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Spotlight interview with Marcelina Bautista (CONLACTRAHO-Mexico)

"If you are at the office today, it is may be thanks to the domestic worker you have at home"

Brussels, 20 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The defence and organisation of domestic workers is at the top of the agenda of the first ITUC World Women's Conference (*). A former child domestic worker, Marcelina Bautista, who heads the Support and Training Centre for Domestic Workers (1) and is the general secretary of the CONLACTRAHO confederation (2), is to bring a key testimony to the Conference.

What are the main difficulties facing domestic workers in Latin America?

They often have to work extremely long hours, which means they are unable to look after their own families, their own children. Most of them are not recognised as workers, and they are not covered by social security, so they do not have the "right" to fall ill. Many employers fail to understand the needs of these workers, who may have children, who may want to study, ... They are often prey to physical violence, verbal abuse and sexual harassment in the workplace, and as their workplace is a private home, it is all the more difficult for them to defend themselves. Often, if accused of some form of abuse, the employer responds by accusing the domestic worker of a crime such as theft, for example, and everyone tends to take the employer's word for it.

Domestic workers are also the victims of numerous forms of exploitation, based on various factors leading to them being discriminated against: they are invisible to the public eye, they do work that does not require an education, they are often from indigenous communities and are not at ease with the national language, etc.

The laws do not generally cover domestic work, which is not consequently considered equal to other forms of employment and does not enjoy the same work-related rights. We can see that at the level of domestic workers' pay, which usually depends on their employer's good will, as their wages are not established by law.

Is domestic work not recognised as employment in any part of Latin America?

Yes, some legislation defines elements such as the length of the working day, but such legislation is not applied. Brazil is one of the countries that has adopted legislation on domestic work, but employers pay it no attention, the authorities do nothing to ensure it is respected, and the workers themselves are not usually aware of their rights.

How much can a domestic worker hope to earn in your country, Mexico?

The law does not set a wage for domestic work, but the minimum wage is five dollars a day for everyone. Many domestic workers are paid six to eight dollars a day if they do not live at their employer's residence, and around 200 dollars a month if they do live at their employer's home. We have calculated that a decent wage would come to at least 25 dollars a day for live-out workers and 600 dollars a month for the others. The global economic crisis unfortunately has also hit domestic workers, and they are increasingly forced to accept the pay and conditions laid down by the boss. If the boss says you only have a right to one day off every two weeks, you have no other choice but to accept, because there are no other jobs to go to, and there is no law stipulating otherwise.

Is it a difficult category of workers to organise in unions?

There are numerous obstacles to their unionisation: domestic labour comprises many different types of workers (casual employees, live-in employees, etc), each worker is employed in a different house, they often only have Sundays off and would rather dedicate the day to their families than to trade union activities. In the absence of a trade union culture among this workforce, trade unions have to be creative if they want to come up with strategies to organise these women and then hold on to them as members. One example of such strategies is the establishment of placement agencies for domestic workers, or their inclusion in campaigns to raise awareness among public opinion, to make their work visible to all, to give them a sense of purpose when defending their rights.

One of the strengths of trade unions is collective bargaining, but this is difficult to put into practice when the employers are all isolated individuals...

That's true, but when the women are organised into unions or associations they learn about their rights and can try to negotiate better pay and working conditions individually. In Mexico, our union runs a placement service, and employers recruiting domestic workers through us are informed of their obligations. The reaction is not always positive. Recently, an employer who I was giving a publication to on domestic workers' rights confessed to me how much she hated giving the day off on public holidays. We offer domestic workers good training before they go to their first interview; we advise them on what they should try to negotiate. We then stay in touch with the worker and the employer to make sure that everything is going fine.

Is it difficult to convince unions to rally to the defence of domestic workers?

