

# 18. Interview with Priscilla Gonzalez

**Silvia Federici:** In your website you describe the recent passing in New York State of the Bill of Rights that Domestic Workers United (DWU) has been fighting for as a historic victory. Can you explain why this bill is so significant? What is at stake in this Bill? What does it change in the conditions of domestic workers in New York and in the country? And why it had been so difficult for domestic workers in the US to win the right to be treated as other workers?

**Priscilla Gonzalez:** The domestic workers bill of rights is historic because it is the first comprehensive law in the history of the United States to not only recognize domestic workers as real workers but also to guarantee basic rights and protections that most other workers won 75 years ago when the first labor laws were enacted in the U.S. Domestic workers, having been primarily African American women, were excluded because of a strong Southern Democrat lobby that fought to prevent African Americans from being able to assert any kind of political power, which gaining labor rights would have afforded them considering the legacy of slavery that domestic work is rooted in.

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So, for 75 years, this exclusion has continued to remain. [As a result] what we have seen is rampant abuse and exploitation that really has not changed much since the turn of the last century. Behind closed doors [domestic/care workers] are facing all kinds of abuse and exploitation: verbal, physical, emotional, even sexual violence and the law has not reached into these households, because it is never considered that someone's home could be someone else's workplace or that these workers are real workers deserving of rights and protection like any other worker.

It is significant also because it is the first time that domestic workers are recognized. The first paragraph of the legislation says, "Domestic workers are..." and it describes who they are. It recognizes the race and gender-based discrimination and the exclusion that workers in the sector have been suffering. It spells out the important contributions that domestic workers make to our society by caring for the homes and families of countless people. The women's movement obviously highlighted the importance of recognizing household work. In this sense, it is also significant that we won rights for a sector [of workers] who are based in the home and perform domestic services that have always been devalued because it is work done by women. Of course, the other significant aspect is that this workforce, in the 21st century, [consists] primarily of immigrant women from the global south, who have fled the devastation of globalization, free trade agreements, structural adjustment programs and the like to come here only to find themselves [living and working] in exploitative conditions. Many are undocumented. To have fought a campaign that was led by immigrant women of color, many of whom were undocumented, that was about the

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expansion of [their] rights, was really significant in the absence of an immigration reform in this country.

[Add to] all these reasons the fact that we have included over 200,000 domestic workers -which is what we estimate we are in New York- under the labor laws, which is a labor victory that we had not been able to obtain in decades, and affects specifically excluded workers who are primarily women. All of these factors are what make the passage of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights so significant. What also is significant is what is at stake. What's at stake in the fact that we were able to gain inclusion for this otherwise excluded and invisible workforce, is that it is going to have an impact and repercussions on many other excluded sectors and could potentially be meaningful also for other workers regardless of whether or not they have been excluded from [labor rights] until now. One of the things that we won in the bill was paid leave. Granted it was a minimum: 3 paid days of rest a year after the first year of employment, which is literally the bare minimum and certainly less than what domestic workers deserve. But it is the only sector [of domestic workers] in the entire country that has been able to win paid leave. Having paid leave included in the statute sets a precedent and could potentially give us an opening, maybe not within this decade but certainly in the future, as we are continuing to work toward an expansion of rights at a time where the rights that we have gained in the labor movement are continually being eroded. That we were able to win this victory in this period of crisis is really significant and is certainly a sign of what is at stake, because we have to keep pushing and we have to keep winning because it has significance for all working people.

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**SF:** Can you explain how have you organized your campaign? What kind of tactics/ strategies have you used? What help/support have you received from other organizations (feminist, for instance) and other workers?

**PG:** The story behind the campaign is that in 2003 we organized a convention called the "Have Your Say Convention" where we brought together over 200 domestic workers from across the city to share with each other –off of the playground, off of the park benches where they are sometimes within ear or eyesight of their employers- to share conditions, to identify similarities and to imagine what being treated with dignity and respect would look like.

For that convention we did mass outreach, so there were people there who were connected to the organization and there were workers for whom that was the first event. That was the event that I went to with my Mom, and my Mom had never gone to a DWU event before, and I had just barely gone to one or two meetings before that. So it was really open because what we realized as an organization was that our first couple of years were focused on building the base and we were also doing a lot of cases for individual workers and what we realized was that going case by case by case was never going to address what was fundamentally a systemic problem and that we needed to take an industry wide approach. So we organized the "Have Your Say Convention", and this list of demands came out that was pointing toward changing the labor laws in the state of New York that would have an impact on the entire industry.

