



Cet article raconte le vécu des femmes qui viennent au Canada comme domestiques avec un permis de travail et nous fait voir à quel point tout contrôle de leur propre vie leur échappe.

The employer I worked for when I first came here treated me as if I was a slave. I'm not speaking for myself alone as a matter of fact, it goes to all the women who come here on a work permit from the Caribbean. Some of them talk about the treatment they get, and some just suck it in, you know what I mean? Well, last August I noticed things were getting too heavy for me to handle, lots of work and less pay, so I just pack my things and left the job, but I had to check with the Immigration Department and they gave me two weeks to find another job. I did, this one is a little better than the first. So I am just trying to stick around a little longer, because when I leave Vancouver I am

not sure I'll get to come back, because I made myself a promise. I am not going to leave my country on a work permit to go to another country, not ever again.

This statement is from a West Indian woman who has been in Canada since 1975 working as a live-in domestic worker in a private home. She is in Canada on a temporary Employment Visa and will eventually have to return to her own country. She has four children in the West Indies whom she is trying to support and keep in school. When she first came to Canada she was earning \$200 a month plus room and board and had one day off per week. Currently she is earning \$300 a month and has two days (but no evenings) off. She is just one of many women in similar situations.

This article describes the experience of the women who come to Canada as domestic workers on Employment Visas and illustrates the lack of control these women

have over most aspects of their lives due to their status as Employment Visa workers. It is also important, however, to point out the attempts that domestic workers have made and are making to take some control, to fight back, to demand a decent life. At the end of the article I will talk about some of the ways that people are working to improve the situation.

Domestic Work and Immigration

Domestic jobs are characterized by low pay and hard work. As well, the women who do this work must suffer the degradation that has come to be associated with domestic work. It is not seen as 'real' work. Nor are the people who do it seen as 'real' workers.

This combination of substandard working conditions and low status has resulted in the need to import workers from other countries to do domestic work. The recruitment of immigrant labour has been used to maintain a supply of domestic servants, par-

West Indian Domestic Workers on Employment Visas

I Thought There Was No More Slavery in Canada!

RACHEL EPSTEIN

ticularly since the early 1900s when industrialization was causing women to enter occupations other than service. In 1903-1904, 3,504 domestics immigrated to Canada; the number rose annually until 1913-14, when 21,476 domestics immigrated.¹ In 1915, the Protestant Directorate of Female Immigration reported that 'during the ten years preceding the war, 129,000 domestic servants entered Canada from overseas.'²

It has long been a problem for the Department of Immigration and for employers of domestic servants that the women who enter the country to take domestic jobs will leave these jobs and enter other employment at the first opportunity. The reasons for this are not hard to understand, given the unattractiveness of the work. Various schemes have been used over the years to keep domestic servants doing domestic work. Women entered Canada by means of an 'assisted passage,' which meant that their passage was paid and then a cer-

tain amount taken from their monthly wages until the debt was paid off. Usually women who came in this way were also made to sign an agreement committing themselves to six months or a year with their first employer.³ In addition, the extreme poverty of the women who immigrated as domestic servants was often enough to prevent them from finding other employment. They often came to the country without even the bare necessities of life, and had to spend their first several months' wages acquiring clothing, etc. They could not afford to leave domestic service because they were dependent on their employers to provide room and board.

Although the demand for domestic servants has decreased since the early part of the century, employers still find it difficult to find people willing to take these jobs, particularly live-in jobs. Until the early 1970s women were being brought into Canada as landed immigrants to work as domestic workers. But this system did not

prove satisfactory in decreasing the labour shortage, as women would frequently leave domestic service as soon as they could find other employment. As a result, the government stopped bringing people in as landed immigrants and instigated a special system to provide a source of domestic labour which could be relied upon to remain doing domestic labour. The government now meets the demand for live-in domestics by bringing people in on Employment Visas. Employment Visas (commonly referred to as work visas or work permits) are issued by the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, formerly the Department of Manpower and Immigration. In 1978, 12,483 visas were issued for domestic work in Canada. The bulk of these were in Ontario and Quebec where 8,154 and 2,357 visas were issued respectively. 925 visas were issued in Alberta and 626 in B.C.⁴ Many of these visas were issued to women from the West Indies — Jamaica, St. Vincent, Trinidad and some of the

other islands in the Caribbean.

