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Members of the IDWF gather outside of Montevideo's City Hall, October 27, 2013.

Domestic Workers Go Global: The Birth of the International Domestic Workers Federation

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“My mother was a kitchen girl. My father was a garden boy. That’s why I’m a unionist, a unionist, a unionist.” Filling the stately auditorium of the Montevideo City Hall for three days in late October 2013, nearly two hundred domestic workers sang what began as the anthem of SADSAWU (South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union) but came to express the aspirations of a worldwide movement. Joined by observers, advocates, and technical staff, representatives from forty-eight organizations and forty-two countries arrived in Uruguay to forge a new international labor federation. They traveled to Uruguay to honor that nation of European immigrants for being the first state to ratify “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” Convention 189 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), passed some eighteen months before. Uruguayan President José Mujica underlined the importance of prioritizing labor and social standards for this sector. “Service workers and domestic workers, you can find them by the thousands, and they have started to have rights as any other worker does,” he told the Congress.¹ State protection of domestic worker rights fulfills the dictates of C189, which after ratification binds a nation to its provisions like any other treaty.² The fight for C189 and its implementation has generated global solidarity and transnational action to advance the rights of migrant domestics.

Trade unions and governments alike long ignored domestic workers, even though “their work makes all other work possible,” as international leader Elizabeth Tang explained.³ “It is

our work in households that enables others to go out and be economically active,” Tanzanian trade unionist Vicky Kanyoka points out.⁴ In the process of securing global protections, domestic workers defied those who took them for granted. They came together in 2006 to build a transnational network (the International Domestic Worker Network [IDWN]). Then, with technical assistance and funding from unions and feminist allies, they transformed this loose association of national and regional groups into the first international labor federation run by women for work dominated by women.⁵ On October 28, 2013, the International Domestic Worker Federation (IDWF) officially launched, marking a critical step in the struggle to assure that those who often work in isolation are included in policy and law. IDWF insists that the essential value of household labor, or social reproduction, be recognized.⁶

ILO Convention 189 has generated global solidarity and transnational action to advance the rights of migrant domestics.

This establishment of a formal union federation builds upon years of efforts to align domestic workers throughout the world. Demanding

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“Respect and Rights,” domestic workers first met in 2006 to campaign for passage of a global labor standard for household employment.⁷ The international network, and now the federation, was possible only because of decades of local struggles by domestic worker groups; in some places, these succeeded in winning inclusion under some degree of labor protection, though usually less robust than the national norm and mostly inadequate when it came to regulating hours, assuring fair wages, reducing sexual abuse, preventing forced labor, guaranteeing freedom of movement, or providing maternity leave and social security. Transnational networking provided a mechanism for achieving these goals at home, and the two-year process of mobilizing for the ILO adoption of C189 was one strategy for recognition.⁸

The mobilization marked an unprecedented intervention into the ILO standard-setting process by the workers who are actually most impacted by a convention. With the aid of WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing) and IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations), and backed by key players within the ILO itself, including its workers’ bureau, leaders of this movement of informal women workers learned how to operate in the crevices of the ILO bureaucracy and the matrices of its tripartite system (of governments, employer associations, and worker organizations), to have their voices heard at the International Labor Conference and even represent their nations as official delegates during the final deliberations. Afterward, they immediately pushed for national ratifications in order for the principles of the convention to “have teeth.”⁹ With their allies, IDWN spearheaded a ratification campaign, “12 by 12,” to have twelve countries ratify by 2012. To date (July 2014), fifteen countries have signed the convention, and a half-dozen more are poised to do so.¹⁰ Latin American nations dominate, buoyed by strong domestic worker organizations active for decades. Signatories are then obliged to rework their own laws to be in compliance and report their progress to the ILO. But only pressure from within a nation and from transnational organizations can monitor these efforts, bringing

miscreants to the notice of the ILO and the world. Like all ILO conventions, C189 sets forth aspirations and best practices. The IDWF deploys it as a movement-building tool to use international institutions, global standards, and transnational networks to improve local conditions.