The list of demands that emerged at that convention would later become the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights

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and that is what we introduced into the state legislature in 2004.

The first couple of years after that we spent a lot of time doing education. Public education, both among the legislators and the public, about the exclusions, about the [work] conditions. We were focused on building our base so that we would have enough power to move the legislation forward. After that we realized that there was no way domestic workers were going to win alone and that we needed to engage more people, and different kinds of sectors. So we started engaging unions and policy advocates and students and employers. We structured the campaign in such a way that it was open enough for every sector, every individual to participate from their location and could engage in the campaign with their whole selves. For example, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, who organized the employers were coming into the campaign grounded in Jewish traditions, grounded in Jewish values, grounded in a progressive, Jewish social justice world view and commitment, and organized from that place. Students organized as the sons and daughters of domestic workers. Unions organized as the relatives of domestic workers or as fellow workers in the same neighborhoods and locations. The story that we always like to tell is SEIU 32BJ who organized the doormen. The doormen are the gatekeepers in the buildings where members work. They are the ones who know who the good employers are, who the bad employers are. They are the ones who call the taxi for our member at one or two o'clock in the morning for our members when they are going home after work. When we did outreach for any number of activities, including the convention, they helped us do the outreach. They distributed the postcards

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and flyers to the domestic workers in their buildings. It was like this real class solidarity that was organic, that was not orchestrated or manipulated but that came from the real on the ground conditions. These workers were interacting with each other and the campaign gave them the opportunity to actually work together on something that was about dignity and respect and a set of values and principles that they shared.

In building the coalition we thought about the messages of the campaign. There are these organic relationships, how do we broaden them? How do we bring in more sectors? So we framed the campaign in such a way that literally anyone who believed in dignity and respect and was educated on the history of exclusion and the value of domestic work could find a place in the campaign. The three key messages were one: "Reverse the history of discrimination and exclusion," which was about educating people including the employers- taking it out of the personal and putting the conditions of the work in a historical context. The second was "Respect the work that makes all other work possible." So we asked, "What is a day in the life of a domestic worker? What is the value added in our society? How is it that these workers actually allow all other work to happen?" And then finally, the third, which was "Standards benefit everyone," which was key for the legislators and for everybody. Who doesn't want to have a stable work force? Who doesn't want to have clarity in employment relationships? So those were the three key messages in the campaign that anybody could find resonance with.

In terms of the strategy, the heart and soul of the campaign, in addition to building a cross sector coalition of

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multiple voices and having a broad enough frame that [other workers] could meaningfully participate in, what we also did was to anchor the campaign by the stories. Domestic workers being front and center, sharing their stories, bringing their stories to light. Contrasting and challenging the invisibility of the workforce to say "This is what I go through", "This is what has happened to me", and "This is why I am part of this campaign. This is why I am fighting for this."

In that process we were doing leadership development. Supporting the workers, their families and their communities to recognize the dignity and value of their labor. It was also about training them to be spokespeople for the campaign and to lead campaign strategy and development. To go up to Albany [New York State's Capital] and become expert lobbyists. They led the lobby teams. We would have these huge Albany days when we would bring two, three hundred people. We structured the teams so that at least one member of the team had to be a domestic worker who would go in there and lead the team with her story, with the conditions, with the history of exclusion, and with the reasons why the bill of rights was the only possibly solution for this industry, which had been made invisible and by default and by design did not squarely fit into existing labor laws which had been created in the context of an industrial US. The campaign was this beautifully transformative opportunity for everyone who participated. For the workers and the supporters and the allies.

**RJ Maccani:** What years does the campaign span?

**PG:** The fall of 2003 was when the convention happened. We introduced the bill in 2004. From 2004 to 2006 we were devoted to doing education and base-building. From

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2006 to 2008 was about building a broad-based coalition of support. We won in 2010. Those last couple of years were really about scaling up the organizing and testing our power and making that visible. So we scaled up our actions. We did the marches, the huge lobby days, and we really brought our power to bear not just with the workers, but making visible the coalition that we had built around this campaign, that technically concerned a particular sector of workers but ultimately inspired and transformed so many people. There was a hearing we had when we were trying to get the bill passed through the labor committee in the Assembly. There were female employers who testified, who were also women's rights advocates, and they said that one of the central struggles of the women's movement was to strike a work/family balance, and that the bill of rights campaign gave them this incredible "ah ha moment", when they realized they could achieve that by depending on the labor of another woman. And because of it, they said they needed to participate in the struggle, because this was about lifting up household work and lifting up the value of another woman's labor, lifting up the value of women's work in the home as wage labor, needing to be protected and afforded the same rights as any other form of wage labor.