The Employment Visa System

As opposed to landed immigrants who may permanently reside in Canada and eventually become Canadian citizens, Employment Visa holders enter the country for a specified period of time and when their visa expires they must return to their own country. It is sometimes possible to renew an Employment Visa but this merely postpones the inevitability of having to leave Canada.

Each visa specifies a particular job, for a particular employer, for a specific length of time. If any of these conditions change (i.e. the worker loses her job, changes employers, etc.) the visa becomes invalid and, unless a new visa can be obtained, the person must leave the country or risk deportation. Thus a person's legal status in the country depends on keeping the job for which her visa was issued. As well, Employment Visa workers are not entitled to most of the protections and benefits enjoyed by other workers in Canada. They have no right to Unemployment Insurance (though they must pay the premiums), Canada Pension Plans, job security arrangements, long-term insurance coverage or promotion. As well they are denied many community, social and health care services.

Some Employment Visas are issued for specialized temporary jobs, such as a tour of foreign musicians or a scientific exchange program. Historically, however, most of the visas have been used to fill jobs characterized by extremely low wages and poor working conditions—such as domestic work, farm work and non-union hotel and restaurant work.

The Employment and Immigration Commission refers to the Employment Visa system as a temporary solution to labour shortages in specific kinds of jobs. In these areas, they say, training programs should be developed so that people within Canada will fill these jobs. It is true that enough people in Canada cannot be found to fill the jobs that are traditionally filled by Employment Visa workers. But this is not due to lack of training, but rather to the deplorably low wages and substandard working conditions in these jobs.

Eliminating the need for Employment Visas does not require more training programs, but improvement of the conditions of work in the areas of employment for which visas are issued. Such things as including domestic and farmworkers under labour standards legislation and enforcing this legislation where it already exists in other industries would be steps in this direction. But the government is not taking these steps and is, in fact, relying more and more heavily on the use of Employment Visas to fill the least desirable jobs.

In 1974 the number of landed immigrants admitted to Canada was two and a half times as great as the number of Em-

ployment Visas issued. By 1978 the balance was reversed and there were more Employment Visas issued than landed immigrants admitted.⁵ The government is favouring Employment Visas over landed immigrant status and working-class people who formerly would have come to Canada as landed immigrants with the right to remain here permanently are, more and more, coming to work on temporary visas. This policy benefits the government in that it receives a supply of workers who fill otherwise unfilled jobs, who will accept whatever wages and working conditions they are offered, and who need not be provided with the social benefits that go along with landed immigrant status. The effect is to further reinforce the low wages and poor working conditions in these jobs, and to severely jeopardize attempts to organize trade unions or other protective organizations in those areas where visa workers are employed.

Domestic Workers on Employment Visas

What you hear about domestic workers on Employment Visas often depends on who you hear it from. So a brief description of my background with the situation is necessary. I first became involved in 1975 when I was introduced to a woman who was about to be deported because she had violated the conditions of her visa. We were unable to prevent this and she was forced to go back to St. Vincent. Through her, though, I met several other women working as domestics on work visas and began to learn from them about their experiences in Canada. I also began to assist with some of the problems they were facing. I located and distributed information on their rights as visa workers, on the social services they were entitled to, and places they could go for help. I accompanied many different people on numerous occasions to Manpower and Immigration offices to extend visas, change jobs, complain about working situations, etc. My home is used as a place for people to get together to talk about their work situations and simply to socialize.

Most of the women who come to Canada on Employment Visas do so as a means of escaping the hardship and poverty they face in the West Indies. Often they were unemployed before they came, or working for extremely low wages as domestics or in factories. Most of them have several children in the West Indies who are being looked after by a relative or friend while they are in Canada. Before they come here, they see Canada as a place where they can make a lot of money to feed, clothe, house and educate their children. Their experience when they get here is often quite different.

What follows is a description of that experience, told mainly by the women themselves. The quotes are drawn from both formal interviews with the women and ac-

counts written by the women themselves.

In St. Vincent it could be really rough, because as I said, there is not much job down there to do. And the few people that are there they pay nothing, you know, they don't pay no good salary and most of them do their housework themselves. That's domestic work. There is other jobs, like mending the roads, and that kind of job, it's the kind of job that you have to sleep with the supervisor and then you might get a job.

I'm not looking for a lump sum of money to go back into my country. All I want is just to get a home for my kids, get some furniture in it, and then I could never have money.

People come to Canada hoping to be able to *save* money to send back home to their families. But often they must *borrow* money to pay the initial costs of getting to Canada (air fare, medical exam, warm clothes, etc.). So when they get to Canada they must first pay this money back, before any money can be saved or sent home.

