

## DOMESTIC WORKERS ORGANIZE!

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*This article traces the history of domestic worker organizing in the U.S. It challenges the long-standing assumption that these—primarily women of color—cleaners, nannies, and elder care providers are unorganizable and assesses the possibilities and limitations of recent organizing efforts. The nature of the occupation—its location in the home, the isolated character of the work, informal arrangements with employers, and exclusions from labor law protection—has fostered community-based, social movement organizing to build coalitions, reform legislation and draw public attention to the plight of domestic workers. Their successes, as well as the obstacles they encounter, hold lessons for other low-wage service sector workers in a new global economy. Domestic workers have integrated an analysis of race, class, culture, and gender—a form of social justice feminism—into their praxis, thus formulating innovative class-based strategies. Yet long-term reform has remained elusive because of their limited power to shape state policy.*

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On June 30, 2007, as 10,000 activists and community organizers gathered at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, a small but determined contingent of domestic workers from around the nation came together to establish the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). Thirteen grass-roots groups, including Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), Andolan, Unity Housecleaners of the Workplace Project, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, CASA de Maryland, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, and Domestic Workers United (DWU), formed the first national organization of domestic workers in nearly thirty years. The domestic worker rights groups not only “stole the show” at the Social Forum, as one observer reported; through their alternative methods, they seek to remodel and revamp old assumptions about labor organizing.<sup>1</sup>

Domestic workers compose a category of labor historically viewed as unorganizable. This essay assesses that assumption in two ways. First, it recovers a legacy of organization that provides a counter narrative to the still standard story that ignores such attempts. Second, it complicates models of labor organizing by considering the possibilities as well as the limits of community-based efforts. The scattering of domestic laborers among myriad employer residences has precluded workplace forms of mobilization; so has their often informal arrangements of employment. By necessity, workers—like nannies, housekeepers, and elder care providers in private homes—excluded from collective bargaining and most labor standards have turned to coalition-building and political strategies to

gain respect, recognition, safety from violence, and living wages. Their appeals to social justice and reliance on lobbying might not be unique; calls for consumer responsibility, corporate campaigns, and legislation have become necessary for a wide range of workers, as seen in various Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE-HERE drives, to even win the right to a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election. Still, attention to the main strategies that the contours of their labor have forced domestic workers to adopt has implications for the organizing of other low-waged and service sector employees. By analyzing their methods, then, we illuminate the turn to community and social movement organizing in which immigrant and African-American women have played a central part in the past as well as the present.

For much of the twentieth century in the United States, women of color—African-American and immigrant—have continued to perform household labor, though the tasks have varied by region, class, and employer need. This occupation includes live-in and live-out workers who labor for a single family, as well as women who are employed by multiple families. Most domestic workers are poor women of color and are often middle aged mothers responsible for children. Sometimes engaged in multiple jobs to make ends meet, they hardly fit the profile of the typical labor activist. A large percentage is undocumented; they fear being deported and many do not speak English. Like other women, they experience "the double day" of work for the family and work for wages, but their paid and unpaid labor often consist of similar care-giving and household activities. To compound the problem, many key labor laws that guarantee workers the right to organize, such as the National Labor Relations Act, exclude domestic work.

The types of labor domestic workers engage in—housework, child and elder care, and personal assistance—reinforce assumptions about their inability to be organized. Traditionally labeled as "women's work," performed by women for centuries without pay, domestic work is sometimes dismissed as not "real" work. Moreover, domestic workers labor apart from other workers in individual households. Because we think of homes as "private" and those within as hidden from view, the location of household labor conventionally appears as a roadblock to collective action. Many live-in workers are separated not only from other workers, but from friends and family as well. Moreover, employers have held such women "as a servant in their home against her own will," as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People reported during an investigation into the practices of Long Island employment agencies who brought women there from Florida in the early 1950s. A half-century later, cases have surfaced of employers who essentially imprison immigrant laborers, according to advocates like the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking in Los Angeles or the Break the Chain Campaign in Washington, DC. About a dozen cases a year are now being tried under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, as immigrant worker rights groups attempt to apply trafficking laws to domestic workers. In June 2008, for example, a federal judge sentenced Varsha Sabhnani, who had abused two Indonesian servants in her

Long Island home, to an eleven-year term for “forced labor, peonage, and harboring aliens.”<sup>3</sup>

As a range of feminist theorists have emphasized, conventional understandings of the home, dismissal of housework as unworthy employment or not really as work, and racialist notions about the workforce have generated material consequences beyond exploitative wages and poor working conditions.<sup>4</sup> Law and social policy either excluded these workers or treated them in an unequal and differential manner. Most domestic laborers are not covered by the Occupational Health and Safety Act or by civil rights legislation because they work in settings with fewer than fifteen employees. Access to Social Security, gained first in the early 1950s, depended on number of hours worked for the same employer, but few employers ever complied. Labor inspectors were not about to or able to check “private” abodes to curb wage, hour, and other abuses.<sup>5</sup> And employers routinely flouted laws and regulations either out of lack of concern or of knowledge. “Nannygate,” named after the scandal surrounding Clinton’s first nominee for Attorney General who had ignored the labor law for household help, led to an upward revision of compensation amounts before an employer became liable for Social Security. It may have changed the behavior of would-be holders of public office, but it hardly improved payments provided to most domestic workers.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, we recover moments when domestic workers have joined together in solidarity. Certainly race or ethnic based Non-governmental Organizations (NGO), middle-class women reformers, government agencies, and trade unions have participated in the process of reforming domestic work. But women workers themselves have created informal networks, mutual aid associations, cooperatives, and unions. Rather than organizing along the primary axis of class alone, these workers have integrated into their organizing strategies more specific identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and family. They have drawn upon their identity as careworkers. They have looked to community and neighborhoods as avenues of mobilization. And they have relied more on social movement strategies of social change, such as lobbying and legislation, codes of conduct and education, rather than strikes and slowdowns. In doing so, they resemble other low-waged workers who find that they require allies outside of their occupation and state support for unionization. They have turned to labor law and codes of conduct not because they have great faith in the inclination of the state to enforce the law. Rather they see in “holding the state accountable for its labor practices” an opening to obtain better conditions from citizen employers, as Monisha Das Gupta concludes about the South Asian group *Andolan*.<sup>7</sup>

