

# FIGHTING OUR SLAVERY

## Domestic Workers Organise

"I have been a domestic worker all my working life. I earn R80.00 a month and I have been with my present employer for 14 years. I work six and a half days a week. Unless I ask, I do not get a weekend off. I get two weeks holiday every February.

My day starts at 6.30 am. It ends when the evening meal has been cooked and the dishes washed. After that I watch television until 9.30pm with my employer. My employer is a widow and does not like to be alone. At present I have no pension scheme. I do not know whether my employer will provide a pension scheme for me when I am too old to work. I am 66 years old."

This is Rose's story. She works in Durban. Most domestic workers are women. There are more than 800 000 women in South Africa working as domestic workers. They each have their own story to tell. But they all have similar experiences. Much of their lives are

taken up with doing housework and caring for families. If it isn't for the employer then it is for her own family. As Elsie said, "I cook for my husband. He's tired from work, lifting up heavy boxes and iron. Sometimes we come in at the same time. He wants his tea. He'll sit down with the paper. You will be a 'girl' again in the house." Most domestic workers hardly ever see their families.

### DOMESTIC WORKERS GET A RAW DEAL

Factory workers and shopworkers are protected by laws. These laws set out minimum working conditions, like hours of work, sick leave, holidays and minimum wages. For many years factory workers and shop workers have come together in their factories and shops. They have built trade unions. They have used their united strength to fight for better wages and working conditions, and more control in their workplace.

Photograph by Lesley Lawson

Gisele Wulfso



But domestic workers and farm workers get a raw deal. They are not protected by the laws that protect factory and shop workers.

### A UNION FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

Over the years, domestic workers have organised to take up their problems so that they can change their lives. In November 1986 all domestic workers associations from around the country met in Cape Town. They came with one thing in mind. To form one big union for domestic workers. Everybody knows that unity means strength. The new union is called the South African Domestic Workers' Union (SADWU) and has 20 000 members. Now SADWU has joined the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to be even stronger. COSATU is a federation of many trade unions. More than 700 000 workers, from different unions, make up COSATU. "COSATU is a worker organisation and it is going to support our union," said Nyami, a SADWU organiser in Durban. The law still does not recognise domestic worker unions, but SADWU and COSATU are ready for the long struggle ahead.

SPEAK met some domestic workers from Durban. Some are members of SADWU. They spoke about life as domestic workers, and about their union.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH R60.00?

Domestic workers' wages and hours of work are not laid down by law. Most domestic workers earn about R100.00 a month. But for many it is less. And in some country towns women earn as little as R30.00 a month. They and their families are expected to live on this money. Often the domestic worker is the only breadwinner.

### MOST DOMESTIC WORKERS, THEY WORK OVERTIME

For factory workers when the bell goes, that's it, that's the end of the day. But for most domestic workers, work never ends. And this is more so for those domestic workers who live on their employer's property. Zandile told SPEAK, "They say to you: 'You don't have to go off early because you stay here, you don't have to catch a bus.' Zandile went on to say, "This week end working business must stop now! We don't feel happy about working the whole Saturday and Sunday. Really, it's on top of our children. Maria told SPEAK, "At the end of the month they have to give us the weekend off, so that those with kids that are so far away can go and see them." Even on the day off the employer tries to get her worker to do some work. As Maria said, "They call us and say: 'Do you want some tea?' Because she wants you to wash the dishes!"

fradix



Photograph by Lesley Lawson



"Sometimes you babysit until 2 o'clock in the morning, and 'Thank you!', they give you R1.00. If you're lucky.! Sometimes it's nothing."

### **"WHEN YOU'RE OLD, YOU ARE NOT HAVING ANYTHING"**

Domestic workers do not get pension or unemployment insurance. Zandile told us: "When you are old, you lose your job. You lose your room. They say to you: 'Go and ask for an old age pension.' 'Where is your home?' Sometimes she didn't even know whether you have children or whether you had a house. 'Don't you have children?' she asks you, 'Can't you go home now to have your pension, you are very, very old now.' Sometimes domestic workers work for about 40 years for one employer, but when she is old, she is not having a house, she is not having anything."

### **"WHEN YOU'VE GOT A BABY, YOU LOSE YOUR JOB. THATS ALL"**

By law, domestic workers have no maternity benefits. "As soon as you are pregnant, the employer starts to tell you that you must try and organise what you are going to do with the baby. But what usually happens is that after you come back you are dismissed, because the employer is used to the new worker. You were not even paid for the time you were on maternity leave. When you've got a baby, you lose your job. That's all." Some employers allow their domestic workers to keep their babies for a while. "Only a few mothers can keep their children for a year," said Maria, "And when you've got to work, you've got to look after her children, and lock yours in the room."