As scholar activists, we attended the historic Montevideo meeting to document the birth of a women’s international labor federation. We recorded the lives and visions of organizers from Uganda and Sri Lanka, Jamaica and Trinidad-Tobago, Hong Kong and Indonesia, and from the Latin American/Caribbean network CONLACTRAHO, founded in 1988 as a pioneering regional organization.¹¹ We met with activists from the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in the United States and advocates from some of the major drivers behind the meeting, including WIEGO, the IUF, ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation), and the ILO. WIEGO, for example, aided with constitution drafting and meeting publicity. Trade unions provided funding. We learned about successful local and regional actions and practices, not only about organizing but also about enforcement: Uruguay, for example, has developed a monitoring model that targets an entire district rather than specific households for the dual purpose of protecting individual worker complainants while warning employers of their responsibilities. We saw how common experiences of migration, legal exclusion, and exploitation united those who came from different political systems, enabling them to give support as well as share sorrows and trade innovative organizing tactics. North American delegates from NDWA included immigrants from Mexico and Colombia, underscoring the ways that the national intersects with the transnational and both intersect with global movements of people and jobs.

The Congress itself underscored the complexities of global organizing. The leader of India’s new National Domestic Worker Trade Union Federation was stopped at the boarding gate for lack of a proper visa, as were three other delegates. Undocumented migrant delegates from Europe were unable to travel at all. These absences exposed the larger structural issues that place disproportionate barriers on

workers from specific regions. Through protest letters to the governments and airlines involved, the IDWF used these injustices to highlight the transnational challenges faced by migrant domestic workers—and to practice the kind of solidarity typical of international labor federations, which tend to monitor conditions around the world that affect the entire sector. IDWF leadership additionally understood the challenge to forging a unified platform out of diverse organizational forms, types of household labor, and political economies. It thus acknowledged differences in political culture (as between Latin Americans affiliated with left unions or parties by comparison to the autonomous women’s and NGO-funded groups in the United States and elsewhere) and set about respecting, indeed celebrating, regional, language, and cultural differences.

The IDWF plans to develop its educational and research capacity, especially in the areas of model contracts and alternative forms of bargaining.

In the course of the Congress, delegates adopted a constitution and elected officers: Hong Kong’s Elizabeth Tang as general secretary, South Africa’s Myrtle Witbooi as president, Peru’s Ernestina Ochoa as vice-president, and regional representatives, including Jamaica’s Shirley Pryce for the Caribbean and the United States’ Juanita Flores for North America.¹² They also adopted a five-year plan, focused on strengthening the federation and maintaining union and civil society partnerships. The plan requires enhancing the functioning of the organizational infrastructure and secretariat, growing regional and local affiliates, and maintaining partnerships with ITUC, workers in related sectors, NGOs, and the ILO. It also includes strategic global campaigns against employment agency abuses and exploitative child domestic labor, and for basic labor protections, such as the right to collective bargaining, minimum wage, rest days, and occupational health and safety. Over the next half decade, the IDWF further plans to develop its

educational and research capacity, especially in the areas of model contracts and alternative forms of bargaining. It has prioritized research on the home care industry and migrant domestic work, two burgeoning trends worldwide.¹³

Like other international labor federations, IDWF aids national groups to push for implementation of local standards and protections, like pensions and health care. It can appeal to global institutions, participating through the IUF and ITUC; mobilize coalition partners, allies, and member groups to protest governmental abuses; and generally alert the world to conditions on the ground. In early 2014, it engaged in solidarity campaigns against mistreatment of migrant domestics in New York City and Hong Kong and urged the sending of postcards to California’s Governor Jerry Brown in support of home care funding. It held an organizing workshop in Zambia and used its new status to speak out at the UN on the anniversary of Tiananmen Square.¹⁴

In early 2014, [the IDWF] engaged in solidarity campaigns against mistreatment of migrant domestics in New York City and Hong Kong.

The Congress ended with a call to action by President Mujica, which brought the delegates to their feet: “We don’t have to get tired of fighting because in the end, only those who stop fighting are defeated. This does not mean that we have the solution right around the corner only because we fight. Nobody will give us anything; we have to win it. And the poor people, even more so poor workers, do not have another tool other than getting together, united, to learn that struggles are collective. . . .”¹⁵ Similarly, Dan Galin, director of the Global Labour Institute (a major supporter of these efforts) and former general secretary of the IUF, emphasized that this mobilization revealed “that there is no such thing as ‘unorganizable’ workers.” Those who long labored apart from unions now serve as the vanguard under “new forms of capitalism.”¹⁶ The formation of a global union of domestic workers marks a pivotal moment in this longer struggle to realize social, economic,

and political rights for those often considered “the poorest of the poor.” From our experience in working directly with the newly formed IDWF, we would agree with ILO leader Manuela Tomei: “This is not the end, but the beginning of a very long battle.”¹⁷ Whether IDWF can sustain outside funding and its own momentum in the face of structural poverty, particularistic local laws, and new causes siphoning off NGO enthusiasm is a question for the future. One thing is certain: household work might mimic the domestic service of the past, but IDWF embodies the new face of labor: female and mobile, searching for dignity and decent work.

