



Third-world domestic workers demonstrate in Toronto, November 22, 1981.

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 liait les employés domestiques à un seul employeur. Grâce aux efforts de groupes tels que International Coalition to End Domestic's 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 Domestic's 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 unanimously passed a resolution calling for the abolition of the temporary-work-permit system.

Since 1973 the system of temporary "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 extremely low and the working conditions are completely unregulated. For example, the Montreal Household 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 preserve of third-world women. The majority come from the economically depressed Caribbean countries and, more recently, from the Philippine 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 *Problems of Immigrant Women in the Canadian Labour Force*. A hard-hitting section on domestic workers documented the exploitation inherent 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." Sheila 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. INTERCEDE's chief objective was to become 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 Immigration 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 announced changes in immigration policy that granted domestic workers with experience and formal training (such as diplomas in housekeeping 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, INTERCEDE protested:

... recent changes you have made restrict landing only to those women who have had the opportunity 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 Philippines 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 support 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 Axworthy and handed him thousands of signed protest letters. They reminded 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 community meetings for domestic workers 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 vulnerability — INTERCEDE's demonstration 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 Axworthy 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 factors 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 particular interests, and reassessed the following year when her work permit is again due for renewal. Those domestic workers who "pass" the second assessment will be processed

for landing, while those who "fail" 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.

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amoureuse,
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Trop tranchée pour être réelle.

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A. Caimmi Lamoureux



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