Larger cultural and structural forces—labor markets, ideas about proper womanhood, racism and xenophobia, law and public policy, social movements and reform politics, as well as the particularities of their employment—further shaped the occupation in ways that have demanded innovative forms of action, such as cross-class and cross-race committees, with all their potential for conflicting interests and obstacles for solidarity. Domestic workers still find themselves subjected to the whims of employers and, with few avenues of redress, further link their fate with other poorly compensated workers who have had to

wage a continual struggle to maintain fleeting victories under antiunion and neoliberal conditions.<sup>8</sup> But, as we suggest, the upsurge of organization in recent years has placed domestic worker rights on the feminist social justice agenda.

### **Historical Legacy: Informal Organization**

Current strategies have a history. Despite the isolated nature of the work, domestic workers long have formed community associations and support groups, and lobbied to reform the occupation. A century ago immigrant household laborers in New York City maintained vibrant ethnic networks and class consciousness even while residing in the homes of the wealthy.<sup>9</sup> African-Americans had strong ties to kin and community, engaged in day to day as well as organized resistance, and shaped the occupation to meet their familial needs.<sup>10</sup> Domestic servants, who were predominantly African-American in the South and a mixed group of immigrant and women of color elsewhere, possessed the powers of the weak: against employers who would withhold wages or abuse bodies, they quit, took leftovers, and borrowed best dresses. But they also organized. Washerwomen, who moved from house to house, particularly stood at the center of group self-help, linked into mutual assistance through the communal nature of their labor. Domestics mounted strikes, the most impressive being in Atlanta in 1881, where those who remembered slavery formed a trade organization, the Washing Society. Derided as “Washing Amazons,” as historian Tera Hunter has recounted, domestics went door to door, spreading their protest and gaining the support of 3,000 washerwomen. Because nearly every white household relied on a black woman to do its laundry, the strike affected the entire city. Other household laborers began demanding higher wages. Some entrepreneurs attempted to introduce steam laundries to wrestle control away from the women, and municipal authorities sought to undermine them by imposing fines and fees. Nevertheless, the women prevailed in raising their rates. But in a pattern that persists, this collective victory could not be sustained. The employment relation was unstable, with workers moving from job to job to find better conditions and employers dismissing servants not to their liking—with only the lack of another person to do their dirty work acting as a deterrent.<sup>11</sup>

In the early twentieth century, worker resistance mostly remained informal. Refusing to live-in, African-American migrants to the urban North transformed domestic service. Although with five or six dollars a week as “good pay,” household employment maintained its association with servitude. Some relatively short-lived unions managed to develop, aided by the International Workers of the World (IWW) in Denver, black clubwomen in Washington DC, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union in the South.<sup>12</sup> But with the ideology of the home as a man’s castle and hostile political and social circumstances, sustaining organization among low-waged workers proved difficult in this occupation as it did with garments and other industries with concentrations of “unskilled” women.

### The Depression Legacy

During the Great Depression, some middle-class families dropped household workers as expendable luxuries, while others sought to procure help at rock-bottom prices. Bargain hunters offered payment as low as fifteen and twenty cents an hour or four dollars for a forty-hour week, and demanded additional tasks, like upper-window washing, laundry, and child care.<sup>13</sup> At the notorious Bronx Slave Market, unemployed women stood on street corners waiting to be picked up for a day's work, often only to discover that they barely made carfare home.<sup>14</sup> This form of day work exemplifies market organization of domestic workers; white labor feminists and black community activists spent the entire decade trying to ban the practice.<sup>15</sup>

The crisis of the Great Depression encouraged attempts to reorganize the occupation. The NGO as facilitator of reform represents one continuous organizing model, especially for groups without a centralized worksite. The National Urban League and its various branches partnered with city, state, and national governments to provide both direct and work relief to unemployed domestic workers, including a pioneer visiting housekeeper project in New York and Brooklyn that supplied careworker/homemakers to other poor people incapacitated by illness. Along with federal agencies and women's groups, particularly the Women's Bureau and the YWCA, the League sought to upgrade domestic labor through training programs and model contracts.<sup>16</sup>

New Deal visiting housekeeping projects represent another form of organizing household labor: government creating new conditions of work in response to social or political pressures. Advocates attempted to deracialize the occupation by emphasizing the presence of white as well as black women, but in fact the projects were designed for black women and reflected how work relief reinforced existing labor market segmentations by race and gender.<sup>17</sup> Interviewed decades later, former aides considered the job "a step above domestic work, though much of their job description meant 'running errands for the sick or invalids, straightening up clothes and housekeeping.'"<sup>18</sup> Housekeeping aides experienced better working conditions, higher pay, and more respect than private household workers. Unlike some workers on relief, they apparently never organized against the Works Progress Administration.<sup>19</sup>