I didn't have that kind of money to travel out here, so I borrowed it and it was against my land and my house. So all I was hoping for was not to save any money to go back home to show off with, just to pay back that money and go back, that I could still show them that I take a chance and I got through with my chance.

Canada Employment and Immigration Commission

In order for an Employment Visa to be issued to someone outside Canada, the employer who requires a domestic must convince Employment Canada that there is no landed immigrant or Canadian citizen in the country who is qualified and willing to take the job. Usually this means posting the job at Employment Canada centres for a period of one to three months. If no suitable applicant is found during this time, the Employment and Immigration Commission will issue an Employment Visa. When the employer registers the job with Employment Canada he or she must fill out a form which states the details of the job offer — description of duties, wages, hours of work, holidays, etc. Due to complaints and publicity about the exploitation of visa workers, the Employment and Immigration Commission has set some minimum standards which must be met before a visa will be issued. The domestic worker must be paid at least \$350 per month plus room and board; she must not work more than eight hours a day, five days a week; and she should have at least two days off per week. When she receives her visa, she should also be given a copy of the job offer

form that her employer filled out and signed, and a letter from the Immigration Department stating what her wages, hours of work and days off should be. The letter also states: 'In the event that your employer does not adhere to the above mentioned salary and working conditions you should contact the Canada Immigration Centre. The Immigration officer may then refer you to Employment Canada who may assist you in finding other employment as a domestic.'

Unfortunately, in many, many cases employers are not adhering to the salaries and working conditions that they put on the government job offer form. Some women are being paid the \$350 per month, but in the majority of cases that I know of they are being paid less than this, often much less. It is not uncommon for people to be working for \$100 or \$200 a month, plus room and board. The employers will sign the form saying they will pay the domestic worker \$350, but then tell her that they can simply not afford the \$350 and will pay her less. If she does not feel satisfied with this they tell her that she can leave the job. But, of course, it is not that simple. Her legal status in the country depends on her having the job for which her visa was issued. Most people feel they have no choice but to accept what is offered.

She knew exactly what I supposed to get, right, but she never paid it. When I had the second extension, I said to her, 'How come you never mention to me about the salary at the Manpower Department?' and she said, 'Well, they don't care about what you pay once you put what they want on the form.'

The letter from the Immigration Department says that if your employer does not adhere to the salary and working conditions spelled out in the job offer, you can inform the Immigration Department and they may help you locate another job as a domestic. But when a domestic goes into the Immigration Department to complain about being underpaid, for example, the first thing the officer says, after hearing what she has to say, is that they have to hear the 'other side,' what her employer has to say about the situation. The immigration officer will call the employer to get his or her side of the story, and this will usually lead to the domestic being fired. After all, who wants their domestic making complaints to the Immigration Department? What happens next is totally up to the discretion of the immigration officer. He or she technically has the right to send the domestic out of the country as her visa is no longer valid. This does not always happen, however. The domestic worker may be issued a new visa with a new employer, especially if she has someone lined up who wants to hire her. If she doesn't have a new job lined up, she might be giv-

en some time to look for one, and then issued a new visa.

It is not uncommon for immigration officers to harass and intimidate the women who come in to complain, to imply that they are lying about their situation, to side with the employers when they hear their side of the story, or to treat the women as if they were trying to get away with something illegal. As well, if the officer does grant time for the woman to look for a new job, it is usually a very limited amount of time — one to two weeks. As a result, the woman will feel pressured to take whatever job she can find rather than risk being sent home, and will often end up in a situation no better than the one she has just left.

The situation is the same if a domestic is fired. Again, she is technically in the country illegally and must report immediately to the Immigration Department and put her life in their hands. They will listen to her side of the story, call her employer and hear theirs, and then, if they decide she was unjustly fired, they might allow her to look for a new job and issue a new visa.

