

Domestic campaign - feminist and race critique

Shireen Ally argues that an international campaign to win an ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers ignores deeper problems with how capitalism abdicates responsibility for the care of its citizens and perpetuates race and gender divides.

Labour Bulletin 33.4 profiled the efforts to secure an International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The Convention is an admirable initiative. Domestic workers often labour without legal recognition as workers, and so without laws that regulate pay, conditions, and social security. In some cases where they have access to legal rights, they only enjoy partial rights, and/or laws are ineffective in practice.

The ILO intervention seeks to make the plight of domestics visible by emphasising their status as 'workers' and moving towards labour standards for the sector. But, for all its merit, radical feminism and race theory suggest a different approach.

At the heart of the 'Decent Work for Domestic Workers' campaign is an assumption that the exploitation of domestics is a product of the failure in coverage or enforcement of rights. The campaign thus advocates a 'regulation solution' to achieve minimum 'decent' standards. But what if the exploitation of domestics lies not in the failure of rights, but in a system of class, race, and gender power?

PRIVATISED CARE

When feminists in the 1970s raised the political concern with paid domestic work, they did not do so simply out of concern for poor wages and conditions. They raised it because it represented an institution which reproduced race, gender and class inequalities.

In paid domestic work, workers

especially poor women of colour laboured in mainly white, middle-class households. Under globalisation where migrant women from the South increasingly work for families of the North, paid domestic work creates a new global inequality.

Feminist theorists of 'care work' emphasised that paid domestic work was significant because it represented a powerful case of a privatised political economy of care.

Angela Davis, radical feminist and race theorist, argued that paid domestic work was how capitalism resolved the care problem in a way that worsened inequalities by diverting conflicts over care work to racialised and privatised relationships 'between women'.

NEW GENERATION ANALYSIS

Today, a new generation of feminists have exposed the ways in which neo-liberal patriarchy entrenches the privatisation of care within the family, continuing the exploitative relationships between women and across race.

In this argument, domestic workers are an army of cheap labour who solve the public problem of care. Instead of calling for labour rights and better pay for domestics, these theorists make the call for labour rights to go hand in hand with the end of families as units of care. This targets the cause, namely the role of domestic carers in capitalist patriarchy, and not just the symptoms of poor wages and conditions.

From this perspective, laws, recognition, and rights for domestics is an important part of a political

strategy for the sector. But, a 'regulation solution' divorced from the politics of broader structural dynamics can be dangerous.

Let's imagine, that decent work for domestics was realised with standards of equitable treatment and an end to the exploitation, oppression and abuse. This would be an important achievement. Yet the domestic sector's function in reproducing inequality would be the same.

The role of domestic carers in capitalism is that capitalism can abdicate responsibility for care, and the patriarchal system of gendered care remains intact. Mainly women of colour would still do the dirty work of mainly white households. Mainly poor women would still provide good care to the children of middle-class families, while they struggle for the same for their own.

In other words, paid domestic work plays a powerful role in keeping the reproduction of race, class and gender inequalities in place.

While we must struggle for justice for domestics within the workplace, a radical feminist and race critique shows that we should not let this replace a broader struggle against what underpins the institution of domestic work. Failure to do so, in a comparison, means engaging in a campaign that challenges the conditions of slaves, when what we really need to challenge is the system of slavery itself. LB

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