**RJ:** Were there other ways that feminists or women's rights advocates participated in the campaign as an organized force?

**PG:** The organized feminist presence in the United States is more middle class, upper-middle class and white. That's the traditional feminist identity in this country. The ways they were engaging were as female employers that had these reflections and these experiences and also,



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simultaneously, as women's rights advocates recognizing that the bill of rights wasn't just a labor rights struggle but also a women's rights issue, because it was about lifting up the value of household work and recognizing the reproductive value of that labor that has also been a long struggle in the women's movement.

I feel like it [feminist participation in the campaign] can't be separated out because it was rooted in that experience. That the policy advocates and feminist lawyers that were testifying were reflecting on their experience as employers of nannies, housekeepers and elder caregivers for their parents.

**RJ:** How many trips would you say you took to Albany [New York State's capital] over the years?

**PG:** We estimate about 40 (laughing).

**RJ:** What's the typical trip to Albany look like?

**PG:** It depends. We count literally all of the trips. The trips could range between a van full of ten people, mostly workers and a few employers and other allies, to busloads of workers and a broad range of allies and supporters. Essentially the trips were about being a presence. The first few years it was just about creating a buzz in Albany about domestic workers and about domestic worker rights. We realized when we went up there that a lot of legislators claimed not to know anything about who domestic workers were, about the conditions, about the history of exclusion. So our charge was really to educate them: These are the conditions they are working in, this is who they are, these are the professions we are representing, this is the demographic, here are the particularities of the industry: it's totally diffuse, completely dispersed, workers behind closed doors. The government doesn't recognize these

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households as workplaces. And then you have employers who don't recognize themselves as employers because the work has never been valued as work.

So those trips were about educating and being a presence. When we started scaling up our tactics then it became about making our power felt. That included yellow t-shirts (laughing). Being a sea of yellow in Albany. It also included really creative methods to engage our constituents and engage the legislature. We did so through art and culture. Our members composed a calypso about the bill of rights. They adapted the electric slide [a popular dance] to the "domestic slide" and put in lyrics that were reflecting the conditions and the struggle for dignity and respect and recognition. One of the highlights, and one of these moments of transformation that was significant, was the president of the AFL-CIO [the largest labor federation in the US] at the time, John Sweeney, came to Albany for the first time in over a decade to lobby for the domestic workers bill of rights. The first two statements that he made to the delegation that we had brought up there of about 250 people were, "Ten million workers are behind this legislation because we think that it is one of the most critical pieces of legislation in the history of this country" and "I am here because my mother was a domestic worker for 40 years."

This campaign had so much heart and integrity, and was so led by the workers themselves, that it resonated in a different way with our targets so that on July 1 [2010], on the night that the bill made its way on to the Senate floor, every single Democratic Senator including the one Republican who voted for it- stood up and made a speech. They made speeches addressing the 100 work-

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ers that we had brought up to Albany that night directly. They said, whether they were reflecting on their mothers or grandmothers who had been domestic workers, or their constituents that included domestic workers, or they were just talking about how this was the just and right thing to do. Almost every one of them thanked domestic workers, and the campaign they had led, for giving them the opportunity to be part of history and to correct a wrong that was decades overdue. All of us, I think for a moment, saw this genuine heartfelt gesture in the legislature at a time when the Senate was in complete chaos in New York. The most dysfunctional Senate in the history of the state. They were at each other's throats. There was no consensus on anything. They weren't unified on anything and this was the one thing that brought them all together and it was unanimous. You could see that there was this genuine reflection that, "This was why I got in to public service. To pass these pieces of legislation."

