

DOMESTIC WORKERS ORGANIZING IN THE UNITED STATES

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FROM CHANGING THEIR WORLD 1ST EDITION
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Building
Feminist
Movements and
Organizations

This case study was produced by AWID's Building Feminist Movements and Organizations (BEFMO) Initiative

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Designer: Storm. Diseño + Comunicación



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Published by AWID, Toronto, Mexico City, Cape Town.

This publication is available online at www.awid.org

This publication is also available online in French and Spanish.

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AWID gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Cordaid, Hivos, Irish Aid, Levi Strauss Foundation, MDG3 Fund (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Oxfam Novib, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Domestic Workers Organizing in the United States

By Andrea Cristina Mercado and Ai-jen Poo

Introduction

Domestic worker organizing in the United States, while still taking place in small pockets across the country, is on the rise. After several centuries of exclusion from recognition as a real workforce, domestic workers are poised to pick up where past efforts left off, fighting to gain respect and power nationally. As a growing force whose experiences point to a long history of systemic inequality for women, workers, immigrants and people of colour, there is tremendous potential for rejuvenating the many segments of the grassroots movements that it intersects with, including the feminist, labour, immigrant rights and racial justice sectors. The following case study of two domestic workers' organizations and the new National Alliance of Domestic Workers that they recently helped form will highlight some lessons from this growing movement.

History of Domestic Work and Domestic Worker Organizing in the United States

Domestic workers have played a critical role in the development of economic and social life in the United States. Historically, this workforce has its roots in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the plantation economy that provided the resources and materials for industrialization in the United States.¹ Enslaved African women worked in the fields growing food and cotton, and they also worked in the homes of plantation owners, caring for their families and children. Native and Chicana women in the West and Southwest also worked as domestic workers in the period leading up to industrialization. Throughout industrialization, women's work in the home also remained invisible and unrecognized. While serving as a foundation for the growth of the economy, domestic work has consistently

been rendered invisible, deliberately and repeatedly excluded from recognition or protection from abuse under United States labour law.²

With the rise of the women's movement in the United States, to enable the entry of middle-class white women in the workforce, women of colour were paid to do their necessary labour in the home. The work that was seen as "women's work," whether in the home or in the "public workforce," was and continues to be seen as less-skilled, and less valuable. Women's work in the home, in particular, has never been recognized as work-- it is seen as "help," and thus, by extension, women working in others' homes as wage labour have never been recognized as real workers. It is important to note that the gender norms that define much of how the labour market values labour have never been challenged. As a result, to this day, women in the United States earn only two-thirds of what men earn for the same work.

1. In the early 20th century, newly arrived European immigrant women who also found work as domestic workers moved out of the field as soon as factory-work became an option. African American women, who were often shut out of the "public" workforce, continued to work as domestic workers, and the work came to be seen as "Black women's work." The image of the "mammy" came to represent African American women in the mainstream media through the early part of the 20th century. Jones, Jacqueline Jones, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, New York: Basic Books, 1985.
2. Jones, Jacqueline, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*: New York, Basic Books, 1985.

The fact that domestic workers have traditionally been women of colour and immigrant women is also significant and telling. While rarely regarded as such, domestic worker exploitation represents a key front in the feminist movement in the United States because it fundamentally necessitates understanding and organizing against race, gender and class-based oppression at once.

More recently, with the advent of neo-liberal globalization, international financial institutions (in particular, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) and U.S.-driven foreign economic policy have compelled former colonies of the global North to open their markets; lower or disappear any barriers to capital, including basic labour and environmental standards; and promote the privatization of land, resources and the few remaining industries that serve the needs of their people. These conditions have led to widespread migration, and as women often serve as primary caregivers for their families, they are often forced to leave their countries to fill the expanding service demands of nations of the North in order to send money home. These immigrant women enter the domestic work industry by the thousands.

