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

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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.

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 recognizes the domestic workforce and establishes basic labor standards. The first legislation of its kind, the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights provides overtime pay, protection from discrimination, and other basic benefits for the more than 200,000 women—most of whom are immigrants of color—who work as nannies, housekeepers, and companions for the elderly in New York State. The fight to win the Bill of Rights was 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.

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?

The world of work inside the home

Domestic workers are among the most vulnerable workers in the United States today. There are an estimated 2.5 million women who labor as domestic workers. 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 day and night, even though many domestic workers have to leave their own children behind in their home nations.

These domestic workers make crucial contributions to the economy in urban areas of the United States as well as 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 earn 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 Data Center and Domestic Workers United, researchers found that 98 percent of domestic workers are foreign born and that 59 percent are the primary income earners for their families. Remittances from domestic work are also a central source of revenue for many nations in the global South.

Even though so much of the economy rests on the work of domestic workers, 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 invisible.

Historically, US labor laws have explicitly excluded domestic workers. This exclusion is rooted in the legacy of slavery. In the early part of the twentieth 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.

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 make 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 (DWU) was born in 1999 out of a joint organizing effort between two community-based organizations: CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, and Andolan: Organizing South Asian Workers. The two organizations had been organizing and fighting cases of injustice on behalf of workers in different Asian communities for several years.

DWU initially helped to organize individual support campaigns for workers who had been mistreated by their employers, were owed wages, or had survived trafficking. DWU organized demonstrations at employers' businesses, and worked with legal partners to file lawsuits against delinquent employers.

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 2002, DWU decided to test the waters and see how possible it would be to win legislative protections for domestic workers. That year, DWU led a successful effort to pass a New York City law to compel domestic worker employment placement agencies to educate workers and employers about basic labor rights. On the day of the vote in 2003, domestic workers packed the balcony inside City Council chambers carrying a sign that read, "The First Step to Victory, The Struggle Continues."

After that initial victory, we wanted to keep domestic worker 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 day-long 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. 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 per hour, notice of termination, severance pay, paid holidays, paid leave, and protection from discrimination. 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 to the state capitol 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 the power to win

Moral arguments were not enough. We had to build power if we wanted to win. We spent the first few 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.

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 growing base of support enabled us to convince more legislators to sign on as cosponsors on our bill. By our third year, we decided to strengthen our support base by creating a campaign organizing committee that our coalition partners and supporters could join to become a part of the 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.

Building worker-to-worker solidarity was also crucial. SEIU Local 32BJ, for example, is a union that represents the thousands of doormen in luxury apartment buildings around New York City. Local 32BJ has a natural affinity between its members and the members of DWU because the union's members are often the friends, confidants, or even husbands of the domestic workers who work in the apartment buildings of 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 shoulders to cry on when someone is fired without notice or severance pay. The members of Local 32BJ have been crucial allies in this fight.

Worker-to-worker solidarity also meant building solidarity between excluded workers. One powerful example came when the New York State Labor Religion Coalition and the local Jobs with Justice chapter chose 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 Farm Workers 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, a press conference, and a march.

Over 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 farm workers 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 farm worker dignity. In the years following, we invited farm worker leaders to participate in all of our actions.

After three years, 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 daylong 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). 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 Senate passed the Bill of Rights in the next legislative session. 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.

Building 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. 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. 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.

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. The power of workers' stories and the strength of our broader frames made the various alliances in this campaign possible.

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. 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.

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 to 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.

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