

## *Latina Women Organizing Immigrant Workers: Conversations with UNITY Housecleaners Cooperative*

by *Drucilla Cornell*

The issue of low-paid immigrants in domestic positions again rose to public notice early this year when Linda Chavez was nominated to be U.S. Secretary of Labor in George W. Bush's Cabinet. It was discovered that Ms. Chavez had an "illegal immigrant" living with her. She described her relationship as one of compassion not employment, but her nomination was withdrawn when the extent of her "guest's" regular housework was revealed. There is no more "intimate" evidence of the class, ethnic, and racial privileges that divide us. After all it is almost always white women who are the employers and, thus, the perpetrators of inequality amongst women. Immigration under conditions of globalization has necessarily become a feminist issue.

UNITY is a cooperative of immigrant housecleaners in Long Island, New York, home to rapidly growing numbers of newcomers from Latin American. UNITY's development was much facilitated by the Hempstead-based Workplace Project, which was founded in 1992 in order to spur the self-organization of immigrant workers. Prior to the establishment of UNITY, the Workplace Project began the "Domestic Placement Agency campaign". In a Fall 1998 interview with *Regional Labor Review*, Jennifer Gordon, the Project's founder, described the struggle to get a handle on how to organize domestics. Due to the intimate setting, many domestic workers feel close to their employers in a way that masks the class and exploitative nature of the work. Unions have traditionally been reluctant to organize these kinds of workers. What it means to be a worker and to see oneself as a worker is part of the struggle. Indeed, for some workers, unions have played a negative role in actively excluding some of them from the organizable working-class.

In the last few years the new leadership of the American Federation of Labor and the Committee of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) has committed themselves to organizing the unorganized. Organizations such as the Workplace Project are not meant to be an alternative to unions. But the understanding that class issues have both a sociological and cultural dimension, and that what is a class issue is in and of itself a matter of political struggle, allows us to see the relationship between class, gender and ethnicity differently. Whether or not something is represented as a woman's issue, or a class-wide issue is not something just in the nature of things.

Organizers of the domestic placement agency campaign were well aware that they needed to develop innovative forms of organizing that also took into account the gender hierarchies that existed amongst the workers who had become members of the Workplace Project. Most obviously there were still clear divisions between men and women's work based on stereotypic notions of gender. Men in the Hempstead area who are immigrants from South America are mainly day-workers who do heavy work as, for example, gardeners or temporary workers on construction sites. After all, it is women who almost entirely work as domestic workers. In the case of women immigrants, the growing "feminization" of many of the low service jobs, which has brought them into the labor force, has also put them in such blatantly exploitative jobs that they have taken on leadership positions in the worker's resistance that they could not otherwise have imagined as appropriate for women. The Workplace Project formed a women's committee precisely to recognize the way in which gender stereotypes affected the perception that women had of themselves and their role as workers.

It was this committee that took on the task of how to proceed with the campaign. The initial research showed that many domestic worker agencies were charging twice the legal fee and advertising jobs at less than minimum wage. A large number of agencies –almost all of them- did not provide any contract between the worker and the employer. Hours were long, responsibilities unspecified, and the worker could be fired at any time if she did not comply with her boss's latest request. So what was to be done? To quote Jennifer Gordon, from her 1998 interview in *Regional Labor Review*:

“Our women’s committee got together and essentially laid out a platform of what they wanted the agencies to agree to do. First, they would only charge the legal fee. Second they wouldn’t place women in jobs that paid less than the minimum wage. Third they would require that both the worker and the employer to sign a contract that set out the working conditions and wages. Everyone would sign, and the domestic worker would have a copy of the agreement. It would be the first time that there would actually be a handle on what domestic workers are supposed to be doing.

In July 1997, we launched the campaign. Working with the support of labor and community and religious allies that we have around the island, after about nine months were able to get five of the six agencies on the island that we targeted to sign the statement of principles by pressuring them. We did this by phone calls, letter campaigns, basically by pressuring the agencies through surrogate clients. We would take people to church in a community group that supported us and have them write letters or make phone calls or send faxes saying “I won’t hire from your agency until you adhere to the statement of principles. The church or organization would likewise say, “we will tell our members, four thousand, three hundred or fifty members, that they should not hire from you until... Long Island CAN, the Long Island Progressive Coalition, and all sorts of groups around Long Island helped us put that pressure on the agencies.”

The results of the campaign were mixed. One difficulty was that enforcement was becoming a full time job. One solution to that problem was to turn to the law. The problem was handed over to the Department of Labor and the Attorney General. The response of both, the Department of Labor and the Attorney General were disappointing. The other idea was “if you cannot beat them join them, “differently.” Rather than try to organize a competitive agency the Workplace Project set out to form a co-operative that would show that housecleaning could be dignified labor. And so the history of UNITY began.