One woman I know was visiting some friends on a Saturday night and did not return home until early Sunday morning (her day off). Her employers had locked her out of the house and in the morning told her to pack her things and leave. On Monday morning I accompanied her to the Immigration Department. The officer took down her statement and then implied that he was sceptical and that he wanted to find out about the other side of the story. He questioned her closely about how she got her visa, who found her job, etc. He said repeatedly that work visas are only temporary and that she would eventually have to leave the country. He implied that she would try to illegally overstay her visa. He also implied that she was in the wrong in the situation with her employer. He asked her if her employers knew she was going out on Saturday night, why she had come home so late, when she left her friends' house, and so on. He said he would contact her employers to establish whether or not she had been wronged. He said he *might* give her a visa and Manpower *might*, solely for humanitarian reasons, help her find another job. But he stated emphatically that they don't have to, and that 'they will really be bending over backwards' for her if they do. We returned to his office the next day after he had spoken to her employers. She had to relate the entire incident again, and he asked her another series of questions completely unrelated to whether or not she had been unjustly fired; questions about her finances, her family, and how long she wanted to stay in Canada. Again, he kept repeating that work visas are only temporary, and implied she had some illegal intention. Finally he did give her two weeks to look for a new job, but with no promises that Manpower

would help her find one. His parting words were 'two weeks should be long enough to settle it one way or the other.' She eventually did find another job and was issued a new work visa.

She was lucky. Another woman was fired for returning home late from church on Easter Sunday to babysit the children of her employers. First thing Monday morning she reported to Manpower to inform them of what had happened. The Manpower officer took down the details and told her to look for another job and then come back. The next day two Immigration officers arrived at her door and told her she was in Canada illegally, that she had violated her visa and had not reported to Immigration. She had made the mistake of reporting to Canada Manpower instead of to Immigration. The Immigration officers told her that she must leave the country immediately, which she was forced to do.

When you are in the country on an Employment Visa you do not have much choice but to accept the conditions offered to you. If you make demands or complaints to your employer or to the Immigration Department you risk losing your job, and therefore your legal status in the country. You will not always be sent out, but it is always the risk.

Well, let's say it's kind of difficult, it's kind of rough, right. Once you're here on a work permit, OK, it's like everyone just try to push you around and stuff like that. And you don't have any choice, right?

Working and Living Conditions

In all provinces in Canada, with the exception of Prince Edward Island, domestic workers are currently excluded from labour standards legislation. In B.C. this means they are excluded from the *Minimum Wage Act*, *Hours of Work Act*, *Payment of Wages Act*, *Annual and General Holidays Act* and *Maternity Protection Act*. The only provincial law which affects their working situations in any way is the B.C. Labour Code, which gives them the right to organize into unions. As mentioned

A two-part colour slide-tape show entitled *Taken for Granted* is available from the Labour Advocacy and Research Association in Vancouver. The slide-tape gives a history of farm and domestic work in B.C. and discusses current working conditions and organizing attempts. Also available is a ten-lesson curriculum guide for use by teachers and students and a collection of background materials. For more information, contact the Labour Advocacy and Research Association, 2520 Triumph Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5K 1S8 (604) 251-3872.

above, Employment Canada has set some minimal standards which must be met before a visa is issued, but these standards are not enforced and are frequently violated. So the domestic worker must depend entirely on the good will of her employer to provide decent working conditions.

Who are the employers? For the most part they are upper-middle class professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, university professors) and business people. Most common is the family with two or three children in which both the husband and wife, or often just the husband, are working. Employers of live-in domestics are sometimes single men, with or without children, who need someone to run the house and/or take care of the kids. Wealthy retired couples sometimes hire a domestic worker to run the house and take care of them. Regardless of the type of employer, the domestic is usually responsible for the entire running of the household.

Oh, I do everything in the house. The cleaning, the laundry, the cooking, right, look after the kids, like have their lunch ready for school, and stuff like that, everything.

Presently wages vary from \$100 to \$400 dollars a month plus room and board, with most people getting around \$250 to \$300. In some cases deductions for Unemployment Insurance, Canada Pension, and income tax are taken from the salary; in other cases they are not. Although it is technically illegal for the employer not to make these deductions, in fact, it is to the worker's advantage if they are not made. Because of the regulations of their work visas, these women will never be able to collect Unemployment Insurance or Canada Pension, so to them the premiums are simply money lost.

In almost every case the women work in excess of a 40-hour week. Some work regular 15 to 16 hour days and are virtually on call 24 hours a day. It is highly unusual for any sort of job description to have been agreed to by the employer and the worker. As a result, the women follow orders from their employers and are assigned a multitude of extra tasks on top of the regular household work. These typically include babysitting in the evening ('you weren't doing anything, were you?'), sewing, gardening, shopping, running errands, staying home all evening answering the phone and taking messages, cleaning up the dog's mess, etc.

