

Oscar Lopez

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OL: My name is Oscar Lopez. I am from El Salvador. I am 36 years old. I am married in El Salvador and three children. I coming here almost three years five months ago, May 5, 2007.

Q: What are you doing here?

OL: I work in Olymel for the meat, actually hogs. This is what I doing over there. I work in Olymel for two years four months.

Q: Tell me about life in El Salvador.

OL: I am born May 7, 1974, and San Salvador is the city in El Salvador. My mom's name is Alicia Calderon; my father is Oscar Armando Lopez. I living with my grandpa because my dad passed away a month after me born. I live almost for 33 years with my grandpa and my grandpa and actually my mom. I have marry in 1994. Most of the time working in the construction. My grandpa is engineer. I am carpenter in El Salvador. The life in El Salvador right now I don't want to say is better, because before for the work it's difficult. Now the big problem in my country is the gangster coming from the U.S. actually. This is called the *Mara Salvatrucha*, stuff like that, is making my country really bad. The government 10 or 12 years ago decide change the money before my money in El Salvador is caught on. Ten years ago the government change for American dollar. The situation no get better, get bad, because everything is coming up – gas, the bill, everything. Right now people working in El Salvador a monthly get \$115 as the base; \$115 American is the salary base.

Q: Give me some idea of what some things cost.

OL: For example, beans for pound is \$3. The bus in my country is 35 cents dollar. Depend what kind of bus, because a little van is \$1. Meal, one liter of the meal is cost \$3. People need to get two jobs and many children is not go to school because the parents don't have enough money for pay the school. Some school is from the government, but you have to pay some money. This is the one reason that my country is mainly children no reading and no writing because I can't go to school.

Q: Do they have children working?

OL: Generally yes. You can see children on the highway with try to sell vegetable or children try to cleaning cars or children working in farms in my country. Or children working for ? in my children. Many children die actually doing this kind of job because it's so danger; but I don't have choice. Actually you see children still starve because I don't have money, I don't have food. The same is for the house in my country: big population and I don't have money I can save for rental apartment and stuff like that. In my country you can see house making about laminate, plastic, or cardboard. People get sick and die faster because actually they hospital is not too much help. You can go to hospital probably for broken leg, stuff like that. You have to wait for five hour for one doctor come and see to you. So it's difficult. The life in my country--this is the reason most people decide to go other countries. Most of the people is go the U.S.

Q: Were you a member of a trade union?

OL: I a member of the union in my country. I working for the union in my country. One is called, what is the name, I forgot the name actually. I working many time but the problem with the union in my country is the kind of union. The company give thousand dollar and you quiet. So the union is easy people give money and shut up. This is the

reason it's not too much members in the union in El Salvador. At the same time it's danger, because when this union get a fire for something for some strike in some company, people die in there.

Q: What do you mean, people die?

OL: Well people don't like companies go on strike. The life in my country is probably say like animal. People who is the more power and people is easy for pay somebody for kill other people. I can say 12 or 15 years ago actually in one union in one local die almost 36 people, and the different kind the unions put one bomb inside and kill many people. This is the reason many people don't like stay with the union. What it says about the union getting money from the companies, they said the union quiet. This is the reason the people not trust for the union in my country.

Q: Why don't they change unions?

OL: Because the problem in my country is the rich have more power and the rich decide, not the union decide. I can't get out of that kind of union in El Salvador. One is called SUTCC is one the big power in El Salvador. And there are many kind of union, for example, for people for employs the commercial and employers in *maquilas*. So all this says different kind of union, but always have problem. The union never help people. The union is most with the company than employees.

Q: You mentioned that young people are dying.

OL: The big problem right now in my country is about the gangster coming from the U.S., called MS 13 and MS 18. This guy now decide get money free from the families is called *Renta*. People call the family and say, I need \$500 monthly or somebody in your family die. Actually this kind of case I can see here in Olymel when some Salvadorians

have to send some money for this gangster because he already call here and say, you know what, I know you in Canada; you have to send me \$500 monthly or some of your family die. I have three friends that already have this kind of problem. The gangster try to get all the childrens, especially girl. Almost three weeks ago in my country found four bodies of girls 16, 15, 14, and 15. The four don't have the head. That one is horrible in my country. People ? this guy, you told the police, next day your family has died because these people have more power than the government. Almost a month and a half ago these people decide stop the transport in my country because the government change they held these people. So these people decide to say, no buses for today and no buses. I can see the power for this guy, because this guy is not using knife. This guy have better guns than the government. Everything is coming from outside El Salvador.

Q: Do you plan to bring your family here?

