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Our Day Has Finally Come: Domestic Worker Organizing in New York City

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OUR DAY HAS FINALLY COME:
DOMESTIC WORKER ORGANIZING IN NEW YORK CITY

by

HARMONY GOLDBERG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy, City University of New York.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

OUR DAY HAS FINALLY COME:
DOMESTIC WORKER ORGANIZING IN NEW YORK CITY

by

Harmony Goldberg

Advisor: Professor Leith Mullings

This dissertation tells the story of Domestic Workers United (DWU), an organization of Latina and Caribbean nannies, housecleaners and elder care providers based in New York City. I trace DWU’s efforts from its campaign to win basic employment protections for domestic workers in New York State through its efforts to enforce those new rights and to raise working standards above the minimum.

The driving motivation behind this work is the search for new paradigms for worker organizing that respond to the political and economic challenges of our times. I argue that domestic workers and other low-wage workers of color are the paradigmatic workers of the 21st century. The dynamics of the domestic work industry are an extreme expression of broader trends towards decentralization, informalization, low-wage work and commodified reproductive labor. DWU is part of a national movement of domestic workers’ organizations that are developing new organizing models that can help workers in other industries navigate these trends.
Domestic Workers United’s work highlights the constraining and stratified models of economic citizenship that shaped labor politics in the last century, suggesting a more expansive, integrative and dynamic approach to worker organizing. Their work provides an example of an “intersectional” approach in which the incorporation of work to address race and gender oppression expands the terrain of “class struggle,” rather than narrowing it. DWU’s model also points towards the need to re-imagine economic citizenship and to conceptualize a new social contract. Their work indicates that, in order to respond to the dynamics of our times, we need to radically expand the realm of state protections, and it also suggests that we need to transform the framework of collective bargaining in the United States in order to enable effective negotiations between workers and employers. DWU’s implicit vision for a new social contract also offers a space for contestation over the social organization of reproductive labor. Finally, DWU’s demonstrates the need for more complex and dynamic approaches to understanding class relations and workers’ struggles that works through the racialized and classed differences between working people rather than focusing only on their shared experiences.
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I want to begin by recognizing the incredible women who built Domestic Workers United: Ai-jen, Priscilla, Allison, Joyce, Meches, Marilyn, Debra, Myrna, Marlene, Beverly, Barbara, Sylvia, Deloris, Pat and the many other powerful women who pushed the work forward. It was an honor to be able to work with you and to be able to listen to your stories and your struggles. You are my inspiration and my hope.

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I am dedicating this work to my little sister, Frank Goldberg, whom we lost in December 2013 as I was finishing writing. My greatest hope in life is now to carry on her legacy of political commitment, deep courage and fierce love. This work - and everything else I will do - is for you, Frank.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

On August 31, 2010, Deloris Wright, a middle-aged Barbadian woman who has worked as a nanny for 22 years, stood up in front of a small room in a community center in Harlem that was crowded with elected officials and news-cameras. After nervously adjusting her bifocals, she took a deep breath, sighed and smiled broadly. And then she began to speak.

I am a proud nanny and a member of Domestic Workers United. Domestic workers have toiled for centuries in the shadow of slavery. Seventy-five years ago, when labor laws were written, legislators didn’t think we were worthy of having rights. But today, after years of fighting for dignity and recognition, our day has finally come.

After she spoke, the governor of New York State, David Paterson, signed the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, legislation that provided basic protections to domestic workers, a group that had been excluded by name from the nation’s foundational worker rights and protections in the 1930s.

A year after the passage of the Bill of Rights, more than a hundred domestic workers gathered together from around the metropolitan region for a Domestic Workers Convention to reflect on the impacts of the Bill of Rights and to discuss new strategies moving forward. As the meeting opened, a petite Mexicana nanny stepped nervously to the microphone, gave an almost identical sigh to Deloris’ of a year earlier, and then she introduced herself, speaking in Spanish, “My name is Sylvia, and I am a proud domestic worker and a member of Domestic Workers United.” As her confidence grew, her words started to gather steam and fire. She went on to describe the nature of the moment for domestic workers in New York City,

Before the Bill of Rights, the law didn’t recognize us. We had to work behind closed doors, and we were all invisible. Now we have a bill, and we are not invisible anymore. But we need to be very determined to defend what we fought for. We are not in a sector without laws anymore. So now we need a new vision for the industry.
This dissertation will tell the story of Domestic Workers United, an organization of nannies, housecleaners and elder care providers from Latin American and Caribbean nations based in New York City. I will trace DWU’s efforts from its campaign to win the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights through its work to enforce those new rights and to raise working standards above the minimum. The driving motivation behind this work is the search for a new paradigm for worker organizing that can respond to the political and economic challenges of our times. It is by now well established that the traditional trade union movement in the United States is struggling with precipitous decline. It is tempting to place the responsibility for union attrition solely on the shoulders of greedy employers and the conservative lawmakers who are undermining established labor rights. These are indeed significant pressures, but there is a growing recognition in the labor movement that there are also a number of internal political and institutional pressures that will make it difficult for many established unions to provide the expansive forms of leadership that would be necessary to reignite a powerful labor movement in this country (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Raynor and Stern 2013; Rolf 2013). Central to these internal challenges is the inability to move beyond what Dorothy Cobble (2010) has called the “factory paradigm” of worker organizing. That paradigm provided a powerful set of tools that facilitated many of the union movement’s greatest successes in the twentieth century, but those tools are losing their efficacy in the contemporary political-economic order.

At the same time as the established union movement has gone into decline, independent organizing among workers in low-wage sectors, including domestic workers, restaurant workers, taxi drivers, day laborers and more, has been growing. Over the last several decades, hundreds of
“worker centers” emerged around the country in order to address the needs of immigrant workers and Black workers who have historically been left out of the labor movement (Fine 2006; Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). While these independent worker organizations are still in a process of maturation, they are developing new models for worker organizing that are tailored to respond to the particular conditions in their industries. Worker centers offer dozens of inspiring stories of hard-pressed workers overcoming challenging odds to win substantive victories, and these organizations have served as a source of hope for many in these dark days for the traditional labor movement. But worker centers offer more than inspiration; they also offer important strategic insights and, potentially, political leadership towards the rebirth of the labor movement.

Workers organizations that are rooted in growth industries are more likely than worker organizations based in declining sectors to experiment with new models and to offer expansive political visions that speak to the needs and interests of broader sections of the working classes (Silver 2003). While many of the most established unions are fighting attrition in declining industries such as manufacturing, the worker centers are based in emergent sectors like the restaurant industry and the domestic work industry and in growing workforces like guest workers and day laborers. The structures and dynamics in the industries in which these organizations are based portend broader transitions in the economy: informalization, decentralization and the growing predominance of service work among others. The strategies developed by organizations that are rooted in these growth industries, whether they be worker centers or traditional unions like Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) experiments organizing homecare workers and fast food workers, can thus offer important lessons to the broader labor movement: how to build a cohesive base among workers who labor in decentralized workplaces, how to address
relationships with both employers and the recipients of services, and more. New paradigms for worker organizing that address the dynamics of the new economy and the experiences of the new working classes are beginning to emerge in these organizations. (Cobble 2010).

Looking at domestic work in particular, the industry’s decentralization and its personalistic dynamics are uniquely extreme, but they are also suggestive of broader trends. The widespread entrance of women into full-time waged labor and the rise of dual earner families has long driven the increasing commodification of reproductive labor: child care, food service, house cleaning, laundry services, elder care and more (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Instead of being seen as the “unorganizable” exception to established successful models of worker organizing, today’s domestic workers are developing new organizing models that can help other workers navigate these emergent trends. Before providing a description of the specific dynamics of the domestic work industry and the work of Domestic Workers United, I will explore the political and historic processes at play behind the assertion that we need to develop a new paradigm of worker organizing that is suited to our times.

**Changing Paradigms of Worker Organizing**

Paradigms of worker organizing give workers a clear way to understand their collective power and to determine what kinds of vehicles will be effective for improving their working conditions, consolidating their victories and advancing their political visions. But an effective paradigm can also become a liability, particularly when a paradigm that is relevant for a certain historical moment becomes reified into a universal and ahistorical truth (Piven and Cloward 2000). If the factory paradigm of worker organizing is seen as the *only* model for worker organizing, then, as
that paradigm becomes outdated, we can come to believe that worker organizing itself has become outdated or impracticable. We can read this transition as the “end of the working class,” the collapse of worker power or the death of the labor movement.

We would do better to understand that workers struggle has never been static; it is always changing as a result of the ongoing process of struggle between workers and their employers (Harvey 2006).\(^1\) Models of worker power and worker organizing are dynamically intertwined with shifts in the organization of production, reproduction, state policy and racial projects. They are therefore constantly in a process of transition. Workers are always developing new ways to organize and express their collective power in order to improve their conditions. As they succeed, they restrain employers’ abilities to make profits. Employers respond to workers’ victories by developing new political strategies and new ways of organizing production that undermine the established power of workers. In turn, workers have to again adjust to the new terrain and develop new organizing methodologies and power repertoires. And the cycle continues. At each stage, old paradigms of worker power become outdated, and new paradigms must be developed to respond to new conditions. Rather than analyzing “worker power” in a monolithic sense, we would do better to investigate what forms of power are available to workers in a given era, given the structure and dynamics of given industries and the broader economy (Piven and Cloward 2000; Silver 2003). But paradigms tend to out-last their immediate context, carried forward by the weight of political organizations, state policies and cultural memory,

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\(^1\) My historically grounded and dynamic approach to analyzing paradigms of worker organizing builds on a to class analysis which asserts that class must be studied in its historical and geographic specificities rather than as an abstract and universalized system. Since capitalism is highly dynamic and adaptive in response to worker resistance and to crises, class structures are also highly dynamic and change over time (Cleaver 1979; Gramsci 1972; Marx and De Leon 1898; Neill, et al. 1997). Rather than attempt to shoehorn analyses of complex social structures into the abstract-structural categories developed by Marx in his more theoretical analyses, it is crucial for politically-oriented work to analyze class in its complex and changing concrete-historical forms (Wright 1985).
leading to mismatches between paradigms of worker organizing and historical conditions (Piven and Cloward 2000).

This kind of paradigmatic mismatch happened at the turn of the last century as mass industrial production was replacing craft production, which relied on highly specialized, skilled labor. In craft production, skilled workers had developed a paradigm of occupation-based worker organizing in which skilled workers consolidated into specialized craft guilds, for example, carpenters in one guild and electricians in another. They exercised power by using these guilds as a form of monopoly control over employers’ access to their specialized skills. In the face of this effective deployment of worker power, employers developed a new way of organizing work: mass industrial production. Industrial production broke down specialized work into simplified tasks on an assembly line that could be carried out by less specialized workers (Braverman 1975). The craft union paradigm of power did not work on the factory floor because this de-skilling reorganization of production undermined the basis of power of the craft unions: their monopoly over skilled labor. At the time, many people declared the labor movement dead because they believed that industrial workers had no potential for power (Brody 1993). But in spite of these predictions, industrial workers organized. They developed new organizing methods and tactical repertoires that reflected the structures and conditions of the new economy (Piven and Cloward 1977).

It took a long process of experimentation to develop a new model of worker power that was relevant for the industrial context, and that new model could not be based on the political assumptions of the previous era. But eventually, industrial workers developed a new model of
worker power, which relied on workers’ collective ability to disrupt production on the factory floor through the mechanism of the strike. This new understanding of shop-floor power took hold after autoworkers in Flint, Michigan occupied the floor of a General Motors factory in 1937. Building on several decades of experimentation with industrial strikes, their sit-down strike achieved a game-changing level of political success. Flint workers stopped up auto production across the country, and it sparked a wave of similar strikes. The success of their action helped to solidify a new understanding of worker power in the industrial context that has defined our understanding of worker power ever since. The attendant paradigmatic model for workers organization is the industrial union which cuts across lines of skill, craft and occupation to bring together all of the workers who labor in a given workplace so they can exercise their collective power vis-à-vis their shared employer (Piven and Cloward 1977; Silver 2003). The newly emergent industrial unions split with the craft union-based American Federation of Labor, which remained wedded to its skilled labor paradigm of worker organizing, in order to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938 and to advance a new wave of workers organizing based on this new “factory paradigm” of worker power.

The factory paradigm was an effective method for responding to the dynamics of industrial production, which defined the U.S. economy in the 20th century. The wave of workers’ unrest that emerged out of this factory paradigm helped to force the hand of the government to pass a sweeping set of progressive laws that came to be known as the “New Deal,” laws which established the social safety net in the United States and which, for all their limits, remain a high-water mark for progressive legislation in this country. As a part of this package of legislation, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) institutionalized the factory paradigm into state policy by
establishing a government-sanctioned form of collective bargaining between workers and employers. Over time, the attendant approach to unionization came to be seen as equivalent with worker organizing itself. This factory paradigm of worker organizing was institutionalized into the organizational structure of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and popularized through broader cultural narratives and understandings of workers and the labor movement (Piven and Cloward 2000). Unionized industrial workers in the United States were able to use these methods to win remarkable victories, receiving higher wage and better benefits than workers in any other industrialized nation (Lichtenstein 2002).

Many workers who did not labor in factories were able to successfully organize in this period, including for example Black sharecroppers in the South (Kelley 1990) and female clerical workers (Strom 1987), using other organizational models and power repertoires. But the models developed by these workers did not factor into the framework of factory paradigm, illustrating the slippages between the historical realities of worker organizing and ways of thinking about worker organizing (Cobble 2001). Many workers and many kinds of work were left out of that paradigm because it was built upon a series of constraining assumptions: that “real work” was that done for wages in the spheres of production while low-waged service work was degraded and while women’s unpaid or poorly paid reproductive labor was seen as a natural or spiritual duty; that the “real workplaces” were public centralized factories, a definition which explicitly excluded the presumptively private sphere of the home and which marginalized the smaller and more decentralized workplaces in which many service workers and other low-wage workers labored; and that the “real worker” was the white male breadwinner who earned sufficient wages
to maintain a family, including a wife who worked as an unpaid caregiver in the home.\footnote{These assumptions did not shape the thinking of the entire labor movement in this period. Many radical labor leaders, particularly organizers from the Communist Party, placed questions of race and gender at the center of their worker organizing. But, as the radical edge of the labor movement was pushed out of the labor movement in the wake of the Taft-Hartley Act, the restraining assumptions of a narrowed factory paradigm became the default position of the labor movement.} The assumptions of the factory paradigm also shaped the framework of worker right and protections that was established during the New Deal. Reflecting a series of compromises among political elites that will be explored in detail in later chapters, this set of new rights and benefits was traced around the model of the white male industrial workers. The New Deal thus established a stratified form of economic citizenship that excluded or provided only constrained rights to many women workers and workers of color.

These assumptions also shaped the labor movement’s assessments about what sectors of workers could be effectively organized, about where that organizing could be carried out and about the nature of worker power. Dorothy Cobble (2010: 282) argues that, “at its core, [the factory paradigm] is a theory that presumes that workers who most clearly resemble the archetypal male proletariat toiling away on the mass production assembly line are the most likely to organize.” In this view, organizing is only possible in large, centralized public workplaces that are located outside the home with a clearly identifiable set of long-term, full-time employees. It assumes that the dynamics of industrial production provide the best context for workers to come to understand their exploitation by their employers and to develop a sense of their shared interests and collective power. That is, work arrangements in which many workers are gathered together under one roof, engaged in a collective process of producing goods for the profit of a central, identifiable employer are assumed to be the only viable context for effective worker organizing. It presupposes that women workers who are engaged in paid or unpaid reproductive labor have a
more difficult time developing a shared identity and sense of interest because they are more isolated into disparate workplaces. It assumes that the personalized connections between workers, employers and clients in service industries will tend to obscure the dynamics of exploitation. These workers are less likely to identify as workers or to develop antagonistic relationships with their employers, and they are therefore less likely to engage in collective organizing. The factory paradigm was also built around the model of industrial workers’ power, that is, their ability to disrupt production through their collective power on the shop floor. This was indeed a powerful model of power, but its effectiveness sometimes led to the conclusion that workers who labored in other kinds of workplaces lacked power at all (Cobble 2010).

