

# REPORT BACK ON DECENT WORK FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR CONFERENCE (ILC) 2010

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Early last month representatives of The National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) and the Jamaica Household Workers Association (JHWA) joined with other member organisations of the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) to participate in the 99<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) in Geneva to impress upon governments the importance of our need for an ILO Convention supplemented by a Recommendation.

“Decent Work for Domestic Workers” was one of the four items on the agenda of the Conference. It was based on the law and practice report and the replies to a questionnaire on Domestic workers that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) had sent out earlier to its constituents, that the Office prepared the “Proposed Conclusions” with a view to a possible Convention and a Recommendation. This “Proposed Conclusion” was the item for discussion over the two week period between Employers, Governments and Workers’ representatives with the guidance of the ILO.

There was a high level of interest by employers, governments and workers and also NGO’s on the subject. Over fifty Domestic workers were present at the United Nations where the discussions took place to offer solidarity and support, inclusive of those who participated in the Committee on Domestic Workers, those who were included in their country’s delegation as advisers to the Trade unions and paid for by their governments. Hats off to the Trade Union Centres like the AFL/CIO, Trade Union Congress (TUC), and even our National Trade Union right here in Jamaica and all the others whose names I cannot remember. They have made a historic gesture that was well appreciated by Domestic Workers.

It was not surprising to see the enormous interest shown on the subject which was evident by the packed rooms at the workers group meetings with not even standing space, which had to be eventually transferred to a bigger room and one had to rush over to the Committee meetings to hold a seat. There was also a lot of media coverage around the World which reflected the significance and importance of Domestic work.

This action taken by the ILO and others acknowledges the invaluable contribution made by Domestic workers to the economy of the various countries and what we deserve in return. It also acknowledges that housework is work and those who do it are workers and the time has come, for this work to be recognized, respected, valued and find its rightful place in the labour market as all others. The time has come for the formalization of Domestic Work which is a growing service in many countries around the world.

Domestic Workers, work in private homes cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, fetching drinking water, taking care of children, the elderly, the sick and disabled among an array of other duties. Workers who for decades suffered abuses by their employers and their family members, and who continue to work in abusive situations, whether it is non-payment or underpayment of wages, non adherence to the provisions of the laws wherever they exist, e.g. non payment of sick leave, vacation leave, maternity leave. No recourse to situations of wrongful dismissals, sexual

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harassment, physical and verbal abuse, and the in-attention to the Health and safety of Domestic Workers who remain excluded from under the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

These are some of the decent work deficits that Domestic Workers face daily because of their vulnerability, because they have dependents and in most cases the sole breadwinner in their family, because they are single mothers, who are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and it is this work that society depends on and it is this work that employers have all admitted at the Conference was important work, and is this work that Domestic workers have been struggling for decades to bring some visibility to, this work and the way Domestic workers are treated is surely a Human Rights issue that needs to be addressed yet employers and some governments are intent on watering down this important “possible” International Instrument that should be legally binding and not just a policy guideline to follow if you wish.

The IDWN of which NUDE is a member of the steering committee was well represented at the ILC and we must give special thanks to the Network Co-ordinator Comrade Pape and Comrade Budin and the staff of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Association (IUF) and of course our funders, without them Domestic workers and their organization from around the World would not have known where the ILO and UNITED NATIONS is, much less be able to speak out for themselves and participate at the ILC and side events.

The IUF and the IDWN have given NUDE and the many other Unions and grassroots organizations representing Domestic Workers around the Globe a much needed voice at the International Fora to fight for our rights and to speak for ourselves. What a sterling contribution they have made towards the upliftment and empowerment of women in seeking to bring equality to the lives of millions of women around the World.

These contributions which usually go unnoticed must be recognised. It is a shame some of our National trade unions could not do the same. What was evident was that we need to work harder to bring a greater awareness amongst trade unions and seek to break traditions and mentality towards Domestic work. Trade Unions everywhere must support the effort of the Domestic Workers, most Trade Union leaders use the services of Domestic Workers and some have been cared and nurtured into what they have become today by Domestic Workers. So we are calling for all to give back by supporting Domestic Workers and allowing them to speak for themselves and to gain some measure of visibility so that we can be victorious.

The International Network worked as a team and we won the right to be at the ILC, some of us won the right to speak and we continued to advocate for our rights, NUDE distributed over 250 copies on NUDE’s response to the ILO Questionnaire. Not one booklet was seen on any of our display tables at the UN at the time we left. This booklet gave a comprehensive situation of Domestic Workers in Trinidad and Tobago. We also distributed our International demands and organizations in the Network all had information to offer.

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An important opportunity should not be overlooked was the many contributions made by Domestic Workers who were able to filter information to the vice chairperson for the Domestic Workers Committee informing her of situations in various countries and having an input through her in the discussion for or against amendments made by the employers. The negotiations were intense and took long hours in the day going into the nights. It was an experience I will never forget, it was a learning experience that no classroom could teach.

