

Organizing with Love: Lessons from the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign

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There are so many organizations and individuals, so many domestic workers, who were involved in the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaign, including dozens who played pivotal roles. I cannot list you all, but thank all of you for your labor of love, and all that you taught me.

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ORGANIZING WITH LOVE: Lessons from the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign

Great organizing campaigns are like great love affairs. You begin to see life through a different lens. You change in unexpected ways. You lose sleep, but you also feel boundless energy. You develop new relationships and new interests. Your skin becomes more open to the world around you. Life feels different, and it's almost like you've been reborn. And, most importantly, you begin to feel things that you previously couldn't have even imagined are possible. Like great love affairs, great campaigns provide us with an opportunity for transformation. They connect us to our deeper purpose and to the commonalities we share, even in the face of tremendous differences. They highlight our interdependence, and they help us to see the potential that our relationships have to create real change in our lives and in the world around us.

The fight to win a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York state – led by Domestic Workers United and the New York Domestic Workers Justice Coalition - has been one of those great organizing campaigns. The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights is a piece of statewide legislation that will recognize the domestic workforce and establish basic labor standards. The first legislation of its kind, the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights will provide overtime pay, protection from discrimination, notice of termination and other basic benefits for the more than 200,000 women – most of whom are immigrant of color - who work as nannies, housekeepers and companions for the elderly in New York State. The fight to win the Bill of Rights has been like a love affair, full of exciting moments, inspiring growth and life-changing struggles. Throughout most years of our efforts, domestic workers and organizers were told we were trying to achieve the impossible. But we believed that we could win.

And as this article is being written, we are on the verge of that seemingly impossible victory. Our six-year organizing campaign to pass the Bill of Rights saw its first major victory in 2009, when the New York State Assembly passed a bill to end some of the exclusions of domestic workers in existing labor laws. On June 1, 2010 the New York State Senate spent two long hours debating the merits of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. On one side, legislators argued that we couldn't ask more of employers in a time of economic strife. On the other side, legislator after legislator told stories about their mothers and grandmothers who had been domestic workers and who had labored in the shadows to provide for their families. The debate concluded with a vote - 33-28 - in favor of passing the bill. The Senate bill went much further than the version passed by the Assembly; it would provide actual benefits like paid leave, benefits that otherwise would be impossible for an individual worker to negotiate on her own. The two bills must still be reconciled and the Governor must sign them into law. However, an historic shift has already taken place. Before this effort, domestic workers were largely invisible, and the question being asked was whether domestic workers should be included in the labor law. Today, the questions are, how far will benefits and protections be extended, and how far will we go to restore dignity?

And we are not only on the verge of a legislative victory that many considered impossible. We have already won much more than a bill. Reflecting the scope of the challenges that we faced, our campaign won transformations on many different levels. The Bill of Rights campaign has been a catalyst for change within and between individuals, between organizations and between movements. This fight has challenged broader social values and structures that have devalued women's domestic labor for generations.

I had the honor of serving the Lead Organizer at Domestic Workers United (DWU) for the past ten years. I wrote this article to share the story of DWU's inspiring history and to draw out the central lessons we learned over the past ten years. In particular, I want to highlight the ways in which our work demonstrates the importance of moving beyond narrow conceptions of self-interest so that we can organize based on an expanded sense of self-interest that honors and reflects our connections and interdependencies.

THE WORLD OF WORK INSIDE THE HOME

Working Conditions:

That story has to begin with some background on the domestic work industry. Domestic workers - who care for some of the most important elements of our lives like our families and our homes - are among the most vulnerable workers in the United States today. There are an estimated 2.5 million women who labor as domestic workers. Domestic workers serve as nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly. They often perform the duties of nurses, art teachers, counselors, tutors, assistants, and nutritionists as well. In the New York metropolitan area alone, over 200,000 women of color leave their homes early in the morning, often in the dark, in order to arrive at their work sites before their employers leave for work. Some even live in their employers' homes, caring for these families throughout the day and night. The more hours that these women spend working in their employers' homes, the fewer hours they have to give their own children the care they need and deserve: making them nutritious meals, helping them with homework or reading them bedtime stories. Many domestic workers even have to leave their own children behind in their home nations. Even though the entire economy rests on their work, their labor has long been taken for granted. Historically associated with the unpaid work of women in the home and with the poorly paid labor of Black and immigrant women, domestic work today remains undervalued and invisibilized. Excluded from basic labor laws and protections, many domestic workers face exploitation and abuse.

"Maria" is a Central American woman in her mid-sixties who works as a domestic worker in New York City, and her story provides a telling illustration of the experiences of many other domestic workers. Maria came to the United States to support her family. She has a son with diabetes, and she could not make enough money in her home nation to cover his costly insulin treatments. When she arrived in New York, she found a job as caregiver for a child with a disability. In addition to the "full-time" work it took to provide him with care, her employers required her to do the cooking, cleaning, and ironing for the entire household. Maria worked 18 hours a day, six days a week for less than \$3 an hour. She lived

in the basement of her employer's home where a broken sewage system flooded the floor by her bed. She had to collect cardboard and wood from the street so she could use them as stepping-stones to reach her bed at night. After three years of working in these terrible conditions, Maria's employers fired her without notice or severance pay. She said that her employer had offered no explanation. "I asked her for permission to stay in the house that night so I could go out and find another place to live. I could not even sleep thinking about where I would go next. No one knows what I went through that night."