The factory paradigm of worker organizing underlay the most powerful era in the history of the labor movement in this country. For a time, working class movements wielded a relatively high degree of social and political power. This limited the ability of the capitalist class to make unrestrained profits, driving them to develop a new regime of accumulation that would allow them to overcome these limits and to, in the words of David Harvey (2006), “restore their class power.” Spurred by the economic stagnation of the 1970s, corporations developed new technologies and new methods of organizing production that enabled them to change the structure and conditions of work. They broke down the large central workplaces that had long served as the assumed terrain of workers struggle in the industrial era. This decentralization took place both spatially through the growth of smaller workplaces and relationally through the subcontracting of work, which decentralized the employment relationship itself. Corporations outsourced industrial production to the lower-waged Sunbelt regions of the United States and to poorer nations around the world, primarily in Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Employers
used the threat of plant closures to increase workers vulnerability and thus to reduce the likelihood of confrontational action. This high mobility of capital undermined industrial workers’ power in the United States and other industrialized nations (Harvey 2006).

As the manufacturing sector in the United States declined, the service economy grew. In order to manage the increasingly decentralized and transnational organization of production, multinational corporations have increasingly centralized management in “global cities” that serve, in Saskia Sassen’s (1991) words, as “command posts” of the world economy. High-end “producer services,” such as legal services and financial services, have developed in order to meet the needs of these global corporate headquarters. While the high-tier occupations in these industries are well-paid high-status jobs, producer services also encompass a thick tier of low-wage occupations like secretaries, janitors, security guards and couriers. Together, these producer services have been the site for the most significant job growth over the past several decades, with finance, insurance and real estate leading the way (Sassen 1991; Silver 2003). The growth of this high tier of professionals also led to the growth of low-wage jobs in the personal service sector, as the new corporate elite built a consumption-heavy “global city” lifestyle. (Castells and Mollenkopf 1991).

In addition to this economic reorganization, the capitalist class has also sought to reconsolidate its power politically through neoliberalism. I understand neoliberalism to a political project of the financial bloc of the capitalist class, which reflects the transition from the dominance of the productive form of capital to the dominance of finance and which was designed to reorganize the state in order to facilitate the rapid accumulation of capital (Harvey 2006; Smith 2011). Two of
the central aspects of the neoliberal agenda in the United States are a dismantling of the social safety net and an undermining of workers’ collective power, advanced in part through assaults on collective bargaining rights and worker protections. By simultaneously undermining workers’ capacity to bargain in their workplaces and weakening the safety net that protects them outside of the workplace, today’s working classes have been placed in an increasingly precarious position. The neoliberal project also has an ideological agenda, which valorizes the market and individualism while it promotes the idea that “there is no alternative” to the unrestrained freedom of capitalist accumulation. It thus attempts to consign the idea of collective worker organizing, whether through the factory paradigm or any other method, to the historical dustbin.

These political and economic transitions intersected with the massive entrance of white women into waged work over the past several decades. Prior to this period, many white women had worked as unwaged housewives, supported by the breadwinner husbands whose wage were high enough to support an entire family. Women of color had long worked for wages outside of the home, an arrangement necessitated by the lower wages paid to men of color (Brewer 1999; Hull, et al. 1982). This influx was first driven by the liberatory visions of the women’s movement, but it was accelerated by the challenging economic dynamics wrought by neoliberalism and globalization. That is, male wages declined as a result of the degradation of work that resulted from global economic restructuring, undermining the historic model of the “family wage.” Combined with inflation, this decline in male income pushed more and more women to enter the labor force in order to maintain their families’ incomes and standards of living. In 2010, women became the majority of the nation’s workforce. But these women entered workplaces whose time and performance demands had been defined by the labor capacities of men with stay-at-home
wives, what Hochschild (2000: 140) describes as a “male-career pattern that has proven surprisingly resistant to change.” The hours are long and demanding, leaving little time or flexibility to meet the always changing demands of family care provisions. In order to fill these deficits, many families have turned to domestic work and other forms of commodified care like child care centers, restaurant food and commercial laundries to meet their families’ care needs (Blair-Loy and Jacobs 2003). This has led to the widespread commodification of reproductive labor and the resultant growth in the personal service industries.

Together, these transitions have significantly altered the employment relationship. Rather than workers having long-term full-time work with a single employer, many workers are now facing part-time work and temporary work. More and more workers are being treated as independent contractors rather than employees, blocking them from accessing many of the historic rights and benefits that are assured to workers in the United States. A number of scholars and activists have used the term “precarious labor” to describe the emergence of this unstable employment relationship (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011).

The transition are well-known by this point: the decentralization of production and the rise of the service economy, the decimation of the social welfare and protectionist aspects of the state due to the successful advance of the neoliberal agenda, the widespread commodification of reproductive labor and the growth of precarity among the working classes. They have profoundly changed the terrain of worker organizing. These transitions disrupt many of the foundational assumptions of the factory paradigm of worker organizing: that workers had long term jobs, that they labored in large centralized workplaces that were focused on production and that were bound to a specific
geographic locations. It has become more and more difficult to effectively exercise that paradigm of worker organizing on this changed political-economic terrain. But the assumptions of the factory paradigm continue to shape our understanding of worker organizing today. They have become a limiting factor on our capacity to imagine models that are more relevant for our context.

These transitions do not mean the “end of the working class” or the “death of the labor movement.” But they do mark the end of one particular formation of the working class, one form of worker power and one phase of the labor movement. At the same time, they also represent the formation of new working classes, the emergence of different forms of worker power and the potential birth of a different labor movement. While the industrial working class is in decline in the United States, a new working class is growing. And a series of experiments with new methods of worker organizing over the last several decades has emerged in response, both within traditional unions and through independent worker centers. They are testing out new ways of reaching workers in these decentralized and informal industries and new methods for exercising worker power. We need to reflect on those experiments to develop new paradigms that can tell a new story about how working people can effectively exercise their collective power in these changed conditions. We are not on the verge of consolidating that new paradigm. Rather, we are at the beginning of what is likely to be a long period of experimentation. But the more awareness

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3 There have been a number of related developments outside of the realm of worker organizing, like community based organizing in working class communities that has responded to the gaps in working class struggles left by the historic narrowness of trade union struggles in the United States (Susser 2012). Recently, community-based efforts and broader social mobilizations like the Occupy movement have stepped into the void left by the erosion of the union movement in this country (Freeman 2013). This work focuses on developments within the realm of self-identified worker organizing inside the United States in order to gain deeper insight into this particular front of working class organizing. But, in order to avoid the historic pitfall of reducing working class struggles to workplace-based organizing, it is important to read this work as exploring one specific front in the movement toward a more expansive approach to class politics in the United States.
that we can bring to the fact that this is the historic task that we face, the more likely we will be to realize it.

I argue that, in order to develop new paradigms for worker organizing, we have to place the struggles of the lowest tiers of the working classes at the center of our analysis. Just as craft workers were the paradigmatic workers of the 19th century and factory workers played that role in the 20th century, the workers who labor in the lower tiers of the economy are the paradigmatic workers of the 21st century. These workers have historically been seen as bit players in the labor movement in the past, whether out of racial and gender biases or out of the inapplicability of the “factory paradigm” organizing models in their industries. It is significant that, in contrast to past centuries in which the paradigmatic workers in the United States have been native-born and immigrant white men, this century’s paradigmatic workers are women, workers of color and immigrant workers. The workforce is increasingly composed of these historically oppressed sectors. As noted earlier, women became the majority of the workforce in 2010 (Rampell 2010), and analysts predict that the United States will be a “majority minority” nation by 2040 (Passel and Cohn 2008). As these trends continue, the experiences of racial and gender oppression will condition the experiences of increasing proportions of the workforce. Struggles around the racialized degradation and gendered devaluation of labor will be at the center of these workers’ struggles, making these issues a long overdue priority for the labor movement (Boris and Nadasen 2008).

Organizing in these sectors has the potential to do more than address the concerns of these specific workers. By placing the struggles of these workers at the center of our analysis rather
than focusing on the struggles of the most privileged workers, we gain access to new insights and to more expansive political possibilities (Hill Collins 2009). This focus requires us to rethink the core assumptions of the factory paradigm of worker organizing that have simultaneously served as powerful tools and limiting factors for worker organizing. If approached strategically and expansively, these new organizing efforts have the potential to challenge long-standing limits and constraints on the democratic rights and collective power of all workers by offering new visions for worker rights and new models for worker organizing. If we are to access these expansive possibilities, we have to resist the tendency to focus narrowly on the extreme marginalization and exploitation of these sectors. Instead, we should telescope out the implications of their models in the interests of the broader workers movement. This is what I set out to do with my investigation of the work of Domestic Workers United in New York City.

**The Domestic Work Industry in New York City**

I chose to focus on domestic worker organizing because the dynamics of the industry are a particularly extreme expression of broader trends in the economy towards decentralization, informalization, low-wage work and commodified reproductive labor. A study of worker organizing around these dynamics can offer helpful lessons to the organizing efforts based among the millions of other workers struggling with similar challenges.

In the decades after World War II, paid domestic work in the United States declined significantly as the white immigrant women and Black women who had previously filled the ranks of the industry were able to access more lucrative and less stigmatized forms of employment. In recent years, however, the domestic work industry has experienced a resurgence and transformation,
reflecting expanded demand for commodified reproductive labor in the face of rising labor force participation among wives and mothers and the aging of the population. The re-emergence of the domestic work industry has been widely analyzed by scholars who have done an exhaustive job exploring the structure and dynamics of the industry (Boris and Klein 2012; Brown 2011; Chang 2000; Colen 1989; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Glenn 1992; Glenn 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Macdonald 2011; Nadasen 2012; Parreñas 2001; Rodriguez 2010; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; Wrigley 1995).

The category of domestic work includes several different occupations: nannies, some of whom are called *au pairs* or babysitters; housecleaners; and privately-paid eldercare providers. These boundaries are often blurred; workers hired for one type of work are often asked to take on additional tasks; for example, a woman hired to do childcare is often asked to do laundry or housecleaning. Employment structures vary as well. Some workers do “live-in work,” working full-time for a single employer and living in their household all or most of the time, while others do “live-out work,” working full-time for a single employer but living in a different household, or “day work,” working for a variety of employers on different days or shifts. Nannies and eldercare providers tend to do full-time live-in or live-out work, while housecleaners more often do day work.

In the past, domestic work in the United States was primarily done by African American women and first-generation European immigrant women in the homes of native-born middle- and upper-class white women (Katzman 1978). The composition of the workforce shifts in accordance with transitions in the political-economic order and the shifting terrain of racial politics, in particular
but the transfer of reproductive labor across the lines of race and class has consistently shaped the industry. Glenn (1992) dubbed this pattern the “racial division of reproductive labor,” arguing that this division of labor both reflects and helps to reinforce the historically racialized and gendered nature of class relations in the United States. Relatedly, Rollins (1985) has argued that the daily interactions in the domestic work industry constitute a realm of micro-politics that both reflect race, class and gender inequities and help to constitute those hierarchies. Wealthier and whiter women have hired poorer women, primarily women of color and white immigrant women, to take on the dirtier and more degrading aspects of the labor of reproduction (Palmer 1989).

This pattern holds true today. Although people from a range of class and racial backgrounds employ domestic workers, the primary employers of domestic workers in New York City are white middle- and upper-class women. Today’s domestic workers are predominantly immigrant women from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean, marking a transition from a historic “racial division of reproductive labor” within the United States to an “international division of reproductive labor” in the era of neoliberal globalization (Parreñas 2001). These women worked in a range of jobs in their home nations, from farm workers to unionized factory workers to schoolteachers. Domestic work in the United States provides them with a quantitatively higher income, but those material benefits come with a sharp drop in social status and challenging working conditions (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001). Once in the United States, many of these women were unable to find jobs in their former professions, and domestic work was one of their only viable employment options.
While it is difficult to document with any certainty, organizers at Domestic Workers United believe that there are now more than 200,000 domestic workers in New York City. In the years previous to the recent economic crisis, job growth in this industry outstripped that in the broader urban economy. Between 1990 and 2000, in a period when the broader job growth rate in New York City was at 10%, the domestic work industry grew by 24% (DataCenter 2006). Anecdotal evidence from a number of domestic workers suggests that there are fewer domestic work jobs since the economic crisis in 2008. While many other cities have relatively mono-ethnic domestic workforces primarily composed of either Latina or Asian workers, New York City’s domestic workforce is incredibly diverse. The higher tier of the domestic work industry is primarily occupied by white middle class women from the United States and western Europe, many of whom are young women looking for temporary jobs to help them complete college or an affordable way to spend a year abroad. These women are hired as *au pairs* to care for older children; they are seen as playing an educative and cultural development role in these children’s’ lives (Wrigley 1995). The industry’s lower tiers are populated by Caribbean, Latina and Asian immigrant women who do the “dirty” work of housecleaning and the nurturing work of early childhood care and elder care. While working conditions vary radically among employers, many of the domestic workers in this tier must work long hours without overtime pay, earning wages below the poverty line and enduring arbitrary supervision and even verbal and physical abuse (DataCenter 2006). There is a growing tier of Eastern European workers in the industry in New York City. Many of these women also experience challenging conditions (Panagiotopoulos 2012), but it is still unclear where they will come to be located in the hierarchies of the industry.

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4 This may contradict broader trends in other service industries. Early evidence indicates that, despite some initial job losses during the height of the crisis, low-wage service jobs have grown while higher-wage industries have declined (Bernhardt 2012), suggesting that the trajectory towards low-wage service work is likely to continue in the wake of the economic crisis.
Pay and working conditions in the industry vary widely, due to the location of domestic workers in private homes and the lack of adequate labor protections. Isolated in individual relationships with their employers, domestic workers negotiate their contracts without the benefit of either clear industry standards or collective bargaining power. While some domestic workers earn a living wage and receive benefits like health care and paid vacation, others labor for long hours and receive low wages and without basic benefits like overtime and notice of termination. Although minimum wage laws technically cover domestic workers, weak government oversight means that the worst paid workers receive wages far below the legal minimum. Live-in workers generally face the most intense forms of abuse and exploitation, regularly working around the clock for sub-minimum wages. Recent immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, tend to take these kinds of live-in jobs after they first migrate to the United States. Over time, many women are able to move into live-out work, which tends to give them better wages and working conditions.

Located in the private space of the home and engaged with the intimate aspects of their employers’ lives, domestic work is often characterized by highly personalistic interactions between workers and employers. These dynamics present particular challenges to workers in their efforts to establish good working conditions. Employers often describe domestic workers as “part of the family,” asserting an intimacy that can be a valuable aspect of the work to domestic workers. At the same time, these assertions are often deployed to advance employers’ needs like being able to demand endless flexibility from workers. These personalized interactions often obscure rather than challenge the structural inequities between workers and employers (Palmer
1989; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). At the same time, the industry is also shaped by explicit and implicit expectations of the deference of workers to their employers, generally manifesting as racialized forms of disrespect and subordination (Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985). The disrespect that many workers experience from their employers can range from basic personal disregard to verbal and physical abuse. Workers often describe their employers’ disrespect as one of the most galling aspects of the industry, placing their desire to be treated with respect on par with more material concerns over wages, hours and benefits.

There are a number of structural challenges that help to create these conditions, including the societal devaluation of women’s labor in the home, the racialized legacies of slavery and servitude which mark the domestic work industry and the broader structural challenges facing low-wage immigrants of color. But, more concretely, the challenging conditions that domestic workers face persist because domestic workers have historically been excluded by name from many federal employment protections and from the right to organize and collectively bargain, an exclusion that resulted from a collaboration between Southern legislators and Northern policymakers that was directly connected to the legacy of slavery in the United States (Katznelson 2005). Some of these exclusions have been eradicated over time, but domestic workers are still excluded by name from the National Labor Relations Act. Some categories of domestic workers remain excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act, like live-in workers who are excluded from overtime protections. Because the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the anti-discrimination protections of Title VII are restricted to workplaces with a significant number of employees, almost all domestic workers are excluded from these protections.
To the extent that domestic workers are included in existent employment protections, the decentralized character of the industry makes it difficult for domestic workers to utilize those protections. Current employment laws, enforcement mechanisms and the standard models of unionization and collective bargaining strategies were developed to reflect the conditions of large-scale industrial workplaces with high worker-to-employer ratios, and they do not fit well with the decentralized and informal nature of the domestic work industry. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that many of the industry’s workers are undocumented immigrants, which enables employers to play on workers’ fears of deportation as an intimidation strategy and which undermine the potential for using intensive government oversight to protect workers. This combination of the residual exclusions of domestic workers and outdated enforcement models leave domestic workers effectively excluded in practice, if not always in name, from the standard package of workers rights and protections assured to other workers in the United States. These difficult conditions have triggered organizing among domestic workers in dozens of cities around the nation, and Domestic Workers United has been among the leading forces in that growing movement.