Since UNITY is a true cooperative, running the organization involves all of the members in major decision-making processes. All members have to serve at least in one committee that makes the Cooperative run. Thus these women work as housecleaners, and as active members of the Cooperative. The whole point is that they control the conditions of their work. Nannies, on the other hand, are controlled by their work, and indeed, sometimes subjected to the whims of their boss.

In a series of meeting last summer and fall, I interviewed Mónica Díaz, the administrative assistant to UNITY, her mother Zoila Rodriguez, and their colleague M.E.A.

### **Interview with Zoila Rodriguez**

**Q:** Zoila, how did you come to this country?

**Z.R.:** How did I come this country? I’ve been legal (*she laughs*)... kind of had to go through borders... There were so many people coming... We were lucky that we could get a visa to come to this country. Now, in 1973, it was the first time that I came as an exchange student. Then, I came twice and went home and lived there for ten years. I came back for like a year and half and went back home. And now, we have ten years, living in New York. Now, it has been hard to get a job...a new life. For most of the people, it’s been a better life. For us, it’s hard for so many reasons.

**Q:** In El Salvador, you were a secretary.

**Z.R.:** Yes.

**Q:** What did you work as when you first came here?

**Z.R.:** Housekeeper and baby-sitter.

**Q:** What were the hours?

**Z.R.:** Hmm. From 7:00 a.m. to, you know, whatever hours, 10, 11, 12, and weekends. I had go. I was a driver for the kids, so I had to go whenever they were getting off from the party, for the same salary.

**Q:** So they paid you a salary. No overtime.

**Z.R.:** Never.

**Q:** Did they give you vacation time?

**Z.R.:** They did. One week.

**Q:** Did they pay you for the vacation?

**Z.R.:** Yeah, they did.

**Q:** How would you describe your experience working as a “nanny”?

**Z.R.:** Well... it is very hard because what I thought was that the people were going to sponsor me. They did file the papers, but it took a long time because they never made any effort to follow up the procedures. I thought...my daughter ...she is the most precious thing in my whole life, so if you're going to leave the kids, the most important thing in your life, to somebody you don't know, you should appreciate that with your life. I mean, if you leave the kids with someone you don't know, you should appreciate what they are doing for the kids, because you are leaving them the whole day, you know. Those kids...These people would go away for two weeks, and they were leaving me with their children, like I was their mother. The youngest boy used to say: “She is not my housekeeper, she is my second mother.” This is how he introduces me to his friends:“ This is Zoila, my second mom.” You know, when I left I didn't have the guts to say that I am leaving. I couldn't. I said that I am going to my country and I will be back. I couldn't say good-bye to them. And I was feeling so bad when I had news that he was too depressed when I left. I was feeling guilty you know, because I thought it was my fault... I don't know. So many things that came to my mind two years ago...

**Q:** So in a sense, you leave your own children to raise other people's children and then it breaks your heart to leave them because you love them, too. Now, How do find working at the Workplace Project?

**Z.R.:** Well, they've given me security. People need help, and they can do that: they can help. In 1990... I was working for some other people... people I worked for and that treated me like I was nobody. Like you don't have dignity. Like you don't deserve to be treated well. And one day, I was with friends on my free weekend and I told them: “One day I am going to have all my papers done, and I am going to be a legal citizen. One day I'm going to build some organization to help women like me. Help people who don't speak English and don't know how to defend themselves.” I remember this as if it were yesterday, and it really happened ten years ago. But I didn't know in those days about the Workplace Project. They came out here, to the Latino community in Hempstead in 1992, and I was introduced to this place in 1996 for the first time. I went to a protest for a girl who had been fired. She was without pay for almost six months, or something like that. I realized: “There is someone else [in a] worse [situation] than me.” I came to this place and started fighting for it, you know. And this place has taught me that we all deserve to be treated with dignity and that everybody has to respect that. We are asking for what we deserve already. That's what we're claiming. We deserve this. We deserve a better life: a life with dignity. You know. They showed me this here at the Workplace Project.

