Connecticut
1st Domestic Workers Congress

Brazilian Immigrant Center Inc.,
For All

All Workers Deserve Respect, Dignity & Labor Law Protection

November 16, 2013
The Connecticut Domestic Worker Congress: How It Happened!

A historic event impacting Connecticut domestic workers happened on November 16, 2013: the Connecticut Domestic Workers Congress. This multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual event took place in the parish hall of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The location is important because Bridgeport is the city with the second highest level of income inequality in the United States. Many of the Congress participants reside in Bridgeport, and this underscores the need for economic justice and empowerment for these workers. This historic event also reflected the character of Bridgeport: a city of immigrants with no clear racial majority.

The Connecticut Domestic Worker Congress was the culmination of 11 months of organizing by the Brazilian Immigrant Center (BIC). SEIU 1199 was a key participant, and several Personal Care Attendants participated on this occasion. St. John’s Episcopal Church encompasses four ethnic/language-based communities: West Indian, Haitian, Hispanic, and Anglo. A dozen members of these diverse communities of St. John’s supported this event through serving food, providing childcare, and picking up of food donations.

On this historic day, the fruits of organizing resulted in attendance of 142 people including domestic workers and their children, movement leaders, supporters, staff and volunteers. Eighty two housecleaners, nannies, and caregivers participated with the goal of defining the workplace justice issues that they wish to see addressed in the Bill of Rights in Connecticut. The sense of hope and optimism ran high to see so many workers present to challenge the historic exclusion of domestic workers from labor protections. This exclusion was cemented into our federal and state labor laws during the eras of slavery and Jim Crow. The women present that day, and a few men, almost all immigrants of color, knew that they were only the latest generation of immigrants for whom vulnerable circumstances made domestic service one of the few available lines of employment. The vulnerability of the domestic service workforce is increased because of the unregulated nature of the industry and resulting opportunity for exploitation.
A strong base of support from many other non-profit organizations, labor groups, immigrant advocates, government agencies, universities, and foundations also made the Congress possible and gave visible encouragement to everyone’s efforts. The sense was that our day had come: this was a day to celebrate and do some serious work envisioning a different kind of future, one more socially and economically just than what we see today!

The list of endorsing, supporting, and participating organizations was impressive. They included: SEIU 1199, the National Alliance of Domestic Workers, the Federal Department of Labor, United Autoworkers, National Employment Law Project (NELP), Yale Law School Worker and Immigrant Rights Clinic (WIRC), Domestic Workers United (DWU), SEIU 1199, SEIU 32BJ, the Naugatuck Valley Project, United Action Connecticut, the Connecticut Center for a New Economy, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield University, St. John’s Episcopal Church, the West Indian and American Association of Greater Bridgeport, Trinity Episcopal Church of Southport, Christ and Holy Trinity Church of Westport, Berger Marks Foundation, Presbyterian Women of New England, Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America of New England, Unitarian-Universalist Association, and Ben and Jerry’s Foundation. Local supporting merchants were generous in their support of the women at the congress by donating a variety of cuisines for lunch. They included: Bagel King of Bridgeport, Barnum’s Publick House, Hacienda Villa, Kingston Kafé, Mama Winnie’s, Christine’s Pot of Gold, Family Flames, Fairfield University, Las Brasas Mexican Buffet, La Mexicana, La Poblanita, Moe’s, Ronald’s Haitian Cuisine, Stop N Shop, Taco King and Trader Joe’s.

Expenses for the Congress were covered through a special grant that was awarded by the Berger Marks Foundation and the community support of 14 local merchants who donated food for the event.
The Congress was a multi-lingual event and so was the audience. Thanks to a loan of simultaneous translation technology system from The Welcome Project in Somerville, MA and The Connecticut Center for a New Economy in Hartford, CT, we had simultaneous translation in Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole.

From the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Domestic Workers United, States Strategy Organizer, Yomara Velez, and DWU Leader, Yvonne Ennis both traveled to Bridgeport to attend the event and spoke with great encouragement of our efforts.

Sarah Leberstein of NELP in Manhattan drove to attend the event as a show of support to the women. Nicole Hallet of Yale Law School’s WIRC in New Haven attended and offered words of support to the workers. The chairs of the gathering were Natalicia Tracy and Meghan Vesel of the Brazilian Immigrant Center (BIC). Nelli Altamirano, the Hispanic Domestic Worker Organizer, also welcomed the crowd.

The heart of the Congress was the division of attendees into 6 breakout groups for workers to compile their wish lists for how a new Connecticut Domestic Worker Bill of Rights would address their concerns about problems in the workplace. The tables included three that were Spanish speaking, one that was Creole speaking, and one that was Portuguese speaking. The talk was animated and engaged as workers shared their analysis of the major shortcomings of their jobs, and how new laws could give them more recognition for being the kind of caring professionals they knew

When the brainstorming sessions were over, a representative from each table explained the table’s key recommendations, in their own language, with their notes displayed. They received applause and encouragement from other Congress participants.
Principles emerging from table brainstorming sessions

1. **Fair pay and benefits** are needed. This means regularizing the regular work week and providing for overtime pay. One group wanted benefits for part time domestic workers. Another group suggested the need for living wage ordinances, and yet another cited that the minimum wage needs to be increased. Other compensation and fringe benefits needs are periodic pay raises, paid holidays, paid sick days, personal days, minimum rest/sleep periods, and specified, mandated break times.

2. **Clear expectations and defined work duties.** The specifics of the job assignment should be made clear in writing or in contracts – what is and is not part of the job. Hours, benefits, the provision of materials and other necessary working conditions should be specified as well. One table mentioned that the employers want them to perform additional tasks such as housecleaning and childcare.

3. **Better protection for the “the help”** who work for schedule owners in housecleaning. These housecleaners deserve clear work expectations and deserve fair pay, overtime, and meal breaks. Housecleaners who work in pairs or teams for a lead schedule owner want to be paid individually, not split the housecleaning fee among the group.

4. **Health related protections.** All domestic workers should be covered by workers compensation insurance, so that their injuries can be treated with no minimum or no cost to the worker. Several groups called for the availability of affordable health insurance, and one group stated there should be an employer contribution towards it. Another group stated that cleaning products with high toxicity levels should be prohibited by law and an organic alternative prescribed.

5. All domestic workers should be treated with **dignity and respect**, as intelligent people who are providing much-needed professional services to employers. They should be not subject to insults, personal abuse, discrimination, and harassment. One group mentioned protection sexual harassment was needed. One group cited the lack of regulation of the domestic service industry and suggested that guidelines for respectful interactions between the employer and worker be promulgated.

6. **Training and professional development.** There should be opportunities available for domestic workers to gain training and professional development related to their work duties. One table cited the need for training in workers’ rights regardless of immigration status. Another table cited the need for occupational health training to increase on-the-job safety.

7. **Discrimination and harassment.** Domestic workers should not be subject to harassment or discrimination on account of race, sexuality, immigrant status, or disability. This also extends to protection from termination without cause for pregnancy. One group suggested the imposition of fines and right to legal action for domestic workers who are abused by employers and fired without cause.

8. **The right to organize into an employment-related association or union.** One Spanish-speaking table cited the need for a labor organization that responded to worker’s rights violations. Another table of many Personal Care Attendants said there should be domestic worker representation on the Workforce Council.