The Story of Domestic Workers United

In the late 1990s, New York’s Asian domestic workers began to organize, forming the Women Workers Project of CAAA: Organizing Asian Communities, which organized Filipina workers, and Andolan and Workers’ Awaaz, which organized South Asian workers. Recognizing that they did not represent the majority of domestic workers in New York City who had migrated from Latin America and the Caribbean, CAAA and Andolan began reaching out to these populations

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5 While scholars have effectively argued that undocumented workers may in fact be more likely to support unionization than native-born workers (Ness 2005), workers fears around their documentation status do manifest as a challenge in DWU’s organizing work.
of workers. After engaging a core of Caribbean and Latina workers, these organizations helped to launch Domestic Workers United as a multi-racial membership organization in 2000. Since 2000, DWU has grown into a nationally-recognized organization with a significant base in the industry and a strong reputation in the trade union movement, the immigrant rights movement and the women’s movement.

Domestic Workers United is a non-profit organization. Although workers are required to pay dues in order to become members of the organization, DWU is primarily financed through foundation funding. In DWU’s early years, CAAAV provided most of the resources needed to staff and run the organization, but the organization became effectively independent by about 2005. DWU is staffed by a combination of veteran social justice organizers and domestic worker leaders who came onto staff after working with the organization for several years. During my research, there were about four paid staff members at Domestic Workers United: an Executive Director who was the daughter of a domestic worker, a Lead Organizer who had been a nanny for ten years before joining the DWU staff, an Operations Director who was a veteran social justice organizer in New York city and a Member Organizer who had also been a nanny. These staff members primarily played a facilitative role; its volunteer members who had a high degree of ownership over the organization did the majority of the organization’s work. The organization has approximately 5,000 domestic workers in its database, and 300 formal members.6

DWU is one of the only multi-racial membership organizations of domestic workers in the country. Scholars Premilla Nadasen and Eileen Boris (2008) celebrated the significance of

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6 The striking disparity is due to the fact that DWU requires its members to pay dues, actively participate in the organization’s work and attend the organization’s monthly General Membership meetings. This high bar for membership is characteristic of many worker centers (Fine 2006).
DWU’s multi-racial composition, particularly since “so much of labor history has been marred by racial and ethnic divisions.” The relationships between members from different racial backgrounds and different nationalities have had real complications and challenges, but the organizations’ dedication to building unity among workers from different backgrounds is an important source of pride for DWU’s worker-leaders. To DWU, “multi-racial” did not mean “all races.” Instead, DWU was a multi-racial organization that represented women of color workers, reflecting the assessment by DWU’s founding organizers that women of color faced the most severe forms of exploitation in the domestic work industry. Ai-jen Poo, one of DWU’s founding organizers, told Helen Panagiotopulos (2012: 152) that, “There’s an emphasis on women of color because it’s the majority of the workforce and historically that’s been the case and there are clear issues around race and gender in the economy.” Priscilla Gonzalez, who directed DWU after Ai-jen left the organization, told Panagiotopulos that, “[The organization] is very much from the perspective of immigrant women of color” because “the industry is primarily immigrant women of color, and they are concentrated in the low wage tier of the sector” (153). This racialized multi-racial composition was articulated in different ways at different times: as “women of color,” “immigrant women” and “Third World women” among others. While the organization never formally prohibited white domestic workers from participating, the white domestic workers who showed up at organizational meetings rarely stayed involved for long, citing alienation and feelings of marginalization. Race defined DWU’s approach to multi-racial

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7 There were huge slippages and complexities in the deployment of these terms that there is not sufficient space to be explored here. For example, it became clear that at times workers were using the term “women of color” to mean all women from racially-marked groups while at other times they were using it to refer specifically to Black women.

8 Helen Panagiotopoulos, a Greek-Australian nanny who wrote her Masters thesis on the work of Domestic Workers United, was an exception to this pattern. She stayed involved in the organization for about two years, and she joined the staff for several months to do communications work. Her reflections on the racial dynamics of Domestic Workers United can be found in her 2012 Masters thesis, “Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Constructing Identity in the United States Domestic Workers’ Movement.”
organizing because of the organizers’ and leading members’ assessment of the ways in which racial degradation shaped the industry.

DWU’s multi-racial composition differs significantly from many of the other domestic worker support networks that have emerged in the past decade. Most of these organizations have been based within particular nationalities, reflecting the broader pattern of nationality-based support and recruitment networks in many immigrant communities. There were a number of other ethnically-based domestic workers organizations in New York City during the course of my research, including Andolan, Cidadao Global which organized Portuguese-speaking Brazilian workers, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees which organized French- and Kreyol-speaking Haitian workers, the Unity Housecleaners project of the Workplace Project which primarily organized Latina workers in Long Island, Adhikaar for Human Rights which organized Nepalese domestic workers, Damayan Migrant Workers Association and Filipinas for Rights and Empowerment, both of which organized Filipina workers. DWU’s early Steering Committee included representatives from a number of these allied domestic worker organizations. For years, DWU functioned both as a coalition of these organizations and as a membership organization for Caribbean, African and Latina workers, marking an interesting convergence of multi-racial and ethnically-based organizing models. As DWU matured, the Steering Committee changed: the organizational representatives left and formed a more formal coalition called the Domestic

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10 Since my research concluded, a number of new organizations have emerged to organize domestic workers in New York City, including a new project to organize Latina workers through New Immigrant Community Empowerment and a number of workers cooperatives focusing on childcare (Beyond Care Cooperative), house-cleaning (Si Se Puede Women’s Cooperative) and eldercare (Golden Steps Cooperative).
Workers Justice Coalition, and the Steering Committee came to be made up of elected representatives from DWU’s individual membership base.

The organization intentionally avoided organizing workers from the constituencies represented by its allied ethnically-based domestic worker organizations in order to avoid becoming a competitive force. Thus, although DWU’s earliest banners, newsletters and T-shirts described the organization as “African, Asian, Caribbean and Latina Workers United,” DWU focused its own organizing work among Latina, Caribbean and African workers. Caribbean workers have made up a large majority, about 80%, of DWU’s membership since its founding, the majority of whom come from Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago. In DWU’s earliest years, there were also small numbers of African American workers and workers from African nations. Over time, the African-American and African members drifted away from the organization. Latina workers from a wide range of nations in Latin America including Mexico, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica and Guatemala filled out most of the rest of the membership.\textsuperscript{11} There were some attempts to increase the membership among Latina workers in the late 2000’s, in part out of a political commitment to building a more fully multi-racial organization and in part as a reflection of the growing proportion of Latina workers in the industry. DWU significantly increased its translation capacities, and it founded a “Latina Committee” to focus on outreach to Latina workers. These

\textsuperscript{11} Here - and throughout this work - I am using the terms “Caribbean” and “Latina” to describe the racial and regional backgrounds of DWU members. Acknowledging the long-standing dialogues about the inaccuracies and slippages in these terms, I am choosing to use the frameworks that are regularly deployed by DWU’s member-leaders to describe themselves and each other. “Caribbean” was generally used to describe English-speaking Afro-Caribbean people. “Latina” was generally used to describe women from Latin American nations, many of whom were mono-lingual speakers of Spanish and some of whom spoke English as a second language. These categories generally assumed a correlation between region, race and language, but there were some complications to this assumption - including for, example, Trinidadian women of South Asian ancestry, Spanish-speaking Dominican women of African descent, white-skinned bi-lingual women from Latin American nations - but the categories captured broad patterns closely enough to be the defining framework for describing racial differences inside the organization.
efforts were not successful in significantly increasing the proportional representation of Latina workers in the organization, but this focused investment was resented by some of the long-standing Caribbean members who were concerned that they were being marginalized within the organization they had built. These internal tensions played out for many months, as members from all backgrounds struggled over how to manifest DWU’s vision for building multi-racial unity between immigrant domestic workers.

There are a number of other meaningful points to note about DWU’s composition. Almost all of DWU’s members have been immigrants, some of whom have legal residency and others of whom are undocumented. Most DWU’s members have been in the country for more than five years, and many of them have been in the country for ten or twenty years. Most DWU members inhabit the middle tiers of the industry, having climbed their way up from the industry’s lowest tiers over time. The overwhelming majority of DWU’s members work as nannies; there are some members who work as elder care providers or who go back-and-forth between nannying work and elder care work. There are very few women who primarily work as housecleaners in DWU’s membership, although many members pick up periodic housecleaning work to supplement their income. Finally, very few DWU members are currently in a parenting role. Some members do not have children at all, but most of DWU members do have children. However, most of these women have adult children, so their child-rearing responsibilities are largely over (although some women did play active roles in raising their grandchildren). Some women did have younger children, but they had to leave them in their nations of origin to be raised by other family members while they came to the United States to work. This meant that DWU members
had significantly more free time to dedicate to the organization than workers who were actively engaged in parenting.

Like many other independent worker organizations, DWU began as an effort to meet the needs of a particular group of workers who were not being organized through the union movement. Ai-jen Poo, one of DWU’s founders, recalled:

The exclusion of domestic workers from the NLRA...made it impossible to organize domestic workers using traditional labor organizing models. [It seemed] that it would be too challenging to figure out how to organize domestic workers, since there was no legal framework for it...[and] given the structure of the industry...because it was seen as marginal or small, operating in the shadow economy...We assumed that the labor movement didn’t see it as a priority.

While Ai-jen noted that the founding organizer’s reflections on the labor movement were based on assumptions rather than on knowledge gained through direct experience, it is also clear that DWU’s centralization of the issues of women workers of color demonstrated a deep commitment to feminist and racial justice politics that differed from the broad politics of the labor movement at the time (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008).

The early DWU leaders began to gather on a weekly basis, organizing broader general meetings every month, first in the back of an African American bookstore and then in the basement of a church in Brooklyn. These meetings would combine education on worker rights with worker testimonials about their experiences in the industry, using story-sharing to build a shared sense of identity and connection among workers. The early years of DWU were characterized by a deep level of connection among a small group of leaders who volunteered endless hours to build the organization. These early members would gather for periodic political education sessions, a training series they called “None But Ourselves” after the Bob Marley’s well-know Redemption
Song, which called on people to “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. / None but ourselves can free our minds.” These early members would also gather for a monthly “Ladies’ Night Out,” integrating informal community-building into the regular pressures of the organizing work.

DWU’s earliest organizing efforts focused on worker-to-worker education and organizing pressure campaigns targeting particularly abusive employers. DWU organizers and member-leaders would reach out to other domestic workers through their social networks. Nannies would share DWU newsletters with other nannies while they chatted in the playground. Workers would educate their neighbors and after church services about their rights and how to advocate for themselves on the job. Much of this worker-to-worker education focused on promoting a standard model contract that domestic workers could use as a model in their negotiations with their employers. This model contract was an organizing tool that one of DWU’s founding members, Carolyn DeLeon, brought from her experiences as a domestic worker in Hong Kong, where all domestic workers are employed under a state-administered contract which is supposed to provide them with a baseline of standards and protections. Although critics have argued that these contracts serve as a mechanism for the control and exploitation of domestic workers in Hong Kong (Constable 1997), the idea that workers could raise standards in the industry by demanding formal contracts and by enforcing an informal industry floor was inspirational to DWU’s early members. The organization developed a standard contract that they reproduced in all of their newsletters and public education materials. DWU also partnered with local legal advocacy organizations and law schools to offer legal support and referral services to victims of wage theft and other workplace violations, including sexual harassment and violence. Like many other worker centers, DWU views legal services as a supplement to collective organizing for
structural change (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005). Because legal strategies are not always sufficient to win redress from employers who withhold wages or use violence against domestic workers, DWU also used public protests to expose and pressure abusive employers. Through these strategies, the organization helped workers win more than $500,000 in compensation for unpaid wages over the years.

As the organization grew, it developed a number of different training programs to support its members on the job and in their organizing. Like other worker centers that prioritize political education and use Frierean popular education methods (Fine 2006; Milkman, et al. 2010), DWU runs an annual Leadership Training Program and an Advanced Leadership Training Program to deepen the organizing skills and the political analysis of its emergent leaders. Run by DWU staff, members and allies, these programs use popular education methods including role plays, skits, visuals and small group processing. These courses also provide time for workers to share their stories with each other. Domestic Workers United sponsors an annual Nanny Course, which incorporates practical skills trainings like CPR certification and contract negotiation, workshops on workers’ rights and political education.

In 2003, Domestic Workers United took on its first campaign to change government policy. They successfully lobbied the New York City Council to pass a law that required local domestic work employment agencies to inform both workers and employers about minimum wage and overtime protections. That campaign served as a practice round for the legislative campaign that would come to define the work of Domestic Workers United for the next six years: the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights.
The vision for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was developed at the “Having Your Say” convention, a day-long gathering of hundreds of domestic workers from around the city. The workers who were present at this convention identified a set of policy priorities to expand workers right and protections on the job, including overtime pay, a minimum of one day of rest per week, an annual cost-of-living adjustment, health care, a living wage of $14 an hour, notice of termination, severance pay, paid holidays, paid leave, and protection from discrimination. These priorities were drafted into the formal Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which was introduced to the New York State legislature in 2004.

The campaign for the Bill of Rights took six years and countless hours of organizing by DWU staff, leaders and allies. That organizing process will be described in more detail in later chapters, but it was built around a dual strategy of worker-led lobbying through which hundreds of workers travelled to Albany to tell their stories to legislators and alliance-building with a range of social forces, including most centrally the traditional labor movement and employers of domestic workers. During the course of the campaign, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), a progressive Jewish organization that was closely allied with DWU, began a project to organize Jewish employers of domestic workers into a network called Shalom Bayit, a Hebrew phrase which translates to “Peace in the Home.” The active support of these employers played a crucial role in convincing legislators, many of whom represented districts that were heavily populated by employers, to support the Bill.
In 2010, after six long years of organizing,\textsuperscript{12} the New York State legislature passed the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. The final bill included: the right to overtime pay at time-and-a-half after 40 hours of work in a week, or 44 hours for workers who live in their employer’s home; a day of rest every seven days, or overtime pay if they agree to work on that day; three paid days of rest each year after one year of work for the same employer; protection under New York State Human Rights Law, and the creation of a special cause of action for domestic workers who suffer sexual or racial harassment; and a directive to the New York State Department of Labor to investigate the feasibility of including domestic workers in collective bargaining rights.

The Bill’s victory demonstrated the power of domestic worker organizing, and it also profoundly changed the political context for that organizing. The victory of the Bill of Rights signified a reversal of the decades-long racialized and gendered exclusion of domestic workers from basic worker protections. By winning inclusion in basic state protections, Domestic Workers United shifted the terrain of its struggle. Having focused for years on a legislative struggle for equality and inclusion, Domestic Workers United would now need to develop new strategic methods for enforcing their new rights and raising industry standards above the minimum protections provided by the state. DWU realized that the terrains of enforcement and the fight for higher standards were profoundly different from the legislative sphere, and that their next phase of organizing would need to expand beyond the strategies that had won the Bill of Rights: moral framing around rights, advocacy by a core of worker-leaders and coalition-building with progressive employers and labor.

\textsuperscript{12} I have here only offered a cursory explanation of this incredibly rich campaign. A more thorough narrative of the Bill of Rights campaign is captured in detail in Ai-jen Poo’s (2010) piece, “Organizing with Love.”
In the year after the Bill of Rights, DWU focused on developing grassroots enforcement strategies in order to consolidate their victory. Given the structure of the industry and the limited reach of the Department of Labor, it became clear that the rights contained in the Bill would not be realized without pressure from below. In order to effectively enforce the Bill, DWU assessed that it would have to develop a much wider reach into the industry. The organization spent much of this first year developing a bottom-up worker-led enforcement program called the Ambassadors Program, in which worker-leaders volunteered to take responsibility for educating workers in specific neighborhoods about their newly-won rights. DWU also began a process of imagining the different long-term strategic trajectories that would enable them to win higher standards in the industry, including modified forms of collective bargaining and expanded legislation to push beyond the existent limits of workers rights.