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Notes

1. We draw upon our field notes unless otherwise noted. We thank the rest of our activist scholar group, especially Mary Romero and Nancy Perez, but most importantly, Myrtle Witbooi, Elizabeth Tang, and the leaders of IDWF.
2. According to the ILO Convention-Enforcement Procedures, “While the ILO has no police force or labor inspectorate empowered to order a workplace to be made safer, governments are sensitive to pleas that they fulfill the obligations they have undertaken in ratifying ILO Conventions. The public pressure brought to bear by use of the ILO procedures has, in a number of cases, led to changes in law and practice, and thus through them to an improvement of working conditions.” Governments are required periodically to report on their compliance with and progress in implementing conventions, a process overseen by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, and the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards. See Anne Trebilcock, “ILO Conventions-Enforcement Procedures,” in *International, Governmental and*

Non-Governmental Safety and Health, eds. Simon Pickvance and Rachael F. Taylor (Geneva: ILO, 2011), available at www.ilo.org/oshenc/par_tiii/resources-institutional-structural-and-legal/international-governmental-and-non-governmental-safety-and-health/item/226-ilo-conventions-enforcement-procedures.

3. Elizabeth Tang, “Item 4 (a): Report of Activities, 2009-2013” (materials for Founding Congress, International Domestic Workers Network, Montevideo, Uruguay, October 26–28, 2013), 1, in authors’ possession.
4. Statement of Vicky Kanyoka, *International Labour Conference Proceedings, 99th Session, 2010* (Geneva: ILO, 2010), 8/41.
5. International Domestic Workers Federation, “Domestic Workers of the World Unite—Report of the Founding Congress of the IDWF,” available at www.idwfed.org/publication.php#sthash.sveuikhz.dpuf.
6. Celia Mather, “Yes, We Did It!” *How the World’s Domestic Workers Won Their International Rights and Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, 2013).
7. International Restructuring Education Network Europe (IRENE), “Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers!” (Tilburg: IRENE and Geneva: IUF, 2008), organizational report.
8. For elaboration, Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish, “‘Slaves No More’: Making Global Labor Standards for Domestic Workers,” *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (forthcoming).
9. Hester Stephens, interview, Geneva, Fish notes, June 16, 2011.
10. IDWN/IDWF, “Ireland: Minister Bruton Announces Ratification of ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” July 9, 2014, available at <http://idwfed.org/news.php>; The International Domestic Workers’ Network, The International Trade Union Confederation, and Human Rights Watch, *Claiming Rights: Domestic Workers’ Movements and Global Advances for Labor Reform* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2013), in authors’ possession. Ratifiers are Uruguay, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Philippines, and Ireland. See www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460.
11. Merike Blofield, *Care Work and Class: Domestic Workers’ Struggle for Equal Rights in Latin America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 58–59.

12. "IDWN Congress: Our New Federation Is Born!" available at <http://idwfed.org/news.php?id=392>.
13. IDWN, "Item 6: IDWN 5 Year Action Plan" (Founding Congress), 1–3, internal document in authors' possession.
14. See www.idwn.info/activity.php.
15. "Uruguay President's Mujica's Speech at IDWN Founding Congress," Fish notes, available at <http://idwfed.org/news.php?id=400>.
16. "The Future of the Domestic Worker Movement," speech by Dan Galin, available at <http://idwfed.org/news.php?id=397>.
17. *C189: Conventional Wisdom*, documentary film produced by IDWN and WIEGO, available at <http://wiego.org/resources/video-c189-conventional-wisdom>.

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Jennifer N. Fish is a chair of women's studies at Old Dominion University and has worked with domestic worker organizations throughout the world since 2000. She is the author of *Domestic Democracy: At Home in South Africa* (Routledge, 2006) and the co-editor, with Hannah E. Britton and Sheila Meintjes, of *Women's Activism in South Africa: Working across Divides* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press). Since 2010, she has used film and ethnographic scholar-activist research to document the formation of the first international organization of domestic workers and its recent emergence as the largest women-led global union, the International Domestic Workers Federation.

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