When we were reflecting back on the campaign. We thought about passing this law but also, in the process, built a movement that was really grounded in dignity and respect and that those words actually meant something substantial to everyone that participated, even marginally. Our lead organizer on the campaign, Ai-jen Poo, has said that there is no such thing as unlikely allies when you are fighting for dignity and respect and when it is clearly spelled out what that looks like. And when the people that are fighting for that are friends, are sharing their stories and leading the movement, there is no such thing as unlikely allies. All you have to do is create an opportunity for people to participate and do the right thing. That is ultimately what grounded the campaign. We went

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into it with this genuine belief in the ultimate goodness of people. That employers, given the opportunity, want to do the right thing. They want to have clarity in the employment relationship, they want to have guidelines. That is what they said time after time in Albany when we lobbied together. Just as the workers wanted rights and protections, they wanted guidelines. They wanted to know, "What is a fair number of vacation days to give? What does severance look like? What kind of notice do I need to give before my conditions change and I have to terminate the relationship?" Those were real questions that people grappled with, and that they reflected on, and the campaign provided that opportunity for them to do. In the same way, or perhaps a much more powerful way, it did so for the workers too. To have a space to come out and say proudly, "I am a domestic worker."

**RJ:** What reasons, if any, did those who voted against the bill of rights give for that decision?

**PG:** Throughout the campaign the pushback was always, "You are fighting for special rights. Why should domestic workers get these rights legislated when everybody else actually has to form a union or negotiate a contract to obtain?" Part of the education was about how our sector is not like any other sector. You have isolated workers. You have a power differential that is 2-to-1 because they are often employed by a couple in these households. You have got these labor laws that were created with different industries in mind. They were not thinking about households. They were thinking about a minimum number of employees in a factory on the shop floor. The labor laws do not readily apply to our sector. We need a specialized solution for the problems that domestic workers are facing.

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At the beginning we said that we are not asking for special rights, we are just asking to be put on equal footing with every other worker. Maybe not all workers have these things but they have the ability to secure them. But then at a certain point we realized that if we were special enough to be excluded than we need to be special enough to be included in a way that actually responds to the particularities of our sector. So that was the challenge throughout. Where the union voice, the voice of the labor movement, was critical was that as workers we were a united front. It was just as much in the interest of unionized members to have this piece of legislation passed as it was to the excluded members to have this legislation passed. Because we needed the victory, we needed to have an impact on labor laws. Working people are suffering all throughout this country and we needed a ray of hope. This legislation had every possibility of passing because we had solid campaign strategy, good leadership and we had a good message that spoke to any number communities.

On the Senate floor on the night of the vote that essentially got it out of the legislature and in to the executive chamber, the arguments that were made were not surprising. One that stood out in particular was, "Parents need to be able to let go of someone who does not give them a good feeling." The discourse was all about parents. At no point was the word employer mentioned. [It fit with] everything we had been saying: that employers do not identify as employers, and that this is why we need this law to make it clear that this is actually an employment relationship that is formal and, as such, needs to have all the corresponding labor laws apply.

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That was one argument. The other was that this "is a loophole for illegals to get rights that they don't deserve" and that "these workers are probably doing a lot better than they would in their home countries." So, these arguments exposed the bigotry and ethnocentrism, and a whole slew of views that, at the end of the day, just didn't pass muster.

Those were the primary arguments. But the other thing that is also significant in some ways, which is also the irony, is that we didn't have an organized opposition. Like the farm workers have the farm bureau, a really well funded agribusiness lobby. We didn't have an organized opposition because employers don't identify as employers. And that actually worked for us. Where we continue to be positioned is that we are positioned to set the terms in our industry. We want the employers to identify as employers. And they didn't, which was fine, because it allowed us to just have to engage with the legislature on their arguments that we could easily respond to.

**SF:** I understand that the main focus of your organizational efforts now is to find means to ensure that the provisions of the Bill of Rights are implemented and expanded. You are also exploring how the right of collective bargaining can be extended to domestic workers. How do you propose to achieve these goals? What kind of community-based structures are envisaging as necessary to make collective bargaining relevant to the situation of domestic workers?

**PG:** One of the things that we are doing is revamping our base building structure, which basically means formalizing the current, informal networks that exist among domestic workers. The workers are already connected

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to each other. Whether it is in the neighborhoods where they live or in the neighborhoods where they work, on the park bench, in the playgrounds, they are already in conversation with each other.