Crucial Contributions:

Domestic workers make crucial contributions to the economy in urban areas of the United States. By taking care of the families and homes of their employers, these women make it possible for their employers to go to work every day. But, because women's work in the home has never been factored into national labor statistics, it is difficult to quantify the economic contributions of this workforce. We can estimate these workers' contribution by imagining what would happen if they withheld their labor. If domestic workers went on strike, they could paralyze almost every industry in urban areas. Doctors, lawyers, bankers, professors, small business owners, civil sector employees, and media executives would all be affected. The entire urban economy would quiver.

Domestic workers also make crucial contributions to the economies in their home nations. Most domestic workers are immigrant women of color from the Global South who are under enormous pressure to make enough money to support their families both in the United States and abroad. In a recent survey of domestic workers in New York, conducted by DataCenter and Domestic Workers United, researchers found that 98% of domestic workers are foreign born and that 59% are the primary income earners for their families. These women migrate to the United States in search of work, and – on their arrival - they find that domestic work is one of the only professions available to them. Remittances from domestic work are a central source of revenue for many nations in the Global South.

Excluded from Basic Labor Protections:

Because domestic work is one of our nation's oldest professions and because it has a vital role in our economy, one might assume that domestic workers would be protected by labor laws. However, from the New Deal on, U.S. labor laws have explicitly excluded domestic workers. This exclusion is rooted in the legacy of slavery. In the early part of the 20th century, most of the nation's domestic workers and farm-workers were African American. When the New Deal's labor legislation was being debated in the 1930s, Southern members of Congress – who feared the emergence of an African American labor movement – blocked the inclusion of farm-workers and domestic workers in federal labor laws.

Even if domestic workers were included in labor laws, the structure of the industry would make it difficult to organize workers or to enforce basic labor standards. The workplaces are unmarked private homes. The terms of employment and working conditions are negotiated house by house. With no clear standards or laws to ensure basic rights, workers have to negotiate the terms of their employment individually day-by-day in situations where they lack any real bargaining power. More often than not, workers risk losing their jobs by asking for basic rights and necessities like an afternoon off to see the doctor or

receive a mammogram. Even for the rare employers who want to compensate domestic workers fairly, there is little information available.

The combination of these dynamics - the racialized exclusion of domestic workers from labor laws, the gendered devaluation of women's work in the home, the decentralized structure of the industry and the economic pressures facing immigrants from the global South - makes domestic workers extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In this context, organizing is both difficult and absolutely essential. Over the past ten years, domestic workers in New York City have developed an innovative organizing model to address the challenging dynamics of the industry and to build grassroots workers power.

THE HISTORY OF DOMESTIC WORKERS UNITED

Domestic Workers United is Born:

Domestic Workers United was born out of a joint organizing effort between two community-based organizations, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities and Andolan: Organizing South Asian Workers, in 1999. The two organizations had been organizing and fighting cases of injustice on behalf of workers in different Asian communities for several years. However, it was clear that Asian women were only a small percentage of the domestic workforce. The majority of domestic workers were Caribbean and Latina women, but there weren't organizations that were engaging these workers. With the intention of building a broader effort that would include all domestic workers, CAAAV and Andolan decided to reach out to these unrepresented workers to survey them about their working conditions and to gauge their interest in organizing.

Beverly Alleyne, a nanny from Barbados who worked for a young family on the Upper West Side, had waited a long time for an organization to form. "There is no place for us to go when our employers try to take advantage of us," she said, "so most of us stay silent." Beverly came to the first meeting of Caribbean workers that emerged from CAAAV and Andolan's outreach efforts. The women at these early meetings decided to form themselves into a Steering Committee, and Domestic Workers United was born in 2000. Since then, Domestic Workers United has served as a vehicle for organizing unorganized populations of domestic workers and for coordinating efforts among the existing groups. Today, DWU organizes Caribbean, Latina, and African nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly in New York. DWU fights for power, respect, and fair labor standards with the goal of building a broader movement for social change.

Our First Steps:

DWU helped to organize individual support campaigns for workers like Maria who have been mistreated by their employers, who have survived trafficking or who are owed wages. DWU organized demonstrations at employers' businesses, and we worked with the City University of New York Immigrant and Refugee Rights Clinic to file lawsuits against delinquent employers. Using a combination of legal pressure and direct action, DWU has helped to recover over \$450,000 in stolen wages for workers like Maria.

As the work evolved, it became clear that grassroots worker education and case-by-case fighting wasn't going to give workers the protection they needed. We would have to find a way to change labor laws. In 2003, DWU decided to test the waters and see how possible it would be to win legislative protections for domestic workers. We wanted to see whether legislative campaigns would mobilize workers and help build the organization, and we wanted to see whether we could win. That year, DWU led a successful effort to pass a New York City law to compel domestic worker employment agencies to educate workers and employers about basic labor rights. On the day of the vote, domestic workers packed the balcony inside City Council chambers carrying a sign that read, "The First Step to Victory, The Struggle Continues." After the passage of the citywide agency bill, we decided to raise our scopes and try to change labor laws for the state of New York.

