DOMESTIC WORKERS ORGANIZE!

Judith Ramirez

Au Canada les employés domestiques étrangers ont jusqu'à récemment été très défavorisés. Elles/ils ont non seulement de mauvais salaires, de longues heures de travail, mais aussi des difficultés à obtenir le statut d'immigrant reçu. Depuis 1973 le système des "visas de travail" temporaires lait les employés domestiques à un seul employeur. Grâce aux efforts de groupes tels que International Coalition to End Domestics' Exploitation (Intercede), "Coalition internationale pour en finir avec l'exploitation des employés domestiques," ces travailleurs peuvent demander le statut d'immigrant reçu bien qu'il leur faille prouver leur indépendance financière avant que ce statut leur soit accordé. Cette législation de 1981 prouve que les efforts des employés domestiques traverse les barrières nationales et raciales et obtiennent des résultats positifs.

"Landed status now!" they chanted in the bitter cold of last November. Domestic workers from the Caribbean, the Philippines, and Great Britain were in the streets together, along with their many supporters. They were demonstrating in front of the immigration office at 480 University Avenue in Toronto, an act that was the culmination of many months of organizing.

"We scrub the floors, we cook the meals, we raise the children — why aren't we good enough to stay?" asked Eulene Boyce, a West Indian domestic worker. "We are here . . . united in our stand . . . calling for an end to the system of indentured servitude which, since 1973, has denied over 60,000 domestic workers the right to landed status in Canada," said a spokesperson for the International Coalition to End Domestics' Exploitation (INTERCEDE).

In March, 1980, Immigration Minister Lloyd Axworthy promised changes in Canada's immigration policy at the First National Conference on Immigrant Women. At the
same conference, delegates unani-
mously passed a resolution calling
for the abolition of the temporary-
work-permit system.

Since 1973 the system of tempo-
rary "employment visas" had tied
domestic workers to one specific
employer. They not only could not
change sector of work — that is,
from domestic work to factory work
— they could not even change from
one domestic job to another without
government permission. They were,
quite simply, a captive labour force.
As if that weren’t enough, domestic
workers were forbidden by law to
change their status from temporary
workers to permanent residents in
Canada, despite the fact that it was
virtually impossible for domestic
workers to enter Canada as landed
immigrants.

The pay for domestic labour is ex-
tremely low and the working condi-
tions are completely unregulated.
For example, the Montreal House-
hold Workers’ Association estimated
in 1979 that the average pay was
fifty dollars per week, plus room
and board, for a fifty- to sixty-hour
work week! As a result, domestic
work in Canada has been the pre-
serve of third-world women. The
majority come from the economi-
cally depressed Caribbean countries
and, more recently, from the Philip-
pine Islands. The average stay was
restricted to three years, after which
the majority of domestic workers
were ordered to leave the country.

In January, 1979, the Advisory
Council on the Status of Women
published Sheila Arnopoulos’s Pro-
blems of Immigrant Women in the
Canadian Labour Force. A hard-hitting
section on domestic workers
documented the exploitation inher-
ent in the temporary-work-
permit system. Later that year the
Committee to Advance the Status of
Housework held a public forum in
Toronto titled "A View from the
Kitchen: Immigrant Women Speak
Out on the Value of Housework." She-
ila Arnopoulos was one of the
keynote panelists, as was Jamaican
feminist Joan French. The workshop
on domestic workers that followed
led to the formation of INTERCEDE.

It grew quickly from a handful of
groups to a coalition of fifty-strong,
including the United Church of
Canada’s Division of Mission in
Canada and the World Conference
on Religion and Peace. INTER-
CEDE’s chief objective was to be-
come a strong and effective lobby
for legislative change. To that end, it
prepared a lengthy brief for the Task
Force on Immigration Practices and
Procedures, appointed by Immigra-
tion Minister Lloyd Axworthy in
September, 1980.

In June, 1981, INTERCEDE led a
twenty-five-member delegation
from Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal,
and Vancouver to meet with Mr.
Axworthy and outline the brief’s
recommendations. Chief among
these was that domestic workers on
temporary work permits be allowed
to apply for permanent residence in
Canada.

Shortly after, the minister an-
nounced changes in immigration
policy that granted domestic work-
ers with experience and formal
training (such as diplomas in house-
keeping and childcare) the right to
apply for landed status. There was
an immediate outcry from third-
world domestic workers and their
allies. In a nationwide letter-writing
campaign to Mr. Axworthy, INTER-
CEDE protested:

... recent changes you have made
restrict land only to those
women who have had the oppor-
tunity to take formal childcare or
housekeeping training and who
come from countries able to offer
them stable work experience as
nannies and housekeepers. The
result will be that a ‘select few’
from the U.K. and northern Europe
are granted landed status, while
the thousands of domestic workers
from the Caribbean and the Philip-
ines won’t have a chance. This
kind of racist immigration policy
is intolerable.