Domestic servants, however, unionized as part of the decade's class-based organizing spearheaded by communists, socialists, and New Dealers. Those who temporarily labored on New Deal projects could have heard A. Philip Randolph in 1937 at the Brooklyn meeting of the Domestic Workers Association of the National Negro Congress, or they could have joined the Domestic Workers Union of New York.<sup>20</sup> The latter group of Harlemites became Local 149 of the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), the predecessor to SEIU. Some members lived in Brooklyn, and some, like Miss Dorothy Nelson of Tuxedo Park, New York, listed their employer's address as their own. Originally this union included hotel domestics and chambermaids, but in mid-decade, the

maids went over to the hotel worker local. Local 149 became the largest union of its kind, although with a membership of 1,000 in the late 1930s, it included only a minute fraction of the city's domestics. It established standards for private employment, seeking to replace personalism with contractual rights.<sup>21</sup>

The Local countered the isolation of the job by providing a place for women to gather at its office. Those who had failed to find day work could cook their lunches on a gas stove, while a reader conveyed the latest news from the papers, especially helpful for those struggling to overcome limited education. A bulletin board overflowed with clippings related to domestic labor. Scattered about were notices of pending legislation and petitions waiting member signatures. The office also had a choice library with books, pamphlets, and magazines on trade unionism—as well as “a few popular fictions,” in recognition of the interests of its diverse membership.<sup>22</sup>

But it was not easy to organize, even though those who signed up remained loyal. As Dora Jones, the executive secretary, told the BSEIU treasurer in 1939, “controlling our membership” was “very difficult” because of “so many part-time and hour workers.” Jones explained:

These workers may work an hour or two daily, a few days at a time, or a day or two weekly, as very often even this little work is not regular. There is such a fine point between being employed and unemployed that it makes it very difficult for us to collect dues, or to know in which category the worker really belongs. Also, there is such a tremendous amount of unemployment in the industry generally, that although many household workers hold Union books, they cannot find work and so cannot pay dues regularly.

Even if low wages kept some from joining and even if others did not yet understand “that they too are a part of the labor movement,” Jones was optimistic that union interest was rising. But, as she noted, women could not afford to pay dues, making it difficult to sustain her organization. The larger union, itself struggling, offered no monies, although it allowed the local to forego payments to the International.<sup>23</sup>

Upgrading the work represented a different tactic for improving worker lives. Middle-class and professional women initiated efforts at standardizing and professionalizing domestic service, according to historian Phyllis Palmer, during the labor shortage of World War I when the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) established a commission on the issue. Part of its goal was to increase the availability of household workers and to improve the quality of the work. The Y saw wage-earning women as a chief constituency, although employers of domestic help dominated its boards. Another “mix-class” women's reform group, the National Women's Trade Union League, committed itself “to promote the organization of domestic workers throughout the country” and favored “exactly the same standards of hours, wages and working conditions . . . as for workers in any other occupation.”<sup>24</sup>

Codes of conduct promulgated by cross-class organizations illustrate yet another approach being revived in the current period. Predominantly white

reform groups, which included the daughters of European immigrants, joined home economists and black educators to organize the first National Committee on Household Employment (NCHE) in 1928. This organization lasted until 1945. The NCHE sought to convince housewife employers to voluntarily comply with its Code of Ethics. A number of local associations, run by workers and encouraged by the Y's industrial assemblies or the Urban League, further formed to push for labor standards. We do not know much about these groups which developed throughout the nation, in Chicago, Philadelphia, Jackson, Mississippi, St. Louis, Oakland, Knoxville, and Baltimore—which proposed codes with a 48-hour week, overtime up to 56 hours per week, no child labor, and the right to “organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing . . . free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers or their agents.”<sup>25</sup>

But most groups, including those connected to the Urban League's Negro Workers' Councils, remained associations or clubs. Unions failed to sustain themselves—given that neither the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) craft model of organizing nor the Congress of Industrial Organizations's (CIO) workplace industrial model addressed the fragmentation of domestic labor or the needs of the women who toiled for other women. The AFL did not recognize domestic labor as skilled or possessing craft attributes. The CIO focused on mass manufacturing and never considered the home a workplace. Organizers of domestics, thus, turned to the YWCA model, which brought women from various sites together for a number of educational and recreational programs and then encouraged them to act. This model offered a more appropriate form for advancement than traditional trade unions in so far as it gathered together scattered laborers and created bonds of solidarity through nonworkplace activities.

NGO organizing, then, shifted strategy from union recognition and collective bargaining, which was difficult given the thousands of individual employers, to legislation and lobbying. But this tactic had its own downside, with the possibility of disempowering workers by placing daily activities in the hands of more educated experts. Housewives, including organized clubwomen, generally were more concerned with protecting their homes from dirt and disease than black women might bring inside than with the wages and hours of domestic workers.<sup>26</sup> In supporting domestic worker rights and unionization, left feminists and black radicals around the New Deal embraced the legislative labor standards strategy.<sup>27</sup>

The legislative route was perilous unless backed by a strong and united political movement that mobilized the larger community. Organizers of domestics sought to link their cause with the rising of organized labor, even if the latter dismissed their efforts as social reform. At YWCA summer camps for workers, household employees in 1938 reflected the new mood of labor on the march, that they too deserved rights. They sang:

No more mistress, no more maid  
No more work that's underpaid.  
Hours that take all your leisure time away.

