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Spotlight on Marissa Begonia (J4DW/Unite/TUC – United Kingdom)

Domestic work: "The worst torture is not seeing your own children"

Brussels, 2 August 2010 (ITUC OnLine): The adoption of an international Convention on Domestic Work and accompanying recommendation was approved in principle at the last International Labour Conference. This is a welcome step forward for the many trade unions fighting to defend this particularly vulnerable group of workers. One of these unions is "Unite the union" (1) in the United Kingdom, which supports the group "Justice for Domestic Workers". Marissa Begonia, a member of the group, describes its activities and the reality of life as a migrant domestic worker.

How do you define "Justice for Domestic Workers"?

"Justice for Domestic Workers" (J4DW) is a self-help group for migrant domestic workers. It is part of the hotel, restaurant and catering branch of the Unite the union, which in turn is a member of the TUC (Trades Union Congress). We campaign and defend our rights, particularly following the changes to the immigration laws. It is important that we, as domestic workers, speak up for ourselves and our rights, rather than having someone else do it for us. Any action becomes more alive, more visible, more effective when domestic workers campaign for themselves, although of course the support of other trade unions and NGOs is very important. Unite helps us a lot in campaigning, and developing our skills through education and training.

What services do you offer your members?

We have a monthly membership collection of £1.00 (1.5 US \$) only, and through this we help fellow domestic workers who have escaped from abusive employers by providing the workers with items to meet basic needs – clothes, food, shelter and a travelling allowance to find a new job. J4DW helps, supports, saves and rebuilds the lives of domestic workers through the little money from our own small salaries. Unite sometimes does fundraising for us as well. We also provide English and IT classes through Unite, as most of the domestic workers don't have English as their first language. This also helps them to fill the requirements of the immigration procedure.

Unite also provides us some union courses, training and awareness-raising that gives us the knowledge to fight for our rights. This education and training help us to develop and improve our skills so that we can be confident when speaking in public, when speaking in the parliament, at government meetings, national and international conferences and mobilisations. This is one of the best ways to organise domestic workers, as most of them come to us not just to ask for help but also to learn. We help them understand that by joining the union, they have access to education, training, benefits, and we make them aware of the importance of campaigning. The advice regarding the immigration procedure (to renew a visa and to apply for ILR – Indefinite Leave to Remain) is provided by Kalayaan (2), an NGO providing services and campaigning for the rights of migrant domestic workers.

How many members do you have, and how do you recruit them?

This is the most difficult occupational group to organise. There are no workers' meetings

we can address; these are individuals and isolated working in private homes. Reaching each domestic worker is very difficult. J4DW has been in existence since 15 March 2009, and in that time we have recruited 300 members. The first contact we have with most of our members is when they need support. Most of our members have run away from the homes of abusive employers. Some are brought to us by people they met when they were being exploited. Apart from the cases of abuse, the best form of contact is by word of mouth. I can speak to the women sitting next to me on a training course, get them more interested by explaining that they can learn more about their rights, We also distribute leaflets.

One year on after the creation of your self-help group – have you already seen results ?

We have improved the lives of many domestic workers who were over-exploited by their employers. We already have links at the international level. We took part in the ILO's last International Labour Conference for example. And we are very pleased to see that major trade unions such as the TUC and Unite are putting the protection of domestic work higher up their agendas.

How can more people be persuaded to defend migrant domestic workers?

It is about time that the world recognises domestic workers as one of the major contributors to the economy of the world. Both the sending and the receiving countries are benefiting from the migrant domestic workers' contributions as carers to children, as carers to the elderly and as those in charge of the household work; we care for the family, which is the building block of every nation. How can all these people go to work without a domestic worker to look after their family? In the Philippines, the economy collapses if we stop sending money for three days. That's why they call us "modern heroes", but where is the protection and support we need most if we are heroes? We have big responsibilities, and it is surprising to see that so far we are not properly appreciated and recognised as workers. It is very disappointing, because the more vulnerable a worker is, the more she needs protection.

Are you a domestic worker?