Furthermore, these same elite international financial institutions stand to gain from the underground service economy, profiting from the vulnerable position of the immigrant workers it employs. The restructuring of production under neo-liberal globalization-- which in the past took place primarily within national borders and now extends to countries all around the world-- has led to an increased need for cities that will act as "global command posts" or places where the process of production can be coordinated.³ Cities like New York need CEO's, corporate lawyers, and financial managers, and they also need nannies, housekeepers, restaurant workers, deliverymen, doormen and security guards to meet the day-to-day

needs of the corporate workforce. Domestic workers play the role of providing the necessary labour in the home that makes all other labour possible, both in their own families and for the families that they work for.⁴

Despite the critical role that domestic workers play in the current global political economy, in the United States they have remained excluded from most basic labour protections and live and work essentially at the whim of their employer. Domestic workers in the United States are predominantly immigrants and women of colour who work long hours for low-wages, without overtime pay, and under extremely isolated conditions.⁵ The vast majority of domestic workers struggle to defend their most basic human rights. In New York, for example, 33% of workers surveyed in 2005 face some form of abuse from their employers.⁶

"We are verbally assaulted and we have to stay quiet. Often we end up leaving these jobs when we can't take it anymore. What is sad and difficult is that sometimes we are not paid a single penny for the work we've done. In my case, I have had good, considerate employers but in these years I have also experienced difficulties, which I never thought I would have to endure - discrimination because of the colour of my skin and for being an immigrant. They've made me sleep in a basement with no heat in the dead of winter. They've denied me food during the time I was living in and also forbid me to bring food for myself from outside. I've also been yelled out to the point where I was becoming sick with depression and nervousness. I left my last job so exhausted and destroyed I could only think of hurling myself in front of passing cars because I was made to feel so bad I wanted to die. I felt worse than a worm after the way they told me how poor I was and that's why I was worth nothing."⁷

There are no standards in the domestic work industry, and the few basic laws that do apply to

3. Sassen, Saskia, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*; Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.
4. Chang, Grace; *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*: Cambridge, Mass., South End Press, 2000.
5. Romero, Mary, *Maid in the U.S.A.*; New York, N.Y., Routledge, 1992.
6. Domestic Workers United, "Home Is Where the Work Is: Inside New York's Domestic Work Industry": New York, Data Centre and Domestic Workers United, 2006.
7. Testimony of a domestic worker submitted to the Domestic Workers Human Rights Tribunal, held in New York City on October 8, 2005.

domestic workers are not enforced. Domestic workers have been left with no choice but to organize, against all odds. It is within this context that organizations fighting for domestic worker rights in the United States have formed.

Contemporary Domestic Worker Organizing in the U.S.

Domestic workers in the United States have always resisted the oppression and exploitation they face. There have been several documented cycles of organizing since the abolition of institutionalized slavery, and most likely more that have not been documented. We know that in 1881, African-American washer-women went on strike and shut down the laundry industry in Atlanta as a result of their organizing efforts. In 1968, Dorothy Boulden, an African-American domestic worker and civil rights activist, helped organize the National Union of Domestic Workers.⁸ The most recent round of organizing, which gave rise to Domestic Workers United and Mujeres Unidas y Activas, began in the 1990's, in immigrant communities.

Domestic work has been one of a few options for immigrant women in the Global City. In the mid-1990's this was particularly true with the closings of the garment factories and other manufacturing in the United States in the global capital's search for cheaper labour abroad. At the same time, labour unions had not addressed the changes in the structure and character of the workforce in the United States that had occurred since changes to immigration laws in 1965, particularly since globalization intensified the migration of people, especially women from the global South, to cities in the United States in search of a means to survive.

Since the 1980's the social justice movement in the United States has been in a low period. Left movements were hit hard by state repression, and just as neo-liberal ideology began to take hold, organizing was at its weakest. Mostly dominated

by non-profit organizations that resisted a deep analysis of the political economic system that they were fighting to change, organizing groups were narrowly focused on issue-specific campaigns, rarely making connections with one another across communities and issue areas.