**Q:** That dignity is crucial.

**Z.R.:** Yes, because every human being is born with it.

**Q:** What are your dreams for your daughter and granddaughter now?

**Z.R.:** This is how I will answer, because there is a dream fro everybody. It is a different dream for different people, you know? I have dreams that you already have only by being an U.S. citizen. I told them in a conference that my dream is the reality that you already have. I told them: “You were born in this country. You have something I want: I want to be an American citizen, to have your same rights. You already have that. That is my dream. Your reality seems to be impossible for me, because it makes me feel like I wasn't worthy of my own dream. For example, my grand daughter is six years old. She has been in every one of our protests since she was two years and half. One day, we were getting ready to go to a rally in Washington D.C. and Alexandra asked me: “Grandma, how long do we have to protest?” I answered: “Until we can walk as free people in this country.” Then, she said: “But, Grandma, I am free to walk in this country, and I know why”. I asked why and she said: “I was born in this country”. He mother – my daughter Monica -- and I have the same dream. Alex dreams of being a rock star, and she makes up her own songs. She has dreams of her own. My daughter's and my own dream is to support Alex anyway we can for her to have hers.

**Q:** So basically, without amnesty, there is no dignity.

**Z.R.:** Basically, we have been treated without dignity. You know, it's like you don't deserve anything good. That is the way I see it.

**Q:** I just want to ask if anyone in your family is an American citizen.

**Z.R.:** Nobody

**Q:** Nobody?

**Z.R.:** I have a small family. I am the only child. Monica is the only child. So we do not have relatives here. It was my mom, and my uncle -her brother- who raised me. You know, as [his] own. And this (*gestures to the Workplace Project*), you know. I have nobody else here. This is like my family.

**Q:** Did you leave the country because of the war?

**Z.R.:** Yes, I did. It was the main reason. Because my daughter was a big girl...like, you know... she looked older. And she was afraid. I was afraid for her, also. Because we were living out of the city, and I had to travel everyday to take her to school, and this and that. So I did not want to take any risks. Anyway, so this is why I sent her first. She came first to Tennessee, you know, and three months later I came over. Yes. But the war was the main reason.

**Q:** Are you a feminist?

**Z.R.:** Yes, I am a feminist, but I am not an extremist. Because I like to be treated as a lady. If there is a heavy box that I have to lift at work or at home, I'm not stupid, I don't want to break my back! I am a feminist because I fight for the same rights that men have.

**Q:** You were telling me about how to raise a daughter...

**Z.R.:** I was saying... When a girl comes to this world and a doctor takes her out of this, you know, the womb of the mom, and said, "This is a girl." I remember when I had my girl and the doctor told me, "It's a girl," I cried. And I didn't cry during labor. Even with all that pain, I did not cry. But I cried when he told me "It's a girl." There is a name for it: a hero. It's a hero. It's a hero. Because when a woman comes to this world she will have to live in this world and do so many things that a man will not do. Women will. Nobody else. So that was a hero...who came out of me. The first hero I met was my mother.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Interview with Monica Diaz**

**Q:** Monica, could you tell us again the story of how you came to be in the United States and what your mother's working situation was?

**MD:** I came when I was twelve in 1989. I was an exchange student because of the war in El Salvador. And I was in Tennessee for nine months as an exchange student in a Christian School. When the war kind of slowed down, the organization that my mother was working for ran out of funds. So, then, she was out of a job in the middle of the war. She realized that things were not looking any better, so she decided to move to Long Island, New York -- some place she'd never heard of, and come and try a new life over here. I met up with her here in 1990... April 1990. And that is when she started working as a live-in housekeeper, which also included being a driver and a babysitter for two kids in a pretty big house that she had to clean daily. So that left me... going to school and almost living on my own. Basically, with her guidance over the phone. The only time I got to spend with her was talking on the phone.

She was promised residency. And we did get a lawyer and visited him twice. It was pretty expensive. But he did not really have accomplished anything because immigration laws changed over time. Either he was not keeping up with immigration laws, or the bosses were really not paying him for what he was supposed to do. So they were not really paying for the residency fee.

**Q:** Did the lawyer achieve anything for you?

**MD:** The lawyer was too far away and not well located for her to have a good relationship with him, but she did get her working papers. Only for working. It does not make you a citizen or a permanent resident. It only allows you to work as a legal immigrant for a period of time. Every couple of months you have to renew it. So that's what she started as, and then...I got pregnant when I was fifteen. I had my daughter when I was sixteen. I was already living on my own, and it made it hard that she was not there for me because she was working. She had to work day and night, either just watching the kids or having to clean during the day. And in '94, I believe, or '95, when a friend of hers spoke to her about the Workplace Project, and how they had a women's group that met every Sunday, and you spoke about your problems in general, and how they had little workshops going on, so you could, I guess, step out of reality for a little while. She started coming here and she took the workshops. There was a time when the kids she watched over took summer classes somewhere around Uniondale, I believe, and she used to come and take the classes for workers' rights and, then, she became a member of the Workplace Project. That is when she had the opportunity to apply for a position, and that is how she became a member of the staff at the Workplace Project. She was a secretary in El Salvador. And, you know, she was used to... She was not used to being a housekeeper, you know? I believe that her self-esteem was not all that great, and being that she could not be there for me, she felt guilty for whatever I did and whatever happened to me. So, being that I did not get married, and I had a baby, and I finished school as soon as I could... I finished school in '94, and I was supposed to graduate in '95. Once she started to work here, it gave her self-respect back, I believe, because she was getting screamed at, and being treated like nothing at her other job. And she had

the chance to utilize the skills that she had learned from school and from other places in which she had worked, and now she is working here. And now we can spend more time together.