So this year, after the bill of rights victory, what we want to do in order to expand our capacity to reach the estimated over 200,000 workers in the metro area is to train a few dozen worker leaders to be the front line of defense. To be the organizational contacts for workers in a given area. So we're gonna be training these worker leaders in "know your rights", in negotiation, and also to be grievance intake specialists where they can respond quickly to cases of abuse and exploitation in a given area. In doing that not only will we be raising the visibility of DWU among workers but also among employers, [letting them know] that there is someone in the neighborhood that is keeping a watch on any potential cases where workers rights are being violated. As part of that, we are hoping that this program will build our capacity to engage in collective bargaining where we can build our power to sit at the table across from employers. One of the things that we are planning to do is with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice to launch what we are calling the "Domestic Justice Dialogue Project". Given that so much of our strategy has been about also doing transformative organizing, what we want to do is to bring groups of workers and groups of employers to talk about the challenges in the employment relationship, to get educated on the history of the industry in the United States, and to start thinking about an agreement or terms that would be of mutual benefit. [We need] to think about incentives that would be useful for employers, whether it is investing in a health care

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pool, where they would have to pay two dollars an hour to pay for full health care for their worker, together with a bunch of other employers in the neighborhood, or organizing workers around the idea that it would be possible for them to negotiate as a group, and not have to individually walk into a household, given the power differential that we have in this industry, to have to negotiate terms that could or could not lead to a job. [We need] to create the conditions where we could identify what our standards are in the industry, what we are not willing to go under, and to present that and have an honest negotiation with employers to try to establish an agreement that families in a given neighborhood will follow, and where we try to organize as many households as possible to follow that. With the ultimate vision of using these local agreements as industry-wide standards that we can take back to Albany and say, "Look. This is what we were able to accomplish on the ground. It has the color of law. We have some real recommendations to make about collective bargaining and how negotiations in this industry look." That is our vision for next couple of years and what we'll be organizing toward. The majority of workers are downstate [New York City and the bordering counties], so our focus will be downstate. When we have the capacity we can investigate what it looks like statewide.

**SF:** Is the campaign for a Bill of Rights taking place also in other parts of the US? What has been so far the impact of your victory on the struggles of other domestic workers across the country? And what kind of help/support have you received from other workers?

**PG:** One of the things that we're doing through the National Domestic Workers Alliance that we helped build and



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form three-and-a-half years ago, is a national research project that will be anchored in several different cities where we'll try to take a snapshot of what the conditions look like for the over two-and-a-half million domestic workers that we estimate are employed in this sector. And with that build momentum and provide additional data to advance similar campaigns in other states. So California and Massachusetts are two states that are launching domestic workers bill of rights campaigns. They are ready to go and will be modeling their campaigns on the New York victory. And also one thing that was interesting that we learned recently is that the California domestic workers bill of rights actually has the right to collectively bargain. So it is possible that we could pilot collective bargaining, or standard negotiation agreements, in tandem and be able to share lessons learned and employ similar tactics and create the momentum beyond one state.

We're also uniting forces with other excluded sectors through what we're calling the "Excluded Workers Congress" where we're bringing together about nine different sectors of workers: domestic workers, farm workers, guest workers, day laborers, taxi workers, restaurant workers, formerly incarcerated workers, work-fare workers to work on the expansion to labor protections for these sectors that have been excluded by either default or design or both. One of the key things that we're gonna be focusing on is precisely collective bargaining because a lot of our sectors share similar characteristics of workers being really isolated, many of the workers not having papers and being in these really vulnerable conditions and our labor laws just not being up to par with the realities of the 21st Century workers. It is one of the things that

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we're really excited about and we're hoping that our pilot projects in New York will be able to help create data, experience and lessons learned.

**SF:** DWU is an impressive umbrella organization made of workers from every part of the world, from the Caribbean Islands to Nepal to Brazil. How have you been able to achieve such multinational composition, cutting across language/cultural, ethnic differences?

**PG:** We found that the bill of rights campaign served as a really critical tool to unify a really diverse workforce because no matter where people came from, the conditions they shared were really similar and that the demands that had been established or identified at the "Have Your Say Convention" really resonated with workers who had not been there. So we could go to a playground and we could talk about sick days and holidays and vacation and notice and severance and a living wage and across the board so many workers, regardless of where they were from, regardless of the language that they spoke or the different religious traditions that they came from, really identified with the fact that as workers they were being denied these basic rights. In a lot of ways the industry-wide approach that we took is ultimately what brought together all these different workers. In the same way that the Excluded Workers Congress and the campaigns that we're identifying as critical for our bases is also unifying folks from across many different sectors, from across many different racial and linguistic backgrounds.

**RJ:** Are there other things that might be relevant to share that might be helpful for other organizations that might try to launch campaigns that involve bridging such diverse communities?

