

24. Interview with Victoria Mamani

Interview conducted by Silvia Federici with Victoria Mamani (Vicky) of Mujeres Creando, at the Mujeres Creando Center, in La Paz, on February 25, 2011. Victoria, who is a member of Mujeres Creando, speaks of the struggle of domestic workers, in which she participated, that led to the passing of a legislation in 2003 specifying these workers' rights and entitlements.

Victoria: Already in 1952 there was an organization of women [domestic workers] that struggled to obtain some rights: the right to rest at least once a week and to have a vacation, because at the time they did not have the right to go out. In 1984, the struggle started again. At the roots of the discrimination against them is often the fact that domestic workers in Bolivia are indigenous women who cannot speak Spanish, because they are from the rural areas; they are discriminated also because of the clothes they wear, often they have to stop wearing their *polleras** and put on a dress, they are also criticized because they use too much water.

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The union that women formed in 1984 was the first union of women domestic workers in the country. The struggle began when one woman who was a member of the Catholic Church was accused of theft. The women then decided to organize. This is how the first union was born. Their mobilization eventually led to the passing of the Bill 2450 that regulates domestic work and was approved by the Bolivian Congress on April 9, 2003.

With the passing of this law domestic workers have obtained 15 days of vacation, some severance pay, calculated on every year of work performed, the fixing of the hours of work, which are supposed to be eight. But in many cases the law cannot be implemented and many women now work ten hours a day. Why the difference? Because employers say that the women consume food and enjoy other benefits. They say it is right that they work ten hours because they sleep in the house. What most matters to the workers is mutual respect. The new law was first presented in parliament in 1993. There was some hope because the vice president was an indigenous person, Hugo Cardenas. But nothing happened. There was a strong struggle. There were marches. The domestic workers were the first to enter in Plaza Murillo something that before had been forbidden. Ten compañeras gathered and started screaming.

I never told my employers that I was part of the union. We had a representative who later became the Minister of Justice under Morales, but in this period was the executive secretary of the union. We demanded to be able to rest on Sunday. The police came with gas. We decided to march also on Monday. We passed in front of the house of the president; many people insulted us, "what are you doing

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here” – they yelled – “why you are not in the kitchen?” But many supported us too.

Today there are four union organizations of domestic workers. The most important is made of women who do skilled manual work. They make *polleras* and mantas. Still, domestic workers face the problem of where to meet. First it was in a church, then the squares have been the places of meeting, they would meet there and bring there their machines, and this served to unite them and gave rise to new organizations. As I said, there are now four organizations, with the same name, but existing in different localities, including in El Alto. We struggle with the Federación Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar de Bolivia (FENATRAHOB) [The National Federation Of Domestic Workers of Bolivia] that gathers 15 unions in Bolivia.¹

In Latin America in the 1990s there was a meeting that was held in Bogotá (Columbia) bringing together 15 countries, on the theme of domestic work. The Latin American Confederation has its main centers in Chile and in Brazil. The objective now is to obtain a daycare for domestic workers so that they can work more freely. Domestic workers

¹[Note of the editors] FENATRAHOB is a national grassroots union for women only. Membership is now up to 6,000. Its general objective is to improve living, working and salary conditions for Bolivian domestic workers (*trabajadoras del hogar*). FENATRAHOB comprises 17 affiliated unions active in the departments of La Paz, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Potosi, Trinidad, Sucre, Oruro and Tarija. Its offices are located in La Paz, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Oruro and Sucre. This federation ensures that its members receive organizational support and provides them with training. It offers domestic workers general training to enable them to expand their areas of expertise, increase their self-confidence and develop their professionalism.

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want to work in a more self-controlled, self-managed way. They pay for the fliers they make by assigning a quota to their members. But despite the Law there has not been any success in the matter of health-care, pension, health insurance. There is a government project to grant domestic workers health insurance, but the problem is always implementation. We have publicized the law with fliers to raise consciousness and obtain respect on both sides. When an employer does not pay we denounce him/her publicly, so, bit by bit, a new attitude is beginning to take hold. The new generations are more combative, they know their rights and they demand to be respected, and if they are abused they denounce it immediately. For our part, we have done workshops and many meetings to raise consciousness. The government every year decides what is the minimum wage. Presently it is 670 bolivianos per month (roughly \$100), but few domestic workers earn this amount. Most earn between 350 and 450 bolivianos.

As migrant women, domestic workers received no support from the government. They are very independent. We received support from a sister organization that helped us organize, helped us with a lawyer, to elaborate the law. We also got support from young students. Now that we have a general law the problem that we face is how to make sure it is implemented. The federation now is focusing on this questions. Now the domestic workers are affiliated with the Central Obrera Boliviana and other national and departmental organizations of human rights; they are also affiliated with a research organization.