**Q:** You both work here, right?

**MD:** Yeah, now. The reason I am working here is because of the Housecleaning Cooperative, which is a branch of the Workplace Project. We have offices right next to each other. And we are much closer now. During the time she was not there for me, not because she did not want to, but because she couldn't, things weren't great between us. And I had the chance to meet my father for the first time, and actually live with him, which was a good experience because he was not the best of a person altogether. And seeing that I had not met him before, he tried to be a father to me or at least to his extent. I was not used to having a father around. All I would give him was attitude, especially me being a teenager at that time. It was not the best relationship, so... not that anyone had spoken bad about him. Now, at that time, I could see already for myself the kind of person he was. I remember that he had never been here for me, and that, still, he would charge my mother for me living with him. I mean, he would charge my mother for whatever he could, like...after school I wanted to take karate, and he'd charged her for that. He charged her for me living with him. It was only a month that I lived with him, but whenever she wanted to see me, and he brought me out from New Jersey ...the toll fee and the gas and all that, she was getting charged for them. Just to see me. And...I mean... I was still his real daughter, and I have his last name, but he does not know how to acknowledge that.

**Q:** Is he an U.S. citizen?

**MD:** He was an U.S. citizen from the 80's. He is a Gulf War Veteran. He still serves in the army. He has his life, but no will to help me at all. Not even with my immigration status, neither with any economic things.

**Q:** So he did not apply for you, for U.S. citizenship?

**MD:** He promised just like everyone else. Immigration has promised. The place my mother worked at as a housekeeper, promised. He promised. But he said the lawyer was too expensive and he couldn't do it. And now I am over twenty-one. I don't know if it is any easier now, and plus, the last time I had seen him, in 1994 when he found out that I was pregnant, he didn't want me living with him. I haven't seen him now for so long that I really don't care. I'm still on my own right now, and I've been... I'm doing pretty O.K. without him so... I'm not really good at begging. So... Just take one day at a time. I already fulfilled the curiosity of wanting to meet my father, and it did not work. He could have helped me, so I need amnesty or something better for me to be able to go to school and better myself, because I graduated from high school when I was seventeen. I was seventeen when I graduated and was ready to go to college when the doors closed on me because I was not a legal resident. I was living here only as an illegal immigrant, which doesn't help me any. There is not a guarantee that I'm going to be able to stay here because I can be deported anytime

**Q:** Can your daughter be an U.S. citizen?

**MD:** My daughter became an U.S. citizen, because she was born here and her father is a citizen of the United States. So if anything should ever happen to me, he would be in control of her life. But he's not around; we didn't work out. Things didn't work out and so we separated in '96.

**Q:** Where is he now?

**MD:** He is in upstate New York, incarcerated. So right now, child support is not coming in and it is kind of tough for me...I have been on my own with my mother's help. I had been on my own with his help. I have never been alone completely. As of last year I was like... to me it was something new... actually, like the first time that I had, you know, that I really found myself with nothing to eat at one point. I don't believe in welfare. But welfare doesn't...really help that much anyway. Now that they have even stronger laws, that not even legal residents get decent benefits. And now that I am working here, I feel better because many bosses out there lower your standards so much and everything else. They treat you like crap and it is really unnecessary. So right now I am waiting for something better, for amnesty or for something, so I can go off to school.

**Q:** MD, you're still talking about your future situation in the United States...

**MD:** My plan is not to go anywhere. I am staying in the United States for as long as I can. I mean, I have been here for over 10 years, so my life is basically here. My culture is here. I mean, I am Salvadorian and I don't forget that. But I am a little bit Puerto Rican and I am a little bit black; I am a little bit American, and I am a little bit white. I am a little bit everything. I mean, it's not like if I am going to El Salvador and go into a Chinese restaurant. There is barely any. As I remember, I think there is only one and that one is in a high-class area, so it is not like I live here. It is not like here in New York, where there is something different in every corner. Everything is so different, and I don't think I would be able to accommodate myself another culture because mine is basically

this one. They always try to Americanize as much as they can, but nevertheless, it is still a third-world country. So I mean...I don't know what I would do over there. I would probably make a good secretary, because I know both languages, but...