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**PG:** I think prioritizing story-telling is really a critical component of any organizing because that is where you can identify the similarities in the experiences that would allow you to tell a story that resonates with people of many different walks of life. Being able to create those opportunities where people can come together, hear from each other, talk about the conditions they are facing and be able to develop a common analysis about the root causes, that is what is gonna unify people. It is being educated about the history of how something evolved. About why we are where we are right now and just being able to just hear from each other and identify the experiences that they share in common. I feel like that is something that is really critical and often not done, where you sort of do it in reverse. Somebody else identifies what the problem is and what the solution needs to be. But it needs to be from the ground where people actually have face-to-face time where they can speak from the heart and say, "This is what I have to go through every single day. And if I can see myself in you then we can struggle together." And it is in the process of that struggling together that transformation happens and where you actually create the possibility for building movement that ultimately is about uniting people that are ostensibly from different, that occupy different spaces.

**SF:** What are the main problems, economic/social/emotional, that domestic workers are facing in their everyday work-experience, in their relations to their employers, as well as the authorities and the law? Does working in a 'global city' like NY hinder or facilitate organizing?

**PG:** I think it is probably both. Easier in that people are in close proximity to each other even though it is still a city that is pretty segregated. Also it is harder because

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you are dealing with so many different types of people. What I was saying earlier about being really intentional about bringing different individuals face-to-face with one another and creating opportunities for those interactions to take place and for that sharing to happen. There is a lot to be said about that. There is a lot of potential that gets created by bringing people together. We always tried really hard in the bill of rights campaign not to make assumptions about anybody. The campaign was intentionally structured in a really open way. Sure, at times, we needed to question, "Well, we don't agree with this particular group on the other stuff that they work on, right? But we can agree on this." And for us that was OK because the priority was identifying shared interests and shared values and if we could start from there then we have hope for transforming those other areas where there is no overlap, where there is difference. But you have to create the opportunity for people to interact and participate.

**SF:** It is often said that domestic/care work is like no other work because its product is the well-being of the people cared-for, this being especially true in the case of child-care and eldercare. It is said that the forms of struggle and resistance that have been typical of industrial work do not apply here, because it is work dealing with human beings. At the same time, many care-workers, nurses in particular have rejected the blackmail used by employers claiming that they cannot strike because people's lives depend on them. How do you see this contrast?

**PG:** I think that is a false assumption. Our experience has been that our members identify as workers, first and foremost. In the industry in which they work, sure, the

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problems are embedded in the fact that it is largely informal. That it is a pretty intimate relationship that is different from other employment relationships. But ultimately this is work that we are fighting to have considered real work. Our members identify as workers and have no qualms about one day going on strike if we can build to that level where it would make a meaningful difference where we could turn out thousands and thousands and thousands of workers. Our members will often talk about how we say, "This is the work that makes all other work possible." If we stop, New York City would stop running. We want to test that. We want to be able to build to a scale that would allow us to put that to test because ultimately it isn't about that blackmail or that false assumption. Our domestic workers are workers just like the steel workers or any other factory worker. They will be ready to go on strike when the time, place and conditions are right for it.

**SF:** How do you see the relation between paid and unpaid domestic work? Do you think that if all domestic work were paid the condition of domestic workers would improve? Do you agree with the position taken by women in the Wages For Housework Campaign that was launched internationally in the 1970s which argued that the unpaid condition of housework, its naturalization as "women's work," is the main cause of the devaluation of paid domestic/care-work as well?

**PG:** I think that ignores the very explicit racial history, particularly in the United States. It is identifying the devaluation of women's work as being a principal factor when in the United States what we also have to consider is that domestic work has its roots in slavery. Enslaved African women were the first domestic workers in this

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country. In the 1930s, when labor laws were being negotiated, because domestic workers were primarily African American they were denied these rights. To ignore that history is not taking into account why domestic workers have been in the position that they are in, because it is a multitude of factors. It is the fact that they do work that is been considered "women's work," it is the fact that there is this really clear lineage to slavery, it is work that in particular brown women and immigrant women have always done, that as a form of wage labor- has always been exploited, [and treated as] expendable. When we talk about why domestic work is ultimately devalued and excluded we have to talk about all of those factors together in order to really get at the root cause and to think about solutions that would actually address and get at all that. So if we were to have this cultural shift where you start valuing women's work in the household it still would not fundamentally transform the domestic work industry. We would still have a long way to go in terms of thinking about the work that immigrant women of color in particular in this country have done for the last couple of decades as a form of wage labor that deserves to be protected and respected and valued.

