

Publications

Spotlight interview with Barbro Budin (IUF – Equality Officer)



New ILO Convention for domestic workers: “an urgent need”

Brussels 7 March 2008: Fighting for a new International Convention covering domestic workers is among the priorities of the new ITUC equality campaign (1). The gender dimension is at the core of the discrimination suffered by domestic workers, denounces IUF Equality Officer Barbro Budin. She also explains how this issue and migration can be better linked.

What are the main problems affecting domestic workers?

One of the basic problems is the isolation and vulnerability of domestic workers. As they are working and sometimes living in individual, private households they are extremely dependant on the good or bad will of the employer and exposed to violence and sexual exploitation. If at all they have an employment contract, it is normally dictated by the employer, who does not have to fear any intervention of labour inspectors.

In many countries domestic workers are not covered by labour legislation, which of course undermines their status and rights as workers, including freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Are there any other reasons behind the very low rate of union membership among this type of worker?

According to ILO, the estimated number of domestic workers is over 100 million and only a small percentage of those are union members. It is partly due to the difficulties for unions to reach out to domestic workers - it is much easier to organize a factory than individual workers in private homes. Other reasons for the low organisation rate are the many obstacles for domestic workers to meet and the fear of loosing their employment if joining a union.

Women form the majority of the domestic service workforce, which is poorly paid and poorly protected. What can be done to ensure that the gender dimension is fully integrated into the drive to promote respect for domestic workers' rights?

It would probably not have taken over 70 years for the ILO Governing Body to consider the inclusion of domestic workers on the ILC agenda if the majority of domestic workers had been men. The gender dimension is in itself one of the core issues in this struggle and it is well documented by a number of domestic workers' organizations who have done outstanding work in highlighting and articulating the gender aspects and the traditional patterns of discrimination that are perpetuated against women in these jobs. Various departments of the ILO have carried out substantial studies and research that are important in this context.

The struggle to improve the plight of domestic workers is intertwined with that of ensuring a rights-based approach to economic migration, linking it to decent work criteria. What practical steps should be taken to articulate this link with migration issues?

There is a need for unions in sending and receiving countries to play a much more active and coordinated role with regard to migration authorities and employment agencies to stop the worst forms of exploitation. Employment agencies have to be put under much stricter control, as some of them make big money on unscrupulous contracts.

The cooperation between unions across the borders is important to ensure that as many migrant workers as possible are informed of their rights and have the contact details of the relevant unions in the receiving country.

The international trade union movement is actively supporting the proposal to introduce a new ILO Convention specifically for domestic workers (2). Why has the need arisen for a new specific legal instrument?

For the reasons mentioned above: domestic workers are in many cases excluded from labour legislation. Although they are probably the most vulnerable among all workers, they lack basic labour trade union and human rights. There is an urgent need not only to obtain a status as a worker, but also to fight against the violence and sexual abuses that many - especially migrant - domestic workers are subject to, and against the spread of child domestic labour.

A special instrument to regulate some employment conditions for domestic workers was first raised at the ILO conference in 1936, so it is not a new issue. And the number of domestic workers is far from decreasing - it is rather the contrary. The privatization of

public services have led to increased demand for domestic workers and home care workers all over the world.

The ITUC, in concert with Global Unions, grouping international unions, has called on all its affiliates to make every effort to promote domestic workers' rights. What challenges do you think trade unions will face in their efforts at national level?

The strong position taken by Global Unions and the whole Workers Group of the ILO Governing Body in favour of an international standard will hopefully be heard and replicated by national unions. They will certainly meet resistance from governments who will claim that they cannot at present afford to include domestic workers in labour legislation and national social security systems; employers who will refute further regulations claiming that it will hamper employment; others who will assert that domestic workers are part of the past (as it was said about workers in the informal economy some years ago). So the unions need to be well prepared.

What practical measures is the IUF taking to promote domestic workers' rights at sectoral level?

The IUF has in the past assisted domestic workers' organizations with trade union training and education programs. The Action program for equality adopted by the IUF Congress last year stresses the need for the IUF and its affiliates to increase its work for domestic workers. One of the first IUF regions to react on that has been Africa, where a newly launched women's project also will address the situation of domestic workers, including migrant domestic workers. Based on the recommendations of the International conference on Domestic Workers held in Amsterdam at the end of 2006, the IUF has together with PSI, UNI and ITUC developed a proposal to establish an international network to promote domestic workers' rights. It will provide a platform for domestic workers and their organizations to make their voices heard. With the resources for the project finally secured, the implementation of this project will start shortly.

How much cooperation is there between the international trade union movement and other civil society organisations involved in defending domestic workers' rights?

The Amsterdam Conference reflected a fruitful cooperation among organizations and institutions in support of domestic workers. This cooperation will hopefully be strengthened through the network.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) The ITUC's new worldwide "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women" campaign, is being launched on International Women's Day, 8 March, with events being organised by 68 national trade union centres from 53 countries across the globe. Gender equality will also be a major feature of the World Day for Decent Work, a global trade union initiative taking place on 7 October 2008.

(2) See the ITUC online "[Protection of domestic workers: the ITUC supports proposed ILO Convention](#)" (with links to several testimonies regarding the organization of domestic workers – South Africa, Hong Kong, Trinidad and Tobago), 13/02/08:

- Also see the [video on domestic workers released by ILO-ACTRAV \(in French\)](#)

(*) The IUF unites food, farm and hotel workers worldwide: www.iuf.org

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates.

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