**Q:** How did you become a secretary?

**MD:** I basically snuck into a free training-school and it was a basic training-school from Stony Brook. I took a little course... not over 18 months. And they are free if you have a low-income family so, at the time –and I still am...I'm still a low-income family– I applied for it with my friend. She brought me there and they asked, just like any other school, for my green card, and I told them I had lost it and it was coming; that I had to apply for another one and it was coming. And I stalled for three months, and the fourth month went by, and when a new semester started they realized that I had studied all semester without proof of a green card, and they insisted they needed it for the next semester. I couldn't go back because I didn't have it. So, hmmm...I only learned a few things. I mean, whatever I did learn I am utilizing it now, and I am still learning, but I was taking the medical assistance course, and I only learned the office skills. I didn't get to the medical part because of my illegal status. That is always an obstacle for everything, especially for school, because, I mean... I can see their point: if you're not going to be here forever, why would they give you free school? But... if there was a way that... hmmm... the government or the state could help... I mean, I have been here twelve years. That still counts as me living here. I guess they should get the point that I am not going anywhere, and that I now have a family here. So I don't know what the solution will be, but I'm still waiting for a legal residence and for anything to happen.

**Q:** Monica, how do you live with the anxiety about the possibility of your being deported and your daughter as a citizen of the U.S., and not of El Salvador, not being allowed to go with you?

**MD:** I try not to think about that because when I do, it really scares me because what happens is... that I would get deported, and I would live in El Salvador, and would probably make good money over there, but my daughter would be left here because she is not a citizen of El Salvador, and she wouldn't really be accepted because she is half African American, and the country discriminated against other races, especially the dark races. I mean, they love gringos that are white Americans. Once you are a little bit darker, and even if you are Salvadorian, you are not anything. Hold on...*(she answers the phone.)*

**Q:** Did you and your mother try to live together, and what was the neighborhood where your mother lived as a housekeeper and a nanny like?

**MD:** She lived in what, I believe, was mostly a Jewish neighborhood, and I mean all kids get cars when they turn sixteen, so it was a middle-class, rich neighborhood. So I wasn't really enthusiastic about moving into that kind of neighborhood, because...I mean... it was good and everything, but I didn't have the same financial background they did. So I was looked at as the housekeeper's daughter because I wasn't raised that way. Not that I think it was bad, but I wasn't raised that way and I was young at that time. And in El Salvador I wasn't a housekeeper's daughter, I was an office worker's daughter and for me, it was a big change... It was a big change and there was a big difference between me, and the other kids. My mother rented a room from people, members of church, that we had met in a mostly Puerto Rican and black neighborhood where I went to school. These people kind of took me in as their daughter, but you know, they were always aware that my mother was on the phone most of time, and tried to be as close to me as she could be from a distance. She'd try to come to the house on Sundays and Mondays. So that was our living-together time. And it was like this for many years until we actually tried to move in together when I was eighteen. I was eighteen and I thought I could rule the world! And I didn't need my mother then. So it didn't work out. Then I moved to New York City so we kind of separated because she still worked in Hempstead, and I went to New York. But now we work together. It is a good experience, because we also see each other everyday.

**Q:** What are your dreams for your daughter?

**MD:** To be able to have almost –not everything– but most of the things I'd be able to give her. Things I didn't have when I was growing up. Like day camp and classes and things like that that, right now, I can't actually give her because, I mean, the secretary part-time job does not pay the best, for a seventy-five-dollar-an-hour tutor and, you know, things like that. But I'm trying to work for a day camp for the summer. We are in May right now. June is around the corner, and school is going to be over, so I am trying to give her that. I'm not trying to be extreme about rules. I'm trying to guide her to do the right thing. I teach her about bad and evil, and that things are good if you work for them, and that being good is the best way out. I mean, I don't hide anything from her. So whenever I have a problem she always knows it. She's not old. She's only six, but she understands. And she understands what I don't have, so she knows not to ask. Hmm... To me, she's a perfect child. Not only because she is my daughter, but everyone tells me so. I think that I am doing a good job so far. But there's always that financial thing that does matter, no matter how good a parent you are. So, you know, I would like to continue trying at school, and no matter what, make sure that I always have forty hours of work, and that I have a better pay and better benefits, and things like that for the future. I want her to always remember that I did whatever I had to so that we could be together, and that I was the one that provided for her with love and everything else.