Immigrant community organizations, independent workers organizations or "workers centres" emerged out of community organizing initiatives that attempted to meet the needs of the new immigrant working-class population. These organizations do not necessarily always focus their organizing on their members' experiences as workers, nor do they always organize at the point of production; they have different starting points including domestic violence, immigrant rights, and state violence. Organizing tactics include direct action campaigns, legislative initiatives, lawsuits and other creative tactics to mobilize and win justice for their members. They also prioritize an "intersectional" analysis of race, gender and class, and promote the leadership of worker members.

In the last 10 years, through the slow and deliberate growth and diversification of the grassroots base-building sector that has prioritized movement building, a shift has begun. Domestic Workers United and Mujeres Unidas y Activas, the two organizations highlighted in this paper, were born of that process. These two organizations have sought to see and analyze the "intersectional,"⁹ root causes of the oppression facing their members, which has led them to take-on and prioritize building relationships that broaden the base, power and perspective of the movement as a whole. They have supported the development of coalitions of domestic workers, as well as immigrant rights organizations, working-class membership organizations, and grassroots organizations with a "global justice" movement-building perspective.

In June, 2007, over 50 domestic workers from Bangladesh, the Philippines, Barbados, Haiti, Mexico, El Salvador, and other countries of the Global South, now working in U.S. cities from California to

8. Jones, Jacqueline, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*: New York, Basic Books, 1985.

9. Crenshaw, Kimberle, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Colour*: 1995.

Maryland, met in Atlanta, Georgia as part of the first United States Social Forum (USSF) for a National Domestic Worker Gathering. They came together as part of a natural evolution of the organizing they were doing locally, and the understanding that they needed to reach out beyond their communities in search of models, strategies and a larger context for their local struggles. They represented thousands of childcare, housecleaning and eldercare providers who are organizing across the country for dignity and justice. Over the course of the four day gathering, they shared organizational models; engaged in joint education sessions on the history of domestic work in the United States; discussed campaign victories and challenges; and presented their struggles to thousands of USSF participants. Across language barriers and cultural divides, the women shared experiences from organizing in their corners of the country, laughed and cried together, and developed lasting relationships. On the final day of the gathering these household workers decided to form a National Domestic Worker Alliance.

The National Domestic Worker Alliance is composed of grassroots organizations that work towards advancing the rights of domestic/household workers. Founding member organizations include the Women's Collective of La Raza Centro Legal, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, and People Organized to Win Employment Rights in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California; the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and the Pilipino Workers' Centre in Southern California; the Women Workers' Project of CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, Domestic Workers United, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Unity Housecleaners Cooperative of the Hempstead Workplace Project, and Las Señoras de Santa María in New York; and CASA de Maryland.

Goals: The goals of this newly formed alliance are to:

1. **Collectively bring public attention to the plight of domestic/household workers;**
2. **Bring respect and recognition to the workforce;**
3. **Improve workplace conditions; and**
4. **Consolidate the voice and power of domestic workers as a workforce.**

Many of the organizations were already working together to advance these goals. California household worker organizations fought for a state bill that was vetoed by governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2006. In New York, organizations joined forces to pass New York City legislation compelling employment agencies that place domestic workers to educate workers about their rights and employers about their legal obligations in 2003. Currently, they are working together to pass a state-wide Domestic Worker Bill of Rights to establish labour standards including a living wage, health care and basic benefits. Maryland domestic workers have been waging transnational campaigns defending domestic workers abused by diplomats.

The coming together of these organizations has exponentially increased the capacity, visibility and influence of domestic workers as a sector in the social justice movement. Organizations in Miami, Chicago, San Antonio, and Baltimore are reaching out to begin a process of organizing domestic workers locally, and seeking the support of the National Alliance. In addition, other sectors, including the labour movement, are beginning to recognize the strategic role this workforce plays in rebuilding the labour movement.

