HELPING THE HELP: UNIONIZATION OF HOUSEHOLD EMPLOYEES**


The National Domestic Workers Union began as a program of the federal government’s War on Poverty in the 1960s. In addition to using the NDWU to illustrate the tensions within these programs, Beck highlights the founding director, Dorothy Bolden, a domestic worker and community activist, who became the liaison between SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) and domestic workers, educating the workers in civil rights strategies and tactics. In 1968, with the help of civil rights attorney, Maynard Jackson, she founded the NDWU, enrolling about 2,000 domestic workers from the Atlanta area. Bolden successfully applied to the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity to fund a homemakers’ skills training program as a way of professionalizing the occupation and raising workers’ wages. The organization also provided trainees with information and referral services and mentoring. By means of NDWU publications and meetings, members learned that there were conditions and wages they no longer had to accept. As director of NDWU, Bolden became the spokesperson at all levels of government for women in domestic service, testifying before Congress about the need for household employees to be covered by employment and social legislation.


Tracing the history of unionization efforts among domestic workers, Boris and Nadeson provide evidence to contest the common assumption that household employees, working in employers’ residences, often under informal arrangements, as a group are unorganizable. Household workers have built community- and ethnic-based coalitions that employ lobbying and legislation in place of traditional union methods of strikes and slowdowns. During the Depression, domestics received support from individual social activists, nascent unions, and other organizations. Though domestic worker organizers hoped to link regulation of their occupation to New Deal legislation, “[t]he 1935 Social Security, 1936 National Labor Relations, and 1938 Fair Labor Standards Acts excluded domestic and agricultural labor, occupations dominated by women and men of color.” (p. 420) It was not until 1974 that Congress revised the FLSA to cover...
domestic labor. By the 1960s, new attempts were made by national women’s and professional associations to promote voluntary standards to improve labor conditions. Current support groups are educating today’s household employees, largely immigrants who encounter harsh penalties rather than protection from federal legislation, about minimum wages and human rights.

DeWitt, Larry. “The decision to exclude agricultural and domestic workers from the 1935 Social Security Act,” Social Security Bulletin, vol. 70, no. 4, 2010, pp. 49-68. Larry DeWitt chronicles the creation and implementation of the 1935 Social Security Act and its impact on agricultural and domestic workers. Programs specified in Titles I, II, and III of this landmark act were major accomplishments, providing benefits for the needy elderly, retired workers, and the unemployed. In addition to outlining the legislative history and historical context of the Social Security Act, DeWitt argues against the perception that the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers was racially motivated. Rather, in his analysis of the scholarly research of Linda Gordon, Robert C. Lieberman, and Kenneth Finegold, among others, he maintains that it was a matter of administrative and political convenience.

Domestic Workers United (DWU) http://www.domesticworkersunited.org/index.php
Domestic Workers United is an advocacy group that was founded in 2000 by the Kalayann/Women Workers Project of CAAAV and Andolan Organizing South Asian Workers as “an organization of Caribbean, Latina and African nannies, housekeepers, and elderly caregivers in New York.” DWU provides a support system for domestic workers by establishing a forum for them to assert their labor rights in the workplace and by offering resources for training, organizing, and advancing their careers. The web site section “Rights and Resources” provides a link to New York’s Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed in November, 2010 as well as supporting information on the bill from the New York State Department of Labor. A record of testimony from domestic workers at the New York State Assembly hearing in November, 2008 is also included, as are the reports “Home is where the work is: Inside New York’s domestic work industry” and “Domestic workers and collective bargaining.” Other links go to standard guidelines for domestic employment, a collection of essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, recent news coverage on household employees, and statistical information on domestic workers in New York State.


Mexican and Central American immigrant women working as nannies and housekeepers in Los Angeles and the women they work for are the focus of Doméstica. The interviews Hondagneu-Sotelo conducted with the workers and their employers in both personal and workplace settings serve as the primary sources for her study. While paid domestic work was thought to be in permanent decline by the mid-twentieth century, the late-twentieth century saw an increase in the employment of household help as more women left homemaking and entered external workplaces. The author states that “[t]he work of cleaning houses and caring for children gradually left the hands of wives and mothers and entered the global marketplace.” (p. xii) Domestic work went from a position strictly of servitude to a legitimate profession. This is illustrated by Hondagneu-Sotelo’s descriptions of
various types of domestic work, both live-in and live-out jobs, housecleaning and other home-based work, and her personal profiles of the women who fill these positions. Hiring practices, social relationships between employer/employee, and labor rights issues are discussed. The global scope of this work was highlighted by the International Labour Organization, which included “setting standards on decent work for domestic workers” on the agenda of the 99th Session (2010) of the International Labour Conference (ILC) http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/lang--en/index.htm.