They protested:

[chorus]  
 Social Security we need  
 Social Security indeed!  
 March we forth 2 million strong,  
 Workers all, but stand alone  
 While all legislative measures pass us by.  
 [stanza]  
 These are things we must demand  
 If high standards we command  
 Then a Household Worker we'll be proud to be.  
 Hours shorter, wages right.  
 Our security in sight—  
 Better understanding in the home we'll see.<sup>28</sup>

Local 149's Dora Jones viewed labor protections as the mechanism that when won, "our troubles will be over."<sup>29</sup> However, the New Deal policy makers never seriously considered domestic labor. Cultural understandings conflated household labor with family work, service with love, and the home appeared as a private place apart from the world of work and the hand of government. The power of the white South, with its entrenched racism and its dependence on low wages, was a menacing obstacle to coverage of domestics under labor legislation and New Dealers were not about to sacrifice their program for a group of workers whom they had their own doubts could be effectively regulated in the home. The president was quick to reassure, when asked if Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) would "force" Southern housewives to "pay your negro [sic] girl eleven dollars a week." He replied that no wage and hour bill would "apply to domestic help." The 1935 Social Security, 1936 National Labor Relations, and 1938 Fair Labor Standards acts excluded domestic and agricultural labor, occupations dominated by women and men of color. Initially FLSA only covered workers engaged in interstate commerce, which justified the exclusion of domestic workers. But these workers also suffered from being devalued by employers throughout the nation, with an interest in cheap household labor. The mistress–maid relationship continued to mystify the employer–employee one, subjecting domestic service to arbitrary personalism.<sup>30</sup>

It would take a new social movement to place private household workers under the labor law. Beginning in the 1950s, some qualified for old-age insurance. In the 1970s, a coalition of professional women, civil rights activists, and domestic worker organizers pushed Congress to place private household labor under the minimum wage provisions of the FLSA, part of an overall expansion of the wage and hour law. Still, live-in workers could not claim overtime. As Boris and Jennifer Klein have noted elsewhere, one expanding form of domestic labor, home care, became classified with casual babysitting and elder companionship, and was written out of the law at this moment.<sup>31</sup>



### **Black Feminism and the New National Committee on Household Employment**

By the 1960s, a combination of demographic, market, and political forces led to both a decline in private household employment and growth of more specialized jobs, like child or elder aide and apartment cleaner. As an alternative to the intimate relationship between mistress and maid, cleaning businesses developed with workers as employees rather than servants—though few firms paid living wages and benefits. Many were new temporary work firms.<sup>32</sup> The rising labor force participation of married women, along with the jump in elders living longer and alone and men failing to take up the slack, soon ratcheted up the demand for paid household labor.<sup>33</sup>

Attempting to shape these changes was a campaign launched by labor feminists, led by the Women's Bureau Director Esther Peterson; prominent women's organizations, like the National Councils of Negro, Jewish, and Catholic women; and national professional associations in public welfare, home economics, and nursing. These groups sought "to reconstitute household service as a dignified and responsible occupation." In 1963, the President's Commission on the Status of Women asked employers to abide by labor standards and employees to improve skills and display "responsible work attitudes." This call for volunteerism, which harkened back to the depression-era NCHE, came with a demand for inclusion of domestic work under "modern labor standards."<sup>34</sup>

Allies attempted to direct improvement of labor conditions and again turned to voluntary standards. The Women's Bureau sparked the formation of a new nonprofit NCHE to coordinate efforts "to standardize and upgrade" the occupation and "expand opportunities for workers." Its first activities reflected the liberal and laborite women in government and the professions, who were mostly white and employers of household labor. In the long tradition of women's reform, NCHE gathered information, publicized conditions, including what various communities were doing to develop opportunities for household labor, and educated the public.<sup>35</sup> It promoted another "Code of Standards" with provisions for minimum wages, overtime, social security, sick leave, vacations, paid holidays, and a "professional" working relationship.<sup>36</sup> Changing the name to household technician further appeared as a way to dignify the labor.

The national women's organizations displayed both their classed understanding of domestic labor and aspirations for crafting paraprofessional occupations, like elder companion, cook, clothing specialist, child care provider, and home manager.<sup>37</sup> Through government and private grants, especially from the Ford Foundation, NCHE developed demonstration projects, training programs, handbooks, and experimental minority-run and owned businesses, cooperatives, and for-profits. It partnered with local groups, including the YWCA in Chicago, the Urban League in Northern Virginia, a business firm in New York, a nonprofit household association in Philadelphia, and the Women's Service Club in Boston.<sup>38</sup> No self-sustaining businesses emerged from these projects, although most met their training and education goals. Only when backed by government

funding, as part of the War on Poverty, did they temporarily improve the wages and conditions of participants.<sup>39</sup> NCHE leaders thought that “self-dependency” was replacing public assistance.<sup>40</sup>

By the time the pilot projects ended, NCHE had emerged as a black feminist NGO. Hired in 1969, Edith Barksdale-Sloan recognized the political gains for poor women from a multiracial organization under black women’s leadership. While the national women’s organizations remained on the Board of Directors, NCHE local affiliates consisted of women welfare recipients who could have and sometimes did belong to the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Both groups shared a similar black feminist and class perspective, while being run by a combination of middle-class and poor staffers and board members. Barksdale-Sloan once narrated the NCHE trajectory as a move from “employers (who wanted ‘better’ maids)” and a “program . . . to train welfare mothers and make them economically independent” to a membership of domestics dedicated to “winning good wages and benefits, raising consciousness and educating consumers of domestic services.”<sup>41</sup>

A fierce champion of the dignity and rights of household laborers, Barksdale-Sloan insisted on equal treatment in politics no less than the workplace. Thus, when a White House meeting of national women’s organizations excluded all women of color except for the middle-class National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), she lectured President Ford in 1974:

We who are poor, poor Black and Spanish surnamed and Native and Asian American and female deserve to have our representatives consulted and our views heard also. Upper and Middle Class white women do not speak for us. We have very different and more horrendous and pressing problems and concerns than the privileged women of this land.<sup>42</sup>

