

Rosa Luxemburg Conference
Future Conditions of Work. Trade Unions -Migrants -Women.
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How can migrants organise themselves?

Firstly, I would like to share with you the experience of migrant domestic workers organising themselves in the UK.

United Workers Association was formed in 1984 as a self-help , organisation for mdws, many of whom had an undocumented status. UWA was started with 17 domestic workers and 9 supporters and through word of mouth it has greatly increased. It was felt that if the workers had their own organisation they would be able to become a powerful force. At the same time workers were encouraged to join the trade union (Transport & General Workers Union) .This became a crucial and significant element in the campaign. UWA was encouraged to grow despite the element of risk for those who didn't have papers. To combat the risk UWA met in a different place every month! Before UWA there was no known group of undocumented workers organizing in the UK. At present it consists of 5,000 members.

The Campaign -immigration status

Kalayaan was established in 1987, to support the rights of migrant domestic workers. We work hand in hand with UWA heading up the campaigning.

The difficulty pinpointed by UWA and Kalayaan was that of immigration status: in the UK, as in many other European countries, workers were dependent on the employer they entered with for their immigration status, they could not change employers legally, and if forced to run away (often without their passport) they could not work for anyone else. Moreover, once their original visa expired they would lose all right to be in the UK. This meant that, having escaped from one abusive situation, workers were very vulnerable to exploitation by secondary employers (usually British), who could take advantage of their immigration status with poor working conditions, low pay etc. This is a problem in common with many European countries.

However, in many European countries it is not even possible to get a visa for domestic work in private households -partly because this work, taking place in the private space, does not count as proper work. So, although there is demand for migrants to work in private households, and that demand (partly because of changes in European society, in the ageing population, the rise in working women, the nuclear family, the decline of the welfare state), is increasing, this is not acknowledged in European states' immigration policies. This means that women must enter clandestinely or overstay, even when they are summoned by a particular employer for a specific job. It means that workers have no protection against abuses of their rights, should they be sexually assaulted for example they cannot go to the police. Even if their employer treats them equitably, they are still an undocumented that that entails.

So immigration status, whether as undocumented or dependent, is a serious problem for migrant domestic workers. And we can see here a communality with other groups of migrants, particularly wives, whose presence in a European state may be dependent on being

married to a partner. In the UK this is known as the "one year rule", where a wife is dependent on her husband for her immigration status for one year before being granted an independent immigration status. This has extreme consequences for those who are forced to remain with violent men, but we must not forget the impact on the well being of women who are forced to keep on the good side of their husband or risk deportation. The pressure that this must put on the best of relationships is surely undeniable, and there are many high profile campaigns against these rules in different countries in Europe.

To return to our campaign, Kalayaan lobbied the British Government for the status of MDWs to be regularised. The campaign was fought with the support of the trade union, using the tools of the media, sympathetic MPs and mobilising public opinion. In July 1998 the UK Government finally announced publicly that they were going to give visas to future mdws accompanying their employer which allows them to change their employer. They would also regularise all those mdws who had been living and working clandestinely since the problem first started in 1980.

The crucial elements to UWA organising were:

- workers organising themselves. The move to organise came from the workers -there were supporters who offered their expertise but it was the workers themselves who ran the group;
- the link to the trade union movement -this was crucial, for the trade union movement was able to articulate the needs of the workers and had access to political bodies and individuals to lobby;
- a united group of people from all nationalities;
- campaigning in public (first public statement on Women's Hour in 1985- the first TV programme in 1987 called "Domestic Slavery in Britain" on BBC2);
- Public support -this came from the campaigning -after the BBC2 programme we had 500 messages of support from the general public.
- Support from MPs and those in the House of Lords.

The benefits in organising are:

- Mutual support to each other;
- Give confidence to the workers;
- Encouragement to each other;
- The Trade Union gives training to the officers.
- As a strong organisation UWA had a legitimate campaign.
- There is strength in numbers.

Difficulties for MDWs in organising

There are many practical difficulties with any group of people organising themselves who live and work in the private household. At the recent RESPECT transnational conference in Brussels a working group identified some of the difficulties.

Firstly, mdws live and work in the same place, there is no difference between work and home and the home is a private space. It is often legally protected, and the state's power to go into homes is very limited. We must recognise that the home is not necessarily a safe place. It is a

place of power and oppression, and it can also be a place of violence. This can be clearly seen in the Kalayaan statistics: in August 2000 we registered 76 new people, of those 39% had experienced physical abuse at the hands of their employers or their employers children, 4% had experienced sexual abuse, and 83% psychological abuse. Unlike the employer, the worker has no privacy, she has no space of her own -often no room or bed, and crucially often she has no space to be herself.

