

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Toni Moore (BWU - Barbados)

"Dignity delayed does not have to be dignity denied"

Toni Moore, deputy general secretary of the Barbados Workers' Union, was at the centre of the negotiations in the final run-up to the adoption in June of the Domestic Workers Convention (1) at the ILO. She outlines the progress made and the new challenges arising from this convention and the situation of domestic workers in Barbados.

What is the situation with regard to unionising domestic workers in Barbados?

Unfortunately, we only started taking an interest in this sector a couple of years ago, when it was placed on the agenda of the ILO Governing Body. We hadn't seen this sector as a priority sooner because of the difficulties organising domestic workers and the few complaints we received from them. On giving it closer attention we realised that we could contribute to giving these workers a much better life. We have started out by organising public forums, during which we inform them of their rights. We have set up a hotline that domestic workers can call if they have a problem. Any kind of worker can call this number, but it is particularly important for domestic workers, as many of them are not paid-up members of our union, so we had to provide them with an easy way of contacting us.

The process of unionising domestic workers is quite slow, as many of them are migrants from other parts of the Caribbean and their status here is irregular. We have no intention, obviously, of reporting their irregular status to the authorities, but they are afraid of contacting us nonetheless. As a result, many of them put up with the fact that their rights are violated.

Our national legislation only allows us to bargain collectively on behalf of workers when we represent over 50% of the workforce. Because domestic workers are employed by individuals, it is difficult to negotiate for them in the same way as for other workers, but we can advise them. We speak on their behalf within the framework of national social dialogue, pressing the government to adopt legislation and practices benefitting domestic workers.

Do you think the adoption of the new Domestic Workers Convention is likely to change anything for domestic workers in Barbados?

Our Minister of Labour announced during the International Labour Conference in June 2011 that the government of Barbados would ratify and apply the convention. The legislation here concerning domestic workers is very outdated; it has not been revised for years. One aspect that needs improving is their access to social security. Because they do not pay any contributions and none are paid for them, they do not have the same social security entitlements as other workers. The ratification of the new convention will oblige the authorities to set up a system allowing domestic workers to benefit from the same social security rights as all other workers. The convention in fact stipulates that the same social security conditions applied to other workers should also apply to domestic workers, whether they contribute or not.

That said, I think that in Barbados, like in other countries, many domestic workers will not fully identify with the convention's provisions regarding social security, as they don't think they earn enough to be incorporated in a social security system, that their wage is already so low that they would rather not have more deducted from it to contribute to such a scheme. Our tasks is therefore not only limited to pressing governments to ratify and implement Convention 189, but also to encouraging domestic workers to cooperate with its application. We have to help them understand that access to social security does not simply mean that their income will be affected in the short run but that it offers a potentially important change to their lives and the lives of their families.

Aside from access to social security, are there other provisions of the convention that could change domestic workers' lives?

The convention provides for written contracts, whereas huge numbers of domestics around the world are working without any document specifying the type of tasks to be fulfilled, their working hours, how they are paid overtime, their leave, etc. It also contains important provisions regarding health and safety at work. If the countries that have voted in favour of the convention actually ratify and apply it, their domestic workers will at last be able to benefit from the leave established in their respective national laws (annual leave, parental leave, maternity leave, etc.). It is a huge step forward: domestic workers contribute to people's wellbeing and happiness, to improving their family lives, making it possible for them to go out and work in a formal employment structure, etc. The adoption of this convention gives domestic workers the chance to attain the same work-life balance, to be able to go home in the evening and spend time with their children, to have a 24-hour period a week that they can devote to their own personal lives, to be able to take holidays, like their employers, etc.

Could your union play a role in helping the unions from the smaller countries in your region promote the application of this convention?

Yes, that is our objective. We want to help strengthen the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) (2) in the region and campaign, alongside international trade unions, for the member states in the region to adapt their laws. At the latest International Labour Conference, Barbados' Minister of Labour also pledged to help encourage other GRULAC members (3) to bring their legislation into line with the new convention.

During the last International Labour Conference, you served as vice chair for the workers' group on the Committee on Domestic Workers when Ms Yakob's had to return to her country (Singapore). This was a crucial role at a time when it was still uncertain which way the vote would go on the adoption of the new Domestic Workers Convention...

I would like to underline the fact that Ms Yakob has worked extremely hard to advance the cause of domestic workers over the last two years. Unfortunately, she had to leave the conference early this year, and I was given the opportunity to stand in for her a week prior to the adoption of the convention. It was an honour to be able to fulfil this task, I was confident in myself but I also felt humbled by the opportunity to play a more important role in the final run-up to the adoption of this extremely important convention. Very few young women are involved in the international trade union movement at leadership level, and although my role was modest, I feel it is important that a young woman from a developing country was able to complete such a task.

Some are of the opinion that the provision in the convention stipulating that domestic workers have the right to the minimum wage will be hard to apply...

If we accept that decent work means the same working conditions, the same social protection, the same rights for all, then there cannot be any discrimination against domestic workers. The setting of a minimum wage may require some readjustments within households to ensure that domestic workers receive what they have a right to. Some say that the ratification of this standard will lead to job losses for domestic workers, because employers will not have the means to pay them, but social dialogue has to come into play. An international convention does not simple say "the member state shall do this or that": many provisions, especially those with financial implications, foresee dialogue with the most representative employers' and workers' organisations, so that the solutions are negotiated. It is not always easy.

Over the last two years of discussions, the employers and certain governments insisted on the need to ensure that the standards are "ratifiable", which is something we agreed on. But is our goal going to be the lowest or the highest common denominator? We have opted for the latter, at the same time as recognising that it will not be possible to do everything in each member state from one day to the next. The convention is not going to change the lives of domestic workers in every country in an instant, or over the course of the next five years, but it is important that governments have marked their agreement with the fundamental principles, and that they will have to work towards applying them, revising their legislation on pay, working hours, health and safety, etc. Some countries will take longer to apply everything, but dignity delayed does not have to be dignity denied.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) See the text of Convention 189 on domestic workers: <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/single.pl?query=012011189@ref&chspec=01>

(2) International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN): <http://en.domesticworkerrights.org/>

(3) Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries

Following the historical adoption of ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers at the ILO Conference in June 2011, the '12 by 12' Campaign aims at 12 ratifications by 2012 of ILO Convention C189. The campaign is organised by ITUC in partnership with the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN), IUF, PSI, ETUC, Human Rights Watch, Solidar, Migrant Forum Asia and World Solidarity. Check out the '12 by 12' campaign webpage: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/travailleurs-euses-domestiques,513.html> and join us on Facebook '12 >12': <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=739448849#!/groups/231305920281513/>

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

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