This same tenacity had helped Barksdale-Sloan advance the cause of household employment when the NCHE founded the Household Technicians of America (HTA) in 1972. NCHE envisioned a multiracial organization that would include African-American, Mexican, Native American, Asian, and white women who worked as domestics.<sup>43</sup>

During the 1970s, HTA aided local worker associations, pushed for coverage under and enforcement of labor laws, and fought against worsening economic conditions. Addressing more than a thousand domestic workers at its founding 1972 convention, Brooklyn Democrat Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman in Congress, described the working conditions of those, like her own mother, who undertook household labor for pay. “We want equal pay for equal work, decent working conditions and respect for the long, hard hours we work,” she declared to “wildly” cheering delegates, as the *New York Times* described them, “who were mostly black and mostly women.” But the *Times* failed to report Chisholm’s linkage of civil rights and worker rights with women’s rights. Previously speaking before the NCHE, she had talked “tough to ‘my sisters’ about strength and power and anger,” how the movement of domestic workers for rights and dignity was part of the drive for women’s rights. The founding

meeting, she explained, “is symbolic of what the Women’s Movement is about.” She exhorted the assembly, “Organize and work together with the women’s groups and labor and civil rights groups in your community. Hold meetings and rallies. Talk to the local press. Let everyone know that you are first-class citizens and that you will not settle for anything less than a fair and equal chance to share in the fruits of this country.”<sup>44</sup> The HTA maintained its ties to the women’s movement. Caroline Reed of the Progressive Household Technicians of America, for example, symbolically read coalition demands at the massive New York International Women’s Day Rally in 1975.<sup>45</sup>

By 1974, the year that Congress included domestic labor in the wage and hour law, local worker associations reached a high point of thirty-seven with 25,000 members.<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Bolden in Atlanta, for example, had worked as a maid for nearly four decades, since the age of nine. In 1968, after several years of civil rights activism, she began to mobilize domestic workers to press for higher wages and better treatment, eventually forming the locally based National Domestic Workers Union of America. In Detroit, Mary McClendon took the lead in establishing the Household Workers Organization in 1969. Geraldine Miller, who was active in the National Organization for Women, founded the Household Technicians Union in the Bronx. These and dozens of other black women domestic workers around the country, inspired by the widespread social protest of the time, campaigned to establish written workplace contracts to protect their basic rights, attempted to increase their political power vis-à-vis their employers through reaching out to coalition partners and through voting themselves, and sought to improve the image and respectability of their profession.<sup>47</sup>

The organization among domestic workers during the 1970s continued to bypass traditional unionism. The AFL-CIO still could not imagine adapting “organizing, collective bargaining and grievance machinery . . . to a situation where workers have several different employers in the course of a week,” although the federation joined the coalition that had pushed for labor standards coverage.<sup>48</sup> While seeking better working conditions and higher pay, the HTA was an association, not a union. Some affiliates were hostile to trade unions, but its mission included gaining rights at work through “the strength of their numbers.” As Dorothy Bolden explained, “A lot of the maids were afraid to join. They were skeptical because they knew what unions had done in the past, and at first ‘union’ was part of the name. I don’t think we realized how much ‘union’ frightens people.”<sup>49</sup> Chapters in New York, Ohio, and the Carolinas viewed themselves as associations focused on “pay, protection, and professionalism.” As one organizer announced, “The garbage men have been upgraded to sanitation workers, with all the benefits, and that is just what we have to do. If you are tough enough to talk back to your big man on Sunday, don’t tell me you’re afraid of Miss Suzy on Monday.” The point was to know one’s rights and demand better pay and respect at work. Given the stigma of service, they sought not only traditional bread and butter improvements, but also, as the head of the 600 strong Domestic United from Charlotte, North Carolina,

explained, “recognition that household workers are among ‘the cleanest, most respectable women in the world.’”<sup>50</sup> These groups upgraded the earlier form of “mutual aid” organizations, lobbying, and bargaining groups by running their own training and education programs and by attempting to build cooperatives. However, as NWRO learned, a poor woman’s movement could not sustain itself without foundation grants, but funding agencies were fickle. In 1977, two years after Barksdale-Sloan left for a government appointment, the NCHE became a project of the National Urban League.<sup>51</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the question of employment rights for some domestic laborers became linked with service sector unionism.<sup>52</sup> When New York domestic workers employed by a third party, as opposed to those hired directly by someone in the home, gained the right to bargain collectively in 1976, SEIU’s flagship building maintenance, Local 32B–32J, initiated a household workers organizing committee. Unlike some older industrial unions, this old AFL union understood that workers in nonindustrial settings were “organizable.” As Klein and Boris have explained, in the process of looking for household employees, SEIU discovered a new type of domestic laborer, the home attendant. Over the next two decades, SEIU, AFSCME, and 1199 formed viable home care unions of women who moved between types of household employment, welfare, and aide jobs in nursing homes and hospitals. They brought together coalition politics and community organizing and, in some states, established through political clout new forms of representation, most notably the public authority, to create an employer for the purpose of collective bargaining for those who labored in scattered homes as “independent providers”—a model now being transferred to child care organizing as well.<sup>53</sup>

As much as scholars have celebrated home care unionization, the structure of the industry has meant limited improvements in wages, benefits, and working-conditions. Unionism has reached only those domestic laborers who come under public payment systems because these workers can be found either through social welfare determinations regarding clients or third-party vendors who hold contracts with the state. Reliance on the state has its downside: when state budgets fall, officials seek to cut both reimbursement rates to agencies with contracts to provide home care and social assistance, which pays for the service, to receivers of such labor, mostly poor elderly women and disabled people.<sup>54</sup>