The year during which I did my fieldwork with Domestic Workers United was both exciting and difficult for the organization. Beginning with a wave of celebration, the organization needed to quickly shift gears in order to respond to these changed conditions. Members and staff alike had to push themselves to move outside of their comfort zones, trying unfamiliar new methods that did not mesh easily with the skills that they had developed during the Bill of Rights campaign. The Bill’s victory timed with a significant staffing transition, as Ai-jen Poo, the founding organizer, left the organization in order to take up a leadership position at the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a federation of domestic worker organizations from around the country which DWU had helped to found in 2007. Priscilla Gonzalez, a young Latina woman whose mother is a domestic worker and who had worked as an organizer with DWU for years, was hired as the
organization’s Executive Director right before the Bill’s passage. The organization simultaneously undertook a serious effort to become more fully multi-racial by building up a stronger base among Latina workers, and it became an independent 501(c)3 organization at the same time.

These simultaneous transitions placed a tremendous amount of pressure on the inter-personal rifts and internal contradictions that are present in any organization, and DWU entered a period of serious internal struggle over issues small and large. At the time of this writing, those struggles are still underway, and it is unclear where they will leave the organization. For reasons both ethical and political, I chose not to describe the specifics of these struggles. Instead, I chose to focus my dissertation primarily on DWU’s experiments with organizing and on the larger subterranean issues that shaped those internal struggles: tensions that reflect the isolation and individualization that define the industry; regional and racial conflicts; the differences between workers’ class origins; and the impact of downward social mobility. Later iterations of my work may excavate these conflicts more explicitly, once the outcomes of these struggles become clear, but I write this work secure in the knowledge that, whatever the outcome of these conflicts may be, there are huge insights to be gained from a deep exploration of DWU’s ground-breaking organizing efforts. Domestic workers organizations around the country have already taken up the model of the New York Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaign, advancing similar legislation in California, Massachusetts and other states. DWU’s work also has relevance beyond the domestic work industry, suggesting some of the strategic directions that could help the broader labor movement to find its way through this rapidly changing political-economic terrain. In particular, the Bill of Rights campaign highlights the ongoing impacts of the many mechanisms
of stratification and constraint that were built into the framework of New Deal labor legislation, and it provides insight into the ways in which that framework cannot adequately address the interests of growing numbers of contemporary workers in the United States. DWU’s experiments with bottom-up enforcement and their imaginaries for methods of winning standards above the minimum suggest new paths that could take us beyond the limits of current worker protections and labor rights.

Methodology

It would be impossible for me to explain why I chose to engage in this research or how I went about it without discussing my political relationship with Domestic Workers United. I had a close relationship with DWU long before I began my formal research, having served as a trainer for their leadership programs since I moved to New York City to begin graduate school. DWU’s worker-leaders blew me away from the first time I met them. I was supposedly there to teach them about the history of the domestic work industry and the structural relationship between race, class and gender, but it was clear that it was a dialogue and an exchange of knowledge from the beginning. Over the years, I helped DWU to develop its political education curriculum which was designed to create space for domestic workers to talk about the macro-level forces that shaped their industry, including workshops on the oppression of women, the history of imperialism, neoliberalism and globalization, the role of domestic work in “global cities” like New York. These workshops served as rich sites for political dialogue between DWU’s worker-leaders; descriptions of conversations that took place in these trainings are integrated throughout this work because they often cut to the heart of the issues raised in this work. Through this work, I developed close relationships with a number of the women who were the leaders and staff of
the organization, and we began to think out loud together about the political challenges and quandaries facing the organization and the broader workers movement. Through my relationship with DWU, I became involved in the broader movement of low-wage workers that was emerging around the country, centrally including the National Domestic Workers Alliance which DWU helped to found in 2007 and the Excluded Workers Congress\(^\text{13}\) which is a national federation of independent workers organizations rooted in sectors like restaurant workers, taxi drivers and guest workers. Through those relationships, I came to be connected to strategic dialogues between these independent worker organizations and the traditional union movement, dialogues focused on addressing the crisis in the union movement and reigniting a broader workers movement in the United States. Engaging in this broader field of movement-building helped me to begin to understand the gravitational role that DWU has played in this emergent movement. It enabled me to come to have a much deeper and dynamic sense of the challenges facing the many different kinds of organizations in the contemporary labor movement. It helped me to realize that, while many people in the labor movement are coming to realize the historical outdatedness of the factory paradigm of worker organizing, no one has yet developed an effective alternative framework. It was this combination of crisis and opening that motivated me to take up this research project. While DWU certainly has not developed a full-blown alternative paradigm, it is one of the sites where the new experiments in workers organizing have reached a level of impact and maturity. When DWU succeeded in its campaign to pass the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, it manifested many of the strengths of the workers center movement. At the same moment, the demands of their new political terrain challenged them to overcome the weaknesses in the workers center model, that is, the limits of advocacy and the challenges of scale and

\(^{13}\) The Excluded Workers Congress has since be re-named the “United Workers Congress.”
power. I came to believe that a deep attention to this transitionary moment would provide useful lessons towards the broader project of re-imagining of worker organizing.

I also realized that DWU’s work had much to offer towards enriching of scholarly examinations of worker organizing and contemporary class relations, demonstrating a turning point in the maturation of new worker organizing in the United States. It provides a clear model of “intersectional organizing” in which the prioritization of the struggle against racial and gender oppression helped to expand the field of “class struggle,” rather than being used to trump class-based analyses and struggles or to narrow them in particularistic ways. It offers an incredibly rich site for examinations of transnational class formation, contestations over the social organization of reproductive labor and transnationally-informed analyses of and challenges to racial inequality. And it can contribute to challenging the long-standing dichotomization between “hidden forms” of resistance and collective struggle.

My research also offered to make some particular contributions to the growing field of literature on the domestic work industry. This literature has focused on the oppressive experiences that workers face in the industry. Almost all scholars of domestic work have explored the hidden transcripts of domestic workers resistance, and many scholars, including Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), Mary Romero (1992), Grace Chang (2000) and Phyllis Palmer (1989) for example, have integrated insightful analyses of domestic workers’ collective organizing into their analysis of the dynamics in the industry, contemporary domestic workers’ organizing itself has not itself been the primary subject of analysis of any book-length work. Most of the literature on domestic workers has focused on the experiences of workers from the same ethnic groups.
Because my research focuses on a multi-racial organization of women engaged in actively contesting their conditions, it will offer a new perspective on the industry.

Towards that effort, I engaged in fifteen months of participant observation with Domestic Workers United, or, more accurately, I engaged in “observant participation” in the organizing work (Vargas 2008). That is, my observations of Domestic Workers United’s work were an outgrowth of my active participation in their organizing work. After a series of conversations about the challenges that DWU faced in the wake of the Bill of Rights victory, we decided that I would help to build the DWU Ambassadors program, the neighborhood-based worker-led enforcement program intended to make the Bill of Rights a reality in workers lives. This meant participation in endless meetings, trainings and the organization’s annual assemblies and conventions. It meant going out on outreach with the Ambassadors, helping to gather surveys about the conditions that workers faced and their visions for the industry. It meant regular informal planning and debriefing conversations with the organization’s staff and leaders, check-ins with the Ambassadors and innumerable side conversations about the organization’s work and internal dynamics. I was also able to engage in conversations with the domestic worker employer organizer at DWU’s allied organization, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, about their experiments, successes and struggles. I was invited to attend key meetings, like DWU’s meeting with the Department of Labor a year after the Bill’s passage to discussion the state of the enforcement efforts. My participation allowed me to observe both the formal work of the organization and the informal dynamics that develop between members, allowing me to observe a milieu of cultural practices, collective actions, organizational processes and discourses that
constitute the “performative” dynamics of class subjectivity and workers struggle rather than being restricted to documenting workers stated attitudes (Fantasia 1988).

I also conducted a series of life history interviews with fifteen DWU members and leaders. The structure for these interviews built on Mintz’s (1960) classic life history model for analyzing changing class relations, integrating the insights that migrant workers’ experience of class must be analyzed transnationally (Rouse 1992) and that class is not constituted in the workplace alone but is also shaped in a manifold number of sites of “everyday life:” political activity, home, family, community, leisure and recreation (Bourdieu 1984; Gramsci 1972; Lamphere 1987; Lefebvre 1991; Mullings 1997). This combination of extended interviews and ethnographic observation helped me to develop a contextualized sense of the workers’ political conceptions, beliefs and practices (Fantasia 1988; Halle 1984; Susser 2012) that was deeper and more dynamics than the sociological survey methods commonly used to study workers subjectivities (Livingstone and Mangan 1996; Wright 1985). In these interviews, we talked about workers’ experiences growing up and their working lives before they migrated. We talked about their path through the domestic work industry and where they saw themselves in the future. They told me about how they got involved in Domestic Workers United and how it has changed the way they see themselves and their work. We would invariably talk about what was going on in the organization: what they were excited about, who frustrated them, who they admired. These interviews lasted from anywhere between two and ten hours. These interviews transformed my understanding of DWU’s organizing work in profound ways. They helped me to build much deeper relationships with individual leaders than I had been able to build through the day-to-day work. That closeness led to much more honest conversations about the organizing and to a
deeper involvement in the organization’s work. They also helped me to understand the profound diversity and complexity of experiences of the members of the organization. Though I knew that domestic workers came from a range of backgrounds in their nations of origins, hearing what those differences came to mean in workers’ lives opened up new layers of understanding for me. As I came to understand workers’ backgrounds and experiences in the industry, conflicts that had seemed reducible to political differences and interpersonal tensions took on different meanings that were more grounded in workers lived experiences and differences. These interviews also challenged me to understand their work as they experienced it, rather than as I thought it to be. The clearest example of this was the process of coming to understand how much workers’ personal relationships with the people in their care meant to them. At first, it was hard for me to reconcile the depth of their love with the exploitative nature of the industry; I saw these dynamics as contradictory. But over time, as more and more women told me their stories, I came to understand the dynamic tension between love and exploitation in the industry and between care and degradation. They helped me to learn the nuances of how this tension impacted their individual decisions on the job and how it helped to expand their organizing.

This kind of deep engagement with the organization and its leaders was at once helpful and challenging for my research. On the one hand, my political commitment to the organization’s work gave me a level of access that would never have been possible otherwise, particularly for a white woman (like myself) trying to research an industry that has been so profoundly shaped by racial inequality. For example, The Help, a Hollywood movie in which a white woman publishes a book of Black domestic workers stories, was released during the year I was doing my research. I had many conversations with DWU leaders who were frustrated with more privileged women
profiteering from the stories of domestic workers, a model that was uncomfortably close to my own research efforts. While it was inevitable that some women would be distrustful of me, my long-standing commitment to supporting the organization’s work meant that many of the organizations’ leaders trusted me enough to share their stories and to allow me into the day-to-day workings of the organization. At the same time, my deep engagement with the organizations meant that I was pulled into the organization’s internal struggles and conflicts, a fact which gave me deeper insights into one section of the organization’s membership but which may have also skewed my perspectives on others. I have been intentional about trying to step back from my deep level of engagement during my writing process, pushing myself to see the organization’s dynamics from all sides and, more importantly, to look for the deeper reasons why different conflicts took place. But for all these complications, I believe that my positioning within the organization deeply enriched my understanding of the dynamics in the industry and in the organizing process. This reflects the insights of other activist scholars, including Charles Hale (2008) and João Vargas (2008) among others, who have argued that their engagement strengthens their research.

My engagement clearly opens up questions of objectivity and distortion: Can I step back far enough to be critical? Did my contributions to the work distort the field I was studying? On the question of objectivity and criticism, I have no qualms. These are certainly many partisan assumptions in my stance: that we need a radical transformation of power relations in this country and in the world, that we will need a powerful new labor movement if we are going to win that level of change, that the new worker organizations offer some hope for new models and so on. But I believe that I have made those stances clear, so the reader can evaluate my work
with that in mind. And while I am deeply committed to the work of Domestic Workers United
and the broader workers movement, it is out of that deep commitment that I am willing to step
back and see the challenges and flaws and contradictions in DWU’s model. While I am
personally and politically dedicated to talking about these gaps and challenges in productive
ways, I believe that we will not be able to advance politically if we do not engage in deep and
honest reflection about the work. I have more complicated feelings about my influence on the
organization. While I know that all anthropologists influence the populations which they are
studying, I had a clear and intentional influence on DWU: I ran political education training
programs about power relations with the same leaders whom I was interviewing about their
perspectives on race, class and gender, and I helped to build one of the programs about which I
am reflecting. However, these projects were always conceived and developed in deep dialogue
with the organization’s staff and leaders. As anyone who has ever engaged with the incredibly
strong women who lead DWU can attest, no one could tell these women how to think. Through
the course of writing, I found peace with this quandary, accepting that my influence mattered but
that the broader organizing process had its own momentum. I believe that the access I gained
through my role in the organization gave me a deeper and more honest insight into the ways in
which these powerful women understood the world and how they were choosing to engage in
changing it. I honestly believe that they shaped me and my thinking far more than I shaped them,
and I am proud of this intellectual product that I feel has been created in dialogue with them.

It is important to note that my research was focused on the study of a single organization that is
based in an industry that employs hundreds of thousands of workers. DWU’s composition is not
perfectly reflective of the composition of the industry as a whole: it primarily represents
Caribbean and Latina women who work as nannies and who inhabit the middle tiers of the industry. This limited my sample in significant ways, preventing me from being able to give meaningful reflections on the make-up of and dynamics within the industry as a whole. This proved to be somewhat troubling when I attempted to draw broader conclusions about the dynamics of the broader industry. I lacked access to concrete statistics on the composition of the workforce, and I lacked insight into the experiences of housecleaners, of Asian and white workers, and of workers in the industry’s higher and lowest tiers. Throughout this dissertation, I do reflect on the broader dynamics of the industry, but, in doing so, I attempt to situate the specific experiences of DWU members in the context of patterns explored by other scholars of domestic work in order to avoid over-generalizing from my limited sample. But while my ability to reflect on the industry as a whole was limited, my focus on DWU as an organization enabled me to provide deep insights into the process of organizing. DWU has been a leading organization in the contemporary domestic workers movement, and it won that movement’s first significant legislative victory. I therefore consider the limits of my sample to be a worthwhile trade-off in my attempt to draw out lessons towards the development of new paradigms of worker organizing.

Chapter Outline

This work will trace DWU’s work from the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights through its efforts to enforce the Bill and to develop a fight for higher standards. Each of my chapters will explore a different aspect the terrain of the domestic work industry and a different component of DWU’s organizing model. Reflecting my integrative approach to class analysis, each chapter will also engage a different aspect of the contested reorganization of class relations:
the changing organization of production and the changing structure of work, transitions in social reproduction, 14 the changing shape of racial politics and projects, 15 the contested development of the state, 16 shifting paradigms of worker power and the always dynamic process of class  

14 Feminist scholars have argued that the organization of class relations must expand beyond a focus on production and the workplace to consider the organization of “social reproduction” and transitions in family forms and gender relations. Because these gendered aspects of social life are just as fundamental to the organization of the economy as formal production, feminist scholars have argued that gender must be understood as a fundamental organizing principle in any study of class formation (Dalla Costa and James 1973; Edholm, et al. 1977; Ginsburg and Reiter 1995; Hartmann 1981; Mies 1986). The organization of reproductive labor is not universal or ahistorical; it is constantly changing in response to ongoing struggles over the division of labor, the resourcing for that labor and its social meaning. Those struggles manifest both within the family and between the family, state and capital. The results of those struggles are profoundly conditioned by the particular political-economic dynamics and gender relations in a given era (Brenner and Laslett 1989; Edholm, et al. 1977; Glenn 1992; Katz 2001; Leacock 1972; Molyneux 1979; Sacks 1984). There is a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between the shifting demands of accumulation and changes in the socially accepted roles of men and women who inhabit different racial and class positions. While they are impacted by broader political-economic transitions, these racialized gender dynamics also facilitate the formation of group identity and provide markers of delineation between groups, making gender a crucial front in the process of class formation (Ginsburg and Reiter 1995; Glenn 1992; Mies 1986; Stoler 2002). Many feminist scholars have deployed an “intersectionality” framework to understand the ways in which gender roles and gender ideologies manifest in different ways for men and women in different racial and class groups and to reflect on gender and familial relations as a crucial front in the construction of racial and class orders (Brodkin 2000; Davis 1983; Glenn 1992; Hill Collins 2009).  

