

Domestic Workers Say No to Slavery

SADWU's Legislation Campaign

On 1 June 1989 domestic workers all over South Africa made the demand that the government introduce laws to protect domestic and farm workers. Workers and representatives of their union, SADWU, went to the offices of the Commissioner of Manpower in Durban, Cape Town, Eastern Transvaal, Northern Transvaal, Johannesburg, East London, Port Elizabeth, and Bloemfontein. The workers gave in a written list of recommendations to the Commissioners' offices. They also gave in petitions signed by thousands of domestic workers calling for laws to protect domestic and farm workers.

They Had the Spirit and Some Were Very Militant

Workers in Johannesburg held a meeting before they went to the Commissioner's offices. Margaret said: "We were very proud that so many domestic workers came. They braved the weather and came. They had the spirit. And some were very militant. We chose three to hand in the demands. The office was too small for all to go in. There were about 200 of us. The Commissioner said he was not the boss. He said that the boss is in Pretoria. So he will send the memorandum to the Minister of Manpower in Pretoria." In all centres the local Commissioners agreed to forward the memorandum to the minister. At the time of writing this article, SADWU had not heard from the minister in response to their memorandum.

The Most Oppressed

Domestic workers and farm workers are the most oppressed and most exploited of all workers in South Africa. They are not protected by any laws and employers can therefore pay them and treat them as they please. SADWU is the union that organises domestic workers. Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU) has begun organising farm workers. Both unions are affiliated to COSATU and work together. Margaret from SADWU told us: "We take up demands for



Photograph: Paul Weinberg

Margaret Nhlapo

"Employers must realise that the slave trade was abolished a long time ago. They should not treat domestic workers as slaves." These are the words of Margaret Nhlapo, who works in the offices of the union for domestic workers, South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU).

farm workers whenever we campaign and FAWU do the same for domestic workers."

Margaret does not think it will be easy to win the demand of laws. Margaret, and many other women working at SADWU's offices, worked as domestic workers before they came to SADWU. And they have been fighting for many years. "We were in the backyards", said Margaret. "We came out of the backyards to run the union. We have been fighting for laws since 1981. I don't think it will be easy to get legislation. It is not a short struggle."

Until there are laws to lay down wages and working conditions SADWU will organise domestic workers to fight for a better life.

Organising Domestic Workers

SADWU organises domestic workers so that they can take up demands with one voice. Often workers come to the union after many years of hardship. Margaret said: "She comes to us after she has had enough for so many years in one family. She comes and joins. And she pours out everything. I ask: 'Why did you bear all this for so long?' She says: 'I thought they would change.' She reaches nowhere so she comes to the union. She wants to create a platform, a negotiating space. We talk to the employers. Some we can't change. Some come around."



Photograph by Omar Badsha

Working in Durban as a domestic worker.

SADWU tries to reach out to employers so that they will understand the demands the union is making. They make contact with employers of all races through the workers that come to them. SADWU is also preparing an open letter to all employers of domestic workers which they will send out to newspapers. SADWU's job is not easy. Without laws, it is the goodness of the employer's heart that will decide how the worker is treated.

Domestic Workers are Humans, After All

"Our demands are not only related to white employers, but to black employers, that is, African, 'Coloured' and Indian employers as well. We feel strongly that the life style of domestic workers is breaking families. They have no human rights like giving love to their children. Their children are neglected. A mother can't bring up her child as she would like to. You will only see your child after another year. The child doesn't know you. You are a stranger. That should not be happening. We are humans after all."

SADWU's Demands

SADWU has set down certain minimum demands for domestic workers. These include contracts between employer and worker, a living wage, pensions, UIF and other benefits, and an end to child labour.

SADWU Demands Contracts

SADWU demands that employers and workers should enter into a contract. Margaret said: "As much as domestic workers benefit from it, employers will also benefit. We are working on a draft contract which endorses our demands." These contracts can be used by workers and employers to set down wages and working conditions. Until these conditions are made into a law, it will still be up to each worker to make demands with the help of their union, and it will be up to individual employers to decide if they want to agree to these conditions.