OL: Yes. One of my ambition when the company told me they need people here is because the company give me the opportunity the PMP program for getting my family here. So it's open for me and this is the reason I decide coming at this country, because I want all my children here.

Q: How were you recruited in El Salvador?

OL: In my case actually I have one uncle and one auntie here that's living for 25 years in Red Deer. My auntie is working for this company, Travelaire, and she help many Salvadorians for coming here. She talks to the company and they give me the opportunity to bring me here. So this is the reason I am here, because my auntie helped me.

Q: How did the company bring you here?

OL: The company send me letter, the contract, everything what I need to do. I had to go, well people from El Salvador, I had to go Guatemala, because in El Salvador I don't have advice. The consul is coming only one time a week, the Canadian Consul. So I had to go Guatemala for get interviews, all the stuff you need. The company had explain special when you not speaking English, had explain, I don't need you speaking English, but when you coming here you have to learn. So that's the one rule that's in the contract.

Q: Who did you talk to in Guatemala?

OL: When I go to Guatemala, the first time I had to talk to some consul, this woman, I don't remember her name, Canadian Conul. My first problem is because the consul is speaking English. So I had to call here the company and say, the consul decide no give me the visa because no speaking English. So the company had to call again the government here for tell that I don't need people speaking English, and send me all the letter. So I had to go for second time, and when the consul see the paper, immediately getting my visa for coming here.

Q: You got a temporary work permit.

OL: Temporary work permit, yes. Actually my first is for two years.

Q: Did the permit have Olymel on it?

OL: When the company give me the... this company Travelaire here first time, so when I got that one I coming here, I leaving from my country Friday, May 4th and I coming Toronto almost 11 o'clock p.m. and I coming here Calgary May 5. So I coming here May 5. I start working the 7th for Travelaire.

Q: What is Travelaire?

OL: Travelaire company is building mobile house. It actually is the one rule in the contract, because when this company tried to get in myself I need to prove that I work in the carpenter for in El Salvador. So I had to give the consul in Guatemala many pictures; when the children were tiny they're working in many construction; and some letters from the companies working before.

Q: Did your temporary work permit have Travelaire written on it?

OL: At the time, yes.

Q: How long did you work for Travelaire?

OL: I working actually for eight months, because twice go on strike because the American dollar is coming down and all the trailers is going to U.S., sell in the U.S. So the company had to closing twice. I working four months, out for two months, and the last I working for another four months. After the company is, one of the rule in this country is the people the more seniority stay in the company. So I had to decide to ? all the working out of the company. The company helped for everybody get a job in different company, and this is the one where I get a job, in Olymel.

Q: When did you start working at Olymel?

OL: My first introduce in Olymel I got it in April, 2008, and I started working on May 21, 2008 in Olymel.

Q: What was it like when you came to Canada?

OL: My first impression is here it's cool. In my country the temperature is plus 35. Those low temperatures plus 27. You never see temperature that's zero. When I coming here, I can tell it's so cool, because I coming in May. So the time has not changed complete, and I see for the first time the snow. I am so happy I can say, because I never saw in reality, on TV and stuff like that. But this country is safe, and I like because you can go to 12, 1 o'clock in the night, and you not have too much worry. In my country, 7 o'clock is when you stay in your home because you go outside, somebody steals your money and stuff like that. Here I can say you're free to go wherever you want. One of the big problem with coming here is because I never speaking English. It's difficult when you understood absolutely nothing. When you need something, you have to try to look sometimes for somebody to help to you. Sometimes people rude, say no I can't help to you. People the same country, because I saw that one actually in Olymel. The people living here for 25 years is like, I don't have time for you. You here for five years and you not speaking English. Well I here for three years four months. Probably my English is not 80%, not 70%, but I try all the time. I like the language. The only problem for people from other country is you have the translate at the same time in your mind.

Q: Is there a translator working in the plant?

OL: Yes. There's many people who help for translator. Actually I have one more from the union is Salvadorian is here for five years, and is one of the translators in the company. This is my job in Olymel about the union – help people when these people not understood, especially now most these guys got family here and the first job they get is Olymel. No speaking English; no any company carry people not speaking English here.

Q: Is it problematic at work when you can't speak English?

OL: Yes, especially when you work with knife, you have big problem, because you not understood what the training try to tell you in your job. Sometimes you make trouble

because you do stuff that you no have to do. People sometimes, you try to say something and people yes, yes, because it's the only understood, yes. People not realize the trouble got in for that one.

Q: Do people get angry at you for "taking their job"?