Developing the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights:

After that initial victory, we wanted to keep domestic workers issues in the limelight and keep our process of building power moving. DWU decided to hold the "Having Your Say' Convention" which brought together hundreds of domestic workers with the goal of laying the foundation for a much bolder statewide campaign to establish new labor laws protecting domestic workers. The Convention brought together domestic workers from over a dozen different countries for a daylong meeting. Even though they spoke six different languages, these workers found a common voice as they shared their experiences of laboring without respect or basic labor standards. They developed a united vision for quality jobs where they would be treated with respect. The emcee of the Convention was Marlene Champion, a nanny from the Caribbean who opened the program by stating, "Ladies, we are making history here today. You have a voice, and together we are going places."

Out of that convention, we developed a set of key priorities that would become the basis for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, including overtime pay, a minimum of one day of rest per week, health care, a living wage of \$14 an hour, notice of termination, severance pay, paid holidays, paid leave, and protection from discrimination. Supported by the New York University Immigrant Rights Law Clinic, DWU drafted the Bill of Rights into formal legislation.

DWU coordinated with the other organizations that organized domestic workers in New York for the next stage of the fight. CAAAV's Women Workers Project, Andolan Organizing South Asian Workers, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Unity Housecleaners, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, Adhikaar for Human Rights and Domestic Workers United were all organizing domestic workers in their respective communities. Together, we formed the New York Domestic Worker Justice Coalition and the Bill of Rights Campaign became the place where domestic workers came together across communities to maximize their power as a workforce.

We took our first trip – in a 15-passenger van full of domestic workers - to the state capital in Albany in January 2004. As we navigated the narrow streets on that cold winter morning, we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, what it would take to win protections for domestic workers. In meeting after meeting with legislators and their aides,

domestic workers were asked questions like, “What are you talking about? Is this about domestic violence?” and “What if I can’t afford to pay \$14 per hour?” We were even told, “Look, honey, the guy that pumps your gas doesn’t get these things by law, why should the babysitter get them?” We spent the next five years learning what it would take to build power and win in Albany.

Building Our Power:

When the campaign started, there was a Republican Governor and a Republican majority in the Senate. By the time our bill had made it through the various committees, we had a Democratic Governor and Democratic majority in the Senate. Throughout these changes, one reality remained constant: Moral arguments were not enough. We had to build power if we wanted to win. Our strategy for building power was two-fold: (1) build our membership base of domestic workers, and (2) build a broad-based coalition of support from a range of different allies: employers, students, communities of faith and the labor movement.

We spent the first legislative sessions in the Bill of Rights Campaign learning the ropes in Albany. We needed to understand the dynamics in this new world of power relations: What power did we have? What power did we need to win? Who had that power? Where did the legislature stand on our agenda? This was the moment when it became clear that we would not only need to continue building our base of domestic workers, but that we would also need to significantly expand our base of support among other social sectors. So we started by building a network of support among our current allies, recruiting people to get involved in our work in concrete ways like collecting postcard signatures and attending our trips to Albany. We expanded our support base by speaking at other organizations’ meetings and in classrooms and churches. This expanded base of support enabled us to convince more legislators to sign on as co-sponsors on our bill. By our third year, we decided to strengthen our support base by creating a “Campaign Organizing Committee” which our coalition partners and supporters could join to become a part of campaign planning process. We invited anyone who had the desire and energy to attend: students, union members, attorneys and individual activists. By opening that kind of space to all the people who were interested in our struggle, we developed a core group of supporters who could lead independent organizing in their own networks. And the tide started to turn; you could hear a buzz around town about the Bill of Rights Campaign. That was the year when we also started to receive significant support from high-profile labor leaders like John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, whose mother had worked as a domestic worker for over 40 years.

Exercising Our Power:

We finally had a strong enough support base to pull together major mobilizations to Albany. So we swapped our vans for buses, and we started to take hundreds of supporters to Albany to meet with legislators about domestic workers rights. Over the course of the six years of the Bill of Rights campaign, DWU members and supporters traveled to Albany more than 40 times. We mobilized more than 1,000 people on day-long trips to meet with legislators. In addition to legislative visits, our Albany mobilizations included rallies, press conferences, and exciting cultural performances such as the “Domestic Slide” (a domestic

workers' version of the Electric Slide). Each person who went to Albany with us returned as an advocate for domestic workers rights. High school students - who at first went to Albany because their teachers thought it would be good exposure to civic processes – talked about the domestic workers in their lives, and they came to realize how those relationships made the Bill of Rights Campaign relevant to their lives.

We also organized events that mobilized our support network in New York City to bring attention to our issues, including hearings, marches, and days of action. More than 8,000 New Yorkers have taken action for respect and recognition for domestic workers, signing over 7,000 postcards supporting the bill's passage and participating in creative media events and large-scale direct actions.

By the fifth year of the campaign, our years of public education were finally enough to give us the influence we needed to be able to meet directly with the Speaker of the Assembly. This meeting led to the Assembly's passage of legislation that eliminated exclusions of domestic workers in the labor law. While the Assembly bill was not the full Bill of Rights, it was a tremendous step forward. The new Democratic majority-led Senate, however, was interested in passing a more substantive bill that more fully reflected our original Bill of Rights. However, due to an unexpected coup that led to a crisis in the Senate leadership, the Senate failed to hold a legislative session for weeks. This took most legislative matters off the table until the next session. After several mobilizations and continued pressure, the Senate finally passed the Bill of Rights in the next legislative session.