Yes, I am a domestic worker and have been for 16 years now. Through this job, I have been raising, educating and giving my three children the decent living they deserve. I first worked as a domestic worker in Singapore, but the salary was very low, and so I decided to work in Hong Kong. My last employer in Hong Kong brought me to London. I didn't know my rights at that time, but when I started to have my days off, my fellow domestic workers told me that I have the right to change employer. I changed because my salary was very low. I now have a very good and supportive employer. I have been with this loving family for six years now. They understand the work I do in J4DW. My first daughter joined me here in 2008, but I am still having a problem bringing in my two other children. As a mother, this is all I dream of in my life: to have all my children by my side. I can still feel the pain up to this day from when I was forced to leave them. I preferred to go away rather than see them slowly die of starvation. I don't wish them to go through the life I've been through. My children are my whole life, the very reason why I have sacrificed the most I can, and they are the future.

Do you have enough time for trade union activities?

Time is the most difficult question for a domestic worker. What time do we have? We work very long hours. After my domestic work, I manage to do the work for J4DW. I will go to sleep at 2.00 a.m. if needed, and if I am not done, I will wake up at 5.00 a.m. to go on. During my work as a domestic worker, I check my e-mails. If it's not urgent, I will answer at night but if it's urgent, I answer quickly and also respond to the urgent needs of my fellow domestic workers. If I need to go to a meeting, I will ask my employer. As long as it is in the morning, I can go, but in the afternoon it is difficult because I need to pick up the child I am looking after. Sunday is the day we do our classes, meetings and

other union activities. It's never easy, but very challenging. J4DW members are very responsible. We put together our little time, and out of that we can do so much. It's difficult, but we know that each of us has a responsibility to help, support and campaign for one another.

What are the worst things about being a migrant domestic worker?

Physically, the long working hours are hard, but those who suffer the worst are the ones who are beaten or sexually abused, their life is a nightmare. A lot of women are in that situation. It is really sad: they work within a family, they should feel safe and happy there, but the opposite is true. Private homes can be a dangerous place for a domestic worker. The work situation is particularly bad for the domestic workers of diplomats. If the workers escape, they end up being illegals. A visa is our life, and being illegal is the worst that can happen because domestic workers become more invisible, more isolated, and employers abuse them more.

Emotionally, the worst torture is not being able to see your own children. I left the Philippines for the first time when I was 24 years old, when my youngest daughter was one year old. When I went back two years later, the saddest thing was that she didn't recognise me. My children are my flesh and blood; they are the reason I work so hard, but we must not forget that our children are also making a sacrifice because it is hard to grow up without your parents at your side. When they are ill, you want to be there with them, but you can only send money to pay the hospital bills.

And then, in many cases, when you do go home, you don't have a husband any more. A broken family is one of the high costs of migration. We have to sacrifice our own wishes, and accept that we don't know what will happen to our children. They might turn into drug addicts, or prostitutes, because no one is there to guide them. There are a lot of teenage pregnancies among the children of migrant workers. The father of my children didn't look after them, but I am lucky because my sister takes good care of them and treats them like her own children.

Have you tried to go back to the Philippines to live with your children?

In Hong Kong, I have been the victim of many abusive employers, so I decided to go back to the Philippines. I tried to stay there with my children. I began to sell food during the day; I got up at 4.00 a.m. every day, but it wasn't enough to meet our needs, so I had to work until midnight in the office of a pub as bookkeeper. Working those hours, I never got to see my kids, and I couldn't save any money either. When they were ill, I didn't have the money to pay for their treatment. So I had no choice but to leave them again and find another job abroad to give them a decent life. That is how I ended up going back to Hong Kong, where my employers offered to take me to London with them where they were going to live.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Unite (<http://www.unite-theunion.com/>), a member of the TUC (<http://www.tuc.org.uk/>)

(2) Kalayaan is an NGO that helps domestic migrant workers in the United Kingdom (<http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/>)

- Marissa Begonia is also the author of « Cry of a migrant », a text which won first prize at a trade union festival organised by Unite. It is available from <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/marissa-begonia/cry-of-migrant>

-For further reading, see the Union View publication on Domestic Work: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/domestic-work-mobilising-for-an.html?lang=en>

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 312 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> y <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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