Secondly, immigration status is crucial, as is clear from my earlier comments. A worker whose immigration status is tied to her employer or is undocumented is extremely vulnerable.

Thirdly, low self-esteem. This may be a factor that leads many . Immigrants to not see the reason for organising.

Fourthly, time. A very practical problem! In a study conducted at . Kalayaan in 1998 we found that 30% of workers interviewed worked more than 12 hours a day, many working up to 16 hours a day.

How Unions can assist migrants -employment rights.

As is clear from what I've just said, for migrant women, employment rights and immigration status are related. A domestic worker is not a "proper" worker. The work is socially despised. Because it takes place in the employer's home it is not considered a workplace. Normal health and safety regulations for example, often do not apply. The relation between the employer and the worker is often heavily personalised and, particularly when the worker lives in, there is a blurring of boundaries, which is almost always to the worker's detriment.

As well as hours there are also issues around the kind of work done. The first problem arises because of the difficulty in defining domestic work. It is a series of processes, often running together, so doing the shopping for instance can include stock-taking, meal planning, budgeting, taking the dog for a walk, putting the food away, throwing the old food out etc. This difficulty in definition translates into not having a job description.

As with this issue of hours, it is very difficult to challenge being given inappropriate jobs though it is widespread -being expected to give some kind of personalised care to animals is a common complaint of many women I have spoken to. The difficulty in challenging can arise from overt oppression, beatings etc, but it can also be more subtle - doing favours, not wanting bad feeling (because you can't get away from it since you're living with your employer). The problem is of course that in a situation where one person is so powerless this is not part of a general give and take. And the relation between domestic workers and employer in the end is an employment relation -for after all, however friendly, many employers are unlikely to support a worker through long-term sickness.

It is in fact employment rights that can potentially protect migrant domestic workers from many of the abuses experienced by mail order brides and women in violent relationships, since much of what I've just talked about applies to them too. Moreover, the right to belong to a trade union gives domestic workers a natural forum for organising to protect themselves.

The trade union can be crucial in ensuring, firstly, that migrants know their rights, secondly in supporting migrants when those rights are abused and thirdly, in campaigning for those rights not yet given: For domestic work in the private household to be categorised as "proper" work.

For full and non-discriminatory employment rights and social protection, including minimum wage, sickness and maternity pay, and pension rights.

Power and Control

While the work done by mdw is crucial to European economies and societies, quite frankly they wouldn't be able to function without the caring jobs in particular that mdw do, some of the work is not at all like this, indeed some of it is humiliating and degrading. There are many cases where the work is unnecessary, almost as if it was invented for the worker to do - polishing the baby's pushchair, filleting the fish and putting it back together for perfect presentation on the plate ... Why should anybody do this? What is the point of these tasks? To make the employer look good. But why do they not do it themselves? Because this is not the kind of work that anyone with a choice would do. (And it's worth saying that it is the kind of work that mail order brides and women with abusive partners often have to do). It is work that shows the employers status, their wealth, their position, and the workers powerlessness. It is confirming the power relations between migrants and citizens, between men and women, and racism and sexism are intimately bound up with this. Who does the dirty work? Who serves? The migrants. Who keeps clean hands? Who is served? How comforting to the employers and what a challenge to the workers, and not just in private households, but in the service sector too.

Ways forward

- for migrant domestic workers to organise as mdw, across nationalities, linking with trades unions, and having relations also with European domestic workers.
- making links with other sectors, including mail order brides, those migrants and citizens for whom the home is not a safe space, trafficked women etc.
- develop new ways of organising, which recognise the particularities of the private home. Vulnerable migrants are often motivated to act collectively, because they are vulnerable, the problem for mdws is, in the end, the worker is face to face alone with the employer .
- recognise the importance of implementation mechanisms for rights as well as the acknowledgement of the rights themselves.
- challenge within other people, within institutions, and within ourselves, those attitudes that detract from the dignity of domestic work, that reproduce racism and sexism, that turn people into objects, means of satisfying our own desires.
- sign the charter of rights. The RESPECT network has drawn up a charter of rights for mdws. This calls for justice and equity for all mdws and lists 12 rights which all mdws should have.