Covering more than 200,000 women, most of them women of color, this legislation will provide fundamental protections for a workforce that has been especially vulnerable to abuse. The momentum from local and state initiatives like the New York Bill of Rights can help create the climate for federal legislation to establish standards and reverse the exclusion and discrimination that have defined the lives of domestic workers for generations.

Challenges Along the Road to Victory:

As politicians began to take us more seriously, it became clear that the greatest challenges to our success lay in the particular conditions facing our industry. Some legislators argued, for example, that in order to achieve days off and benefits, domestic workers must form a union and collectively bargain "like other workers." A few legislators claimed that they could not enact a law with the provisions in our bill because it would provide "special protections" for domestic workers that other workers did not receive by law. These arguments side-step the fact that domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the right to organize and collectively bargain through the National Labor Relations Act. But even if domestic workers were included, the dynamics of their employment makes it difficult (if not impossible) to engage in collective bargaining in the traditional sense. Domestic workers labor in private homes which function as separate workplaces; there is no collective workforce, nor is there a central employer with whom to bargain. When individual workers try to bargain with their employers, termination is the standard result since employers can simply hire another worker. In the context of such extreme inequality

in the bargaining power between domestic workers and their employers, workers cannot simply organize and bargain “like other workers.”

We learned to argue to the power brokers and lawmakers that domestic workers had no hope of achieving basic rights - like notice of termination or paid sick days - unless those rights were legislated. We identified precedents where laws were made to account for the highly specific nature of certain industries. And we sought out experts who could help us make our arguments. But at the end of the day, all of our efforts to frame our case more effectively were missing the point. Rather than continue in a back-and-forth about technicalities with a few legislators, we realized we needed to shift the broader debate and build a broader base of support outside of Albany. The problem was not only technical. The problem was that domestic workers were so dehumanized and invisibilized in popular consciousness; the problem was that it was hard to see the connections between the issues facing domestic workers and the issues facing all New Yorkers. This vision - of humanizing domestic workers and showing our connections to other people - served as a guiding light throughout the roadblocks of the campaign. That guiding light led us to focus on building power through organizing so that eventually we could shift the debate from technicalities and legal fine points to human rights. Shifting to this broader strategy required us to transform the way that we organize.

LESSONS IN TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZING

As effective as our campaign has been in changing state policy, the impact of the process of organizing and alliance-building has been equally important. The Bill of Rights campaign offered an opportunity for people to step outside of their own patterns, to make different choices and to build different relationships with others. We learned crucial lessons about personal and social transformation in the process of this campaign. In particular, we learned that the historical assumption on which a great deal of organizing models are based - that we need to build our organizing campaigns based on people’s material self-interests - is not the whole story. Domestic Workers United led a campaign that mobilized many different communities of people based on an expanded sense of self-interest that acknowledged our relationships and our interdependencies.

During our campaigns, we learned that just about everyone is connected - in one way or another - to someone who works as a domestic worker. In many of our meetings with City Council members and with state legislators, we often heard stories where they remembered the experiences of their mothers who did domestic work. Whether they were raised by a domestic worker, or had relatives, or they themselves did this work at one point or another - everyone has a connection to this workforce. The personal connections that everyday people of all walks of life had to this workforce became one of the key mobilizing forces throughout the campaign. As the campaign progressed, our consciousness also shifted. Although the Bill is called the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights, we came to see that ultimately what was at stake was our collective humanity. To help draw this lesson out more clearly, I want to share some stories about how we built support among multiple different sectors: among domestic workers, with the children of domestic workers and

children who had been raised by domestic workers, with the employers of domestic workers and with workers in other industries. These are the real stories and victories of this campaign.

Drawing on the Stories of Domestic Workers:

The work of Domestic Workers United is based on the premise that our power is rooted in our membership, specifically on the capacity of our membership to lead our organization and to provide leadership for broader movements that reach beyond domestic workers. The Bill of Rights campaign strengthened that resolve. But it also taught us the ways in which workers stories can play a crucial role in drawing people into a struggle, particularly when those stories emphasize connection and interdependence. We knew that the stories and leadership of domestic workers would be a driving force throughout the campaign. What we didn't expect was how many other people would feel that their own life stories were so closely connected to the stories of domestic workers. These connections turned out to be an electric cord that energized the campaign from beginning to end.

Allison Julien, Building on Her Family Ties:

Allison Julien comes from a long line of domestic workers. Both her mother and her grandmother worked as domestic workers first in Barbados and later in the United States. Allison came from Barbados to the United States as a young woman, and she took a job working as a nanny. She joined DWU in 2003, just as the Bill of Rights campaign was starting. She already had eight years of work experience in the industry. Allison often said, "I'm here because I'm proud of the work I do, and I think it should be respected. And I'm here because I can be; my mother and my grandmother couldn't." Julien has been to Albany every year since the beginning of the Bill of Rights campaign, often taking days off without pay to participate in these actions. When we break into teams for legislative visits, she and dozens of other domestic workers lead teams of supporters through rounds of legislative visits. In those meetings, Allison and others tell their stories - stories of abuse and mistreatment, stories of resilience and courage, and stories of how they got involved in organizing for labor standards. Not every domestic worker who walks in the door chooses to participate the way Allison has. But every worker who has stepped up and who has provided the hard work and leadership that helped drive the Bill of Right campaign was motivated by more than a narrow sense of self-interest. They didn't only talk about bigger paychecks or days off for themselves. Like Allison, they talked about their mothers and their grandmothers who had done this work before them, and they talked about their children for whom they wanted the opportunity to choose different futures.