### **Household Organizing and the New Immigration**

Since the formation of the HTA, the private household labor force has shifted. The civil rights movement opened up other jobs to African-American women, and increased immigration in the 1970s meant that women from the Americas, Asia, and Eastern Europe would undertake housework, especially outside of the South.<sup>55</sup> Today, domestic work is part of a growing service sector, and is indicative of a shifting economy. While the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to the rise of a service sector economy has been underway since World War II and is well documented by scholars, Saskia Sassen

has pointed to the increasing reliance on domestic service over the past decade in “global cities” as two-parent families with both adults working struggle to relieve the “care gap.” This gap is filled by and large by immigrant women workers, some documented, some not. As Das Gupta has noted, the demand for hi-tech and other professional workers from South Asia in particular has led to middle-class immigrants bringing domestics from their home countries to undertake “grossly underpaid” reproductive labor that frees legal immigrants to chase the American Dream.<sup>56</sup> These workers face many of the typical problems historically encountered by domestic workers attempting to organize: isolation, the discounting of domestic work as “real” work, lack of legal right to organize, refusal of employers to abide by legal responsibilities. But compounding these are problems of immigration status, language barriers, and complete dependence upon their employers. Exploitation and abuse are not uncommon and new instances of slavery, as we have noted, have emerged.

With the exception of home health care aides, the plight of domestic workers continued to be, for the most part, neglected by mainstream labor organizers. In the early 1990s, these workers began to come together in neighborhood associations and ethnically-based workers centers. Whereas Dorothy Bolden lingered at bus stops to find Atlanta’s domestic workers, today organizers go to playgrounds and ethnic stores, hoping to catch workers when performing tasks of child care and shopping. Because of the distrust or lack of familiarity with American culture and politics, and as well as the frequency with which workers changed occupations and employers, the neighborhood associations proved to be a more viable and effective organizing strategy.<sup>57</sup> Workers were able to develop ethnic bonds of solidarity, overcome the language barrier, and provide assistance with housing and immigration issues, for example, rather than addressing strictly workplace concerns.

One goal is to expose the home as a workplace and tear away its shield of privacy by publicizing the labor that takes place within and how immigration regulations actually penetrate such home workplaces. As Das Gupta perceptively shows, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act placed the burden of checking worker status on employers, but reserved harsher penalties for undocumented employees than for those who hire them. Instead of a deterrent, when it comes to household labor, the law encouraged employers to coerce immigrant domestics by threatening to report them to authorities and it has enabled egregious behavior, from seizing passports to physical abuse, as part of a disciplining regime of fear.<sup>58</sup>

These workers developed a model of organizing that integrated race, class, ethnicity, culture, and, increasingly, gender. In Montgomery County, Maryland, Central American workers, as part of an advocacy group known as CASA de Maryland, began a worker center in 1993 to address the needs of day laborers. CASA engages in job training and placement, instruction in language, citizenship, and health, as well as organizing and advocacy. In Long Island, the Workplace Project, which started in 1992 as a legal clinic serving immigrants, transformed into a worker-run center. The Workplace Project organizes

low-wage workers, initiated UNITY, a cooperative house-cleaning service, and pushes for reform and protective legislation. It created a domestic worker bill of rights, raised wages for day laborers and helped pass the New York State Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act, which increased the penalty on employers failing to pay minimum wage and made it a felony.<sup>59</sup> In New York City, the Chinese Staff and Workers Association initiated the Lower East Side Worker Center in 1993 and in the Bronx the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence started a Women's Workers Project to address the needs of domestic workers. These local groups in New York City came together in 2000 and formed DWU. These examples of neighborhood centers and associations enabled workers to organize independent of a particular employer or even of a particular occupation, because organizing efforts were rooted in the community rather than the workplace. Low-wage immigrant workers, including domestic workers, tend to move in and out of poorly compensated jobs and so finding the individuals rather than concentrating on their workplaces links these shifting laborers to larger social struggles.

Consisting of workers from the Americas, including the Caribbean, as well as Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, these organizations have developed out of immigrant women's struggles for dignity and well-being. They are expanding the legacy of the NCHE in demanding inclusion rather than neglect by the law, in providing model contracts, and in organizing. They rely on popular education, including role playing, to teach workers their rights and to instill confidence that they can challenge employers and lawmakers. Many of these centers offer leadership training, workers rights courses, or citizenship classes to enable workers to know and assert their rights. They organize, according to one reporter, "one person at a time."<sup>60</sup> In contrast to traditional unions wherein the elected leadership represents the interests of workers, the worker-center model sees every worker as a leader. Groups like DWU teach, "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.'"<sup>61</sup>

DWU is an important example of how workers have been able to build a base of support independent of the union model. Members have made community organizing, tactics embraced by the SEIU and other successful union-organizing campaigns, the backbone of their efforts. The most frequent site of organizing is children's playgrounds, where nannies with their charges are found in abundance. Women have learned about DWU through word of mouth. Friends inform friends about this support group that takes up individual cases of abuse as well as pushes for broader reform of the system. Race and ethnicity have been central to organizing efforts, in part because that is how many women initially enter the occupation. But in addition, networks of support are easier to establish among women with a similar cultural and ethnic background. As Nahar Alam, one of the founders and executive director of Andolan—an organization of South Asian workers in Queens—described an earlier domestic workers rights

group “Awaaz serves as a family.”<sup>62</sup> But with DWU, groups come together. The coalition that composes DWU includes some organizations that are predominantly Filipina, others that are mainly South Asian, and many that are primarily Caribbean. Despite the ethnic nature of how groups emerge and maintain solidarity, DWU’s success at building interracial bridges among domestic workers is astounding when so much of labor history has been marred by racial and ethnic divisions. It makes the category “women of color” come alive.<sup>63</sup>