**Q:** And did your mother leave her work place with any benefits?

**MD:** No. The people that she worked for were factory owners in New York City and, unfortunately, their factory somehow went down the drain and things didn't get any better. They had to sell the big house they had, and they lost their comfort and their one million dollar house. I mean, the structure of the house was only a million dollars. And they had to move from there to... back to the city where they were originally from. So they moved back there. Rent over there is not any cheaper, but... they had to move. My mother said that they lived in a one-bedroom apartment. So I am sure that they don't have the best conditions right now, and they don't have it good since the time my mother left. They definitely didn't help her and didn't acknowledge the time that she spent with their kids as a "second mother." That's what the kids called her. The kids used to call her their second mom, and all the teachers and all the tutors knew my mother more than they did their actual mother. So she did not leave with any benefits, but you know, she had the knowledge of how abused housekeepers feel, because she experienced it more than once. Not only did she get screamed at, and whatever else, but the trauma of not being with me. Not just her, me also: I had to live alone for so many years and at such a young age, but that was like the best thing that could happen, and that she could do at that time, I guess. So, I take one day at a time now.

**Q:** How would you describe what working at the Workplace Project has meant to you?

**MD:** A closer encounter with my mother, and you know, it is an actual job. But it is also teaching me a lot about my life, and my background –since I have been so busy trying to fit in the U.S. – and a lot about certain people, and about what would be fair for workers and employers, and about all the things that immigrants have to go through. It's a good place where you come and let your feelings out or hear other people's feelings, because everyone is going through something all the time. Immigrants are always scared of being deported, and having the INS called on them. They usually don't do anything about exploitation or anything like that because they are always so scared. So this is a good place that teaches you that you don't have to be scared for just being an immigrant. I mean, everyone else was at one time. It is funny that you know they were, but they don't recall it.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Interview with M.E.A.**

**Q:** When did you arrive in the United States and where are you from?

**M.E.A.:** Well, I arrived in the United States in 1988. It's been almost twelve years that I've been here. I am from Ecuador. I worked, the first time, as a live-in, a domestic worker. But I also worked in a factory for ten years. But about two years ago, the company was about to shut down, and it didn't, shut down and it didn't, shut down... until finally they did, and I discovered the Cooperative was better. Because since I got to know the Cooperative, I got involved and started working with it. And... always looking out for a better schedule, because I am mother of a family. I have three children. I needed time for my family, and not spend many hours working at a factory. In a factory you have to put in many hours. Right now I work four hours and leave early to go pick up my kids at school. I have time to be with them.

**Q:** Were you in charge of child care?

**M.E.A.:** No, because there weren't any children. But when I went to work for the first time, there was a lot to do around the house. That house had not been cleaned in years! So, when she saw that everything was clean, she brought her mother over. I had to take care of her mom. Besides cleaning the house, she would take me to clean up the office, and once the office was done, nice and clean, I helped her with the filing. I did whatever she told me to: washing, ironing, cleaning-up the house...

**Q:** How long did you stay with this lady?

**M.E.A.:** Almost eleven months. She would also take me to clean up her daughter's apartment... and they never gave me extra money. Always the same. They paid me \$100 a week.

**Q:** Did you at any time get a raise?

**M.E.A.:** No. When I asked to work more...to make more money... Because... I asked whether she could give me a reference for me to be able to work with someone else. She said to me: "You can work elsewhere now because I don't need you here anymore." She sent her mom back to Guatemala, and she told me I could look for another job.

**Q:** So she was from Guatemala, and she fired you?

**M.E.A.:** Yes. And she also asked me not to tell that I had worked with them because her son is a lawyer. To not damage his reputation.

**Q:** She threatened you?

**M.E.A.:** I didn't take it as a threat, but rather, that it would be detrimental to her because of her son being a lawyer; working with laws...

**Q:** Which is a threat! Because how could you have a reference?

**M.E.A.:** I think it was ignorance because... if someone asked for a reference, I couldn't provide it.

Then, a nun from the church of Our Lady of Loretto referred me to another lady who was American. They treated me a hundred per cent better than my previous boss, because this one was very considerate, and she even paid better. \$50 more, which was very good for me.

**Q:** A hundred and fifty dollars.

**M.E.A.:** And work there was not even a fourth of what I had to do at the other place!

**Q:** Did you take care of kids there?

**M.E.A.:** They did have children there, but I took care of them in the afternoons. They went to school in the morning. I only had to make breakfast and dinner.

**Q:** How long did you work there?

**M.E.A.:** Five or six months. The lady was pregnant and a baby girl was born. So I asked her if she could refer me to somebody else, but she couldn't. Because she wanted to send me to friend of hers, but then she said: "If anyone asks for a reference, and you find a job"... to give her phone number and her name and... That's what I did when I found a job. But she wanted me to work during the day, and then go back at night to stay with her so that I wouldn't have to pay any rent.