1. Mujeres Unidas y Activas and Domestic Worker Organizing in California

"Through my work on MUA's Respect Women's Work Campaign, I have learned that the work that we do as women should be recognized. I don't feel like my work as a mother and wife or as a domestic worker in other people's homes is valued. Sometimes I feel like I am seen as just another piece of furniture in the house. But this injustice motivates me to struggle so that our voices are heard, our work is recognized, and our rights are respected. The work has to begin with us as women. We have to respect ourselves and our work first and then demand that respect from everyone else." — Luz Sampedro, MUA's Campaign Coordinating Committee

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) was formed by immigrant women in 1990 to provide a support group setting where Latina immigrants could share their experiences of domestic violence, worker abuse, discrimination, isolation, and in the process

of healing and personal transformation, become empowered to collectively fight for immigrant, women and workers' rights. Through group support sessions and political education workshops, MUA members find their voice, make links between personal problems and broader social and economic injustices, recognize their own strength, and build community and collective power.

MUA has participated in campaigns to save prenatal care services for undocumented immigrant women in the State of California; address the lack of adequate interpretation services in the Alameda County public healthcare system; create immigrant women's provisions in the national Violence Against Women Act (VAWA); and has mobilized vigils, marches, and community forums to protest the war in Iraq and anti-immigrant attacks. The organization has built a solid base among women who were formerly isolated and unaware of their power. The organization has won national recognition as a model program for the empowerment and organization of immigrant women. MUA currently organizes in San Francisco and Oakland, California and has over 400 active members.

While recognizing the formidable problems faced by Latina immigrant women, MUA draws on the strengths of these same women as peer mentors, group facilitators, community educators, and organizers. With this philosophy in mind, MUA adopts a multi-layered program approach to Latina immigrant empowerment, leadership, and activism. Women approaching the organization for support are encouraged to become a member and attend weekly group meetings. After three to six months of participation, members have the opportunity to take one of the several MUA trainings offered yearly. MUA's Meeting Facilitator and Peer Counselling trainings prepare members to take leadership roles in the organization, creating spaces where immigrant women can discuss experiences of oppression and support one another. The Caring Hands Workers' Association offers members intensive job skills trainings in the childcare and home health care sectors combined with workers' rights courses that prepare Latina immigrants to defend their rights and obtain greater economic independence and security.

Comprehensive leadership and organizing trainings organized by MUA empower members to

understand the systems that oppress and exploit them as women, workers, and immigrants, create their own vision for the world, build multi-racial alliances, and gain the tools to launch community education and organizing campaigns. Graduates of the trainings must make a specific commitment to participate in the respective Committee to practice and develop their leadership for six months to a year after the training. As a member develops her skills in one of the committees, she may decide to complete another training and thus take on a different role in the organization. This cycle presents continued opportunities for growth and development.

At the centre of MUA's political work is the *Comité Corazon*, or Campaign Coordinating "Heart" Committee, made up of veteran and new MUA leaders. This Committee is tasked with leading participatory processes to identify campaigns and is responsible for making key decisions on how to advance the work. It is also the space where immigrant women engage in conversations about *machismo*; connect violence on the job to violence in the home; discuss the relationship between institutional and interpersonal oppression; dream up long-term solutions; and create strategies on how to get there. These women make presentations at MUA's bi-weekly general meetings; gather input from the membership; plan, execute and evaluate campaign activities; and represent MUA in local and state-wide coalition meetings. They also coordinate work with MUA Peer Counsellors, Meeting Facilitators, and Worker Association committees. New and emerging leaders in the organization are encouraged to take part in MUA's annual 8 week leadership course and 4 month training, "Leadership and Unity for Community Power," which provides political theory and organizing skills to prepare MUA members to participate in the *Comité Corazon*.

In the winter of 2003, MUA decided to shift towards more strategic community organizing and dedicate increased resources for longer-term campaigns conceived, designed, and led by the MUA membership. After a good deal of research, analysis and discussions, MUA members decided to focus their first long-term strategic campaign on Immigrant Women's Workers Rights: Inside and Outside the Home. MUA joined forces with the Day Labour Program's Women's Collective of La Raza

Centro Legal, and with the support of the Data Centre and the San Francisco Department of Public Health, created a participatory research project to assess conditions in the domestic/household work industry. Over 30 immigrant women were trained to administer the survey, and together, they conducted over 240 surveys of their peers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The hour-long surveys were conducted in laundromats, at parks, clinics, bus stops and, in the homes of household workers. The study found that most household workers are supporting, on average, two adults and two children, but more than 80 percent are not making enough to support a family of this size. One in five workers reported that in the last two months they had experienced verbal or physical abuse on the job.

