

A rising worker rights movement must include domestic workers | Opinion

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On a visit to Trenton, Evelyn Saz and a group of domestic workers spoke with 11 elected officials, including the chair of the Black Caucus, Assemblywoman Sumter, about the NJ Workers Domestic Bill of Rights and how critical it is for thousands of domestic workers.

By Patricia Campos Medina and Evelyn Saz

This past labor day weekend, we celebrated a rising labor movement. A recent Gallup poll indicated that 71% of Americans support unions, and more workers in our retail and service economy are joining unions.

Support for unions is driven by the common experience of young workers, women, workers of color, and immigrants in our service and care economy, who, during the pandemic, were finally recognized as essential workers. Yet, corporate America failed to reward them with better pay, access to health insurance, and paid sick and family leave.

While this worker organizing activity is protected under the law, we must also recognize that the National Labor Relations Act and other labor protections established in the 1930s still exclude domestic workers, condemning this workforce to a Jim Crow era of

exploitation for workers of color in our care economy.

Domestic workers play a critical role in our economy by providing essential care to middle-class and professional families.

These workers are the nannies who care for our children, the homecare workers who care for our elderly, and the cleaners who keep our homes clean. Yet, they lack basic labor protections, and most work without a written agreement spelling out the duties they must perform at the workplace, which happens to be someone's private home.

That is why domestic workers across the US have joined efforts with National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) to demand fundamental rights and protections; in ten states, including California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon and Virginia, and two major cities Seattle and Philadelphia have passed domestic workers' bills of rights and protections. Current campaigns are taking place in Washington DC and New Jersey.

In New Jersey, domestic workers like Evelyn Saz have joined in solidarity with hundreds of her fellow domestic workers to demand basic protections under the law.

Saz is a trained psychologist in her native country of El Salvador. She takes pride in her professionalism in caring for her client's needs. As a single mother of one, she must manage her family's demands with the demands of her client's family.

During the pandemic, she contracted COVID-19. Without access to healthcare, paid leave, sick leave, or unemployment insurance, she was ill and couldn't work during the early days of the pandemic, and she and her son were forced to survive with help from mutual aid organizations.

Saz's story is not unique. A recent study from Rutgers University's Center for Women and Work revealed that 86% of domestic workers surveyed indicated they suffer from harsh working conditions, such as wage theft, unpredictable schedules, fluctuating work hours, and last-minute changes to their schedules to accommodate patient or family demands, plus extra requests to perform duties that endanger their own health and safety.

They also lack benefits like paid sick leave, health care, and access to unemployment insurance and workers' compensation in case of unexpected job loss and injuries at work.

As Evelyn eloquently states, "exploitation is a reality that dominates the domestic work industry in NJ. That is the main reason my compañeras and I are organizing to demand our rights."

Backed by NDWA, and sponsored by Sen. Richard Codey and Assemblywoman Britnee Timberlake, the NJ Domestic Workers Bill of Rights aims to provide the following basic labor protections for domestic workers:

- The elimination of the safety and health exclusions to ensure safe and secure workplaces.

- A two-week termination policy to ensure domestic workers are not fired without adequate notice.
- Protection against retaliation from an employer when a worker asserts their rights, privacy, and anti-trafficking protections to ensure live-in workers are allowed freedom in their communication and privacy, paid rest periods, and meal breaks after working a certain number of consecutive hours.
- Written agreements between an employer and domestic worker that documents work hours, wages, duties, and other rights.

Those who oppose providing domestic workers fundamental workplace rights, such as guaranteeing live-in workers one day of unpaid rest per week, frame their arguments as an unnecessary burden on employers.

Groups like the New Jersey Home Care Association, the New Jersey Business and Industrial Association, Au-Pair agencies, and the New Jersey Insurance Council ought to change course and stop treating domestic workers, primarily women of color, as disposable, discounting the need to protect workers' welfare, which ultimately jeopardizes their ability to deliver quality care to our loved ones.

By supporting the workforce and this bill, they would positively respond to the current demands in our economy to invest and value women's work in our care economy.

Domestic workers are organizing because they are essential to our national economy and deserve a fair wage and dignity on the job. Just like workers at Amazon and tech professionals at Google, they are demanding an opportunity to build the American Dream for their families.

To make our economy fairer and more robust, we must recognize the private home as a workplace and offer equal workplace rights and critical protections for domestic workers like Evelyn Saz. They deserve to be treated with dignity as she takes care of our loved ones.

Patricia Campos-Medina is a labor, political and immigrant rights activist. She appears on the podcast #ActivistaRiseUp

Evelyn Saz is a domestic worker and organizer with the NJ Chapter of NDWA.

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