**Q:** To help her with the children?

**M.E.A.:** No! So that I wouldn't have to pay any rent. Only to sleep, she said. But I found a job somewhere else, but as a live-in.

**Q:** You didn't have to work?

**M.E.A.:** No. She said, "No. Don't worry about dinner. I'm here and I will take care of everything at home..." I should go only to sleep.

**Q:** This new job would be, then, your third job...

**M.E.A.:** Yes. This was another job that I took as a live-in. The children there were older.

**Q:** How many children did your previous boss have?

**M.E.A.:** Three.

**Q:** And four with the baby?

**M.E.A.:** The baby was the fourth child.

**Q:** So you took care of the three oldest children?

**M.E.A.:** Yes. And when I arrived to the other place, which she had referred me to, and where I was very well paid. What didn't work out was that I decided to take a medical exam, and they found I had something that needed to be treated, so they prescribed me some medicine. So this, the lady, didn't take it well. She thought it would be contagious... that she would catch it and so on... And she told me to leave and come back for the job after I recovered. I had a cough that... I sometimes had to work outdoors, in the sun... go fetch the horses. And inside, there was too much air conditioning. I don't know... I caught a cough...

**Q:** Working in the countryside?

**M.E.A.:** No, in a mansion in Hicksville, New York, far from here. They had horses. I had to go, take the horses to where they ran and ate. There... in the fields. I had to take them in the morning, and bring them back at three in the afternoon. But indoors, there was too much air conditioning, and I caught such a bad cough! And she said to me that she might catch it, and that I should go to the doctor and have a check up, and then come back with a letter from the doctor after I got better.

**Q:** Did she pay sick leave while you were sick?



**M.E.A.:** No. I had just been there for about three weeks or fifteen days... I don't remember. She paid everything [she owed me], but I found a factory, and in that factory I stayed on for ten years, and... I...didn't want to think about it.

**Q:** You know what I think? I think she thought you might have T.B. – tuberculosis. Sometimes racism takes the form of “you have a contagious disease”.

**M.E.A.:** Yes. When the doctor gave me the medicine, he asked me: “Are you going back to work there?” “No.” “Okay! Do you have a job?” “Yes.” Because I had told him that when I went back to visit, and I didn't have the letter, the boss told me to go get the letter. But when I went back to the doctor's for my check up, he said: “But it was just a cough! What a fuss!”

**Q:** A cold!

**M.E.A.:** Only that the air conditioning was too high and it was bad for me. Well, I was better off working at a factory.

**Q:** What kind of factory?

**M.E.A.:** It's a factory of... It's a warehouse.

**Q:** How much did you earn there?

**M.E.A.:** I had an entrance salary of six dollars the hour. There was a union and all, but since they never raised the wages I, with the classes that I took here [at the Workplace Project] and that taught us about our rights – that we had to claim them -- I went and presented my claim. But we picked up signatures and they gave us a quarter. Twenty-five cents!

**Q:** Was that the raise?

**M.E.A.:** That was the raise. After eight years!

**Q:** How many hours a day?

**M.E.A.:** Eight hours a day. I put in forty hours a week.. Sometimes I'd work overtime, which paid the hour and a half.

**Q:** After how long did you claim a raise?

**M.E.A.:** I had been working there for eight years.

**Q:** Oh! No raise!

**M.E.A.:** No raise.

**Q:** What were your benefits?

**M.E.A.:** We had holidays; we had vacations and insurance. I had no family coverage. But what I didn't like was that the union didn't do anything... that they didn't pay attention to any complaint we brought up, but, when they, the union, were going to charge us more, they would do it without notifying us at all. They just did it. For example, the union would charge us more without letting us know. They just took it!

**Q:** Did you have health benefits?

**M.E.A.:** We had six sick days, and they took one. They left us five, and they didn't even tell us about it. In other words, when they were going to negotiate a new contract with the workers, no one would speak to us or say: “this is what we're going to do” or “this is what the company says we're going to do.” Only when it was done...

**Q:** I worked in a union, and I was fired because I told the workers that they were not getting the benefits the union told them they were receiving. A corrupt union. What was the name of your union?

**M.E.A.:** I don't remember which one it was... When I went to the union to complain about them not talking to us when our sick-days were going to be taken from us, he, the union director, said that he was our representative, and that, as such, he was authorized to make all these changes. “Well,” I said, “ if you represent me, you should also represent us by getting us a raise. What you represent is their asking us for a higher production.” Because, yes, the production goals they were demanding from us were high, but a raise? Never! They didn't give us a raise!