**SF:** What is your relation with feminist organizations? What do you think of the position that some feminists take that women should not hire domestics or care-workers because it creates an unequal power relation among women? What would you say to these feminists?

**PG:** I am thinking about how our members would respond to that question actually. Ultimately our struggle is about valuing and lifting up the dignity of this profession, understanding it as a profession. Everyone has to

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work, right? Many people have employers. Many people have supervisors. Many people work in workplaces that are hierarchical. So domestic workers aren't necessarily fighting to be treated differently. They are fighting to be on equal footing with all other works. If there is a woman that wants to hire someone to work in her home, if the conditions are dignified, if the conditions really reflect the value of the work, the contributions that that working is making to the home, of raising a child, of having to employ a variety of skills, everything from basic pediatrics to child psychology to health and safety to language instruction, and they are getting a living wage, a wage that really honors all of the different things that they're doing then there is no reason for that to be shameful, right, or to be wrong, or to necessarily be unequal. Ultimately what we want is fair working conditions and to get pay for an honest day's work. It is not as simple as saying, "Well, I am a feminist, I am not gonna hire somebody. If I have kids I'll just take care of my kids." Folks need work and they want to work. This is a profession. It is skilled. There is a career ladder, contrary to popular belief. There is a way for this to work, you know?

**SF:** How can women and men best support the struggle of DWU and domestic workers in general? What concretely each of us can do to expand domestic workers rights?

**PG:** We are at the place now where, at least in New York, we're launching a Know Your Rights campaign, which we understand has to have a really strong communications infrastructure because our industry is so disperse. What we're looking for our allies for support around is to help spread the word about this law in New York. If they're not in New York, to help spread the word about the value

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of domestic work because what we want to do in terms of fundamentally transforming the industry, in addition to expanding basic labor rights and protections is also to change the way that people think about domestic work. To shift from this thinking that it is invisible, unskilled, inexperienced work to this thinking that is really reflective of what the work actually is, which is skilled, expert, professional and contributing significantly to the overall functioning of society and to our economy. That is not a concrete call to action but it is encouraging people to have these conversations, to think differently about the brown woman who is pushing the white kid in the stroller that for so long has been a really visible presence in New York City but that, for the reasons that we know, have been really invisible and it is about us recognizing it, making it visible, talking about the law in New York, talking about the movement of domestic workers nationally, talking about it internationally. The ILO, the International Labor Organization, is dedicating the next five years to investigating domestic work around the world and in June of 2011 will be passing a convention on the rights of domestic workers. It is on the international radar that this is a burgeoning movement that is setting precedent, not just for domestic workers but for all excluded workers and ultimately for all working people in terms of redefining the value of labor and challenging the traditional instruments and frameworks that we have relied upon to protect our rights as workers in the world.

**RJ:** Thinking about the international context of the readership of this interview, something that you mentioned within the interview was the notion of "transformative organizing." Do you have a few words to say about



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what that means to you or Domestic Workers United or what that means in the context of organizing in the United States?

**PG:** It means a lot of things. Transformative organizing is about challenging structural inequities but it is also about personal transformation and unlearning all of the values that we have inherited through capitalism and through existing and surviving in capitalist society. It is about shifting our consciousness around building community in a different way and looking beyond individualism. In our particular context around domestic work it is been a lot about making visible the invisible. It is a lot about exposing histories of racism and discrimination. It is about self-reflection and revaluing human relationships in the context of struggle. You create campaigns with a movement building perspective, that it is not just about the ultimate win and what you can gain in the short term but that ultimately it is about the struggle you engage in with people you never thought you would engage in struggle with, who would be standing by you and who you, just by virtue of struggling together, you are transformed by. Your worldview is changed, your consciousness is shifted and that, by having participated in something like that, in a campaign that had that perspective, you will change the way that you engage in the world as a conscious, just human being. That to me is "transformative organizing" and that to me is what the bill of rights campaign gave to us and gave to everybody who ever participated in it.

For campaign information and updates regarding the implementation of the NY Domestic Workers Bill of Rights and collective bargaining, please visit

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<http://www.domesticworkersunited.org> and  
<http://www.knowyourrightsny.org>.