Well, I got to do the garden, I go outside and do all the garden, water the lawn and sweep the back porch and sweep the front porch, take up all the garbage and take them outside. Do her garden, do her friend's garden, and, you know, everything. One day she took me

to her friend's boat and I went there and washed that boat, it was very cold, cause there was no hot and cold water at the marina, and I got to use the cold water. My hand was frozen. It was very hard for me. Then when I came back I make supper.

Most people have two days off per week, although not always.

I said, 'What about the days off?' She said, 'Well, you have Sunday off and some of the evenings off, either Wednesday or Thursday during the week.' But I never got that, I just had Sunday off.

It is common for the domestic to have to make breakfast for the family on her days off, or, as in one case, to have to return home three times during the day to make meals. In many cases the domestic is not allowed to leave the house without informing her employer of where she is going and with whom, the purpose of her outing, and the exact time she will return.

Some employers give their domestic statutory holidays off. But holidays are often the time when the domestic's services are most in demand (children home from school, entertaining, etc.) and many women have to work on those days.

Well, at those times they have lots of parties and stuff like that going on, right, and you have to stay up till 12:30, 1:00 and you never get anything extra for that overtime.

Room and board are provided as part of the salary, but the quality of the accommodation varies tremendously. Many people complain of a lack of privacy in the homes they must both work and live in. Some domestics have to share a room with the children in the household or have their room used as a family room, TV room, sewing room, etc. One woman had to keep her door open at all times in case the children started to cry, others say their employers do not respect their privacy and walk in without knocking. In one case the piano was moved into the domestic's room for the children to practice on! Some women report not getting enough to eat, especially if the employers are trying to lose weight.

Some of the Jamaican girls, you know, they're not feeding them right, they get very little to eat. Nothing is there to eat and I guess they have to go out on their own and try to get something.

Some women are denied phone privileges, others are afraid to speak on the phone because their employers listen on the extension. One woman discovered that her mail was being read, and that some letters were not even getting to her.

When the domestic is employed by a single man it is not uncommon for him to expect her to agree to sexual activity as well as her regular housekeeping duties. I spoke to one man on the phone who had advertised for a domestic. He wanted to know what the person I was calling for looked like, what race she was and how old she was. He told me he wasn't interested in someone 'he would be embarrassed being seen in public with,' and that as well as a housekeeper, he wanted a 'friend.'

Because they are so easily distinguishable by their appearance and accents, these women are frequently the victims of overt racism. One woman was told not to visit her friends because she returned smelling of curry; several women say they are asked regularly if they have showered that day, because they stink; another woman had her employer's child spit in her face and call her 'a dirty Negro.' Many domestic workers feel that the reason they are treated poorly, paid poorly, and worked so hard is because they are Black.

This employer wanted me to come in and take the job the next day. She wanted me to come and meet the lady who was leaving, to show me what to do. She told me that the last domestic, who was a White lady, didn't want to stay in the basement, so her son gave her his room upstairs on the first floor and the son took the basement. Well, if I take the job, I will have to go in the basement, and give back her son his first floor. So I said, if I was White, I could have continued with the upstairs room, but because I am Black I have to go down in the basement.

It is a lonely and frightening experience to arrive in an unknown country, separated from your family, to be placed in a home where you are expected to work long hours every day and where you are denied contact with the outside world. Many women report feeling very depressed and crying alone in their room for weeks after they arrive. As well, the homes of their employers are often located in outlying areas of the city which furthers their isolation and lack of contact with other people.

Canada was different than I expected. I know I heard about the ice, but I thought I was coming to meet even more people of my colour, you know, and sometimes I sit on the bus and I am the only Black person and I feel so worried, I say what am I doing in this place, but then I travel and I meet other people and you know, they talk to me and, once I meet some Black people and then I knew well, I wasn't the only Black person in the country.

Quite often the only people these women have contact with, besides their em-

ployers, are the women they know from home who are also working as domestics. But usually they are not allowed or don't feel comfortable having friends visiting at the homes of their employers, so must find other places to meet. In nice weather they can visit parks and other outdoor places, but when the weather is bad, there is not much available. Sometimes all they can do is to buy a Sunday pass for the buses, and ride around the city talking to each other. Other social contact comes from church on Sunday, which some women attend regularly, others only occasionally.

The livelihood of these women depends on their being healthy and able to do hard work. If they become sick and cannot work for any length of time they are likely to be fired and have no compensation or sick leave available to them. You simply have to work when you are sick, or risk losing your job and your immigration status.