Photograph by Pax Magwaza

Domestic workers on the move in Durban.

The contracts will include a set wage, hours of work, pension, leave, and other benefits. It will also include a reasonable notice time in the case of termination of employment.

SADWU Demands a Living Wage

SADWU demands that domestic workers should be paid a decent wage and work reasonable hours. Margaret said: "Domestic workers are still getting paid as low as R50 and R80 a month, which is disgusting. It is disturbing when you think that a worker is not just working for herself. Even if she was, she would not go far on that money.

"We are demanding R450 a month for skilled workers. That is those who look after small children and who can cook or bake or have worked for a long time and know their jobs well. Some people train a domestic worker and then they don't want to pay because they say 'She was blank when she came, I taught her everything.' Even if she is trained by the same employer she is skilled and should be paid as such."

"We are demanding R350 a month for semi-skilled workers. And these demands are for a five day, 40 hour week. For casual work we demand R3.50 an hour."

SADWU believes that if employers cannot afford these wages they should not employ domestic workers.

SADWU Demands Pensions

SADWU demands that employers provide for pensions. Margaret said: "Pension is a far cry. After people worked 40 years for one employer they walk out the same as they came in - with nothing. We are highlighting it to employers that they should obtain a pension for their employees. Some employers are willing but don't know how they can go about it. Others think the state pension is enough to live on. But it is only worth a week's groceries. It is worth nothing. So employers must start looking at obtaining private pension schemes for domestic workers."

SADWU demands that employers should register their workers with a pension fund, and the employer and worker should pay towards this fund.

Unemployment Insurance and Other Benefits

SADWU demands that domestic workers should be covered by UIF. This will allow workers to be covered by unemployment insurance so they will receive some money in times when they are unemployed.

SADWU also demands that the employer must register the worker for workers' compensation benefits. The employer should provide decent accommodation with hot and cold running water, and electricity, if a power source exists on the property. Employers have a responsibility to make sure workers get proper medical treatment when necessary. Overtime work should be paid for. Workers must be given one month's notice of termination of employment, or one month's pay in lieu of notice. SADWU demands that workers should have the right to join any union of their choice.

SADWU Demands an End to Child Employment

SADWU demands that children under 16 years of age should not be employed. They have come across many cases of child

labour. Margaret said: 'It is ridiculous. This happens especially among Blacks - that is 'Coloureds', Indians and Africans. A woman employer will fetch a child from the parents. The parents, because of their situation, let her have the child. She will pay the parents R25 or R35 a month. And she won't give it every month. She will say 'I am helping the parents.' But if she wants to help, she must send the child to school. These children are more exploited than workers in white homes. They sleep in the kitchen, and they can't go to bed unless every one else is sleeping. They are not allowed out of the house. They can't play. They don't know where they are. They get lost. We are mothers. We come from rural areas, and we know our children are being taken by people from the towns.' Sometimes social workers from the townships send such children to SADWU. There were recently two children sent. SADWU organisers looked after the children until they were able to send them back to their parents. "The one child was 15 years old. She had bruises on her back. She had the phone number of the school where the woman worked and of the shop where the man

worked as a salesman. We got them to the office. The woman refused to send the child home. I said just give her the money to go home."

Join the Union and Fight Alongside
SADWU's message to domestic workers is to join SADWU and organise. Margaret said, "Domestic workers should join the union and fight. We should not tire. And more important we should fight now because of high prices and rising costs of living. Legislation is important because if we have some legislation, domestic workers lives can be controlled and there would not be so much exploiting."

And until there is legislation SADWU will continue to fight and to demand that employers pay the wages and meet the conditions set out by the union. The message to employers is clear, "Employers must try and treat domestic workers as mothers, as housewives. They should realise that the slave trade was abolished a long time ago. They should not treat domestic workers as slaves. Domestic workers are human beings."●



Photograph by Pax Magwaza, Afrapix

The union makes us strong! SADWU at the Commissioner's office in Durban.