Pat Francois, A Story of Resilience:

Pat Francois came to the organization in 2005 after having found a flyer in the park. "After reading it, I knew this organization was for me," she recalled. She started coming to the monthly open meetings held in a church in Fort Greene. She attended the workshops and events as much as her schedule would permit. For several years, she rarely missed a meeting. In December 2008, in the midst of our annual holiday gathering, Pat arrived late. Looking down, she hid a dark ring around her eye. Toward the end of the celebration several women encouraged her toward the front of the room to address the entire group. At the mic, she described a shocking nightmare: "My employer crossed the line when he hit

me. I have dealt with the verbal abuse for six years, but this I could not take.” Her employer had punched her after she tried to stop him from mistreating his own child. Pat Francois’s human rights and dignity were at stake, but she knew she was not alone. This experience propelled her to take leadership in the Bill of Rights Campaign. She attended workshops and trainings and prepared to go to Albany to “speak truth to power.” Armed with a blue plastic folder full of materials and photos of her swollen face and hand after the incident, Francois speaks at rallies and press conferences about her experiences and builds support for the Bill of Rights. For the last two years, her story has moved hundreds of others to take action. Speaking at a recent day of action in Albany, she said:

Today we are speaking out for me and for other domestic workers who’ve been discriminated against and treated unjustly. I am the voice of the 200,000 of us who give our hearts and our health to take care of New York’s families. We need respect! We need justice! We need the Bill of Rights now!

Regardless of whether or not someone has a personal connection to domestic work, most people find the assaults on human dignity in the domestic work industry unacceptable. The issue of human rights and dignity became a unifying theme throughout the Bill of Rights campaign, opening the door to creative and powerful actions that highlighted the importance of treating everyone with humanity and transforming our relationships.

Framing Our Work Broadly:

Rather than framing our work as a narrow workers’ rights campaign focused strictly on the issues of domestic workers, we intentionally built the campaign around broader axes of structural inequality. We based our frames on our analysis of the root causes of the problems facing domestic workers including the devaluing of “women’s work” in the home, the legacy of slavery in the United States, and the lack of a social safety net in the United States and internationally. This broader framing allowed us to develop messages for the Bill of Rights Campaign that then helped us to broaden our campaign by forging key alliances. Our message that we need to “*Respect the work that makes all other work possible*” allowed us to build relationships with women’s organizations, mothers, and long-time advocates for gender justice and women’s equality. Our “*Reverse a long history of discrimination and exclusion*” message allowed us to build with farm workers, homeless people, guest workers, and the millions of others excluded by the existing legal system. And “*Standards benefit everyone*” highlighted our interconnectedness as people, and it allowed us to build relationships with unions, employers, faith leaders, and other people who believed in the moral imperative of basic human rights.

We learned that it is possible to frame any campaign broadly enough to allow you to pull in unexpected allies and therefore to bring more power to your agenda. In the Bill of Rights campaign, we wouldn’t have been able to win legislative victories through the power of our base alone; we needed to draw in other allies to have the impact that we wanted. The power of workers’ stories and the strength of our broader frames made those alliances possible. And we didn’t only build the tactical power we needed to win our fight; we changed the nature of relationships between domestic workers, the children they raise and their employers in the process.

The Power of the Children:

The Children's March:

On a hot Sunday morning in the summer of 2009, children of all ages and backgrounds colored in chalk on the sidewalks outside New York's City Hall. They wrote messages like, "Respect My Mom" and "I love my Nanny." Then, with red balloons tied around their wrists that read "DWU," children of domestic workers walked together with children who were cared for by domestic workers. They led a march down Broadway to demand the passage of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

The "Children and Families March for Domestic Workers Rights" began with a rally outside City Hall in front of a fence strung with cards made by children with messages like, "I want to thank my nanny for taking me to the zoo." During the program, children spoke about what they loved about their caregivers, and adults who had been raised by domestic workers spoke about the role that domestic workers had played in their young lives. Julia, a young organizer and artist, spoke about her caregiver:

Joanie raised me. Me and my sister. She is my first memory. She is who explained to me how it is, and how to love, and how to help another person through it all. My mother is a photographer, so there are pictures, many many pictures of us, Joanie and me – us in our bathing suits when I'm about 6, us napping with me lying on her back as a little kid, me in all the hairdos she gave me, done like a Black girl's, pulled in tight, even lines from a hard comb, locked down in "bubbles" and elastics. Sometimes she even took me home with her for the weekend to Brooklyn, and then I would play with the other kids on the street, never wanting to leave. We were always close. To this day, her sister introduces me to someone and says: "This one is Joan's heart." Because Joanie took me on, she took me in. And for that, I have so much of myself I owe to her. She raised me – which is not the same thing as being paid to do a job. She taught me, she accepted me, and if I had not known her, if she had not supplied those things, I don't know what I'd be now, or who.

Stories like these were followed by the children of domestic workers who spoke about how they wished they saw more of their mothers. "I hope Mr. Governor will sign the Bill of Rights because my mom deserves respect. She works hard," said Brisa Larios, an 8-year-old girl whose mother is a domestic worker and a member of DWU. This Children's March helped make the entire picture visible, revealing the web of human relationships and showing how we're all interconnected.