People come to Canada with high hopes of earning money and providing for themselves and their families in the West Indies. But when their visas expire most people find themselves in virtually the same economic position they were in when they arrived. And they have often suffered miserably during their time in Canada. Still, some people maintain that it is better to be in Canada on an Employment Visa than to go back to the West Indies and struggle to survive there. Others say that if they had known what they would face in Canada, they would never have come.

Landed Immigrant Status

Many of the women who come to Canada on Employment Visas would eventually like to become landed immigrants and settle permanently in Canada. In order to apply for landed immigrant status they must have a job offer from a Canadian employer. This is another reason why a domestic will hesitate to complain about working conditions or wages or to make demands of her employer — she does not want to alienate the employer on whom she is relying for a job offer.

To make her application for landed immigrant status, a woman must return to her own country. Very few of these women achieve the number of 'points' necessary to immigrate to Canada and many, if they return to Canada at all, come back on another Employment Visa. By denying these women landed immigrant status and maintaining the Employment Visa system, the government maintains a captive labour pool, with no power and no rights.

Changing the Situation

It is clear then, that an individual domestic worker on a work visa is quite limited in what she can do to improve her situation. If she is lucky she will be paid a living wage and will manage to negotiate a reasonable working arrangement with her employer. If she is being underpaid, overworked, or otherwise abused she can, again, if she is lucky, change jobs without a huge amount of hassle from the Employment and Immigration Commission, and, hopefully, get into a better situation.

More militant methods of dealing with the problem do exist. Some women have begun to take *legal* action against employers who abuse them. In a recent case in Vancouver, a domestic was being paid \$150 a month instead of the \$350 her employers had put on the Manpower job offer form. This woman went to Immigration and made a formal complaint. She found a new job and was issued a new visa. She then sued her former employers for the back wages she was owed. After an extremely time-consuming and emotionally exhausting process, she reached an out-of-court settlement and was awarded approximately \$500. There have been similar cases in Eastern Canada. Hopefully the courageous actions of these women will alert other employers of domestics to the illegality of their actions, and will encourage other domestics who are being underpaid to take action against the injustices being done to them.

Unionization and Association

Domestic workers are employed in a variety of different situations. Some work in private households for private individuals; some work through large employment agencies. Others are employed either directly or indirectly by the government. It is in this latter area that most gains have been made in actual union organizing. In 1974 the California Homemaker's Association was recognized by Sacramento County as the bargaining agent for domestics employed by the government. In Powell River, B.C., a group of 'homemakers' employed

A Seventeen-Hour Day Isn't Really Work Mabel Itzcovich

A small farmer in El Salvador, the father of sixteen children, nine living, was asked by a social researcher, 'What sort of work does your wife do?'

'She doesn't do anything, she stays at home,' he answered. Asked how she spent her time at home, the farmer said:

She gets up at four in the morning, fetches water and wood, makes the fire and prepares breakfast. Then she takes the washing down to the river and goes to the market to buy whatever we need. After that she gets lunch ready and brings it to me in the fields, about three kilometres from our house. Then she has the chickens and pigs to look after, and the children, of course. She has supper ready when I get home. After supper, when the rest of the family has gone to bed, she finishes any housework that is left over and then she goes to bed herself about nine o'clock.

'She does all this and you still say she doesn't work?' the researcher asked. 'Of course she doesn't,' the farmer said, 'I told you: she stays at home.'



An Andean mother and daughter

indirectly by the government through a non-profit society was granted certification with SORWUC — the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada. They have already signed their first contract. They won a wage increase and standard union clauses for grievances, discipline and discharge procedures. In addition they negotiated three weeks vacation after two years of service, paid sick leave and double time for worked holidays, maternity and adoption leave, worker's compensation, scheduling based on seniority, two consecutive days off after six or ten days worked, and 15¢ per mile travel allowance after the first four miles. These benefits are a significant advance for homemakers who are not covered by any labour standards legislation and who have never before been organized.

Domestic workers who work in private households for individual employers have many obstacles to face in any attempt to organize a union or association. First, there is the problem of locating each other. They are scattered all over, each woman with a different employer and a different work place. This is very different from the situation in a factory, for example, where large groups of workers are gathered and working for one employer. Then there is the fear of losing one's job — a very real fear, especially in these times of high unemployment and inflation. Most domestic workers are either the sole support for their families or provide a much-needed second income. They cannot afford to lose their income. For Employment Visa workers, being fired is even more serious, as they risk not only their jobs and livelihood, but also their permission to stay in the country. As well, because domestic work has been afforded so little respect in our society, many domestic workers do not see themselves as 'real' workers with the right to demand a reasonable working situation.