We confronted our first challenge at the ILC when the government of India sought to throw out the right of Domestic Workers to an ILO Convention, they introduced an amendment which was seconded by the employers' group to replace the words "Convention supplemented by a Recommendation" by the word "Recommendation". This was strongly opposed by the Workers Vice Chairperson. The employers' vice chairperson supported the amendment and after comments from the delegates representing employers, government and workers, the employers group requested a record vote on the proposed amendment. This first challenge was won because of the support from sufficient governments to vote **against** the amendments.

That did not go down well with the employers who are accustomed to being in control. They also disliked when we started clapping with this first victory and the next day we were warned that we would be thrown out if we could not stay quiet. NUDE is pleased to report that the South Africa, US, Australia and Brazilian governments took the lead in defending the rights of Domestic workers at the Conference, also Namibia and Canada made pertinent contributions that supported the effort to protect Domestic workers. We had Barbados, Latin America countries amongst the governments that supported an ILO Convention supplemented by a Recommendation for Domestic Workers but we were reminded that this was a double discussion and discussions would be held next year, when the ILC would take a final decision on the adoption of the new instrument(s). Whether it would be a Convention and/or a Recommendation.

So we have a lot of work to do in our countries and our regions to secure support from our governments for an ILO Convention for Domestic Workers. Already victory is coming our way since our Trinidad and Tobago government has admitted of its intention to recognize Domestics as Workers.

At the conference NUDE was invited to speak at two forums, the first as a panelist at a side event at the United Nations which was hosted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Foundation and Migrant Rights International with the theme "The impact of the Lack of Social Protection for Domestic Workers and their families" and the other as a keynote speaker at a public meeting on the Asian Platform at the Broken Chair opposite the United Nations, which was also supported by Human Rights Watch, Anti Slavery, National Domestic Workers Alliance and other Asian organisations.

NUDE together with the other Regional Coordinators of the Network comrade Kanyoka from Tanzania, Comrade Bautitsta from Mexico and Comrade Ip Pui Yu from Hong Kong were invited

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to a meeting with the representatives from Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Foundation which was facilitated by the IUF with Comrade Ron Oswald General Secretary of the IUF in attendance and our International Network Co ordinator Comrade Pape and Comrade Budin Gender & Equality office and Trade Union Development Officer at the IUF. We had fruitful discussions and exchanged information on our organizations we represented.

Both NUDE and JWHA were honored to participate in the 61<sup>st</sup> Commonwealth Trade Union group annual meeting which was hosted by Trades Union Congress UK at which our own Sir Leroy Trotman of the Barbados Workers Union and also the worker representative on the ILO Governing Body made a contribution that we can only remain proud of him. We also attended the ILO 144 tri-arpitite meeting and listened to the discourse on the Signapore experience. We attended a video show at the ILO and heard from a female trade unionist who has since been exiled from her country of the oppression faced by farmers in Zimbabwe. The two weeks and more for all of us was packed.

We attended meetings at 8.00am every morning with the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) to sum up what happened the Day before, what was the activities for the Day and what was expected of us throughout the Day. We had a great team and we had the necessary translations to ensure co-ordination. The first week we left the UN at 8.00 pm and the second week at 10.00 pm. The Network also hosted several meetings during the weekends, meetings with ACTRAV to inform us and update us on the proceedings of the ILO, our own evaluation meetings and fundraising meetings, we were even given the opportunity to meet with the Director of the ILO and take a photo with him too, the Domestic Workers were so excited.

Though we were tired everyone I spoke with, said it was their greatest lobbying experience and they were really happy to be part of the process and the IDWN.

In closing, I should note that The IUF provides the organizational base for the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) of which NUDE's General Secretary holds the position of Financial Monitor on the steering committee and the Caribbean Regional Coordinator with the mandate to organize and build a Caribbean network to raise awareness of the issue of Domestic workers amongst stakeholders and the Public at large and to gain and build support within the Region for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The Caribbean need to be more visible on the International level where the poor and excluded are concerned.

NUDE has been networking since 2009 with the Jamaica Household Workers Association (JHWA). Disseminating and exchanging information on Domestic workers and seeking ways to revive our relationship that started over a decade ago at the ILO Workshop on Domestic Workers in the Caribbean over a decade ago . NUDE has also been lobbying to get Domestic Workers to join Unions on their delegation to the ILC from the Caribbean and will continue to do so for the upcoming ILC in 2011 where the final discussions on Domestic workers will take place.

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There is a lot of work still to be done, we must be prepared for next June 2011, we must encourage our governments around the World to support an ILO Convention for Domestic Workers and to include a lawyer (Industrial Relations) as an adviser on the national delegation, and we must continue to seek allies to strengthen and build our networks in every Region where we are, whether it is in Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, Asia, Europe or North America. We must keep the issue alive in the media, in the towns, in the communities on the buses and in our homes. We need solidarity and support from our trade unions. We want an ILO Convention for Domestic Workers. Our Time is Now, we must be included in the Decent Work concept to equip ourselves to face future economic consequences.