

Women's Economic Empowerment

Voice for Domestic Workers



Myrtle's story

“Our Struggle Is Far From Over” by Leslie Tuttle

Myrtle Witbooi's struggle to advance the rights of domestic workers worldwide began over forty years ago in South Africa. The fact that in 2010 domestic workers won the right to negotiate a binding ILO Convention in 2011 and could still lose the vote means that the struggle is far from over; it has taken sixty-two years to get to this stage, when rights for domestic workers were first raised at the ILO.

Myrtle reflects that her efforts will not stop at a convention: “Bringing all of us together was an eye opener for me, she says, *“but when we were fighting in South Africa, we didn't know all the suffering of the domestic workers in the world. Now, my life is being controlled by the suffering of all the domestic workers and it makes me even more determined. We must move forward to where we have a global union for domestic workers.”*

Myrtle's personal struggle started back in 1966 when she was barred from further education. She had problems with her identity papers, so she resorted to becoming a domestic worker. She was asked to take on dozens of tasks for which she had no training at all: babysitter, nurse, security guard, cook, cleaner, - all aspects of “home economics.” She served one family for twelve years, raising their child with love, working without even one paid holiday. She learned first hand that domestic workers were either invisible or a caricature in society's eyes. In 1969, when a newspaper article disparaged domestic workers for bad behavior, she couldn't resist. She took up a pen and made her voice heard in a letter to the editor. She demanded to know, “Why are we different? Why must we work like slaves?” This spontaneous outburst changed her life forever.



Photo by Leslie Tuttle, WIEGO's General Assembly

A few days after her letter was published, Myrtle opened the door of her employer's home to a stranger who asked, “Where's the nanny?” Myrtle replied, “Who are you looking for?” The stranger said, “I am looking for the servants.” while staring straight at her. Her employer then joined the conversation, and the stranger asked to see “Myrtle.” “Well, I only employ one person and you are looking at her.” she explained. He said something to the effect that he didn't think a domestic worker would look like this. Myrtle burst out with, “What did you expect me to look like? Some scarf on my head and hiding my color?” That was the beginning of a new friendship between Myrtle and the journalist. He wanted to know where she got all her ideas, and he offered to help her organize a meeting for domestic workers to talk about their concerns.

250 domestic workers came to that first meeting. Myrtle stood before them, incredibly nervous, having never addressed a group of that size. She didn't know until then was that she was a born leader. She helped domestic workers in South Africa create a union - post apartheid - and some 40 years later help to put pressure on the ILO to defend the rights of domestic workers on a worldwide basis.

Myrtle's employer gave her the break she needed to put the domestic workers in touch with each other. Myrtle was allowed to use the phone two hours a day and to hold meetings in the employer's garage. In spite of the employer's best efforts to keep her, once Myrtle had a husband and two children, she was told by authorities she could not keep her family on a white person's premises. She was forced to find work in a factory. Not surprisingly, Myrtle also took on a leadership role at the factory. By the time it closed down in 1983, the manager encouraged her to use her organizing skills once again on behalf of the domestic workers. It didn't take long to link up with other domestic workers. They were urged by the South African Congress of Trade Unions to form a national union. They received training and guidance from a more experienced union, the South African Clothing and Textile Union (SACTU) and together formed the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU). While

financial support from the Dutch government helped them survive apartheid, when the Dutch withdrew support, SADWU as a national union had to struggle to find financial backing. In 1997 the Union was forced to close due to financial difficulties. However, Myrtle and a group of domestic workers did not give up. In 1999, a German woman, Ruth Kadalie, married to a South African, came to their aid by giving them 6 months of free rental space and a phone donated as a 50th birthday present from her women's group in Germany. This allowed them to revive their organizing efforts and in 2000 a new union was born, the South African Domestic, Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU)

“We had been slaves, now we had a union,” Myrtle explains. “We chose to stay independent and small, but we did the bulk of the work passing the domestic worker labor laws in South Africa. With members at a national level we have become very militant. The government and Ministry of Labor calls us when they want to discuss domestic workers issues.” When the discussion on standards (Convention and/or Recommendation) for domestic workers was put on the agenda of the International Labour Conference (ILC), Myrtle's Union, SADSAWU, with other domestic workers' unions and associations agreed to mobilize worldwide support for the convention. To create a global community of domestic workers, they established the “International Domestic Worker's Network”, with its organizational base in the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF), Myrtle was asked to be President.

Myrtle reflects back on the time when domestic workers had to stand before their employers, ask for their wages and then bow to them and clap in a required gesture of servile gratitude. While those days are gone, the struggle goes on. It will take a great deal of effort still to win an ILO Convention and then to implement the convention globally. Myrtle speaks with the same passion and commitment that prompted her to write her first letter decades ago; “It is in the solidarity that we now have that we find we share one common goal; to free ourselves from slavery, to be recognized as human beings. We want to be seen as women who do a decent job, adding to the economy of the world, enriching it. There is a slogan in South Africa that women won't be free until domestic workers are free. What we mean by that is that until my employer sees me as a human being, a woman that other women respect, domestic workers won't be free. We want it to come in our lifetime.”

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