Despite all these problems, however, domestic workers in private households are coming together to improve their working and living conditions. Having been systematically excluded from the legislative

and organizational protections that other workers have gained over the past 100 years, domestic workers are beginning to realize that they too have rights, and to see the strength that can be gained through organization. In the United States there are several organizations of and for domestic workers — the California Homemaker's Association, the Household Technicians of America, the National Committee on Household Employment, the New York State Coalition of Household Workers, to name a few.

In Canada, there are several organizations working to improve the lives of domestic workers. Two groups, one called Cleaner's Action and the other, Labour Rights for Domestic Servants, are organizing in Toronto, the Labour Advocacy and Research Association is working in Vancouver, and the Household Worker's Association was formed in 1976 in Montreal.⁶

Eighty domestic workers, many of them visa workers, attended the first meeting of the Household Worker's Association. At this first meeting they discussed the conditions of their work, identified the ways they were being exploited, and talked about what an association could do to prevent this abuse and improve their lives. They decided to meet monthly. The goals of the Association were defined at a meeting in September 1977. They are: (1) the inclusion of domestic workers in the *Quebec Minimum Wage Act* and other laws regulating working conditions, such as worker's compensation; (2) provision of training courses for domestics, covering not only cooking, cleaning, nutrition, etc., but also work contracts and legal rights of household workers; (3) the establishment of a co-op referral centre to help women find decent jobs with reasonable conditions; (4) the production of a model work contract, to be signed and agreed upon by a domestic and her employer.

Since these goals were established, the Association has been very active. Membership has increased to about 300. Much attention has been focussed on dealing with problem of individual members — interven-

ing in cases where a domestic is being underpaid or overworked, helping a person find a new job and informing her of her rights and of Immigration regulations, and taking cases to small claims court to sue for back wages. The Association has done extensive lobbying of the provincial government and is anticipating that the Quebec government will soon take steps to include domestic workers under the *Minimum Wage Act*. In April 1978, the first training course offered by HWA began. A group of HWA members have produced a work contract for household workers specifying conditions of work, pay and other benefits. The Association is also in the process of establishing a cooperative job referral centre. Workers will only be referred to employers who agree to sign a work contract which meets certain standards. In addition to these activities, HWA puts out a regular newsletter for its members, organizes social activities, and generally attempts to increase public awareness of the situation of household workers.

Because of their vulnerable position, domestic workers who are in Canada on work visas are in the most exploitative work situations and are most in need of the benefits and protection which come through organization with other people in the same situation. Yet, because of their insecure status in the country, these women are in the worst position to initiate or actively participate in organizing attempts. The Household Worker's Association is a good example, however, of how Employment Visa workers can benefit from being a part of a larger organization composed of other domestics in more secure positions. The visa workers in HWA have people available to act as advocates on their behalf, access to information concerning their rights and the laws which apply to them, social contact with other domestics. They will benefit from any successful drive to include domestic workers under labour standards legislation, and can make use of the work contract designed by the HWA and the job referral centre being set up.

There is one contradiction inherent in

Notes

1. Memo from W.D. Scott, Supt. of Immigration, to Mr. Cory, Mar. 13, 1919, RG76, Domestics. Cited in Genevieve Leslie, 'Domestic Service in Canada 1880-1920' in *Women at Work 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974).
2. Rules and Regulations of the Protestant Directorate of Female Immigration, adopted June 22, 1915, RG76, Domestics. Cited in Genevieve Leslie, *op. cit.*
3. Master and servant legislation was enacted in most provinces around the turn of the century. In some provinces, this legislation stated that a servant could not be bound by the terms of a contract signed outside the province; this protected the servant from an exploitative contract which she might have signed in order to immigrate. However, the

Dept. of Immigration circumvented this legislation by having immigrant domestics re-sign their contracts upon arrival in Canada. See, for example, the letter from W.D. Scott to J.V. Lantulum, Dominion Immigration Agent, St. John, New Brunswick, Nov. 28, 1907, RG76, Domestics. This footnote extracted from Genevieve Leslie, *op. cit.*

4. The Department of Employment and Immigration divides domestic work into a number of different classifications. To calculate the total number of visas issued for domestic work in 1978 I included the following classifications: babysitters, personal servants, domestic maids, companions and domestic couples. I excluded butlers and farm housekeepers.