In subsequent meetings, domestic workers analyzed the survey results and, indignant at the exclusion of domestic workers from many labour laws and the rampant non compliance with existing protections, decided to organize a domestic worker rights campaign. MUA, the Women's Collective, and the Women Workers Project at People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) formed a Bay Area Domestic Worker Rights Coalition to strategize and work together to improve conditions in the industry.

Domestic workers organizing in Southern California at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and the Pilipino Worker Centre (PWC) were also busy organizing household workers and discussing state-wide strategy. In September of 2005, an historic California Domestic Workers Meeting was held in San Francisco, and over 50 members of MUA, LRCL, CHIRLA, PWC and POWER participated, representing thousands of housekeepers, childcare providers, and caregivers. During the two-day meeting, each organization presented the demands of their membership, and together the list was prioritized. A state-wide Household Worker Rights Coalition was formed. Subsequently, a delegation of domestic workers and advocates met with a California Assembly member with the list of demands, and she agreed to introduce legislation the following year.

From the onset, these base-building organizations agreed to prioritize domestic worker leadership, leadership development, and democratic decision-making processes. Over the course of the

2006 grassroots legislative campaign, more than 500 domestic worker leaders participated in education, outreach, and advocacy activities. Support was built for the campaign through presentations and one-on-one meetings with over seventy-five community organizations representing seniors, faith communities, labour, women, immigrants, and health and safety advocates. Hundreds of domestic workers travelled to the state capitol each month to meet with legislators, lobby for their bill, and hold press conferences and rallies. The bill passed the California Senate and House of Representatives, but despite the organizing efforts, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed the legislation.

Domestic worker leaders refuse to be vetoed. In the words of MUA *Comité Corazon* leader Enma Delgado, "He vetoed the bill, but he can't take away everything we have learned. We are ready for our next campaign." California household worker organizations continue to collaborate, and are currently researching a state-wide policy campaign for 2008.

Around 2005, MUA began connecting with an organization in New York called Domestic Workers United, which had also begun a parallel process of member-led research on industry working conditions, to share lessons and information about organizing domestic workers.

2. Domestic Workers United and Organizing in New York

"Whether you are documented or not in this whole-wide world there are human rights. And once you know this, no employer can bullshit you. If you don't walk that dog, if you don't shovel that snow, and they say they will call immigration. Look them in the eye and tell them, 'I'm not afraid of you. I'm not an alien. I'm a human being.'" Joyce Campbell, Domestic Workers United, NY

Domestic Workers United was founded in 2000 by members of Kalayaan/Women Workers Project of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, in collaboration with Andolan: Organizing South Asian Workers. Many Filipina domestic workers who were members of CAAAV worked in Hong Kong as domestic workers before arriving in New York. In Hong Kong, the domestic workers movement

is very strong--it is composed of various organizations which provide diverse services and have a long history of organizing. In addition, all domestic workers in Hong Kong work under a standard contract.

When the Filipina domestic workers arrived in New York, they were surprised to find that no standards existed for this labour force in the United States. They were also surprised to find that the largest populations of domestic workers-- women from the Caribbean and Latin America-- were not being organized by any existing organization. In 1999, after two years of advocacy work for individual Asian domestic workers who were underpaid or abused by their employers, they saw the need for industry standards and a voice for all domestic workers, and thus members of CAAAV's Women Workers Project began broad outreach to all domestic workers.

