...

PC: Just, one thing, before you asked (*in reference to the questions I sent her before the interview*) "are there issues that IRMO considers to be particularly important and/or alarming for the community's wellbeing?" I would say housing. It's an incredibly important issue for the community. It's really serious. It's really expensive, they find themselves in irregular situations, they don't speak English... people take advantage of them, make them pay the same as I do for a lovely house in Brixton, but for a shared room. They abuse them, because they don't understand what's going on, they can't read the contracts, if they even have one... The landlords take advantage of them, they live in overcrowded places, sometimes you have three families in a single place...

AL: It's like, nobody declares that they're living there... They find themselves in irregular situations, and because of that, it's a lot easier to take advantage of them of course.

PC: Exactly. Just picture it, and now it's becoming increasingly difficult for them to even open a bank account. It's really, really complicated...

AL: Yes, of course... well, thank you so much for speaking to me.

PC: You're welcome, it was so nice to speak to you.

AL: And, well, thank you for listening to RadioVoz, and... yeah, thank you, goodbye!

PC: Ciao!