Initially, it is true that we were unhappy with the fact that this issue was not on trade unions' agendas. Many trade unionists also employ domestic workers. Some organisations defending domestic workers have, however, affiliated to unions and these now understand that it is their duty to defend the rights of all workers. The international network of domestic workers supported by the IUF (3) is involving more and more unions in this fight. The domestic workers' association I head in Mexico already operates like a union and we plan to turn it into a genuine trade union organisation by the end of 2009.

Tens of thousands of children are involved in domestic work in Latin America...

They are taken on from a very young age, sometimes as young as 10 or 11, and then they are mistreated because they are not capable of fulfilling the tasks of an adult! They are often misled by their employers, who promise to send them to school in exchange for domestic work, but then rarely do so. They find themselves in houses far away from home, forced to carry out tasks they dislike. In some cases, they are the victims of veritable child domestic trafficking rings, some of which are very well organised.

You yourself had to start work as a domestic at a very young age...

Yes, as of 14, when I finished my primary school studies. I had no alternative, I had to make a living. I had to leave for Mexico City, an eight-hour journey by road from home. I dreamt of being able to study, but my only alternative to living on the streets was to work as a live-in domestic in a family home. I had to look after their children and do the housework, all that without speaking any Spanish, which I went on to learn little by little. I worked every day from six in the morning until nine at night, with one day off every two weeks. As is often the case with domestic work, the list of tasks was endless. It's very hard to take on such responsibilities at that age, you have to put your own childhood to one side. It was when trying to find out how I could study, in spite of my situation, that I came into contact with a group of women activists and became involved in the cause.

What does your work as an activist bring you on a personal level?

I really love fighting for these women who find themselves in the same situation as I did when I first reached Mexico City. When listening to them telling their stories, I put myself in their position, and I remember all the violence I suffered. The fact that I really understand their predicament helps me to advise them at psychological and legal level, and about the training options available to them. The employers tell us we are part of the family, but it isn't true. We usually have to live in a storeroom, a room where all the members of the household come and go as they please. We have access to the whole house, but it is not ours. We can go into the living room to clean it, but not to sit in it...

In June 2010, the International Labour Conference is going to examine the possible adoption in 2011 of a new international convention specific to domestic work. Would the adoption of such an instrument help domestic workers in Latin America?

If our governments ratify it, this new standard could play a vital role in making them enforce rights that have thus far been ignored. It will constitute another tool in the quest to improve the situation of domestic workers, to give greater visibility to their legal situation. It is really important: we have been trying to have a bill passed on domestic labour for 12 years in Mexico but, in the absence of any firm backing, we have not yet succeeded.

What can be done to build a better understanding of domestic workers'

contribution to the economy?

They fulfil tasks that others cannot do or don't want to do. They make it possible for their bosses to go out to work in the public or private sector, doing jobs that are essential to economic development. If you are at the office today, it is maybe thanks to the domestic worker you have at home, who prepares your meals, cleans your house, irons your clothes, etc.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Centro de Apoyo y Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar

(2) Conlactraho (Confederation of Domestic Workers from Latin America and the Caribbean - Confederación de Latinoamérica y el Caribe de las Trabajadoras del Hogar) groups 14 organisations supporting domestic workers in 14 countries, most of which are trade union organisations.

(3) See <http://en.domesticworkerrights.org/>

(*) Under the heading "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women", the first ITUC World Women's Conference is bringing together 450 delegates from over 100 countries from 19 to 21 October in Brussels. They will examine the repercussions of the global jobs crisis on women and map out international trade union action to improve their job security, pay and working conditions. For more information, see the ITUC website at:

[<http://www.ituc-csi.org/womensconference?lang=fr>](http://www.ituc-csi.org/womensconference?lang=fr) (photos and interviews of the delegates).

Also see the website of the "Decision for Life" project <http://dfl.wageindicator.org/home> covering 14 developing and transition countries and eight occupational groups.

Photos of the Conference:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ituc/sets/72157622062720970/>

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 158 countries and territories and has 316 national affiliates.

Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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