Domestic worker organizing has also helped shift the agenda of some unions. As sociologist Janice Fine explains, in recent years a number of unions, including the AFL-CIO, have reversed their stance on immigration and called for widespread amnesty.<sup>64</sup> Unions, such as SEIU, UNITE-HERE, and the recently formed Change to Win Federation, have redoubled their commitment to grassroots organizing and reaching out to immigrant service sector workers. The New York City Central Labor Council has allied with and demonstrated support for DWU. Perhaps the most lasting impact of worker-center organizing is less the number of workers who have attended meetings or who have come to rallies, but their willingness to speak to workers long marginalized by the mainstream labor movement, thus pointing the way toward multiple strategies of labor organizing.

Beginning in 2002, DWU joined with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) to establish the Justice for Domestic Workers Campaign, *Shalom Bayit*, to reach employers and convince them to abide by a model contract drawn up by domestic workers and their advocates. JFREJ activists conducted hundreds of meetings with individuals as well as house meetings. From 2005, DWU and JFREJ worked through rabbis and congregations to educate employers, improve working conditions, and “move the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights forward in the State Assembly and Senate, by planning and participating in strategy sessions, trainings, cultural events, press conferences, legislative meetings, rallies, and a major Town Hall event.”<sup>65</sup> We might view these efforts as a maturation of a strategy first set forth by the Domestic Workers Union Local 149, which over sixty years before, had urged “Rabbies [sic] in the various synagogues, and white clergymen, that they should stress to their congregation that they should stop hiring the girls from the slave marts at starvation wages, and have an organization set up and supervised by the church members in the church, or some community house in the neighborhood, and let the girls come there and wait for jobs.”<sup>66</sup> In contrast to other methods of labor organizing that pit employer and employee against one another, organizers of domestic workers see employers as invaluable allies in improving the conditions of domestic labor. Their mutual dependence, in some cases, has fostered collaborative efforts. In other cases, employers are the target of protests.

DWU has been at the forefront of defending and advocating for domestic workers in New York City. They have highlighted particularly egregious cases of worker abuse. Women gather in front of the homes of employers in demonstrations of shame to defend individual workers. One highly publicized case in the summer of 2007 involved Marina, a mother of four from Colombia. Marina was

a live-in worker who cared for a disabled child while also cleaning, cooking, ironing, sweeping, and hand washing clothes for the entire household. She worked six days a week for less than \$2.00 an hour and was forced to sleep in a sewage-filled basement. DWU held press conferences, picketed, and drew attention to the case while asking for back wages and a public apology.<sup>67</sup> While not all campaigns are successful, DWU has managed to recover \$300,000 in unpaid wages for workers.

Even more important than the amount of back wages won or the number of workers rescued from virtual slavery, organizing efforts by domestic workers have empowered poor immigrant women. Groups like DWU in New York and CHIRLA in Los Angeles organized for the nationwide immigrant rights rallies over the past few years. They have succeeded in bringing an alternative perspective to the contentious debates about immigration by asserting that whether documented or not, immigrant workers also have rights. And within social activist circles, such as the U.S. Social Forum, they have foregrounded the plight of domestic workers.

In addition, they have modeled a transnational feminist politics.<sup>68</sup> In 2007 at the U.S. Social Forum domestic workers from around the country not only formed the NADW. They also established contact and met with domestic worker rights groups from Mexico, South America, and Europe. They gathered again in New York City in June 2008, where workers shared organizing and community-building strategies, and built solidarity among themselves. Domestic workers' status as immigrants has facilitated transnational connections, as many of them have direct ties to other parts of the world. But the alliances are also premised on a racialized, gendered understanding of the occupation and similar ways that such workers across the globe are exploited and vulnerable. As Erline Browne, a domestic worker and organizer with DWU who attended an international gathering of domestic worker activists in Amsterdam explained: "Wherever you go the story is the same. Once you start doing this work, you just do not get respected."<sup>69</sup> Their transnational feminism is not rooted in a notion of global sisterhood, but emerges out of a globalized economy and takes into account the particularities of their lives and occupation, including their position as transnational migrants.

Groups around the country have pushed for legislation that would offer domestic workers a measure of legal protection. In 2008, the County Council of Montgomery County, Maryland passed a bill requiring employers in that county to sign contracts spelling out wages and hours with domestic workers who they employ for more than 20 hours a week, with live-in employees having their own bedroom. Advocated by CASA de Maryland, the bill goes a long way toward standardizing the occupation and holding employers accountable. In 2003, DWU won a victory with legislation passed unanimously by the New York City Council that requires agencies that place domestic workers to inform employees in writing of their wages, hours, and responsibilities and to have employers sign statements that they are aware of labor laws such as minimum wage, overtime pay, and Social Security requirements. While such a law privatizes responsibility for notification



of labor standards, it also educates employers as well as workers, and provides a tool to demand better conditions and move against exploitative employers.<sup>70</sup>