Early on, Andolan members and Women Workers Project members supported each other's efforts, and worked together to build DWU as collaborative project to build the power of the domestic workforce as a whole. In 1999, the two groups, along with Unity Housecleaners, a project of the Workplace Project in Long Island, held a meeting to discuss industry-wide organizing strategies. Soon after, in 2000, a Steering Committee of Caribbean workers was established to provide leadership for the new group.

Today, DWU is an independent organization of workers from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America, and coordinates with other domestic workers organizations through the New York Domestic Workers Justice Coalition to build the power of the entire workforce. The Coalitions' member organizations include Domestic Workers United; Andolan: Organizing South Asian Workers; Kalayaan/Women Workers Project of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities; Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees; Damayan Migrant Workers Association; and the Unity Housecleaners of Long Island.

From its inception, DWU was a movement-building vehicle. DWU seeks to organize unorganized populations of workers as well as support the coordination among existing organizing efforts in the interests of the entire workforce. Its work is framed by the following four main goals: 1) building the power of the domestic workforce, 2) raising the

level of respect for domestic work, 3) establishing fair labour standards for the domestic workforce, and 4) helping to build a movement to end exploitation once and for all. DWU is also interested, as the final goal suggests, in broadening the perspective of its members, to see themselves as agents of change in the world, working to not only transform conditions for domestic workers, but for all workers and oppressed people. In other words, it seeks to forge a vision that links the struggle to change conditions for domestic workers to building a broad-based movement for fundamental social transformation.

Today, the organizational structure includes active member-led committees who are responsible for carrying out the work of the organization, including a membership base-building committee; a campaign committee; an organizational development committee; the cultural/skit committee; and the leadership development committee. Each committee is coordinated by members of the Steering Committee. Steering Committee members are active members who have attended at least 6 consecutive general meetings, graduated from the DWU leadership training program, and can commit to the Steering Committee member responsibilities and principles.

Organizing Model: DWU's organizing model has 5 components:

1. **Membership base-building to build an engaged membership base to scale.** This includes street outreach, park outreach, church outreach, word of mouth, follow-up phone-banking, and programs that bring workers into the organization such as computer classes and language classes.
2. **Leadership development that supports the political leadership of domestic workers in the organization and the broader movement.** This includes an annual Leadership Training Program, and ongoing exchange and exposure with other movement building organizations.
3. **Grassroots campaigns to improve the living and working conditions of domestic workers, including campaigns for justice for exploited domestic workers and the overarching policy campaigns for labour standards.** At any given moment, DWU has between 3-5 ongoing cases for justice for un-

derpaid and abused domestic workers, and its current overarching campaign is to pass the New York State Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. Strategic communications and media work is a critical part of these campaigns. Media has been and continues to be a critical tool in changing the way people see and think about domestic work

4. **Building alliances that strengthen the movement.** This includes alliances built through the campaign work and the long-term strategic alliances that build the power and leadership capacity of low-wage workers. DWU is part of many ongoing alliances including the New York Domestic Workers Justice Coalition; the National Alliance of Domestic Workers; New York Jobs with Justice; and Grassroots Global Justice. DWU is also interested in strengthening alliances with farm workers and low-wage workers in the South, due to common histories of racialized exclusion from labour protections and from the mainstream labour movement.
5. **Organizational development to insure the organization has the resources and capacity to support the growth of the organizing work.** This includes volunteer development, grassroots fundraising, and multi-lingual organizing capacity building, among other things.

DWU has raised the visibility of domestic worker issues in New York by exposing cases of exploitation and organizing grassroots campaigns for power, respect and fair labour standards. Since 2000, DWU has won over \$400,000.00 in unpaid wages for exploited domestic workers in the state. DWU also released an unprecedented study on the domestic work industry called, *Home Is Where the Work Is: Inside New York's Domestic Work Industry.* In addition, in 2003, DWU members celebrated the passage of legislation in New York City compelling employment agencies that place domestic workers to play a role in protecting the rights of domestic workers, and a resolution calling on all domestic employers to follow the guidelines in DWU's standard contract. Soon after, members of DWU held a convention to discuss the establishment of fair labour standards for domestic workers at the state-wide level.