15 I prioritize questions of racial oppression in my analysis based on the idea that we must attend deeply to the differentiations and stratification that are inherent to the process of capital accumulation. Traditional Marxist theory has often analyzed the dynamics of race, nation and gender as epiphenomenal to the dynamics of class and predicted that capitalist development would eliminate the internal racial, national and gender stratifications within the working class. This resultant homogenization would create the conditions for the “inevitable” unification of the multi-racial, multi-national working class. History has, however, shown that capitalism simultaneously has the tendency to internalize social and geographic differentiations and mobilize them in its own political and economic interests (Gramsci 1972; Hall 1986a; Harvey 1996; Harvey 1998). The working class is thus deeply stratified between colonial and metropole nations (Wallerstein 1975) and within nations along the lines of race (Brodkin 2000; Davis 1983; Du Bois 1969; Hall 1996). These dynamics are not merely ideological “tricks” deployed by the elite to divide an otherwise homogenous working class. Race and nation can be more accurately understood as both material realities and political projects which both elites and exploited classes are actively engaged in promoting. Although culture and ideology are crucial aspects of racial stratification, race cannot be adequately understood as a strictly cultural phenomenon or as an ideological expression of material class relations. Instead, race is structured into the organizations of production through the racialized division of labor, and it structures other material processes like the construction of segregated urban neighborhoods, resulting in racialized class orders (Du Bois 1969; Hall 1978; Hall 1996; Mullings 2005; Omi and Winant 1994). Because divisions between different strata of the working class are often constructed along racial lines, it has been has argued that class is often lived through the “modality” of race, that is, the dynamics of class are often shaped through and experienced as racial dynamics (Hall 1978).  

16 The state is a central node in the process of class formation. The state and the workplace have never been separate; they have always been mutually defining sites of contestation and constitution (Glenn 2002). State labor rights and protections both reflect and shape the ways in which we understand “work” and “workers.” Government officials do not unilaterally establish frameworks for worker rights and protections; rather, these frameworks are developed through an active process of contestation and negotiation between workers, capital and the state. Organized movements of workers are active participants in the process of the formation of state labor law and of broader class structures and relations. Workers’ struggles with the state are an important arena in which they come to shape their understandings of themselves as a “class” (Brodkin 2000; Glenn 2002; Gramsci 1972; Hall 1986b; Katzenelson and Zolberg 1986). The terms of economic citizenship, as shaped through the struggles of workers with their employers
formation. In each of these chapters, I will explore the ways in which historically established power relations are manifesting in new ways in the “neoliberal present” (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008), and I will also draw out DWU’s transformative vision for the future in each of these spheres. I will tie these threads together in my concluding chapter, pulling out the insights that DWU’s work suggests towards the development of new paradigms of worker organizing.

But, before I dig into this exploration of DWU’s organizing work, my opening chapter, “Workers Stories Can Play a Crucial Role in Drawing People into a Struggle,” provides brief life histories of eleven of DWU’s worker-leaders, women who played central roles in the development of DWU’s models. This chapter is intended to convey the remarkable diversity of backgrounds and experiences that exist within workers organizations. It would be easy to assume a degree of homogeneity of women’s experiences, given that these women currently inhabit a shared location in the U.S. class order. There are, indeed, remarkable echoes between their experiences in the domestic work industry. But their stories also communicate the importance of and the state, condition the ways in which workers are empowered or constrained in their workplace-based struggles. The ways in which the state structures labor law are both reflective and constitutive of broader class relations, including the ways in which class interpenetrates with race, gender and nationality. The struggle over the racial and gender inequities of economic citizenship in the United States have long been a central aspect of the struggles of workers of color and women workers in this country, struggles with interweave political struggles over state policies with cultural struggles over the meaning and value of work itself (Glenn 2002).

17 Class formation is the highly contingent and historically-specific process by which people who share a position in the always-changing structure of class relations come to make sense of their relationships with each other and with other groups in society (Thompson 1963). “Class formation” builds on the analytical approach that asserts that class cannot be reduced to an economic position; it is just as centrally a social and political relation. The structural positions that people inhabit do not automatically determine their understandings of their class position and interests. Rather, structures define the range of possibilities for different ways of interpreting social relations (Mullings 1997; Thompson 1978; Wood 1990). Thus, the political, the ideological and the cultural are crucial in the shaping of class itself. A class formation approach requires an open-ness to a range of ways in which workers interpret and express their experiences, a sensitivity to the cultural and political forces at play in that process of interpretation and an awareness of the various ways in which solidarity and division may manifest among workers who inhabit a shared structural position.

18 As one expression of my desire to ground this work in the voice and visions of DWU’s leaders, each of my chapter titles draws on a quotation from a worker leader or a slogan from Domestic Workers united.
understanding the diversity of workers’ lives beyond their experiences in the workplace: their family histories, their experiences with work and class in their nations of origins, their relationships with people in their communities and more. As Boris and Nadasen (2008) point out, when domestic workers organize, they do not only identify as “workers” but also as caregivers, as mothers and as immigrants. This understanding gives us a deep sense of the need to rethink the boundaries of worker organizing, helping us to transcend the “worksite orientation” of the factory paradigm and to look at workers experiences of class as a contested narrative of a complicated trajectory rather than as a simple snapshot of a particular moment in time.

Knowing that terrain of struggle must necessarily influence the ways in which workers come to resist their exploitation, my next three chapters will explore three different aspects of the particular terrain of domestic work industry: decentralization and informalization, the racialized degradation of domestic work and the devaluation of caring labor. In each of these chapters I explore the relationship between individualized infra-politics and more explicit forms of collective struggle (Kelley 1994; Scott 1990) and between the drive to improve workers material conditions and the fight to win respect and dignity for domestic work (Fraser 1994; Macdonald and Merrill 2002). I also attend to the impacts of these various dynamics on workers understanding of their positions, identities and interests; in this, I will explore their understandings of both intra-class relations, that is, relations between workers, and inter-class relations, that is, workers’ relations with employers and other social forces.

This first of these, “The Division Starts in the Workplace,” will explore the impact of the decentralization, informalization and stratification of the lower tiers of the domestic work
industry. Domestic work is profoundly decentralized, located in tens of thousands of private homes around the metropolitan regions. The industry functions effectively outside of government regulation or collective standards. This structure encourages domestic workers to deploy individualized advancement strategies in order to improve their conditions, though many immigrant women build informal networks that allow for some level of collectivization of struggle (Brown 2011; Hunter 1997). I will explore the ways in which Domestic Workers United adopted a dual strategy to deal with these dynamics: developing programs and practices that formalized these individualized advancement strategies and working to bring the domestic work industry “out of the shadows” and into the reach of state regulation. Through this chapter, I will explore the ways in which shifts in the structure of the workplace have impacted the broader terrain of worker organizing.

My next chapter, “Tell Dem Slavery Done,” will explore the ways in which the racial logic that was formed by racial slavery in the United States continues to echo in the structure and relations of the contemporary domestic work industry. Almost every worker I spoke with had stories of job in which she believed that she had been treated “like a slave,” mainly their first jobs in the bottom tiers of the industry. The critical role of these experiences with racialized degradation has led DWU to focus its work around the struggle against racial oppression in the industry, challenging the historic exclusions of domestic workers from the standard package of worker rights and framing their work in the language of racial justice and civil rights. Through this chapter, I will be examining the centrality of racial oppression to class relations in the United States and its implications for worker organizing. I will argue that the effectiveness of DWU’s
model suggests the power of placing the struggle against racial oppression at the center of the labor movement in the United States.

The following chapter, “The Love Can Take Over Everything Else,” will explore the contradiction between the societal devaluation of the caring labor and the powerful relationships of love that exist between domestic workers and the people for whom they provide care. I will argue that the meaning and impact of those caring relationships is contested, with employers often deploying care to increase their ability to exploit workers while workers attempt to use care as a source of pride and deeper meaning in their work. I found that workers sometimes make individual compromises in their wages and working conditions in the name of love, but that same love also provided a motivating factor for workers to engage in collective organizing to challenge the social devaluation of their labor. DWU’s organizing model reflects the significance of these caring relationships; the organization developed internal practices to validate the importance of the caring labor and built campaigns to challenge the devaluation of care work. Through this chapter, I will begin to explore the changing organization of reproductive labor in the United States and how it shapes worker organizing.

The next three chapters will explore DWU’s campaign work in more detail, starting with a chapter focused on the campaign to win the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, followed by chapter exploring their attempts to enforce the rights they had won through a worker-led enforcement strategy and a chapter focused on DWU’s initial efforts to develop new strategies to raise standards in the industry above the legal minimum. The passage of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights represented a turning point in the struggle for domestic workers’ rights, from the
struggle for equality and inclusion to the struggle for standards above the legally-established minimum. Turning points are moments that can illuminate both the past and the future. In this case, the passage of the Bill of Rights sheds light on the stratifying and constraining nature of historic labor rights and protections in the United States, while DWU’s work to imagine the next stages of their struggle in the year following the bill’s passage sheds light on possible future trajectories for the transformation of workers’ rights in this country.

The chapter on the campaign for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, “Our Day Has Finally Come,” will trace the process by which the initially expansive framework of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights was negotiated down to equal inclusion in the existent rights and protections. I contextualize this story in a historic exploration of the processes by which our current framework for workers’ rights, which is characterized by a clear prioritization of workplace-based collective bargaining and the development of a frail social safety net and weak social labor protections, was negotiated during the New Deal. I explore these historical processes to unearth the ways in which race and gender helped to shape historical rights and to reveal that this framework institutionalized a stratified form of economic citizenship that ultimately constrained the struggles of all workers. While the Bill of Rights campaign suggests the tremendous importance and power of the struggle for equality, it also exposes the fact that equality is not enough. Through this chapter, I will explore the way in which our current framework for government-ensured worker rights and protections needs to shift in order to address changes in the political-economic order.
My seventh chapter, “We Are Going to Have to be the Ones to Enforce It,” examines DWU’s efforts to push against the edges of the terms of that equality. In the year after the passage of the Bill of Rights, DWU began to experiment with new strategies for enforcement and for raising standards above the legal minimum. It quickly became clear that the Department of Labor would not be able to enforce the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in a comprehensive way, due to the convergence of the historical construction of enforcement mechanisms around the industrial model and the neoliberal decimation of the labor inspectorate. In response, DWU began a process of developing a bottom-up enforcement program through which worker-leaders volunteered to educate their fellow workers about their newly-won rights in neighborhoods around the city. In so doing, they developed a model for worker organizing that responded to the conditions of their industry: fostering bottom-up worker leadership to respond to the decentralization of the industry, working through existent social networks between domestic workers, and being sensitive to the geographic variations in the industry. Through this chapter, I will explore continuities and shifts in the regulatory regime and what demands enforcement efforts make on contemporary worker organizations. I argue that DWU’s innovations begin to suggest new models for labor enforcement and worker organizing that not only challenge the ravages of the neoliberal project but that they also begin to push beyond the limits established during the New Deal.

My eighth chapter, “This is Only the Beginning,” continues this exploration into models that transcend the limits of existent worker organizing paradigms by looking at the ways in which DWU began to imagine the struggle to raise standards in the industry above the legally-established minimum, given the lack of fit between the dynamics of the industry and the
established model of collective bargaining. In this chapter, I argue that the location of the domestic work industry in the gendered sphere of reproductive labor is the definitional structural condition that has forced domestic worker organizers to develop new models for worker organizing. Their experiments included geographic models of informal collective bargaining through social networks, a federal-level legislative campaign that combines demands for worker rights with the interests of people who are in need of long-term care, and an imaginary of a domestic workers strike in New York City. These efforts all force us to broaden our perspective beyond a strict focus on the individual worker and the isolated workplace and to attend to the broader social significance of the labor of social reproduction. Through this chapter, I will explore the changing nature of worker power. I will argue that DWU’s work suggests new ways to think about the potential collective power of domestic workers and more expansive and integrative frameworks for workers rights and the social safety net.

My final ethnographic chapters will complicate the relatively unitary organizing story that I will have told through the earlier chapters, drawing out the often subterranean contradictions that exist within the domestic work industry. These contradictions reflect some of structural aspects of the industry which often remain opaque to outside observers. In my chapter, “We Have Differences, But in The End We Are All Working for The Same Thing,” I explore the political impacts of racialized stratification of the lower tiers of the industry. This often leads to racialized tensions between workers in the lower tiers of the industry. In the following chapter, “Here, I Am Not Me...Back Home, I Would Be Me,” I explore the implications of another often-obscured dynamic in the industry: the fact that domestic workers come from a range of occupations and class backgrounds in their nations of origin. These classed differences are significant in shaping
domestic workers’ experiences of the industry and their relationships with each other. I found that neither of these contradictions was effectively addressed through calls for unity or assertions that “we are all in the same position.” Instead, deeper levels of unity and solidarity were only built when these contradictions between workers were put on the table for explicit discussion and struggle. Through these chapters, I will explore the complicated and contested dynamics of class formation as they manifest in the contemporary domestic work industry. I will argue that these dynamics have broader implications for how we think about the “working class” and how worker organizers need to approach the process of building solidarity between workers.

In my concluding chapter, I will draw out the theoretical and political implications of DWU’s organizing work. While the new models with which they were experimenting are too nascent to fully evaluate for their effectiveness, they point in the direction of some possible trajectories for the development of new paradigms of workers organizing and more dynamic and expansive approaches to class analysis.
CHAPTER 2: “Workers Stories Can Play a Crucial Role in Drawing People into a Struggle:” Life Histories of Leading Members of Domestic Workers United

The story of Domestic Workers United has to begin with the stories of the women who built the organization. Too often, scholarly analyses of labor organizing efforts treat the organization or the campaign as their unit of study, consigning the workers who built those organizations to the occasional quotation or representative story. Even thought these analyses of organizing efforts emphasize working people’s agency, this organizational focus can help to solidify the sense that working people are monolithic. It can imply that they are defined by their positions as “workers” rather than individuals who have full lives and distinct life trajectories with their particular hardships and their unique joys. Even when we are trying to argue that these workers deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, we can lose sight of their humanity.

Story-sharing is an important aspect of Domestic Workers United’s work. Reflecting on her time with DWU, Ai-jen Poo (2010) wrote,

The work of Domestic Workers United is based on the premise that our power is rooted in our membership, specifically on the capacity of our membership to lead our organization and to provide leadership for broader movements that reach beyond domestic workers. The Bill of Rights campaign strengthened that resolve. But it also taught us the ways in which workers stories can play a crucial role in drawing people into a struggle, particularly when those stories emphasize connection and interdependence. We knew that the stories and leadership of domestic workers would be a driving force throughout the campaign. (10)

Here, I will share the stories of eleven of the women with whom I worked and who did me the honor of sharing their stories with me. It would not be possible for me to tell the stories of all

19 Some of these women asked that I used their names in this work, a request I honored after reviewing their stories and quotations with them and making sure that nothing contained here could put them at risk. Other workers wished to remain anonymous, so I honored that desire by changing their name and some of the details of their stories so
of DWU’s leaders: I did not do in-depth interviews with all of the women who have led DWU over the years, and it would take an entire book to tell all of their amazing stories. And I do not tell the stories of all of the women whom I interviewed. I chose eleven women who were most actively involved in the organization during my research and whose stories capture the wide range of backgrounds and life experiences that exist among women in the industry. I chose to write about these women in particular because I found myself returning to their words again and again throughout the following chapters, and I want the reader to have a sense of the women whose experiences and analyses bring life and texture to this work.

In each description, I will provide some descriptive information such as age range, nation of origin and racial background. To the extent possible - I will describe each woman’s childhood experiences and the reasons why she migrated to the United States. I will tell the stories of her entrance into the domestic work industry, one or two representative working experiences and her involvement in DWU. I will also try to give the reader a sense of how each woman sees her future unfolding.

**Allison:** Allison is a nanny from Barbados who is in her forties, but her sunny disposition makes it seem like she’s in her twenties. She is pretty, with bright eyes and long locks that she usually wears twisted high and wrapped tightly behind her head. Twenty years into her career as a domestic worker, Allison is now a well-paid nanny in Park Slope. She has developed an informal specialization in working with children with behavioral and developmental challenges, and she constantly talks about how much she loves the children she cares for.
Allison grew up in a small fishing village in Barbados, right on the ocean. She and her thirteen brothers and sisters were raised by their mother in an old wooden house in the village. Shortly after Allison was born, her father migrated to the United States to work in the restaurant industry so he could send money home to support the family. Her mother stayed at home to raise the children. Before Allison had been born, her mother had work as a domestic worker in New York City for several years. When Allison was a child, her grandmother also worked as a domestic worker for a wealthy white family in Barbados. Allison speaks with pain and anger in her voice when she tells their stories. Talking about her grandmother, she said,

There was a lot of things that she put up with that I don’t see myself ever doing. My grandmother, she would talk about the things that pissed her off but then she would get up the next morning like nothing happened, and she would go to work. She even had to work on Christmas Day. Christmas home is a huge thing. It’s really about family. It’s about the neighborhood because everybody eats together. You go from neighbor to neighbor’s house. It’s a big thing. And my grandmother, on Christmas Day, she would have to get up and go into work to cook for the family that she cared for before she even cooked at home.