**Q:** When did you first start working with the women of the Cooperative?

**M.E.A.** I was working both at the factory and with the women of the Cooperative. I've been working two years here. In other words, I was working weekends at the Cooperative. Saturdays. Because we have the meetings here on Sunday, and I went to the factory Monday through Friday. We meet here on Sunday, once a month. On Sunday, I came to the workshops.

**Q:** What made you come to the Cooperative?

**M.E.A.:** I took a course on labor rights. When I took it, then I started my work at the factory, too, helping the other women workers to learn their rights: that we had to complain about the union; for them to not treat us the way they did. We were yelled at --"Spanish... shit"-- by the boss... Because we would ask him why he made us fill out orders that were very heavy. We would fill in the orders, but we claimed there should be a man to pick up those that were very heavy. And that's when the boss would use that kind of... dirty language! You see... We, the women, picked up the boxes and we organized them. For example, there was this sheet with a list of orders that had to be taken out: perfumes, medicine... whatever the client had ordered, and we had to pick all that up. And all of that was too heavy because there would be pots and pans, and heavy metal items... chairs... Too heavy! We were asking for a man to be brought in, and the boss didn't want that. So, there was a young girl that confronted him. What happened was that this girl did not put in the heavy items, so the boss came up to her and took the labels from her, and said: "Go home!" So, since I had more or less learned about workers' rights, and I knew that he was being unfair to us... I had told other fellow workers that we had the right to stand up to him. So, the next time that another incident happened, we refused to work a full day.

**Q:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**M.E.A.:** Yes. I am a feminist.

**Q:** Could you tell us more about what you mentioned before... about how you were concerned about the well being of the older women workers?

**M.E.A.:** Well, there were ladies there that were 40 and 50 years old and who had been working there for about twenty years or twenty-four years. Well, I'd been there for ten years, and I felt young, but my energies were drained out. I'd get there tense and nervous... I couldn't work hard. So I said to them: "How come they keep asking us for higher levels of production when our energies are already drained out? Those old women couldn't work any harder! And also, there were nineteen young women that were on a list that the boss had and that he was going to take into the office for them to sign some document, even if you didn't want to do so. But the supervisor said that they had to sign and that if you refused, the supervisor would do it, forge it, stating that the worker, had signed it. And that was not fair. Because I can accept that I can't do any more, [that I can't] work any more. Even if I tried, I couldn't do it. And they would force those old ladies to do so. That's when we started mobilizing. Because that was too much exploitation.

**Q:** One more question. What you expect for the girl... for your daughter?

**M.E.A.:** Not only for my daughter. I would want it for more children. Actually, I want them to study, to get prepared. Because if one has a title in something, one can work wherever one wishes. Because, unfortunately, I didn't have that opportunity, because my parents were very poor. And I seek that for my children. Something. A better future so that they can make a life for themselves.

**Q:** One more...One more question! From where do you, get your courage? I know how hard it is to fight the boss!

**M.E.A.:** Yes. Maybe for being such a fighter, and for claiming my rights, I have lost other things. Right now, I'm needing a letter that has to be filled out... for the green card; because that's what Immigration requires. I asked for it at work. Having done all that, they told me that they would send it to me by mail, and till this day... I have not received it. They said that, since I confronted the boss and the union, that was the reason for their not giving me the letter. I wasn't on my own. I went with another fellow worker, and the others saw us. There were two of us. I haven't received the letter. I needed that letter. I think that they felt I was doing something for justice... for the workers' to be respected. If they don't send it... I say... well... I'll get get it somewhere else. I'm now going, maybe this week before they close, to where the main offices of the company are located, in Westbury, NY, to ask the lady in charge of all the workers for the letter. Because I asked the union for it, and they still have not sent it. I asked the supervisor there...at the factory, and he said the union would send it. Because I answered back. I have been told, by my supervisor, that [it was because] I have an attitude; because I asked: "Why do you demand such a high production ? I am not a machine to just throw it out there! I can't produce miracles!" That woman had [already] presented some complaints about me, saying I didn't want to do my job. That time, they even went as far as firing me. But I got other supervisors on my side, and I re-entered through another department, and went on working with others, until she noticed I was back at work, in spite of having been fired by her.

All of this for claiming our rights. I don't work for that company anymore. I am very happy working with the UNITY Housecleaning Cooperative because I have more time to spend with my children. I am learning English, and many other things.

*Drucilla Cornell, a former union organizer, is a Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at Rutgers University. These interviews are edited versions of those to be published in her forthcoming book: Legacies of Dignity (St. Martin's Press), and are published here by permission. Interview translations by Constanza Morales-Mair and Monica Diaz.*

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 10-20.  
© 2001 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University.*