The convention resulted in the drafting of the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, which establish-

es fair labour standards, including a living wage, health care, and basic benefits. It also addresses the exclusion of domestic workers from most basic labour protections; provides recognition as a real workforce; and establishes specific protections to address the isolation and vulnerability of domestic workers to abuse and mistreatment. The bill, when passed, will be the most comprehensive legislation protecting domestic workers in the history of the United States. DWU is currently fighting to pass this Bill of Rights in 2008.

In the course of uniting all domestic workers organizations and collaborating to develop industry-wide organizing strategies, such as the Bill of Rights campaign, DWU members have been able push the feminist movement to see the relationship between the exploitation of women's invisible labour in the home and labour rights for women, women of colour in particular. Organizations like "A Better Balance," which consists mainly of middle-class women struggling to find a balance between work and family responsibilities, have joined the fight for a bill of rights. Additionally, the labour movement has started to understand that new organizing strategies are needed to meet the changing conditions and dynamics of the global economy, and to recognize the role that immigrant women workers have to play in rejuvenating the movement. President John Sweeney of the AFL-CIO attended the DWU Bill of Rights Town Hall Meeting which took place on June 7, 2007, where he spoke about his mother, who was a domestic worker for 40 years, and the importance of supporting domestic workers organizing.



Conclusion

While full of challenges and young in its current stage of development, domestic worker organizing in the US has already impacted the broader social justice movement politically, practically and culturally. Politically, the analysis of the impact of neo-liberal globalization on women in the global South, and migrant women in the North, has helped many to understand the more invisible effects of the brutal economic system we live under. In addition, the analysis of domestic workers' necessary labour, and its role and value in the global economy, is helping bring about an understanding of the strategic importance of the leadership of this sector of workers. Similarly, the analysis of the history of

slavery in the United States and its lasting imprint on modern day society will be a crucial grounding for any future social justice movement.

Practically, domestic workers leadership has already challenged a culture of patriarchy, classism and racism in society as a whole and within the social justice movement as well. This movement has opened the door for hundreds of working-class immigrant women of colour to exercise leadership—organize, inspire and mobilize entire communities for a better future—thus proving that they are precisely the leadership that the social justice movement in the United States has been waiting for. Domestic workers have built organizations, support groups, cooperatives, alliances and cultures of resistance in their communities.

Significantly, the first United States Social Forum was organized and heavily attended by member-based “movement” organizations, rooted in working class communities of colour - many of which are led by women. In many ways the USSF was a manifestation of a profound shift within the social justice movement in the United States, the product of several years of ground work, community organizing, leadership development, and alliance building. Domestic worker organizations are proud to be part of this growing worker-led force. The domestic worker rights movement was strongly represented throughout the USSF, and at a time when many are asking what will come of the historic gathering, the formation of a National Domestic Worker Alliance is lauded as one of the gatherings major successes.

In addition, domestic worker organizations have proven that there’s no such thing as “**unorganizable**” people, communities, or workforces. Although there are extreme challenges, particularly

organizing in the United States, where workers are working around the clock under enormous economic and social pressures, domestic workers are organizing. Thus they have forced us to ask many important questions about why certain populations are characterized as “unorganizable,” including who is saying this, why they are saying it, and who benefits from such a characterization.

While some of the leaders of this burgeoning movement may not have a strong identification with feminism, the character of their struggle is decidedly pro-women. On a daily basis they are demanding that “women’s” work be recognized and valued, and they are practicing women’s self-determination, asserting their right to make their own decisions and live with respect and dignity. They challenge the replication of capitalist patriarchy within social justice movements, and are at the forefront of cutting edge organizing in the United States. Most recently, domestic worker leaders have challenged the National Day Labour Organizing Network (NDLON) to recognize female day labourers; proposed and won a women’s rights resolution at NDLON’s national assembly; and have stepped up to leadership roles within the organization.