And of her mother, “The way she addressed the families that she worked for - Mister and Missus - I never ever got it, even as a kid. There was something about it that triggered me as a child and I realize it’s probably the same thing that triggers me to this day.”

After she graduated from high school, Allison’s family sent her to the United States to find work. She moved in with her sister who worked as a baby sitter and a housekeeper. Allison started out by piecing together poorly paid, part-time childcare jobs, but her talent with children and her strong negotiations skills helped her to quickly access higher quality jobs.
Allison sees a good deal of continuity between her experiences and those of her mother and grandmother.

[My grandmother] would get up really early in the morning, and she would get back around six o’clock in the evening. So when I really look at the hours that she did in the 1950s and 60s and what I do in 2011, there’s really no differences. It’s literally the same long hours.

One of her first jobs had many echoes of their experiences. She was working as a part-time nanny for what she called a “filthy rich family on the Upper East Side.” They had two children, one of whom had diabetes and required close monitoring. The father was never home, so Allison interacted with the mother whom she described as “rich and mean. She was really dominating and belittling.” Allison had constant struggles with her employer, but she said that her breaking point came at Christmas.

They wanted me to travel with them for Christmas, but I told her that I couldn’t be there. When I grew up, Christmas meant family. I needed to be home with my family. She wasn’t happy. When they came back, I went back into work. I told her that I was leaving. The first thing she said (I was making ten dollars an hour which was a lot of money in the early 90s), and she said, “Well, if it’s money, we’ll give you a raise to 15 - 20 dollars an hour.” I remember telling her that the money didn’t matter, that she was hurting my sanity. I didn’t know where work would come from, but I knew I could no longer stay in that environment.

Allison told many stories about standing up for herself on the job. Remembering the deference that had been expected of her mother, Allison is resolute in how she relates to her employers. She refused one employer who asked her to refer to her a “Miss.” She said, “I didn’t feel like I needed to give her that power, and I never did.” She would not call them by name, rather than using the honorifics.

As much as she was able to assert pride and self-respect in her relationships with her employers, Alison struggled with the regular stream of negative feedback she got about her work from her
family members in Barbados and from people she met in the United States. She said that getting involved in DWU helped her to “value the work that I did, understanding that my work was important. If I didn’t go to the work, the parents couldn’t go to work. I really noticed my place in society as one of importance.” Allison memories of her mother and her grandmothers’ time in the industry also motivate her in her organizing work today, “I often say that I do this organizing for [my mother]....In some ways, I’m just standing up for the things that they couldn’t stand up for. I feel like - if I scream loud enough right now - then [those employers] will hear it. And I know that my mother hears me.” Allison is an active leader in DWU, playing the central role in pulling together the organization’s annual Nanny Course, serving on the Board of Directors and spending most of her evenings in DWU’s offices. She hopes to leave domestic work one day so that she can take up full-time work as a professional organizer.

**Pat:** Pat is a short, heavy-set woman from Barbados. She has close cropped hair, and she dresses conservatively. Pat is a devout Christian, and she is the mother of two young men. Pat often sits silently in meetings, but, if you can pull her aside and talk with her one-on-one, she warms up quickly. When she gets excited telling you about something, she’ll chuckle warmly and rock back and forth slightly, expressing the energy she finds in her story.

Pat grew up as the oldest of nine children, living on the outskirts of the city in Barbados. Pat’s father died when she was young, and her mother remarried a man who worked as a “steamer,” moving cargo on the steamships that traveled between the different Caribbean islands. Pat’s mother mostly stayed at home to raise the children, but, when Pat was young, her mother spent some time working as a cook in a private home.
When she was a teenager, Pat’s mother found her a job after she finished high school, at a garment factory that was owned by a German company. The German owners rarely came to Barbados; instead they hired local men to serve as managers. Pat was a member of a union in Barbados. When something would come up that made the workers unhappy, they would come together and plan a strike. But the Barbadian managers would sit down and negotiate with them first. They would almost always get their demands met, and the strikes would be averted.

Pat first came to the United States for a romantic relationship. The relationship did not work out, but Pat stayed to work. Pat’s first job in the domestic work industry was a live-in job in a house in Long Island. She worked for a woman who owned a high-end boutique in Manhattan. In Barbados, the normal workday goes from eight in the morning until 4 in the afternoon, after which people would have plenty of time to themselves. Here, the hours were much longer, particularly for live-in workers. Pat worked 12-hour days during the week, and she had to work part of the weekend as well. She struggled with basic issues of disrespect from the employers and from the children, experiences that she contrasted with her memories of life back home. “There are definitely differences between people back home, but they don’t act like that. They don’t think they’re better than everybody else.” Pat consistently pushed back on employers who she felt disrespected her. Pat moved through a series of jobs in the industry, staying with different employers for long stretches of time and reaching a comfortable level in the industry. After about ten years, Pat decided to transition to live-out work.
Pat eventually married another devout Christian, also from Barbados, with whom she raised two children. For many years, Pat’s husband had a solid job that paid him $25 per hour. Pat and her husband were in a good financial place. They had savings. They were able to go on vacations together. They bought a house in Brooklyn and a house in Barbados where they were planning to retire. “I always know that - when I finished working - I wanted to go back home, to retire home, to die home, to be buried home.” Pat spoke wistfully about what her retirement would look like,

We have our home. We get up in the morning. We have our breakfast. We sit on the porch. We look at the ocean. We go to the beach. I love the beach. We have all these friends, and we could have them over. We could sit and talk about the past. My husband would be slamming dominoes down on the table.

Pat is proud of her hard-learned ability to provide loving care to children. But those very capacities led to conflict on her last job when her last employer, who was a psychologist, grew jealous of Pat’s relationship with her daughter. When Pat first started working for that family, the little girl was very withdrawn. “She was not really an affectionate child. She was shy, and she didn’t like to be hugged or cuddled. So I gave her time. I would just sit next to her, and I would talk to her. Then I would hold her hand and then I would give her little kisses on her head. I gave her time.” The little girl warmed up over time.

One day, I was coming in and they opened the door. She ran up to the door, and she gave me the biggest hug and she would not let go. The father was like, ‘Wow! That’s a first!’ Then, one day, the mom saw her come into the room and give me a big hug and a kiss. She said it wasn’t a problem, but I could see that it bothered her that her daughter was more affectionate with me.

The mother got started to get more and more upset about the difference in her relationship with her daughter and Pat’s. Eventually, the mother fired Pat, saying that she was too attached to the little girl. Pat hasn’t seen the little girl since then, causing her a great deal of sadness. They moved without sharing their new phone number or address.
This happened around the time the economic crisis hit, and Pat hasn’t been able to find a job since. She suspects that this family is giving her bad references when new prospective employers call. The family refused to pay her the vacation she was owed. A friend told her that DWU could help her to get that money, and Pat got actively involved in the organization. But, as her financial situation worsened, she stopped coming to meetings and events. It’s been a hard few years for Pat. Pat’s husband was also out of work for three years. When the crisis hit, they lost much of their savings in the stock market, and they’ve had to spend down their remaining savings. Now they are facing foreclosure on both of their homes. Pat reflected on how her thinking about her future is in flux, “In my head, I see myself sitting back in a rocking chair. And saying, ‘Babe, lets go to St. Lucia or to Grenada.’ That’s what retiring back home was going to be like. Now I don’t know because we don’t have much money and I don’t know if we can keep our home down there.” Pat is starting to struggle with depression.

I have these feelings I can’t understand. Sometimes I just want to stay home. I don’t want to be bothered with everything. Like I’m in my own world, and I could just step off the planet. My world started to crumble down. It’s like the walls in my life started to fall down. Sometimes I don’t know that I can take it.

**Sylvia:** Sylvia is a petite Mexican nanny in her late 40s. She has a round face, framed by her long hair which she almost always wears pulled back. Sylvia is one of the few monolingual Spanish speakers who play a leadership role in DWU, and it is often hard for her to engage in the rapid back-and-forth debates between the organization’s English-speaking worker-leaders. So she remains quiet much of the time, but, when she chooses to speak, she almost always gives an extended and fiery speech. She makes it clear that, even if she has remained quiet, she has been deeply engaged in the debates as they unfold.
Sylvia grew up in a rural area of Mexico, daughter to a single mother who had to leave her children at home while she went out to work in the fields. When Sylvia was 12, her mother sent her to another town to do farm work. During the summers, they would return home to plant food on their own land. She was only able to go to school for five years, so, like her mother, her ability to read and write is limited. Sylvia picked tomatoes for several years until she moved to a small city where she started to work as a live-in housecleaner. There, Sylvia fell in love with another household worker. She became pregnant, and the two were married. The relationship did not work out, and Sylvia became a single mother of two. She tried to make her way by selling tamales and tacos on the street. But she couldn’t earn enough to raise her children, so she decided to migrate to the United States to find work. She left her nine year-old daughter and her four year-old son with her mother in Mexico. She told a heartbreaking story about their parting. “I was going to leave in about two days. I had just taken a shower, and I went to put on my clothes, and I found a piece of paper that was folded up. My daughter had written, ‘Mom. Don’t worry. I’m going to take care of my little brother.’” She left for the United States, and she did not see her children for six years, until she returned to help her daughter celebrate her quinceañera on her fifteenth birthday.

Sylvia moved to New York City because her brother and her cousins were already working there. She first took a live-in job in Brooklyn, doing housecleaning and caring for a family with one child. She said the work wasn’t too hard because the house was small. But the family paid her very little, and there was very little food for her to eat. She moved from job to job, finding the hours long, the pay low and the employers abusive. She stopped working as a live-in after five years, but her hours remained long and her pay low. In one job she described, she worked six
days a week for ten hours each day for $240 per week, bringing her hourly wage to four dollars an hour.

She eventually landed a decent job with a family in Manhattan where she earned $400 per week. She worked for them for six years, but that relationship came to a difficult end when Sylvia fell suddenly and seriously ill. After she recovered, she pieced together small housecleaning jobs, but it was hard work. The employers would yell at her, telling her to work faster. And the days were long; she cleaned ten hours at a time, working until her feet ached. But the work was still not enough, and Sylvia had to spend down her savings. She recently landed a part-time nannying job in Park Slope that pays her enough to get by. She would like to return to live in Mexico, but she plans to stay in the United States for a few more years so she can continue making enough money to support her son while he finishes up his studies at a university in Mexico.

**Marlene:** Marlene is a tall and dignified woman from Barbados, with glasses and short graying hair. Marlene has six children, who have in turn made her a grandmother to eleven children, some of whom live in the United States and the others in Barbados. You can tell that Marlene is a good grandmother, not the kind who spoils you with toys and candy but the kind who shows you her love with a home-cooked meal and a stern look.

Marlene grew up in a small town in the country outside of St. Michael’s Parish in Barbados. She was raised by a single mother, who worked, as Marlene put it, “at odds and ends, and on plantations.” Her mother did not always have enough money for food, but Marlene said that she never went hungry because she could always pick fruit off the trees. She told me, “Back in those
days, we didn’t know if that was rough or not.” Marlene started working when she was young, first picking weeds on a sugarcane plantation during her summer breaks for 50 cents a day. She started working as a domestic worker for a white family in Barbados when she was 14 years old, a job she left when she had her first child.

Marlene spent much of her working life on the assembly line in a poultry-processing plant, where she worked for sixteen and a half years. Marlene and her co-workers had to slaughter thousands of chickens per day, taking home about $300 per week, with a weekly “bonus” of a chicken to take home to their families. The work was dirty and dangerous. Marlene was the shop steward for her union in the plant; she developed a good rapport with the plant manager whose small office looked out over the plant. The company would regularly try to increase the production speed and reduce costs by cutting out extra allowances like providing laundry soap strong enough to get the blood out of the uniforms that workers were required to wear. Marlene said that she and the plant manager were always able to work these issues out through dialogue, and she was proud that they had never had to go on strike. The factory closed down when Marlene was in her mid-forties, and she decided to migrate to the United States to earn enough money to buy a home in Barbados so that she could retire in comfort.

Her first job in the United States was providing care to an aging Jewish professor, with whom she developed a close personal relationship. After he passed, Marlene took on the care of another elderly man. She speaks with real affection about these two men, and she is clearly proud of the quality of care she could provide for both of them in their final days. Speaking of the second man, she told me,
I had to give him insulin. I should not have had to give anything like that because a nurse should do that, but I used to give it. And he didn’t even notice when he would get it because of the way I did it. I would pinch his skin, and - at the same time - when you put in needles, you use your other hand and distract them. You rub their hand. You rub someplace for distraction, so they wouldn’t feel it. And he would always say, ‘You did it already?’

He encouraged Marlene to consider leaving domestic work and going into nursing because she had such a good instinct with care.

But the work was exhausting. She was living in, and she did not sleep well because she was always worried about whether the people whom she called her “patients” were all right. So she took a job as a live-out nanny, raising the children of the nephew of the Jewish professor for whom she had cared. She said, “Working as a nanny, I take care of a child like I take care of my own. If you put your child in my hands, you can afford to go and not even worry. Because I am gonna take care of that child with my life.” At first, the mother was jealous of Marlene’s close relationship with her infant daughter.

She was crying when I would leave. She used to scream so loud, the doorman said, ‘Why you don’t take home that child with you? That child screams after you leave.’” But they worked it out, with the support of the employers’ mother who told her daughter to be happy that her daughter was being so well cared for….And that changed the relationship between us, made it better. And now she even told me, ‘That’s your child.’

Marlene is sixty-seven years old. She wants to stop working, retire and return home to Barbados. But she hasn’t yet reached her goal: saving enough money to buy a home in Barbados where she can retire. She told me, “Money’s all that stops me from going. I just need a little money, and then I go home.”
Marlene was one of DWU’s earliest members, joining the organization within months of its founding. Her primary role has been to cook for the monthly membership meetings, bringing trays and trays of food so that the domestic workers in attendance could have a hot meal while they worked. Marlene dutifully attends every meeting, listening closely and sharing her thoughts about what happened through individual conversations after the meetings.

Liliana: Liliana is a slight Guatemalan woman in her late 30s, who works as a nanny in Manhattan. She is pretty and energetic. Liliana usually dresses plainly, and she usually ties her hair back into a long braid. Liliana does not fear a conflict, bringing passion and energy to bear regularly in DWU meetings.

Liliana was born into a large family in a village in Guatemala. Her parents were indigenous Mayans, a population that faces a great deal of poverty and discrimination in Guatemala. Her father owned a private bus, which is one of the primary modes of transport in Guatemala. Her mother worked as a seamstress. When she was a child, one of her brothers developed an infection in his eye, and it had to be surgically removed. Liliana went to nursing school in Guatemala, and she would travel to the United States to work as a domestic worker during her summer breaks. She remembers working long days back then, taking care of six kids from 7am until she put the children to sleep at night. Once she finished her nursing degree, she realized that her brother would have a hard time finding employment because of his disability. Her family would need significant financial support, more than she would have been able to earn as a nurse in Guatemala. So she decided to migrate to the United States in the hopes of earning enough to support her family.
When she first arrived in New York City, she shared a room in a church with another woman; in place of rent, they would clean the church. For the first three years, she worked in a jewelry factory. The hours were good, but the pay was very low. So she eventually went back to domestic work. She took a live-in nanny job, where she stayed for the next ten years. It was difficult. Live-in work was isolating, and the child was hyper-active. The mother would not take any steps to discipline him, so Liliana was left to deal with the consequences: tantrums, outbursts in public and insults.

At first, Liliana was worried to tell her mother that she had become a full-time nanny. She told me that she said, “I’m sorry, Mom, but that nurse’s certificate is only a piece of decoration.” Her mother responded saying that it was “better to be a nanny than a prostitute.” Liliana said that she had talked about that with a woman who did work as a prostitute, who had told Liliana that she’d rather do that than to work as a domestic worker and be treated like a slave. Liliana then reflected, “It’s true that - in some places - they treat you like a slave.”

