Open Letter from the AFL-CIO and National Domestic Workers Alliance (USA) to trade unions and national centers around the world
May 10, 2011

As trade unionists we face uncertain times. Corporations continue to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few while the working majority of the world struggles to survive. Workers’ voices and the freedom of trade unions to thrive have faced increasing attacks as the global economic crisis has created increasing polarization in many of our countries. Yet this moment has also created enormous opportunities to grow the global labor movement in a new, broader, and deeper way. The informal sector and many industries that were once thought of as marginal are coming to represent more and more of the economy. Workers in those sectors have been organizing and winning real change, even though they are excluded from the protection of fundamental labor rights. These new forms of worker representation offer a window into a global labor movement for the 21st Century, and the possibilities for the renewal we need.

As we approach the historic 100th International Labour Conference (ILC) where we will discuss and vote on a Convention and Recommendation for Decent Work for Domestic Workers, we call on trade unionists and domestic workers organizations around the world to seize the moment to strengthen and expand our global labor movement. By working together to ensure the voices of domestic workers are heard, and that we achieve a strong convention at the ILC, we can build lasting partnerships to improve conditions for domestic workers, and expand our movements to achieve justice and dignity for workers around the world. The following offers the partnership between the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the AFL-CIO in the United States as a case study for trade union federations around the world who seek to connect with domestic workers in the ILO process.

US Case Study

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) brings together 33 independent domestic worker organizations in 17 major cities and 11 states across the country, to organize the 2.5 million domestic workers in the United States for respect, recognition and labor standards. Through leadership development, strategic campaigns and alliance building NDWA seeks to help build a powerful movement for social and global justice.
The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is a voluntary federation of 56 national and international labor unions. The AFL-CIO union movement represents 12.2 million members, including 3.2 million members in Working America, its community affiliate. The AFL-CIO includes teachers and taxi drivers, musicians and miners, firefighters and farm workers, bakers and bottlers, engineers and editors, pilots and public employees, doctors and nurses, painters and plumbers—and more. The mission of the AFL-CIO is to improve the lives of working families—to bring economic justice to the workplace and social justice to our nation.

Beginning in 2009, the AFL-CIO and NDWA began a collaboration to raise the level of respect and recognition for domestic workers, establish labor standards, and build a more inclusive and powerful labor movement in the United States. This collaboration originated at the local level, as domestic workers in cities around the country sought to build relationships with local unions, and sought the support of the labor movement for its organizing and policy initiatives.

To date, the collaboration has included:
- Local city and county level campaigns to enact ordinances or laws to expand protections and promote the rights of domestic workers such as the Montgomery County (Maryland) Domestic Workers Bill of Rights;
- Statewide campaigns to establish labor standards for domestic workers, such as the campaigns for New York and California Domestic Workers Bills of Rights;
- Local efforts to explore new models of collective bargaining for domestic workers;
- Initiatives to create administrative and regulatory changes at state and federal Departments of Labor;
- National campaigns to establish labor standards, expand collective bargaining rights, create dignified jobs and support quality care for all;
- Collaboration with the Excluded Workers Congress (an alliance of workers across sectors historically excluded from labor protections and the right to organize: domestic workers, farm workers, taxi drivers, tipped workers, formerly incarcerated workers, welfare/workfare workers, day laborers, workers in states with anti-union laws, and guest workers) in ongoing dialogues toward the creation of a new, shared vision for labor laws and the right to organize in the United States that is reflective of the current reality facing the working-class and the ongoing imperative to establish the right to organize as a human right.
The collaboration involves many strategies to raise awareness and create connections between domestic workers organizations and unions, including:

- Development of new educational curriculum and programming that can foster mutual understanding and authentic relationships of solidarity between domestic workers and union members at the rank-and-file level;
- Working together to provide research, documentation, and relevant models and case studies for collective bargaining, organizing, training, leadership development and expanded worker protections;
- Education among AFL-CIO affiliates about the work of domestic workers and their efforts to build power and win respect on the job;
- Education among domestic workers organizations about the history of the labor movement, how trade unions work, and the role of domestic workers in strengthening a broader labor movement;
- Supporting involvement of domestic workers organizations in local AFL-CIO chartered bodies, Central Labor Councils and State Federations, including moving Central Labor Councils and State Federations of Labor to support campaigns for labor standards and domestic workers rights;
- Promotion of domestic worker organizing in labor movement conferences, meetings, and strategic conversations;
- Promotion of trade union organizing efforts in broader social movement and grassroots organizing gatherings;
- Integration of the labor movement with other social movements, through collaboration on cross-cutting public policy such as health care, environment and immigration reform;

The Historic Opportunity of the ILO Convention for Decent Work for Domestic Workers

The work toward an ILO Convention for Decent Work for Domestic Workers represents an enormous step toward recognition, rights, and respect for domestic workers. It has provided an opportunity to lift up the experiences of domestic workers, a previously invisible workforce, on an international stage. It has supported the engagement of a broad cross-section of international and national governmental entities in the issues facing domestic workers, and has created an opportunity for domestic workers to connect across borders. The Convention itself will be an historic achievement, and the path toward the Convention has been equally important.

NDWA and AFL-CIO partnership on the ILO Convention has offered an opportunity to work together in the international arena to strengthen and build upon the local, state and national level work together. The international work has allowed us to work in deeper the partnership as representatives of the workforce in the United
States, while innovating a model of partnership between union and non-union worker organizations that can be applied to many excluded workers sectors, and will prove increasingly important.

Specifically, the partnership has involved:

- Inclusion of NDWA in all tri-partite consultations
- Inclusion of NDWA representatives in the official US Labor Delegation to the ILO

- Coordination around strategy and implementation of Convention-related work including regular monthly coordination calls
- Inclusion of NDWA in AFL-CIO activities related to domestic workers at the International Labor Organization (ILO), for example:
  - ACTRAV calls to review the Law and Practice Report;
  - Meetings with the Spokesperson of the Workers Group prior to the Conference;
  - Meetings with DOL/ILAB prior to the Conference;
  - Meetings with the US Chamber on International Business prior to the Conference;
  - Joint review and discussion of convention-related documents
- Collaboration and resource-sharing on research related to the convention

The collaboration allowed for domestic workers to directly engage in the process at all levels, to help ensure the relevance of the Convention in the lives of domestic workers. And, having shared the experience of making history together toward recognition of an extremely isolated and invisible workforce, significant bonds have formed. Ultimately this work solidified the relationship between trade unions and domestic workers organizations, toward long-term deeper partnership.

**Call to Action**

The occasion of the ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers provides a unique and critical opportunity for trade unions and domestic workers to build meaningful relationships that will hold up against the threats of corporate greed and a global weakening of workers’ voices. Our own experiences have proven that collaboration between the trade union movement and organizations of excluded workers hold great potential to strengthen our collective power to organize, win, and build a strong 21st century labor movement.
We call on all national trade unions represented in the ILO to:

- Include domestic workers from domestic worker organizations or unions as voting delegates to the ILC
- Seize the moment to begin or continue to build a lasting relationship of mutual respect so that together you can:
  - Win ratification and implementation of the Convention and Recommendation
  - Monitor and enforce critical labor standards
  - Strategize jointly about building institutions, establishing new laws, and organizing at the local, national and international levels to protect workers and build the power of the working class

We believe these types of partnerships will support domestic workers to take their rightful place in the global labor movement. We look forward to making history with you this June in Geneva, and to our ongoing work to win dignity and justice for all workers.