OL: I have very bad experience when I come in Olymel, honestly. When my foreman give me my area working, my area working is called fancy meat. I working on cure floor as the area cool and kill floor, because most of the areas the heat is plus 15, 20, 25. In this area the heat is plus 5. Most of the time it's coming down, it's like a freezer. So I remember the Canadian guy, my foreman, told you, you have the training ??? and in the ???. The first pronunciation the guy coming is, I don't want to help F people. I don't understand the first time when the guy told you like that, but when other people told me what it say, I am really angry. I no coming for take the position of anybody; I coming for working the same everybody. The only problem is no speaking English at the time. But I saw many people racist about the immigrant people because of thinking they're coming to take their place. Honestly, Canadian people don't like working in this company. The job is too hard and probably people never working like that. Most of the people coming from other country is coming there working on job hard. That's the reason people, I don't say I like 100%, but the job is good. You have good benefits and you have job. People don't like working probably too hard. I work in the ?, sometimes working 45 hour and no go sleep because I had to finish some job. Probably go sleep in my house for three hours, I had to come back and continue working. So my life is working, working, working. I have three children in my country to spend everything. I had to continue working.

Q: How do people treat you out in the community?

OL: The first time it's difficult because people know, the physical the people here are many Filipinos, Spanish people. These two kind of country sometimes people think

you're Filipino or you're Salvadorian or you're Latino. So sometimes people don't want to speak with you because probably you not speaking the same language. I can say most of my friends in Olymel, 80% of my friends in Olymel, is more Filipinos. Not because speaking the language – I speaking English with all these guy, because that's the only language can understood. I understood some speaking with these guy, because the Tagalog I have 35% pronunciation like Spanish. But most of my time speaking in English.

Q: How did you come to Olymel on a temporary work permit? Are you permanent now?

OL: Not yet.

Q: Explain that.

OL: I come with the temporary working. My first permit working actually is prior; in May this year I already got my new work permit. But the thing is I give the opportunity, well one of the rule is for the contract is you had to go at the school for learning English. Actually you go inside the PMP program. You have one level, about four tests you have to do. The company is give to you every for working the teacher for everybody go the school after working. I have six hour every week. So I go to school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Q: Where are you going to school?

OL: Inside Olymel. Olymel have the classroom and the teacher is from Olymel for teaching everybody. I go to school for six months actually, because after that I go for my test. It's four different kind of test: speaking, learning, writing, and reading. So the level for the test for writing is 2%, for reading is 3%, for speaking and for listen is 3. So when I go for my tests, I got a 4, 4, 4, and 2. One of the big problem for Spanish people is

writing, because the writing is speaking. But it's not the same pronunciation for your writing. This is the one big problem.

Q: If people don't pass this test, they don't qualify for the PMP?

OL: You have, well I can say, you have people actually this time, probably three years here and stay there in the school for three years. But people, they probably say, well most of the people is from Ukrainian, because most of these people always say, I don't care about the English. No realize that you want to stay here, you have to speak English. Yes, the company have sometime say, sorry, you no learning, this is your last work permit; you have to return. When the government, because after you have to get interviews with one official to come to Olymel every sometime. I already have that one actually myself. The only difference is the rule is every time.

Q: So the company nominated you for provincial nominee, and it nominates these other people too. But you don't qualify until you pass these tests?

OL: When you pass the test and the government have the rule is for that. For example, you need the grade 12. This is the one problem I have myself now because I working when I have eight years old, start working. I go in the night in the school and I doing only until grade 9 in my country. Now when the official government coming and do my interviews, he say, that's okay, you actually bring me in the program. But when I send all my papers at the government, they government decided no, send me out of the program. But a month and a half ago the government send me one letter that gave me the opportunity to do the GED test here for making the grade 12 and continuing the program.

Q: So you can't stay in Canada unless you have grade 12 equivalent?

OL: No.

Q: What has the union done for TFWs?

OL: About the union I can tell in my experience, this is the best union I never see in my life. This union help everybody coming from El Salvador, or doesn't matter the country. When you coming here, you not coming directly to the company, you coming here because the union actually bring teachers for teaching all the people about the job and about the rules in this country. I don't want anybody coming saying, not anybody told me that. The union bring all the information to all these people, and the union take care about these people. I know that when all the ? guys told me when coming here the union is help translator. This guy need go someplace. The union tell what you had to do, everything. It's continue because the union is take care of the people in Olymel. Most of the time the people that need help of the union is immigrant, foreign working.

Q: What about the union negotiations with the company?

OL: I know about the union negotiation with the company because I tried to get opportunity this guy. The company need people. So the union decide help the company help the people. This is the time when the union get the negotiation about that. The good thing is the company has said everything about the union help in get opportunity all this foreign working. I can say 100% the people is so happy about what is doing the union.

Q: The people are supporting the union?