John Sweeney, Representing 10 Million Workers and His Mother:

In June 2007, Domestic Workers United held a Town Hall meeting to focus attention on the Bill of Rights and several close allies in the labor movement were able to invite AFL-CIO President, John Sweeney, to speak. Through that process, we learned that John Sweeney's mother had been a domestic worker for more than 40 years. During the Town Hall, President Sweeney stood next to Barbara Young, a domestic worker and former union leader in her home country of Barbados, to address a roomful of more than 300 domestic workers and supporters.

As the son of an immigrant domestic worker who had not had any labor protections, he recounted his memory of her pain. He remembered his mother's disappointment at the exclusion of domestic workers when the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935. He proclaimed, "The ten million workers who are part of the AFL-CIO support the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights." In that moment, President Sweeney not only paid homage to his beloved mother; he also expanded the ranks of workers who could feel at home in the labor movement. President Sweeney promised to join us in Albany during the following legislative session to express his support directly to the legislators. As promised, on a sunny April morning, he arrived from Washington and joined hundreds of domestic workers and supporters in front of the Capitol Building for our rally. Wearing a gold T-shirt that read "Rights, Respect and Recognition for Domestic Workers," Sweeney met with legislators to advocate for our Bill of Rights. That day started the momentum that we needed in the State Assembly and it led to our first real engagement with leaders of the State Senate.

President Sweeney was the leader of a labor movement that was seeking to rebuild in a changing economy, and it was significant that he chose to provide support to workers in this key sector where the AFL-CIO had not previously organized. The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign offered an opportunity for the AFL-CIO to redefine itself as a labor movement for the 21st century, and it gave domestic workers a space where they could feel like they were a part of the broader labor movement. The campaign also offered Sweeney an opportunity to honor his mother and for New York domestic workers to feel honored in the process. Over the course of the campaign, we came to realize that the mothers of many labor leaders had been domestic workers, and these connections have provided a powerful basis on which to build a profound level of solidarity between workers.

Employers:

Given the stark racial and class inequities between domestic workers and their employers, it would have been easy to adopt an organizing model based on antagonism and resentment between these groups. But Domestic Workers United chose to maintain a space to build relationships and alliances with employers who wanted to find a way to be fair employers. These alliances proved to be crucial in both building the power we needed to win the Bill of Rights and in transforming relations within the industry.

Shalom Bayit, Peace in the Home:

Given the way that domestic work is structured, DWU has had to develop strategies to achieve both structural change and changes in the relationships between individual workers and employers. Because workers have to negotiate their contracts on an individual basis, each arrangement of employers and workers is different. Some employers compel workers to work as long as possible for as little as possible. Some employers pay a living wage and make an extra effort to arrive home on time. And while many workers are afraid to negotiate with their employers or assert their rights, others are extremely vocal. While many employers take advantage of the decentralization and invisibility of the workforce, others do not.

Every home is its own situation, and we had to pay close attention to how to improve conditions in these individual homes. Rather than see this as an impossible situation, we saw it as an opportunity. There were potentially many employer families who could be moved. And, there were certainly many workers who could be organized. Each and every person on all sides could be brought into our campaign, but it was up to us to do it. This informed our approach to coalition building. We approached everyone – workers, employers, coalition partners, community leaders, and elected officials – with the same general assumptions: 1) Every one of us has needed care, provided care, or relied upon someone else for care at some point in our lives, 2) If we frame our work around values and create the right conditions, people will choose fairness and love even when it cuts against their immediate self-interest.

The values of compassion and interconnection can become guiding principles. Campaigns that bring people together to make positive change in the world, like the Bill of Rights Campaign, are ideal vessels for assumptions and values such as ours. These principles served as the basis for one of our most important alliances, our relationship with the Shalom Bayit project of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ). Shalom Bayit - which means “peace in the home” in Hebrew -was the name of JFREJ’s project to organize a network of domestic employers, “Employers for Justice.”

We first started working with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in 2002, when we launched our effort to pass New York City legislation. We invited JFREJ members who were either former or current employers of domestic workers to come to our events and speak about why they supported domestic workers’ rights. Over time, JFREJ decided to initiate “Shalom Bayit,” centered around the idea of bringing together progressive employers and the broader Jewish community to support domestic workers’ rights, drawing upon traditional Jewish values and a long history of Jewish progressive unionism. They started to organize in a small handful of synagogues and later expanded to reach many more.

When we launched our statewide campaign, JFREJ was with us from the beginning, attending meetings and mobilizing employer spokespeople for our actions. One employer, Gayle Kirschenbaum, spoke at the Human Rights Tribunal:

The first time I heard Debbie - our son’s caregiver - refer to me as her boss, I was taken aback. The word seemed too formal. I had hopes for the kind of intimacy I’d known other parents and nannies to experience, and I wanted Debbie to relate to me as someone other than her employer. I’ve now come to see that - whether an employer hopes to replicate the mistress-servant dynamic, or tries to negate the power relationship altogether - both attitudes can undermine the rights of a domestic worker. Without workplace standards, which kind of employer she ends up with is wholly arbitrary. Debbie ended up with me; my resistance to seeing myself as an employer meant that it took too long for Debbie to be treated like an employee. Rather than signing a contract and agreeing to the terms of work on day one, we talked about benefits casually, after she’d already started work. I would not have tolerated such lack of professionalism in my own job.