Both DWU and CASA de Maryland have proposed domestic worker bills of rights, which guarantee health benefits, paid vacation, and sick days. The DWU bill, introduced into the New York State legislature, would guarantee for domestic workers overtime, paid vacation, sick leave, health benefits, severance, twenty-one days advance notice before termination, and cost of living increases. A provision allows workers to initiate complaints. If passed, it would be the first of its kind in the nation, setting a precedent for transforming domestic work into a regulated occupation with benefits. But both the Maryland and New York bills have encountered resistance as legislators question why domestic workers should be assured rights not afforded to other workers. Private household workers, organizers argue in response, require their own legislation because they lack a central employer; the very conditions of the labor mitigate against conventional collective bargaining. Initiators have changed some provisions to attract votes, such as dropping inclusion of family and medical leave and lowering the minimum-wage demand. Despite the obstacles, domestic workers have continued to mobilize students, employers, and other workers to their cause.<sup>71</sup>

Domestic worker organizing—both contemporary and historical—holds lessons for workers who are part of the new global economy. Precisely because of their vulnerability and their exclusions from standard labor protections, domestic workers have turned to community organizing, lobbying and social justice strategies. DWU and the worker-center model have laid the basis for political mobilization. The lobbying campaign, the codes of conduct, and the public shaming of abusive employers have served as educating tools. These groups have also practiced a social justice feminism that recognizes divisions among women by race, class, ethnicity, immigration status, social responsibility, and legal rights. For women workers with little other recourse, such social movement strategies can serve as an indispensable component of any labor campaign.

Their lack of workplace economic power has prompted them to seek to convince the state to act on their behalf. But this has been a particularly difficult task, as the limited successes of both the historical and contemporary examples demonstrate. The state is subject to competing interests and often ends up benefiting more powerful constituencies. Domestic worker organizing has underscored the continual need to gain political power and hold elected officials accountable to pro-labor constituencies, a difficult task when the workers in question may be ineligible to vote. Thus, domestic workers have had to develop accountability through broad coalition politics. Their efforts suggest that low-waged workers, even those in the home and in nonstandard employment relations, are not isolated people; they live embedded lives and thus interact with others in families, churches, ethnic societies, and communities. Having organizers coming from these communities and cultivating worker leaders are key approaches. Nonetheless, there is no magic formula for success, given the power of those who benefit from their labors. Just as health care workers have linked better care to better wages and working conditions, domestic workers need to

emphasize the benefits employers gain from their skill, attentiveness, and labor well done. Revaluing their labors in a material as well as discursive sense would decrease turnover, especially important for carework.

In this article, we have recalled earlier attempts at organizing by domestic workers in part because private household workers remain minimally incorporated into the nation's labor standards regime. At this historical juncture, when neoliberal economic restructuring and conservative political ascendancy have attempted to erase the gains of civil rights, women's rights, and labor rights, when all workers face the threat of precarious employment, it is imperative to take note of innovative models of organizing, particularly by those who have been deemed powerless. Although denied the legal right to unionize, these workers have formed alternative associations, rooted in a politics of race, gender, culture, ethnicity, and economic exploitation. Domestic worker organizing has reevaluated the meaning of citizenship—not only rights and responsibilities of those born here, but also the concept itself. Household workers suggest that those who work hard, pay taxes, and build lives deserve rights even if they were born elsewhere. They have a right to a living wage, a right to job benefits, and a right to organize. Despite the chilling impact of wars abroad and neglected social needs at home, revitalized movements for economic justice, including women's economic justice and a new immigrant freedom movement, are bringing hope that a better world is indeed possible.

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  57. For more on this see Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica*, chap. 8, Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers’ Unions: Rebuilding Labor From Below* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005); and Sarumathi Jayaraman and Immanuel Ness, eds., *The New Urban Immigrant Workforce: Innovative Models for Labor Organizing* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).
  58. Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*, 219–21.
  59. See Jennifer Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), chap. 2.
  60. Daffodil Altan, “Nanny 411” *Mother Jones*, March/April 2007, 32(2): 24.
  61. Perdue, “Domestic Workers Take US Social Forum By Storm.”
  62. Anaga Dalal, “Cleaning Up Exploitation” *Ms. Magazine*, March/April 1998 8(5), 12.
  63. DWU, “History,” at <http://www.domesticworkersunited.org/programs.php>, last accessed November 26, 2007.
  64. Janice Fine, “Worker Centers and Immigrant Women” in *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007): 211–30.
  65. Jews For Economic and Social Justice website, <http://www.jfrej.org/ShalomBayit2.html>, last accessed November 25, 2007.
  66. Morris, “Domestic Workers’ Union,” February 7, 1939, 4.
  67. DWU leaflet, “Justice for Marina!” 2007.
  68. For more on transnational feminism see, Manisha Desai, “Transnationalism: The Face of Feminist Politics post-Beijing” *International Social Science Journal* 57(2), 2005: 319–30. Anna Sampaio “Transnational Feminisms in a New Global Matrix” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6:2 (June 2004): 181–206. Johanna Brenner, “Transnational Feminism and the Struggle for Global Justice,” *New Politics* 9(2) (Winter 2003): 78–87.
  69. Erline Browne, Interview with Premilla Nadasen, 1 April 2008, New York City.
  70. Stacey Vanek Smith, “Nannies Get New Rights in NYC Measure,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 2003; Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*, 225, finds this bill as fitting into neo-liberal privatization schemes and critiques it for offering far less to far fewer numbers than DWU had hoped.
  71. Jessica Lee, “Domestic Workers Demand Fair Labor Laws,” *The Independent*, May 7, 2008; “Domestic Workers Sue, Organize for Their Rights,” Associated Press, June 4, 2008; “Women’s Work,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2008, editorial. We have followed these developments over the past few years through attending meetings and serving on panels with organizers. See also, “Bill of Rights—2008 Legislative Session,” <http://domesticworkersunited.blogspot.com/>, assessed last August 9, 2008.

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