The Filipino domestic workers
organized an Ad Hoc Committee for
Landed Status and, with the sup-
port of the International Association
of Filipino Patriots, held the first
demonstration of domestic workers
on record. In front of a high-class
Toronto restaurant where the Liberal
Party was holding a fund-raising
dinner, they cornered Lloyd Ax-
worthy and handed him thousands
of signed protest letters. They re-
minded him of his promise to ease
the plight of domestic workers and
of the fact that his recent changes
only made things worse.

Summer turned into fall, but the
only thing forthcoming from Mr.
Axworthy was more promises that
further changes would be "announced
soon." In late October
INTERCEDE called a series of com-
community meetings for domestic work-
ers and their supporters in order to
decide what to do. The consensus
was that a large demonstration
should be organized to put pressure
on the government to act without
further delay. Although controversy
later broke out in Toronto’s Black
community — some feared it was
dangerous and irresponsible for
domestic workers to take to the
streets, given their historic vulner-
ability — INTERCEDE’s demon-
stration on November 22 was an
enormous success. "Your cause is
just and you will win," said Wilson
Head of the National Black Coalition
of Canada.

Four days later, on November 26,
Immigration Minister Lloyd Ax-
worthy announced the long-awaited
changes in Canada’s immigration
policy, changes that finally granted
temporary workers the right to
apply for landed status. Domestic
workers who have been working in
Canada for at least two years can
now apply for permanent residence
when their work permits are due for
renewal. They undergo an initial
assessment to determine their
"potential for self-sufficiency," which
takes into account such fac-
tors as education, skills, family and
community ties in Canada, and
"personal suitability."

If a domestic worker is judged to
be lacking in "potential for self-
sufficiency," she will be referred for
upgrading, according to her particu-
lar interests, and reassessed the fol-
lowing year when her work permit
is again due for renewal. Those
domestic workers who "pass" the
second assessment will be processed
will be given a final extension of one year, after which they will be ordered to leave Canada.

The policy has obvious potential as a significant step forward for domestic workers. Mr. Axworthy has repeatedly stressed that the intent of his new policy is to facilitate landed status for the majority of domestic workers here on temporary work permits. He has urged organizations such as INTERCEDE and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women to monitor the policy’s implementation and report any concerns to him.

Immediately following Mr. Axworthy’s announcement INTERCEDE held several community meetings, attended by as many as 250 domestic workers, where possible guidelines for implementing the policy were thrashed out. While most domestic workers were happy that they could finally apply for landed status here, the very notion of having to prove “self-sufficiency” to the Canadian government was offensive to many. “I supported five children before I came here, and I’ve supported five children since I came here, and they want to know if I can manage on my own?” said Mary Dabreo from St. Vincent.

The fate of older domestic workers who had little formal education at home and who have been out of school for decades was a special concern in drafting recommended guidelines. INTERCEDE argued strongly that short-term, community-based courses be recognized as valid for “upgrading” purposes. Any woman who has come to Canada to perform a service in great demand—that is, housework—should not have to acquire a second trade, unless she wishes to, in order to qualify for permanent status. The value of her skills in performing housework and in meeting a need in the Canadian economy should contribute toward a positive assessment under the new policy.

The provinces have a critical role to play if this policy is to give domestic workers a bona fide chance at gaining landed status. Minimum-wage legislation must protect domestic workers by giving them an adequate rate so that those who choose this work can earn a living wage and be self-sufficient. Otherwise the new policy will become a cruel joke that puts foreign domestic workers in a catch-22 position. They will have to prove “self-sufficiency” to the federal Immigration Commission, but they will be unable to do so because provincial labour laws are so weak that a “self-sufficient” wage for domestic work is a contradiction in terms. In Ontario the legally required rate for domestic workers is only three dollars per hour with a potential work week of 132 hours! It is third-world domestics who will be penalized for the fact that Canadian society holds housework in such low esteem. As one domestic worker put it, “they want it done, but they don’t want to pay for it.”

It is still too early to tell to what extent the spirit of the new policy will be followed by the immigration officers carrying out the “assessments.” The enormous discretion of the individual officers is in itself a serious concern to many who are monitoring this policy. INTERCEDE is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the policy’s first year in operation. We will be advising the minister, as he requested, of any discrepancies between what should be happening and what may, in fact, be happening.

One thing is quite clear—the only reason we have a new, less exploitative policy in Canada today is because domestic workers and their allies banded together, across national and racial lines, and fought like hell to get it.

Transition

Égarée sur une voie nébuleuse
Trop acerbe pour être sûre,
Trop laiteuse pour être amoureuse,
J’abandonne une géométrie
Trop tranchée pour être réelle.
J’opte pour une courbature
Trop courbe pour être vraie,
J’opte pour une vérité
Trop honnête pour être aimée.

A. Caimmi Lamoureux

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