Culturally, domestic workers organizing has forced the social justice movement to value the many roles women play, as primary income earners, for families at home and abroad, and caregivers for their employers and their own children. Domestic workers have forced people to think more about the invisible labour that makes other work possible, and the importance of recognizing, respecting, and protecting this work under basic human rights principles. In the words of Domestic Workers United members, “We have a dream that one day; all work will be valued equally.”

 Timeline: Domestic Worker Organizing in California

- Summer 2004** Participatory Research Project of Bay Area Household Workers
- Labour Day 2005** Bay Area Domestic Worker Rights Coalition launched
- October 2005** State-wide Gathering of California Domestic Workers, in San Francisco; prioritize list of legislative demands, and state-wide coalition formed
- November 2005** Delegation travelled to Los Angeles to meet with California Assembly member, Cindy Montañez; decision to create a bill to include domestic workers in overtime protections and fines for abusive employers
- January 2006** “Nanny Bill” Introduced in California Assembly
- March 30, 2006** Hundreds of domestic workers travel to Sacramento, the capital of the state of California, for Household Worker Lobby Day
- May 2006** “Nanny Bill” passes through California Assembly
- August 2006** “Nanny Bill” passes through California Senate
- September 2006** Governor Schwarzenegger vetoes the “Nanny Bill”; California domestic workers determined to keep fighting for equal rights
- January 2007** National Planning begins to convene a meeting of domestic workers organizations nationally at the first United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia in June.
- March 2007** *“Behind Closed Doors: Working Conditions of Bay Area Household Workers”* report release on International Women’s Day attended by over 150 domestic workers, media and community supporters
- June 2007** 12 domestic workers organizations from 4 different cities convene at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta and engage in several days of exchange, joint educational programs, and hold workshops for the forum participants. At the final meeting, they decide to form the National Domestic Workers Alliance.

 Timeline: Domestic Workers United, New York

- 1965** Immigration Act passes, allowing immigration to the United States from a larger range of countries around the world
- 1996** The new generation of domestic worker organizing in New York begins in the South Asian Community, out of a South Asian domestic violence service organization, Sakhi for South Asian Women.
- 1998** CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities’ Women Workers Project begins organizing Filipina domestic workers
- 1999** Strategic discussions between domestic workers organizations in New York begins, including CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, Andolan: Organizing South Asian Workers, and Unity Housecleaners in Long Island.



- 1999** CAAAV's Women Workers Project begins outreach to Caribbean domestic workers and wins first case totalling over \$120,000.00 in damages for an enslaved domestic worker from Jamaica.
- 2000** Domestic Workers United founded, Steering Committee established
- June 2003** Domestic workers in New York work together in a coalition to win the passage of Local Law 33, legislation to compel employment agencies that place domestic workers in jobs to education workers about their rights and employers about their legal obligations.
- November 2003** Domestic workers in New York hold convention of over 200 domestic workers to discuss labour standards, resulting in the drafting of the "Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights"
- January 2004** Domestic workers in New York launch a state-wide campaign to demand the passage of the "Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights" in the state legislature to establish fair labour standards for domestic workers in New York State.
- April 2004** Harlem-based Assemblyman Keith Wright introduces the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights in the Assembly.
- October 2005** Domestic workers in New York hold the Domestic Workers Human Rights Tribunal, bringing forward testimony of a dozen workers to a panel of experts including the UN Special Rapporteur on Racial Discrimination.
- May 2006** Domestic workers in New York, along with researchers from Oakland, California's Data Centre release "*Home is Where the Work Is: Inside New York's Domestic Work Industry.*"
- January 2007** National planning begins to convene a meeting of domestic workers organizations nationally at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia in June.
- Early June 2007** Domestic workers in New York hold a week of action, including a Town Hall meeting; a march; the Albany action day; and a Labor Solidarity Breakfast. Workers from Casa de Maryland attend in solidarity.
- June 27-July 1 2007** 12 domestic workers organizations from 4 different cities convene at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta and engage in days of exchange, joint educational programs, and hold workshops for the forum participants. At the final meeting, they decide to form the National Domestic Workers Alliance.