

DOMESTIC WORKERS

Domestic workers, together with miners and farm labourers, form the major part of South Africa's labour force. Numbering more than one million, they work for an average income of R90 per month, although in rural areas it is often much less. They are relegated to the lowest economic status and are discriminated against in terms of South Africa's harsh, racist laws, both as a class and as a sex. Their working conditions are not governed by the country's basic employment laws. There is no legal minimum wage, no paid holidays, no unemployment insurance, maternity benefits, sick leave or compensation if injured at work.

While some domestic workers are members of the 'permanent' urban working class, commuting each day by train, bus or taxi from their homes in the townships to the white suburbs a fair distance away, many are migrants. For them domestic work in the cities is the only means of escape from the desperate poverty of South Africa's so-called 'homelands'. They are separated from their homes and families, and may only get to see their husbands and children a few times a year. Due to their isolation from their families and society, their dependence on their employers becomes debilitating. The paternalism inherent in the relationship between domestic worker and employer undermines potential worker solidarity and reinforces the system of exploitation. Many domestic workers will tell how well they are treated by their employers, who are 'like friends', but in the next breath they admit they are not paid a living wage. These women often occupy a small room in the backyard of their employer's home. In many cases facilities such as toilets, electricity and hot water are inadequate. They are discouraged from having visitors (too much noise) and even their husbands or boyfriends have to sneak in. Due to the lack of affordable recreational facilities in the suburbs, many domestic workers are forced to conduct their social lives on street pavements or in parks. However, there is also a demand to learn new skills. Churches and synagogues in the more built-up areas run 'centres of concern'. Here domestic workers are taught skills such as sewing, cookery, literacy, dancing, driving, and accountancy for a very nominal fee. These courses take place on a Thursday, which is officially 'maid's day off'.

The very nature of domestic work, which isolates each individual worker in a strange home, militates against effective collective organisation and unionisation. However, a talk of trade unions and the gains other workers have made through organised labour has filtered through to the backyard rooms of South Africa.

In November 1986, domestic workers belonging to five domestic worker unions nationwide gathered in Cape Town to form S.A.D.W.U. (South African Domestic Workers' Union) — one strong national union affiliated to C.O.S.A.T.U. (Congress of South African Trade Unions) — the largest non-racial democratic labour federation in the country.

S.A.D.W.U. has called for:

- A minimum wage of R200 per month
- 40 working hours per week
- 21 days leave per annum (with full pay)
- Maternity benefits
- 14 days sick leave
- Notice pay
- All domestic workers to be protected by the same laws as workers in industry and commerce.

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