The employer-activists organized “living room gatherings,” meetings in their homes where they invited friends who employed domestic workers. At these gatherings, they discussed ways in which employers could take responsibility for creating decent working conditions. JFREJ activists also worked to bring domestic workers to speak in synagogues, to hold workshops for employers in different synagogues around the city, and to mobilize large contingents of Jewish activists and employers to support the Bill of Rights in Albany.

In 2009, during a critical moment in the legislative session, JFREJ organized a Jewish communal meeting (similar to a Town Hall meeting) to kick off a week of action for the Bill of Rights. The event brought together more than a dozen rabbis, four synagogues, more than 200 people, and five legislators. Rabbis read passages from the Torah that referred to freedom from slavery and our interconnectedness as people. This gathering was the first campaign event to which the Speaker of the Assembly sent a representative. It led to an in-person meeting with the Speaker later that week, and it helped to catalyze the Bill’s passage in the Assembly later that session. Everyone who participated in the Jewish Communal Meeting grew from the experience. We stretched beyond our own comfort zones, and we found strength on the common ground of shared values. We could feel our movement growing in breadth and depth.

JFREJ participated in the monthly campaign organizing meetings, so they knew the overall strategy from month to month. Instead of restricting their participation, DWU gave them the space and support they needed to take initiative to organize and build momentum around the issue within their own community. They took leadership in their own organizing, and they felt ownership of the broader campaign in the process. This approach to our organizing work – to make space for all kinds of people to take leadership – is crucial for organizing in general.

Donna Schneiderman: Mother, Employer & Activist:

Our relationships with individual employers also led to significant opportunities in our campaign. One of the best examples is our relationship with Donna Schneiderman, mother of a beautiful 9-year-old girl named Abigail. Schneiderman, one of the many employers who has made the journey to Albany over the years to advocate for the passage of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, said: “Respect for domestic workers is also respect for our children.” The first time she spoke at a press conference in Albany, she shed tears of gratitude. Her testimony spoke of the comfort she felt knowing that her daughter was in the caring hands of her nanny when she went back to the work that she loved as a media consultant. Speaking in Albany was not only an opportunity to honor to her nanny’s contribution to their family life; it was also a chance to take concrete action toward addressing the systemic problems facing all the working women who have to balance their commitments to work and family in isolation.

Schneiderman drew on her experience in media and communications in her participation in the Bill of Rights campaign. Late in the 2009 legislative session, she helped to secure a spot on the Brian Lehrer show on public radio for us to speak about the Bill of Rights, one of the key issues hanging in the balance while the Senate was not in session. Right before our segment, Lehrer interviewed Governor Paterson via telephone. He mentioned to the

Governor that we were in the studio and asked him what his position on the Bill of Rights was. The Governor replied, “The exclusion of domestic workers and farm workers from labor rights is the legacy of a long history of racism. When this bill comes to my desk, I will sign it.” Donna Schneiderman, Barbara Young and I were in the studio at the time. We had never heard the Governor express support for the bill. In fact, we were concerned that his office was not going to support it. But not only did he back it; he did so on public radio. And he framed it as part of a legacy of racism in labor laws. It was a sudden and unexpected victory! The light at the end of the tunnel glowed that morning.

BUILDING WORKER-TO-WORKER SOLIDARITY

The Ties that Bind: Doormen and Domestic Workers:

The Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ is a union that represents the thousands of doormen in luxury apartment buildings around the City. Local 32BJ has a natural affinity between its members and the members of DWU because the Local’s members are often the friends, confidants, even husbands, of the domestic workers who work in the apartment buildings of the wealthy. The doormen hear the workers’ stories of abuse, they are the ones who help workers into cabs after late nights of babysitting, and they are also the shoulder to cry on when someone is fired without notice or severance pay.

The members of 32BJ have been crucial allies in our fight. They have provided spaces for our meetings and conventions. And they have consistently endorsed our campaigns and used their leverage with elected officials to support the Bill of Rights. When we have done outreach in Manhattan’s luxury apartment buildings, in addition to reaching out to domestic workers, we spoke to the doormen in the buildings. When we told them that their union supported our work, they offered a wealth of information about the domestic workers in their buildings, how many there were, the best way to reach them, and some even helped pass out our postcards. Some doormen even cheered us on, noting: “It’s about time someone stood up for these workers.”

Our trips to Albany often included delegations of SEIU Local 32BJ members and staff. Hector Figueroa, Secretary Treasurer of SEIU Local 32BJ, joined one of our most important trips to Albany to meet with legislators as a member of our National Leadership Delegation. In a meeting with Speaker of the State Assembly Sheldon Silver, we explained the significance of the Bill. Silver listened and then said: “You know, what you’re asking for, no other workers receive by law.” Hector Figueroa stepped in and said: “Other workers are able to collectively bargain for basic rights. That is impossible for this workforce because of the nature of the industry. Legislation is really necessary.” He had stepped in at the right moment with exactly the right message. Rather than seeing our victory as an affront to their base, he stood with us in solidarity. The affinity between doormen and domestic workers combined with the commitment of progressive union leadership to embracing new forms of organizing offers a glimpse of the potential of an inclusive labor movement, reflective of the hopes and dreams of the new working class.