OL: The people supporting the union 100%. Right now I can say not only the foreign working, most of the people in Olymel support the union, because this union is not help the company, it's help the people.

Q: Is there sometimes trouble between the union and the company?

OL: Most of the time when they have some agreements about something wrong in the plant, the people making some mistake, because this is the most working when I had to get a discipline for these people. So the union is when I gotta fight with the company. I can say most of the foremen don't like the union because always the union try to help most of the people. This is part of my job in Olymel, because I am the union for one year. Part of my job is help most the people that not understood when the foreman gives some discipline. The company say these people, you are one day suspension, and stuff like that. My job is investigation that what say the foreman is true or no. I have chose to work. I am happy actually doing this job, because it's learning more about this country, learning more about more English, and my Spanish people is happy. Not only my Spanish people, I can say I help all of my friends, Filipinos. When all this guy is in trouble they come in and say, Oscar, I need your help. This is my job.

Q: Do you take time from work?

OL: I have the contract; they call it agreement, I have it for time you need to go outside the working. So you have one hour for doing all the job. You had to told your foreman, I had to do this about the union. The foreman say, okay go.

Q: Have there been any strikes since you've been here?

OL: Not for the moment. Everything is all good. So I'm not afraid of that one. Everything is not perfect, but everything is going good way. The company I don't have problems sometime, a little problem inside the plant about the machine and stuff like that. But all this week actually I working for one hour and a half overtime. But the people is happy. Most of the people is happy about the job, everything. Sometime I have little problems. But this is our job to help these people, make sure everything is going correctly.

Q: Are you confident that you will become a citizen of Canada?

OL: I pray God every day to try to get my resident, because I want my children here. I love this country because for me it's my second country now. I can say thank you the government for giving me the opportunity to stay me here and help to get me my residence.

Q: Do you think you'll be successful?

OL: It's a little difficult because the test is not easy. It's more than 200 page. I saw the percent you have to get for that one. But I'll try; I'll try. My new work permit is expiring until next year in October. So I have time for reading my book and try learning.

Q: If your work permit expires this time, do you have to go home?

OL: According to the rule is I have to go home. When the PMP program say no more until your work permit is expire, you don't have more. I can look in a lot of companies but not for Olymel. You have opportunity to look in other companies for working, and the company apply for you or go a different province.

Q: If you succeed, will you be able to bring your family?

OL: Yes. When you accepted in the program, you have a few months for bring your family here. Actually the government gives the time until the time you have to bring your family here. Part of the rule is you have to get a house for your family and you now continue working for support your family.

Q: Will you stay here in Red Deer?

OL: Yes. I love Red Deer. I don't want to go Edmonton or Calgary because it's too big for me. I stay here for almost four years.

Q: How much of the economy in El Salvador is directed towards exporting to North America?

OL: The big problem is most of the companies is not from El Salvador. It's from China, Japanese, or the U.S. About exportation, most of the coffee is not in El Salvador. Most of the coffee is going to Costa Rica, Guatemala, all different country. Actually most of the working is coming from Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. People from my country is afraid working for the coffee, because it's danger. It's about the delinquents that comes there actually. Most of the people working for the coffee is woman. The areas is too big and sometimes the army tried to protect people; but it's not enough. The exportation is not only the coffee – the exportation right now in my country is about the cheese, the traditional *pupusas*. Now the U.S. have tried exportation about *tamales*, is making about the corn. All this stuff is going outside my country but most of the people doing this stuff is ? different kind of companies. Now everything is about machine: I don't need people for that one. This is the reason the economy in my country, people not realize the economy in my country is bad because thinking all this stuff go outside, exportation, is not too much people working in that. For one machine it's possible one people taking two, three machines making *pupusas*, *tamales*, in the café. I can say that one is, and the *maquilas*. The *maquilas* is how much you got it today, \$5 a day. This is paid the companies. Most of the money you never see. You have to pay union for nothing; you have to pay your benefit. Like here the healthcare, in my country it's called *salud social*. You go for some problem medical: I don't have medicine for you. You have to buy the medicine outside.

Q: Was there a difference in the workplaces between Travelaire, which isn't unionized, and Olymel, which is unionized?

OL: When I go to Travelaire I can say I don't see too much about the union, because the company probably is probably have only 300 people working in there. I don't see too much help in the union in there actually, because I don't see too much problem like Olymel. I not speaking English at the time, and I not understood most the stuff there. A little difficult, because all the time my foreman and my lead hand is Canadian people. When I need something all the time trying looking for some translator. So I don't know about the union in Travelaire. I can say not too much. But I saw a few problem in there, and the union resolved faster because it's not too much people like Olymel.