In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the need for domestic help in middle-class households in New York City and the surrounding boroughs engendered debate over the rights of household employers versus the labor rights of their employees. May describes the socio-economic background of the “servant question” and the methods of grass roots organization among workers. The majority of the employers were middle-class women. Their behavior had an impact not only on their positions as employers, but also on their roles as moral reformers and leaders in the women’s rights movement. Their opponents expressed the opinion that if these women could not keep their housemaids in order and treat them with respect, how could they be responsible enough to vote or pass moral judgment on society? The author quotes educator and reformer Lucy Maynard Salmon that, “reform begins at the top, revolutions at the bottom,” urging the upper class to find “a satisfactory solution of the vexing question of domestic service.” (p. 73) May also talks about the present situation of domestic workers in New York and the effects these labor issues have on global politics: “[h]iring a household worker . . . often means participating in a system of global labor exploitation.” (p. 180) May discusses her research in relation to Nannygate (http://uncpressblog.com/2011/05/26/vanessa-may-domestic-workers-nannygates-and-the-irs/) and the movie *The Help* (http://uncpressblog.com/2011/08/24/historians-on-the-help-vanessa-may-and-rebecca-sharpless-respond/#.Tuzc0cjlay4. email) on the UNC Press Blog.


This article maintains that feminist studies about the plight of domestic workers and their diminished social status actually hinder the workers’ social and economic progress. Meagher argues that creating more socially progressive research in the field can make a greater contribution towards professionalizing household occupations. She believes feminist scholars need to place more emphasis on recognizing and analyzing the solidarity-based strategies that are currently practiced by domestic workers rather than continue to describe domestic work as exploitative and degrading. Meagher also suggests that domestic workers will find greater economic and social advantage by aligning themselves with organized labor groups and commercial companies. The remainder of the article discusses the practices of domestics’ cooperatives and the constraints of collective solidarity-based work.

*Maid in the U.S.A.* is considered a landmark in domestic worker studies. At the time of its initial publication in 1992, it focused on an area unexplored by researchers—the lives and personal struggles of the female household worker. Romero’s findings were based on interviews with twenty-five Chicana (women of Mexican decent born and raised in the United States), domestic servants living and working in the Denver, Colorado area. As Romero explains in the introduction to the 10th anniversary edition (2002), “My analysis contributed to the field of literature that drew attention to the importance of paid domestic labor as a window into race, class, and gender relations and reproductive labor.” (p. 1) She discusses current issues among domestic workers, addresses criticism of her work, and lists significant publications in the field since the book was published. The Clinton-era “Nannygate” scandal of 1993, “the first national scandal over childcare arrangement,” is given particular attention.


Peggie Smith addresses the barriers that domestic workers face when using traditional methods to organize. She describes alternative solutions these workers have developed for successful organizing using both union and non-union structures. Smith defines what paid domestic work is in order to help the reader understand why unionization is necessary. She then reviews the history and interpretation of the National Labors Relations Act and state collective bargaining laws as applied to domestic workers, the exclusion of domestics from these statutes, and the implications for organizing. Smith describes the work of the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) in organizing home-care workers in Los Angeles in 1999, Professor Dorothy Sue Cobble’s model of “occupational unionism,” Jane Street and the organizing efforts of the DWIU (Domestic Workers’ Industrial Union), and the DWIU’s legacy in domestic service co-operatives like the Domestic Workers Association of Los Angeles (DWA). She sees the limited liability corporation (LLC) as a particularly promising structure for protecting undocumented alien household workers. In conclusion, Smith examines whether the relationship between the domestic workers and their employers is a “traditional industrial relationship,” if the traditional union practices of pickets, boycotts, and strikes are effective in the context of that relationship, and if these actions violate a homeowner’s right to privacy.


The *Scholar & Feminist Online* is an online-only web journal published by the Barnard Center for Research on Women. This special issue is the product of a two-year joint project between the Barnard Center for Research on Women, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and Domestic Workers United. Among the scholarly articles about women and domestic work, “Organizing Home Care,” by Jennifer Klein and Eileen Boris, summarizes the history of the organized labor movement among domestic workers, specifically home health care workers. The section “Working for Change” focuses on labor organizing activities of National Domestic Workers Alliance and other groups, and provides both articles and videos that document their work. *Valuing domestic work* also provides online links to various domestic labor organizations and a list of recommended readings.