Building Unity Between Excluded Workers:

On a cold morning in early March 2008, a white sign that dripped with water outside of the church on the Albany Green read, "End Modern Day Slavery – Reverse The Legacy of Exclusion." The New York State Labor Religion Coalition and the local Jobs with Justice chapter had chosen to highlight domestic workers' and farm workers' rights during its annual 40-hour fast which was themed, "Welcoming the Stranger: Prophetic Voices for Immigrant Rights." The New York Justice for Farmworkers Campaign and the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign mobilized workers to participate in the 40-hour fast activities which included legislative visits, a morning interfaith service and press conference, and a march.

Through the course of the day, the workers collaborated in mixed groups of farm workers and domestic workers. They learned from one another's stories, they built camaraderie, and they laughed together. At the end of the day, Lois Newland, a companion for the elderly and member of DWU, said, "We never ask ourselves at Thanksgiving dinner with all the food on the table, who suffered to make it possible for that food to be there? Now I know." In turn, the farmworkers remarked on the courage and clarity with which domestic workers engaged legislators. One of them said, "We learned a lot from working with you. You have given us more energy to fight." After the exchange, domestic workers would rarely participate in an event without raising the question of farmworker dignity.

In the years following, we would invite farm worker leaders to participate in all of our actions. One farmworker journeyed from Immokalee, Florida to participate in our national social justice leadership delegation to Albany. Listening to the stories of domestic workers and seeing the leadership of domestic workers in the Bill of Rights campaign, he found the connections between farm workers and domestic workers remarkable. At a meeting with then Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith, he said: "When I listen to the stories of domestic workers, I hear the story of farmworkers and so many others. This is about basic human dignity. We must listen and take action."

Building Solidarity with Workers Upstate:

One of the most important targets in our campaign, the Chair of the Labor Committee in the State Assembly, was from Rochester, a city where we had few connections. Up until that point, the Chair had not focused on the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, and we needed her support. Through the AFL-CIO, we got in touch with Denise Young, an organizer at the Public Employees Federation and long-time Rochester labor organizer. Young helped to set up a meeting with the Area Labor Federation's Executive Council Meeting in the summer of 2008. Deloris Wright, a nanny from Jamaica, and Joycelyn Gill-Campbell, a former nanny and current staff organizer for Domestic Workers United, joined me on the journey to Rochester to meet with the Labor Federation and build the support of local unions for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

The meeting was held at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers offices, among a committee of workers whose own experiences as white, male, more formal sector workers were quite different, with little exposure to the type of industry we were organizing in. We only had a few minutes to speak about the Bill of Rights and felt

uncertain about the reception we would receive. Wright and Gill-Campbell spoke about the conditions facing domestic workers and the long history, dating back to slavery, of the exclusions in the labor law facing domestic workers. Upon realizing that domestic workers were excluded from the right to organize, a committee member passionately remarked, “it is outrageous in this day and age that there are workers excluded from labor laws and our sisters are still dealing with these conditions.”

After some discussion, they unanimously passed a resolution in support of the legislation and committed to call the Chair of the Assembly to support the coalition’s efforts. Regardless of their lack of a personal connection to the industry, these worker leaders understood the stakes: without basic labor rights, particularly the right to organize, the basic human dignity of domestic workers was at stake. That meant their own human dignity was at stake. That kind of solidarity was not only a crucial asset in our work to build the power we needed to win the Bill of Rights campaign; it was also profoundly transformative for us on a personal level. It showed us that we could build meaningful human connections across lines of difference that would have alienated us in the past.

CLOSING

Several years ago, my grandfather had a stroke that left him paralyzed on the left side of his body. My grandmother was more than 70 years old, and she was unable to help him move around, bathe, or meet many of his basic needs. So - like thousands of other families - my grandparents hired a home attendant named Mrs. Li. I first met Mrs. Li a couple of years after she had been hired, when a second stroke had put my grandfather back in the hospital, leaving him in critical condition. I remember going to visit him in his hospital room. Mrs. Li sat at the side of his bed with a small plastic comb in her hand, slowly combing back his thin grey hair. His eyes were closed, and his expression peaceful and light. I turned to greet my grandmother, who said quietly, “He asks for her to comb his hair. It puts him at ease.” Apparently, every morning at home for the last two years, she patiently combed his hair after bathing him.

At that moment, it became clear to me that there are few greater gifts than being cared for by another person. That care roots us in the interconnectedness of humanity. When we face the uncertainty of life, we have each other to rely on. But our society does not respect, protect, or value the work of caring.

Organizing for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, organizing to change the way that care work is treated has profoundly transformed the countless numbers of people who joined in the campaign. The stories that workers have shared in the course of the campaigns, the actions that we have organized and the many relationships that have been built through the campaign – all of these moments have provided entry points to help us connect with our mutual humanity. They have shown us the possibility for the kind of deep social transformation that we need to achieve, throughout society and within ourselves.

The campaign to pass the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights is ongoing. Where it will end up is still a question of organizing. But the experience of the campaign to pass the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York has already provided an opening for the transformation of the relations within the domestic work industry and a vision for how we can transform all of our relations throughout our nation and beyond. Like a great love affair, it has helped us grow.

As a movement, we face enormous challenges ahead. The Bill of Rights Campaign is an example of the types of campaigns – full of hard work, risk and uncertainty – that we will need embrace in order to make a real difference for the next generation. It provides a hopeful push, despite the unknown, toward campaigns based on love, to bring us into the right relationships with one another for the change we need. In taking these risks, we may become who we were meant to be as a movement.