Q: So there was a union in Travelaire?

OL: Yes, I had union.

Q: What union was that?

OL: ?workers. The picture is one hands, like that. Ya, it's ?workers.

Q: How did the union help you find a place to live?

OL: Actually when the people coming here want a place, most of the people coming is the hotel from the union right now. Most of the people coming here after that the Olymel and the union get some building for these people. For part of the contract is a few months, six months I'm thinking, you live in the building, the union and the company got it. That's part of the rule.

Q: Where are you living now?

OL: Right now everybody try to get the more cheap rental. For example, Spanish people from El Salvador, you had to change the Canadian dollar American dollar. So you lost money. Right now the change is like for one dollar American you had \$1.15, \$1.30; so you lost 30 cents for every dollar. So people try to save the more possible money. I can say in few apartment is living four or five people for try to saving more money. I living with Canadian woman right now; she is renting me apartment. So it's no big expense for me, because it's only me. But when my family coming here, my idea is try to buy house. I try to get something for my family.

Q: Are there any differences in pay between the TFWs and the other workers?

OL: About the pays for everybody, I can say all depend the level. I have base; right now the base in Olymel doesn't matter if it's foreign worker or Canadian, it is \$14.25. This is the base. I don't have different; they're the same. When I'm working at Travelaire, when I coming here, the company paid me \$10.05 for hour. When I go Olymel, Olymel pays me \$12.05.

Q: In Travelaire, was there a difference in pay between TFW and Canadian?

OL: No, the same. Everybody got the same. The difference is the money paid for hour. At Travelaire it's only \$10.05 and Olymel it's \$12.05. But everybody got it the same. You got the contract, you got the same pay for everything, and you have actually the same benefits.

Q: Has the union helped with safety on the job?

OL: About that, before you come working in the plant, the time you have today the training. When you understood the company and the union bring one translator in there.

So the two day training they try to explain everything about the meat, what you had to do, what you had to protection. You had to use your mesh glove, your anti-cut, and all your safety. So actually you have one day for safety training and one day for about the--for example emergency. You have one tour in the plant for emergencies, everything. And you have always your translator.

Q: Is there a high accident rate?

OL: Not too much. A few months ago I had one accident. But that one is the person doing the job was pulling the knife out and the knife come in the leg. But not too much because the rule is in the company is to try to make safety everybody. Actually, right now the foreman, when the union is doing the check everybody that everybody have the anti-cut, everything the safety, for try to not trouble the company.

Q: Are you allowed to go home to visit?

OL: You have to have visa for go. For example, right now I got my work permit almost three weeks ago. They only need send my passport at the government until they need my visa traveler and send a copy of my work permits. That's for one year, and the government send me my visa for one year. I can go El Salvador any time I want to, but you have to get more money. When you come in for working here, you are allowed to work only for the company what is you working. You not allowed working in other companies enough to make ? for other company. So it's a little difficult. But most of the people, for example from El Salvador, after three or four years go and stuff like that. But you have to allow the time wherever you go ????. It's open.

Q: So Olymel applies for a PMP for their workers as part of the union contract?

OL: Yes, it's part of the union contract. Yes, that one is part of the union: the contract is union. When the company, everybody come for working had to apply for the PMP program and always respect the rule. In the government the rule is, for example, you have some hire in your country where you coming: what are you doing you had to prove everything. You not prove nothing, you travel and you have to go home.

Q: Do you think your family will like it here?

OL: Oh, 100%. My children every day say, dad, when go? I want to go.

Q: How do you keep in touch with them?

OL: It's difficult, because actually one of my bad experiences when I coming here is this year my grandma who take care of me all my life passed away. But at the time my work permit is almost expire. And I don't have the money to go to El Salvador, because she's in coma for five days in the hospital. So I never see my grandma again. Now is dead. That's the one difficult, because when something wrong in your country you want to be there, but you have to say, I'm doing what I'm doing for my family. You have to support sometimes bad things in your life, and it's difficult. I say, I lost my grandma, I never see her again, and I never see her again. But next year I want to go my country and see all my family and my children, because now I imagine my children is so tall.

Q: Anything else you'd like to say?

OL: I want to say is about the company and the union. I appreciate all what it's doing for all the foreign working. I hope one day the government understood about the foreign working. I saw many time the news that some part the government is saying I don't like about bring more foreign working here. Always says the Canadian, I don't have job, and that one is not true. I working in Olymel for almost three years and I saw coming 15 new

hires. The 15 is 10 Canadian; the 10 probably stay probably for three months and is going, because I don't like the kind of job. Thank you for the opportunity and I hope I get my residence soon.

[END]