### **"WE DON'T NEED TO LIVE IN A BACK YARD"**

Like farmworkers, domestic workers often

live in their employer's property. So they are under their employer's control more than factory and shop workers. And domestic workers face their employers alone. They don't have support of each other like workers in the factory. Each domestic worker works alone for one employer. She gets to know her employer very well. "It is hard to challenge your boss when you are a domestic worker because domestic work is sort of 'friendship work'. It's not like the factory where you can change the department and go and work under a new manager or a new foreman," says Nyami.

Most domestic workers live in their employers' backyards. Those backyards are often not fit for people to live in. "We need our own homes to live with our children," said Zandile, "We don't need to live in a back yard. That's why we can't strike, because we live there. Each and every employer knows that we haven't got houses. And you depend on her."

### **BUILDING OUR UNION**

It is not easy to organise domestic workers. SADWU helps domestic workers to know their rights. Domestic workers are trained to negotiate with their employers so that they can improve their conditions at work. "Every domestic worker is a shopsteward." She has to fight all of her battles herself. The first thing is to get the workers to understand what the union is. Maria told us: "All over Durban we have branches. At the branch meetings we always explain about SADWU." Workers also go to workshops to learn about the union and about organising as domestic workers. Once workers have joined the union they talk to other workers in the street where they work. This way, they organise them into the union. This is how the union grows. Workers who work in the

same street are then organised into street committees. "The street committees are the foundation of our union," said Maria. She told us how domestic workers start a street committee: "You go sometimes, to the shops and there you meet other domestic workers. You talk to them about the union. Sometimes you carry pamphlets to give to them to read. You go to where they work and talk to them about the union. And then you make a day 'Could you come and visit me at my house so that we could talk?' It could be one person, it could be two. It doesn't matter how many you get because you could talk to those today and tomorrow you talk to others."

Even those who haven't joined the union are invited to street meetings. At these meetings everyone is kept aware of what is happening in the union.

"When people come with problems to the office, that is also how we organise them. Most of the people who come to the office

with problems are not members, they are people who have disputes with the employers. After they've been helped, they are told about how domestic workers are organised in the area where they work."

### IT IS NOT EASY TO GET DOMESTIC WORKERS TO JOIN THE UNION

"Some of the domestic workers lose their jobs as soon as the employer notices that they have come under the union. Most of them, they hide that they've gone to the union. Most of the employers are not happy about our union. They know that we know they are treating us badly," Maria said.

It is not easy for domestic workers to go to meetings because of the long hours they work. And often it is hard for women to be in the union. Husbands and boyfriends do not always like them to be involved. Maria said that when she was married, it was very hard to be active in the union.





Strength in unity! Domestic workers at the launch of SADWU in November 1986

### JOINING HANDS TO FIGHT FOR OUR RIGHTS

Domestic workers have a long fight ahead. Their struggle is especially hard because they have no laws to protect them. Through SADWU, domestic workers are joining hands to fight for the day when they have the same rights as other workers. But SADWU does not stop at this. Along with COSATU, SADWU is fighting for a South Africa where there is no exploitation and everyone has the right to a decent life.

This is a domestic workers' song from the United States of America -

We're from the nursery  
 And from the laundry too;  
 We're coming from the kitchen  
 Where there's always work to do.  
 We're joining hands in friendship  
 And we're joining in song,  
 If we build the union together  
 It will make us strong!

### BUILDING OUR UNION

Here is a list of different branches of SADWU around the country!

SADWU  
 20 St Andrew's St.  
 Durban  
 4001  
Tel: 305 1322

SADWU  
 5 Long St.  
 Mowbray  
 Cape Town  
 7700  
Tel: 692 112

SADWU  
 I.M.S. Building  
 34 Murchison St.  
 Newcastle  
Tel: 21651

SADWU  
 37 Morris St.  
 Empangeni  
 3880  
Tel: 27063

SADWU  
 507 Atlantic House  
 16 Corporation St.  
 Cape Town  
 8001  
Tel: 456 384

SADWU  
 P.O. Box 1502  
 East London  
 5200

SADWU  
 165 Pietermaritz St.  
 Pietermaritzburg  
 3201  
Tel: 39630

