

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION – ITUC

Spotlight interview with Pia Stalpaert

"We are carrying out valuable trade union work in silence"

In June 2011, Pia Stalpaert, president of CSC Alimentation et Services, the food and services union affiliated to the confederation of Christian trade unions of Belgium, took part in the discussions that led to the adoption of an ILO Convention on domestic work. Her union has been fighting for recognition and respect for the rights of domestic workers for many years. An effective scheme benefitting these workers is operating in Belgium, and the union would like to share this experience with less well organised countries.

What are the main problems affecting domestic workers in Belgium?

The main problem in Belgium, as with the rest of the world, is the isolation in which domestic workers find themselves. Domestic workers are employed in private homes, do not usually have any work colleagues and find themselves in a position of inferiority, or even weakness, in relation to their employers. They often depend on the goodwill of the household, which does not leave them well placed to discuss pay and working conditions.

Despite this being a quite difficult sector to regulate and control, does Belgium have any regulations regarding domestic work?

In Belgium we have the system of national negotiations undertaken by joint committees. Domestic workers also fall within the scope of a joint committee, and the major advantage we have is that we can negotiate pay and working conditions that must be applied to all the domestic workers in the country.

The committee meets every two years to conclude a collective agreement, giving us an opportunity to improve working conditions. It is often only small steps that we are able to take, but they are always steps forward. Following the negotiations, we publish leaflets that we send to all our members in the sector, to bring them up to date with the recent developments in their status.

The "service voucher" scheme to formalise domestic work has been operating in Belgium since 2004. How does it work?

A service voucher is a method of payment, including a financial contribution from the state, which individuals can use to pay accredited companies for local services or works carried out by a worker linked to the accredited firm by an employment contract.

The scheme is a federal government initiative, launched in 2004. It was part of the search for a solution for the many unemployed people in our country as well as being a way of formalising cleaning work in private homes, which was generally undeclared.

Our union was against the initiative initially; we were against the idea of people being forced into cleaning work, but we soon realised that the scheme also had its advantages. The workers were finally given full legal status and came under the scope of a joint committee. It had to be recognised that many of them were genuinely happy with their work and also wanted to become active in a union.

What are the advantages of this scheme?

There are currently more than 100,000 people employed under this scheme that makes domestic work affordable for middle income households at the same time as giving the workers concerned a legal status with all the pay and working conditions required. It, above all, allows them to exercise their trade union rights.

In addition, the service voucher system breaks with the 'master and servant' relationship of subordination. The workers are grouped together within an agency that becomes their legal employer and households in turn become customers rather than bosses. As a result, the workers are part of an actual company, they have colleagues and belong to a group. They have access to training and their rights are defended by trade union representatives.

In June 2011, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted a Convention that finally gives worker status and thus workers' rights to domestic employees.

How did Belgian unions contribute to the fight to secure this historic text?

I personally was able to take part, in representation of Belgian trade unions, in the discussions in Geneva in 2010 and 2011. In 2010, I, along with a unionist from the United States, was the only workers' representative to take part in a small working group in charge of establishing the definition of the Convention.

How did a country as small as Belgium come to take part in this? I think it is mainly thanks to the fact that we have been involved for many years now in trying to defend those in a sector as difficult as domestic work.

We have gained experience over recent years in the service voucher sector and are able to quote the good aspects of the scheme as an example. I shared these experiences at the negotiations in Geneva. Whilst it is obvious that a typically Belgian scheme cannot be copied in the rest of the world, some aspects of it served as a foundation during the negotiations.

What challenges does this Convention raise for Belgium?

First of all, we have to ensure that the Convention is ratified. Our country has a good reputation internationally when it comes to social dialogue, so we clearly have an exemplary role to play in this respect. At the same time, in some countries, domestic work is much more widespread and problematic than in ours. Each country therefore has to reflect on its own way of putting the Convention into practice, and it is up to us to help them by providing technical and financial support, as we are already doing in a number of countries...

In Belgium, our current Employment Minister has pledged to introduce a code of conduct for embassy staff and the many expatriates employing domestic personnel. Our legislation regarding domestic workers is, however, outdated and also needs revising. Part-time domestic staff should, for example, have the same access to social security as full-time staff, and should systematically be given an employment contract, which is still not the case. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but the Convention gives us an extra hand with the status of domestic staff.

We are not usually able to conclude spectacular agreements in sectors like these, and they do not usually get much media attention. That's why it's good, on this occasion, that thanks to the ILO Convention we are able to benefit from media interest helping us to show the valuable trade union work we are carrying out in silence.

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