Total figures for other provinces in 1978 were: Newfoundland, 4; Prince Edward Island, 3; Nova Scotia, 30; New Brunswick, 47;

Manitoba, 273; Saskatchewan, 61; and the Yukon and Northwest Territories, 3. Statistics obtained from Immigration Statistics, Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, Vancouver, B.C.

5. In 1974, 218,465 landed immigrants were admitted to Canada and 87,353 Employment Visas were issued. In 1978, 72,475 landed immigrants were admitted and 83,497 Employment Visas were issued. These figures were obtained from Immigration Statistics, Canada Employment and Immigration Commission 1973-78 and verbally from the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission in Vancouver, B.C.
6. For more information these organizations can be contacted at:
Cleaner's Action
c/o St. Christopher House

an organization composed of both people who are on work visas and people who are landed immigrants or citizens, however. The citizens and landed immigrants would likely demand the elimination of the Employment Visa system, since it serves to undercut them by providing domestic workers who must basically accept whatever conditions they are offered. The work visa people, on the other hand, have a lot invested in being able to stay in Canada and could not be sure of being admitted as landed immigrants should the Employment Visa system be ended. The best resolution of the contradiction would be for both groups to support the twin demands of abolition of the Employment Visa system and landed immigrant status for those already here.

Domestic work is not seen as *real* work. It has been systematically devalued and ignored and, subsequently, the conditions of work in domestic jobs have remained very poor. Since very early in the history of Canada, employers of domestic workers, in conjunction with the Immigration Department, have found it necessary to bring domestic workers into Canada from other countries, and to devise methods to ensure that the women brought in would remain doing domestic work. The Employment Visa system is the most recent of these methods. The women who are currently entering Canada to do domestic work on Employment Visas have no choice but to continue doing domestic work and little option but to accept the conditions of work they are offered.

But domestic workers in Canada are beginning to demand their right to a living wage and a decent working situation. They are recognizing, and demanding that others recognize, that domestic work is a legitimate occupation. They are starting to press for the very basic rights that other workers have long taken for granted. Workers in other areas struggled long and hard for union protection, the Minimum Wage, and the eight-hour day. Domestic workers are just beginning this struggle. But it is growing daily.

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Rapport de l'OFAQ

Femmes et famille



Christine Workman

This is a report presented by the Quebec Association of Family Organization to the Quebec government. It draws a parallel between OFAQ demands and those of the Council on the Status of Women and points out the similarities – and the differences – between the needs of families and those of women.

Les Organismes familiaux associés du Québec sont une confédération représentant entre 100,000 à 125,000 familles au Québec, regroupées depuis 1971 en onze fédérations et trois membres auxiliaires. C'est un groupe de pression et de représentation ayant comme but principal d'exprimer l'opinion et la pensée des familles québécoises dans la vie politique de notre province. L'OFAQ représente toutes les formes de familles, familles défavorisées (économiquement), familles d'accueil, familles monoparentales, familles 'ordinaires', etc. L'éventail inclut également la totalité des classes sociales et économiques.

LOFAQ a déjà envoyé plusieurs mémoires aux autorités gouvernementales, dont celui à MM. les Ministres Lazure et Marc Lalonde, Ministres responsables, au sujet du problème des allocations aux familles (mai 1977) et un autre l'année suivante à MM. René Lévesque, Premier Ministre, Jacques

Parizeau, Ministre des Finances et Pierre Marois, Ministre d'Etat au Développement social, sur les conséquences de certaines mesures économiques.

De plus, en mars 1979 – l'OFAQ a publié sa réaction au rapport du comité interministériel sur les services d'accueil à la petite enfance.

Le dernier mémoire publié en avril 1979 est une réflexion sur le rapport *Québécoises, égalité et indépendance*, publié par le Conseil du statut de la femme. Il est présenté aux ministres et députés québécois concernés et s'intitule: *Des Femmes et des familles*.

Si nous avons cru bon de le reproduire *in extenso*, c'est que l'OFAQ, frappé par la teneur des recommandations suggérées pour l'établissement d'une politique d'ensemble de la condition féminine, n'a pu s'empêcher d'y trouver des coïncidences avec leurs propres revendications. 'Et c'est sous l'éclairage de cette complicité que nous avons examiné le rapport, sans faire une approche détaillée, ni critique'.

(Texte: *Femmes et Familles*, p. 3.)

Femmes et famille

Femmes et familles souffrent, au point de départ de notre analyse, de la même