Liliana often faced explicit racism from her employers, but she reflected that, even when those attitudes weren’t explicit, many employers treated their immigrant workers poorly. Liliana said, “If you don’t speak perfect English, then they will ignore you. If you don’t show a card that says that you are a legal resident, they don’t realize that you are a human being.” Though Liliana is herself documented and bilingual, she has seen many of her friends and co-workers subjected to degrading conditions. She told me one story of a job where she worked as a nanny. The family also hired an undocumented woman, a monolingual Spanish-speaking live-in cleaner who
worked eleven hours a day for $90 a day. One day, the employer accused this woman of stealing $20 from her, and she started screaming at her. She went into the woman’s room and took her wallet, taking out more than $60 and claiming that it was her money. The employer called the police, and she screamed at the woman, “You’re not a citizen. You’re an undocumented Mexican. I’m going to have you deported.” The police came to the house, but they focused on de-escalating the situation. They escorted the worker out instead of engaging with the employer’s demands to deport her. When the case came to court a month later, the employer asked Liliana to testify on her behalf and to say that the woman had stolen money and had threatened her. When Liliana refused, she was promptly fired. She refused to let Liliana gather her things. Liliana told me that the woman had even gone so far as to call around the different employment agencies, trying to blackball her from getting any other jobs.

The work has clearly been challenging in many ways, but Liliana is proud that she has been able to send significant amounts of money home. Those resources have helped her family tremendously. She helped her disabled brother to buy his own bus, so he wouldn’t have to approach anyone else for a job. She helped her sister to start a beauty salon, and she has even been able to invest in rental properties in Guatemala where she plans to retire. She said, “Here when you get old, if you don’t have anyone to help you, how are you going to survive? People are in a bad situation here.”

**Jennifer:** Jennifer has a regal air to her. Now in her 50s, she grew up in Barbados. She currently works as a nanny in Park Slope. With her short hair, which she has dyed blonde, and her carefully put-together outfits, Jennifer moves through the world with confidence. She is the type
of person who immediately makes you feel like her confidante, as if only the two of you understand what is really going on around you.

Jennifer grew up in a large family, one of five children. Her family did not have much money. She remembers having only one pair of shoes to go to school. When the soles wore out, she had to put cardboard in them and keep wearing them. Jennifer had a difficult relationship with her mother, whom Jennifer said made her money as a professional ballroom dancer. She wasn’t around very much to take care of her children, and she left Jennifer to care of her brothers and sisters. She would cook meals and launder clothes while her mother was out. Jennifer was academically inclined, and she got a scholarship to a prominent school when she was 13. Her mother would not buy her the uniform or books she needed to go to school, so Jennifer started working in a factory that made matchsticks to earn money for her supplies for school.

When she was 19, she married her neighbor’s son to get out of her mother’s home. He was ten years older than she was, and he was very jealous of Jennifer. Over time, she came to hate him for his controlling behavior. She started a job at the Ministry of Labor, working as an accountant who helped local community development initiatives, like workers’ cooperatives, set up their financial systems. Jennifer eventually got pregnant, and she had a son. But she was still deeply unhappy with her husband. She saved up enough money to get her own apartment, and she left her husband. A messy struggle over custody ensued. When Jennifer’s job disappeared due to government retrenchment, she decided she needed to get out of this difficult situation. So she migrated to the United States, intending to go to school. She left her son behind for several years,
in the care of her sister. They were apart for several years, and she said that, “That seemed like the longest time in the world.”

Jennifer took a live-in nanny job in New Jersey when she first moved to the United States. Though she told me that she had never had a really bad employer, the stories she told about her isolation and disrespectful treatment by employers sounded painful. In her early days in the industry, she comforted herself by reading the Bible and remembering the advice she had gotten from her grandmother to “meekly wait and murmur not” and to remember that “this too shall pass.” She said, “I had that to take me right through my life, and I kept going every day, hoping that it’s really going to come true. So I stayed on that job. It wasn’t too much that I couldn’t bear.”

She started to take courses on the weekends, and that was where she met a famous author who asked her to come work for him. He wanted her to take care of his daughter who had attention deficit disorder and needed intensive support. Jennifer would take classes in the mornings, and then she would pick the little girl up from school. She would then either take her to the author’s lavish apartment or to eat at the Waldorf-Astoria. Jennifer also started to take care of the children of a neighboring family, an opera singer who had an adopted girl and a little boy who was born with partial hearing. She told me,

Those children filled a void in my life, and that was so wonderful. ...anything that had to do with giving all of myself to children is what kept me very happy. He [the little boy] needed all of me, and so did those two little girls. So it was the best thing in the world for me, even though I missed my son. Even then...these kids filled that void.
Jennifer decided that it was time to bring her son up to the United States from Trinidad, and she found a job that would allow her to bring her son to work with her. By that time, Jennifer had developed a specialization in working with children with physical and emotional challenges. She would work with these children until they were school age, and then she would move on to another job.

The way that Jennifer talked about her work was complicated. She was proud of the care that she gave to these children that needed intensive support. She found emotional and personal fulfillment in caring for children, and she regularly called this work her “passion.” She spoke highly of many of her employers. But she also recounted a number of tales of real struggle and open conflict on the job, when she would have to draw lines in the sand about wages, hours and respectful treatment. It was this contradiction between the pride that she took in her work and the disrespect with which she was treated that motivated her to join Domestic Workers United. Jennifer was on DWU’s Board of Directors, and she was often chosen to speak publicly for the organization.

Martina: Martina is a reserved Jamaican woman who has worked as a housecleaner and an elder care provider. In her 60s, she is thin, and she wears glasses. Martina is both intense and a bit nervous, and it seems like it takes her a while to develop trust in people. She has had a difficult time in the industry. Even though she maintains a calm demeanor while talking about her experiences, you can feel her anger.
Martina grew up in a rural area of Jamaica, where her family had been farmers for generations. Her father migrated to England when she was eight to earn money to support the family, while her mother did housecleaning and laundry to bring in some extra money. Martina was good at school and she worked her way through college. She became a well-known teacher and then an administrator at a respected Catholic school in a neighborhood in Kingston. She said, “I loved it. It was very, very rewarding. The students that you teach - they go out, and many of them become teachers, too, or nurses, accountants and policemen - that sort of thing. It makes you feel so proud that you were a part of that building up.” While she was teaching, she decided to build a house where she could live with her adult son who was en route to becoming an engineer. While her teaching job brought her a reasonable income, it was not enough to cover the costs of land and construction. Martina had friends who were also teachers who would come to the United States to do domestic work during their summer breaks, and they encouraged Martina to do the same. She was resistant for a long time, saying, “There was a time when I did say to my mother, ‘I am not going to wash anybody's dirty clothes and clean them dirty floor.’ With that in mind, and that kind of mindset, I told my friend that if I come to America, I wasn’t going to come up here and do it.” But as her construction costs rose, Martina could not pay her debts. So she came to the United States to do domestic work.

She first moved to Rochester, where she took care of an older woman who had just left a rehab center. She said in her first weeks, she struggled with the transition in her class position. She said she kept thinking "Oh my god. I am not doing this thing back home, so why am I coming here and doing this?" The woman she took care of was very demanding and negative. When Martina asked for a chance to sit down for a few minutes instead of always standing, the woman would
curse at her using racial epithets. Her next job was no easier. She worked as a live-in housecleaner for a wealthy family, and she had to work long hours doing tasks which seemed extravagantly useless to her, like ironing bed sheets. She earned $250 per week. She left that job to take a live-in elder care job, working with an Italian man who had worked as a baker. She described him as sweet, and she remembers their time together fondly. But he passed away, and so that job ended. Since then, Martina has had a hard time finding consistent work, given the downward turn in the industry in wake of the economic crisis. Regardless, she has been able to pay off the debts that she owed for the basic construction of her home. She is now staying on in order to earn enough money to make some finishing touches on the house.

The thing that was hardest for Martina to stomach was the daily disrespect: the way that her first employer insulted her, being forbidden to shower in her employer’s bathroom even when she was living in, being woken up by employers when working 24-hour shifts because they objected to paying her for sleeping. She told me, “Respect comes first for me. The money comes after that. You need quality care for your family? Then treat me like a human being. Respect me. Appreciate me. Don’t treat me worse than how you treat the dog in your house.” Martina described the differences between her experiences as a schoolteacher and her experiences as a housecleaner,

Where I worked, we were like a family. We never do anything without consulting the others. We all worked together to figure out what should happen with the students, and everyone’s opinion mattered....Here, I’m taking care of somebody’s house and then they don’t see me. I’m doing the work but I’m invisible.

She reflected wistfully on how she was seen by her community in Jamaica, “I, as a teacher, was seen as a middle class. People would look up to me, respect me...They would never say a bad word if they see a teacher or a nurse, or a police or so on because that level of respect was there.”
Martina says that these experiences have changed her.

    Back home, I know I was not poor, but not rich. I was at a comfortable stage in my life. I came here, and my standards were lowered. I have learned that no matter what you have or where you think you are, you can drop way back down there. It doesn’t make sense to become cocky about anything that you have. Just be who you are, treat people like people, not like you better than they are.

She said,

    I am going to have a better house than what I grew up in. I am going to have a much better house that what I'm in here. But it doesn’t mean that I am going to have an air about me, where I am going to treat people as if I'm better than they are. Because of the experience I have here, I am going to be able to bring myself to the level of talking to the big man up there, but I can also deal with the little man down here. I’ve learned that here.

**Myrna:** Myrna is a Trinidadian nanny with a rich voice and a warm energy. In her 60s, she is tall, with short hair and dark-rimmed glasses. You can tell that Myrna is a performer by the stately way that she carries herself. She loves music, and she often bursts into song when she is speaking. She is active in her Evangelical Church, and her stories are peppered with references to God, prayer and faith. Myrna is a community-builder, and she was always telling me stories about the women she had helped, whether it was through her church, her social networks or through Domestic Workers United.

Myrna had seven brothers and sisters. Her mother died when she was young, and different families took in the siblings. Myrna was raised by her mother’s friend, who was a school principal. She said that being raised by her mother’s friend shaped about she thought about caregiving, that it “takes a village” of support to raise children. This influences why she finds so much value in the work that she does and how she relates to other domestic workers, encouraging them to build networks of support and to help each other in their work. She grew up
in the Evangelical church, getting involved with missionary work when she was quite young. Her spirituality is clearly a guiding force in her life.

Myrna finished school when she was 18 years old, and she took up book-keeping work. She eventually left that work to follow her passion for food. She took a cooking course, and then she opened up a cafeteria at a local school that she ran for three years. Myrna also had a passion for music and performance, and she originally moved to the United States with her young daughter to study music. She took a nanny job while she was in school. She told me that she realized in her first days on the job that the work of caring for children was her “calling in life.”

Her first nanny job was a live-in job in the suburbs. During the week, she left her daughter in Brooklyn with her aunt, and Myrna would come back to Brooklyn to be with them on the weekends. She told me that, on Sundays, she would iron her daughter’s clothes for the week and pack all of her snacks, using these small acts of care to show her daughter that she was there with her even though they were apart. Although she felt a great deal of love for the family that she worked for, she told me that, “those two years felt like ten years.” She eventually left live-in work because her daughter wanted her closer. She told me, “It didn’t feel like an option to stay when she said, ‘Mommy, why you don’t come home?’” So I said to the mom, ‘I’m sorry but my child needs me.’”

Myrna told me that she has always been blessed to have good employers. She said, “I’m in touch with all the kids I’ve ever worked for.” She visits most of the children that she has raised on their birthdays. She said that she learned most of what she knows about childcare by raising her own
daughter, but Myrna has also invested heavily in formal education to develop her skills with child-rearing. She has read dozens of books on infant care and child development. She took courses on child development and baby nursing on nights and weekends. When she was considering leaving nannying to work in a nursing home, she also got her Certified Nursing Assistant certification.

Over time, Myrna has become an in-demand baby-nurse. She focuses on caring for new infants and teaching their parents to care for them, a specialization which tends to receive relatively high pay in the industry. She works for several families at once, spending a few days a week with each. She works with the families until the babies are about five months old, and then she moves on. For years, Myrna has worked in Tribeca, a high-status neighborhood where domestic workers tend to be well-paid and on the more “professional” end of the spectrum. She told me that employers often approach her on the street or in the park, asking her advice and trying to convince her to come work for them.

Myrna also has a strong reputation among the workers in the neighborhood, who approach her for advice. While she has primarily had positive experiences in her work, she has always been close to more tragic situations. Myrna told me story after story of women who had been mistreated by their employers, who were ordered around like servants, who were treated like they were stupid and unskilled, whose basic health needs were neglected to the point of illness and even death. The tragedy of these kinds of stories was Myrna’s motivation for getting involved with Domestic Workers United. She brought the knowledge that she had gained at
DWU out to her networks, educating both workers and employers in Tribeca about workers rights.

Myrna is happy being a domestic worker, for now. She thinks that, one day, she may move back to Trinidad and open a retirement home, where she can continue with what she sees as her life’s work: providing care.

**Gabriela:** Gabriela is a slender, light-skinned woman in her early 40s from Peru. She had long wavy hair and a sharp look in her eye. She is always dressed fashionably. She knows how to make things happen and how to get her way. I first met Gabriela during a training that was being documented by a *New York Times* reporter and a photographer. Gabriela joked with the reporter that they should photograph her because she wanted to be famous. Her picture appeared on the cover of the *New York Metro* section the next day, accompanying an article about DWU’s work.

Gabriela was born in a small fishing city outside of Lima in Peru almost 40 years ago, the youngest daughter of a father who worked as a fisherman and a mother who alternated between running small restaurants and market stands. Gabriela is a self-described “independent woman,” which she attributes to her mother. She said that her mother always wanted to make her own money even though her husband could have supported her. Her family employed a live-in domestic worker who came from the countryside. Gabriela’s mother was active in the union movement in Peru. When her uncle’s union would go out on strike, Gabriela’s mother would cook for the striking workers. She would bring Gabriela along to participate in the demonstrations and marches, and that shaped Gabriela’s worldview from a young age. She said,
“The way I was raised makes such a difference. I am a worker first. A worker, not a servant. That’s it.”

Gabriela went to college in Peru. She fell in love while she was there, and she dropped out and never went back. She opened a small clothing store, an occupation that helps to explain why Gabriela is always fashionably dressed. Following in her mother’s footsteps, Gabriela got involved with a local political party that had formed to fight government corruption. She helped do outreach and to run campaigns, but she left when she started to see corruption develop within the party itself. Things got difficult in Gabriela’s personal life, and she decided to move to the United States for a change.

Gabriela moved to New York City because her brother had also moved here to work. Her brother works in the W Hotel, where he is active in his union. She had already studied English when she was in Peru, and she took more English classes after she arrived. She now has a strong command of the English language. When she first migrated here, Gabriela worked for a bicycle rental company in Central Park during the week, a job she supplemented by working as a nanny on the weekends. She said that she got tired of working seven days a week, so she shifted to full-time domestic work. Her took a job as a live-in nanny in the upper-middle class suburb of Scarsdale, on the outskirts of the city. She liked it at first; she told me that her employers were kind and conscientious about treating her well as a worker. But over time, the isolation of living in the suburbs got to her, and she grew depressed. She said, “Now, when people say they are living in, I feel the pain for them.” She told me that when she first came here, she “worked for nothing”
because it seemed like so much more than people were paid in Peru. She eventually moved on, finding less isolating live-out jobs in Manhattan.

Gabriela gets animated when she talks about the children she takes care of, even as she speaks with mixed feelings about the parents. She says, “I call them miyo and mijia - my ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ - in Spanish. The parents know, and they’re fine with it...That’s the best part, the kids. You get along with the kids but sometimes not the parents because they want things from you that they aren’t willing to give.” Gabriela is clearly proud of her ability to negotiate the often-challenging dynamics with employers; she believes that her negotiation skills help her to avoid being treated the way many other Latina workers are treated in the industry, “[Employers] think that all the Spanish people are at the same level. And because most of us don’t speak English, they want to step on you. But if you don’t let them, then it will be fine. Different workers are treated differently in the industry....I think it’s personality.”

Gabriela had originally planned to stay in the United States for five years, but she said, “I got caught here.” Her absence has been hardest on her mother. “I didn’t see her for two years, and it looked like ten years had gone through her when I saw her again. She was so devastated.”

**Bianca:** Bianca is a mature Uruguayan nanny. Bianca has wavy red-brown hair, and she wears glasses. You can tell that she was both a professor and an activist in Uruguay, by the strident and sonorous way that she speaks.
Bianca grew up as the oldest child of four. Her parents, both of whom were of Italian descent, climbed their way up from working class origins to a more middle class lifestyle by building up their own businesses. Her mother was a dress-maker, and her father owned an electrical wiring company. Her family was active in leftist political movements in Uruguay, and she credits her own dedication to social justice work to that legacy. Bianca became a teacher, and she eventually started lecturing at a college in Montevideo. She also served as the headmistress of a private school. She was active in the teachers union and in the movement against the dictatorship in Uruguay. She eventually started an English language school where she employed seven language teachers. Bianca also employed a domestic worker who cleaned her home and took care of her children. After an economic crisis rolled over from Argentina and hit Uruguay, Bianca’s school went into bankruptcy. This economic challenge hit at the same time as a number of personal challenges in her life. Bianca felt destroyed, and she decided to follow one of her sons to the United States to find a fresh start.

At first, Bianca took on temp work, laboring in small factories in New Jersey and cleaning office buildings. But the wages were so abysmal that she soon took a better-paying job as a nanny for a family in Manhattan, and she has worked in the industry for five years. She is now raising a little boy, and she sees herself as both his nanny and his personal tutor. She says that she has a good relationship with her employers but that it took time to establish a foundation of respect and understanding. She had to hold the line on a daily basis to keep her job responsibilities from expanding. They have now worked out an understanding with each other that, for the most part, holds steady.
Beyond the challenges of these day-to-day negotiations over the terms of her employment, Bianca has struggled to come to terms with her new position in life. She struggled to accept the fact that she used to employ a domestic worker but that she is now a domestic worker herself. She faces judgment from her friends and family in Uruguay, who don’t understand why she would take a position that they believed to be beneath her socially. Her future plans are indefinite. She says that she tries not to think about whether or not she will ever return home.

**Meches:** Meches is a nanny who came to the United States from Guatemala. She has a bright, round face, and she has shoulder-length curly hair. Though she is in her late thirties, she has an incredibly youthful energy. Her laugh is infectious, bringing smiles to people’s faces, even when they don’t know what she is laughing about. Meches is a natural organizer, drawing people in with her warm hugs and enthusiasm. But she is much more complicated than what she initially presents, keeping her personal struggles hidden behind the cover of her enthusiasm.

Meches grew up in an upper-middle class family. As is true of many people in the middle and upper classes in Guatemala, Meches’ family was very light-complexioned; they were racially marked as “white.” Her father worked as an engineer and a manager in a large factory in Guatemala City while her mother stayed at home to raise the children. She says that she grew up in a “bubble” in the suburbs of Guatemala, running safely through the streets with her siblings and cousins while a civil war raged in the countryside. Meches’ family had two domestic workers living in their home while she was growing up. She said,

> They did everything for us. They did the cleaning, the beds, everything. They were indigenous people, and pretty nice people. My parents would say, “We are all the same.” But we were not all the same. They were living with us, but we were never even. At
dinnertime, they would have to eat in the kitchen or eat outside. We were in the dining room.

Meches’ parents paid for her and her three siblings to go to college. They were all pressured to either marry someone wealthy so they could stay at home and raise their own families or to take up professional careers of their own. After she finished college, Meches went abroad to France to work as an *au pair*. She found that she loved working with children, so she came to the United States to earn a degree in play therapy. She eventually found work in the U.S. as a nanny.

Meches struggled to come to terms with her new position in life. On the one hand, she loved working with children, and she appreciated the amount of personal freedom she had in the United States. But she resented the way that her employers talked to her, and she was frustrated that she was expected to do housecleaning as well as take care of the children in her earliest jobs. She left these jobs in search of work that would let her focus exclusively on childcare. And she succeeded, deploying her English language capacities and her college education to assert her ability to provide meaningful education to the children in her care. She increased her marketability by attending a number of professional child-rearing courses. But even though she was able to quickly work her way up the ladder of the domestic work industry, she said, “It was hard for me to call myself a domestic worker at first because I came from the other side of that back home. My life switched. I am now on the other side of the fence.” Meches had been raised by domestic workers, and she was now a domestic worker. She had been wealthy, and now she was poor. She had been racially marked as white, and now she was racially marked as a person of color. She has had to face negative reactions from her family and friends from Guatemala. She said, “I was getting negative reactions. They have domestic workers in their houses. And I am a domestic worker.” When she realized that she was going to have a difficult time leaving the
domestic work industry and escaping from the weight of these kinds of reactions, she went through a long period of depression.

Meches told me that she tried to separate herself as much as possible from who she had been back home in order to deal with her pain from the social shaming that she received from her family and friends in Guatemala. She wanted to think of herself as starting fresh as a new person in the United States. When she first got involved with Domestic Workers United, she refused to speak Spanish in the meetings, and she shied away from working with the other Latina members. Being part of DWU started to shift how Meches felt about herself and her work. “I used to be ashamed. But now I don’t care. Being at DWU, it makes it different. I feel everyone is so proud about what they do. I am a nanny, and I am proud of being a nanny. So you can see that what we do is professional. It’s a really nice feeling.” Meches has played a leading role in expanding the organization’s outreach to Latina domestic workers in neighborhoods around Brooklyn.

**DWU Staff:** There are three other women whose words also appear throughout this work, the women who were on the staff of Domestic Workers United and who played a central role building the organization: Ai-jen Poo, Priscilla Gonzalez and Joyce Campbell.

Ai-jen Poo was a founding organizer of Domestic Workers United. Ai-jen is tall and attractive, and she has a gentle but powerful presence. She is known for her loving energy and her ability to quickly build deep connections with people in her organizing work. Ai-jen is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, both of whom are professionals. Ai-jen got involved in political work while she was in college, and she became a full-time organizer after she graduates. Before she helped
to found Domestic Workers United, she was the organizer of the Women Workers’ Project at an organization called CAAAV, an acronym that originally stood for Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence. CAAAV came out of the “identity politics” movements of the 1980s and 1990s, specifically in reaction to the violent murder of Vincent Chin in 1982. CAAAV was a leading organization in the racial justice movement in New York City in the 1990s when Ai-jen joined its staff. Motivated by a desire to reach the immigrant women workers who had historically been marginalized in the women’s movement and the labor movement, Ai-jen tried to organize nail salon workers and sex workers. Those efforts failed to take hold, but Ai-jen gained greater traction when she started to reach out to Filipina domestic workers. Through that work, Ai-jen helped to found Domestic Workers United to serve as an organization that could engage the Latina and Caribbean women workers who made up the majority of the domestic workforce in New York City. As that organizing took off, Ai-jen quickly began to focus the majority of her energy on building DWU. Over time, Ai-jen became the lead organizer at DWU. She put in long hours to build the organization, develop leaders, build alliances and coordinate the Bill of Rights campaign. Through her work with DWU, Ai-jen developed a national reputation as a leader in the racial justice movement in which she had cut her teeth and also as a leader in the women’s movement and the labor movement. In all of these movements, she has been a voice calling for more inclusive and transformative visions and practices. Ai-jen transitioned out of her role at Domestic Workers United shortly before the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. She stepped into a national leadership role as the Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a national federation of locally based domestic worker organizations that DWU had helped to found in 2007.
When Ai-jen transitioned out of leadership at DWU, Priscilla Gonzalez, who stepped in as the organizations’ first Executive Director, replaced her. Priscilla is the daughter of a Latina domestic worker who grew up in New York City. Priscilla is shorter than Ai-jen, with curly shoulder length hair and dark-rimmed glasses. Priscilla is soft-spoken, the kind of organizer who prefers to work behind the scenes rather than take the microphone or the bullhorn. She first built a relationship with DWU when she was looking for services to support her mother who had been mistreated by an employer. She started volunteering with the organization as an interpreter, and over time she came onto staff as an organizer who could bring her bi-lingual capacities to bear towards the work of organizing Latina workers. When Ai-jen transitioned out of DWU, Priscilla took on the role of Executive Director. She led the organization during the passage of the Bill of Rights and through the hard work of developing a new strategic direction for the organization in the wake of the Bill’s passage. She had to push herself to overcome her preference for working behind the scenes, learning to take center stage at times when the work demanded it. While she was at DWU, Priscilla built extensive relationships with the labor movement in the city, both through her experiences in the Bill of Rights campaign and through her participation in a training program for women leaders in the union movement. While she was clear about the limits of the traditional labor movement, she also appreciated her experiences with organizers who were serious about fighting to win substantive changes in their members’ lives and with the solidarity she experienced. The organizing models of the union movement deeply influenced her perspective on the ways in which DWU’s work needed to grow.

Joycelyn Gill-Campbell, whom most people call Joyce, is Barbadian woman who worked as a nanny in Manhattan for a decade before joining DWU’s staff as an organizer. With her close-
cropped hair and loving but gruff manner, she has a strong and authoritative energy. Before moving the United States, Joyce was in the Barbadian military. She is famous in the organization for serving as a fiery speaker and powerful chant-leader, drawing out the energy and passion of others with her booming voice. Joyce was one of DWU’s earliest members, and she played an important role in laying the foundations of the organization. Joyce is skilled at supporting individual workers in their disputes with their employers. At times, she almost reminds you of an organizer in the early days of the labor movement the 1930s. Joyce has a fierce kind of pride, speaking angrily about the disrespect with which domestic workers are treated by their employers but also powerfully about the need for unity between working class people. She is always leaving the office to go to a protest or a picket of an organization that has supported DWU in the past, chastising other DWU members to remember the importance of solidarity. In reflecting on her work as an organizer, Joyce said, “I like being able to help people, to help the broader working class - not just domestic workers.”
Domestic workers face some of the most egregious forms of exploitation in the United States today, but they do not have monolithic or static experiences of their work. As the leaders of DWU told me their powerful stories, I was struck by the incredible range of experiences that each worker had in the industry. The same woman would tell me a story of her first job in the industry, when she had first moved here and was still undocumented. She took a live-in job as a housecleaner and nanny for two children in the suburbs. She would work ten hours day, seven days a week for $200 a week, a rate that made her wage about $3 per hour. She would tell me how her employers would scream at her. She would tell me about how often she cried herself to sleep, missing the children she’d had to leave behind to come here to earn money so they could go to school. Then, as her story unfolded, she would tell me about her most recent job where she was a live-out nanny making $20 an hour, working regular 40-hour weeks. She would get overtime pay when her employers asked her to stay longer because they were running late. While she still had some challenges with her employers, she felt like she been able to “get them in line” enough to negotiate decent working conditions and a level of respect. After many years of bureaucratic wrangling and thousands of dollars in legal fees, she had gotten U.S. citizenship. She could now travel home to her nation of origin periodically to see her family. She had her own apartment, and she had enough time to go to church, to spend time with friends and to be a leader at Domestic Workers United. Her children were grown now. Some of them had moved the United States, and they were able to see each other regularly.
On one level, this is the classic story of the immigrant worker who moves to the United States with little else than the capacity to work. She struggles with intense exploitation at first, but, after a great deal of sacrifice, she works her way up to a decent level of material comfort. But if we dig into that story, other patterns emerge: the remarkable differences in conditions that exist within what can seem to be a relatively homogenous low-wage industry, the stratifications that exist between low-wage immigrant women workers of color, the absence of government regulation that has allowed these dynamics to flourish and the individual and collective strategies that workers have developed to help them navigate an unregulated and stratified industry. And if we dig even deeper into those patterns, we can gain insight into the broader trends that are reshaping the organization of work in the economy as a whole: the rise of service work and the attendant trends towards the decentralization of workplaces and the growth of stratification within particular industries, deregulation and the rise of the informal economy and the resultant growth of what has come to be called “precarious labor.”

This chapter will explore the structure of work in the domestic work industry: the isolation of domestic workers into one-on-one negotiations with their employers, the stratifications that shape the domestic work industry in New York City, and the absence of government regulation of the industry. I will explore the individual strategies that domestic workers deploy to improve their standing in the industry, given the absence of government regulation. I will trace the ways in which domestic workers build social networks that allow them to turn their individual strategies into collective efforts. I will then explore the ways in which Domestic Workers United builds on these informal strategies, and I will discuss DWU’s organizing efforts to bring the domestic work industry “out of the shadows” and into the formal economy. In these explorations,
I hope to explore the organic relationship between individual and collective forms of worker resistance, and I intend to demonstrate that domestic workers have used these methods not only to improve their individual conditions, but also to change the shape of industry over time.

**Decentralization & Network-Building**

There are a number of emerging patterns in the broader economy that have long shaped the domestic work industry: informalization, decentralization and stratification. The domestic work industry has historically operated outside of the realm of government regulation. The government’s lack of regulation in the domestic work industry does more than reflect the social marginalization of domestic workers’ labor; it helps to facilitate that marginalization, leaving these women to navigate the extreme power imbalances in the industry on their own. This lack of oversight communicates to employers that they are free to do as they wish; to workers, it conveys that they are not socially valued enough to be protected. This would be challenging in any industry, but it is particularly challenging in an industry characterized by such extreme power imbalances (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; McGrath and DeFilippis 2009).

Decentralization, a new development in many other sectors, has always been definitional to the structure of the domestic work industry. Located in private homes and focused on meeting the cleaning and care needs of individual families, tens of thousands of domestic workers are locked into individual negotiations with tens of thousands of individual employers to set the terms of their employment. Much of their labor takes place in the isolation of the individual workplaces, and many of the domestic workers with whom I spoke talked about struggling with isolation when they first started working in the industry. This kind of isolation is most severe for live-in
workers, particularly those who live in the outer suburbs that ring the metropolitan region. This was true for all categories of workers: those who did housecleaning, child care and elder care.

Sylvia told me about her early experiences in the industry,

   My first couple of jobs, they were really hard for me because I didn’t know anything about here...I worked all the time as a live-in. I didn’t really go out. I was always inside....I didn’t know that - in the city - there were people who took care of children, and other people who took care of cleaning. They would pay me $240 for six days a week, ten hours a day. So that’s like 4 dollars an hour. I didn’t know that was too little...I worked for a while, but I was still that innocent mind.

It wasn’t until she stopped living in and found a nannying job in Manhattan that she started going out of the house and connecting with other workers. It started when she took the baby who was in her care to the park. “That’s when I started meeting other people who are taking care of children. That’s when I found all this out.” These women gave Sylvia a sense of the informal standards in the industry, like that her wages were not only far below what other women were earning in the neighborhood but that they were also below the legal minimum. They told her that, in Manhattan, it was standard to negotiate to either be a nanny or a housecleaner that doing both for the same pay was exploitative. They said that, when women did both for the same pay, that it made it harder for them to negotiate to keep those tasks separate. She said, “Now, if I start counting all of those things [that happened to me], I get so upset.”

Sylvia’s story reveals one of the impacts of the decentralization of domestic work: the isolation of workers into individual homes. The workplace in domestic work is structured such that domestic workers do not inevitably come into contact with one another. This isolation can facilitate workers accepting wages and working conditions that dip below both the legal minimum and the informal standards that workers in the industry have set over time. In this
individualized working environment, workers must necessarily deploy individual strategies of resistance in order to improve their working conditions.

In order to dig into an analysis of the ways in which domestic workers have informally and formally worked to overcome this individualization and, in the process, build more structural analyses and more collective strategies, I want to turn to another aspect of Sylvia’s narrative. Her story reveals more than just the decentralization and the resultant isolation and disempowerment of workers. It also demonstrates one way that domestic workers have collectively responded to those conditions, by building support networks to help overcome their isolation in the workplace (Brown 2011). There is nothing fundamentally new in this practice. Women have long built informal social networks that have served as the foundation of collective organizing, whether they have done it through community-based networks focused on the maintenance of their families (Nash 1979; Susser 2012) or through social networks in their workplaces (Bookman 1988; Brodkin 1988; Lamphere 1987; Zavella 1987). Domestic workers in particular have historically relied on both informal and formal social networks, like penny savers clubs and mutual aid societies, to help them navigate the specific challenges of the industry (Hunter 1997). But, in an era when decentralization and informalization are impacting increasing numbers of workers, it is particularly important to bring attention to these practices. Our analyses of worker organizing will be deeper if we bring these informal social practices out from the background of the political where they have long been relegated and place them in the forefront of the process of developing new paradigms of worker organizing.
You can easily see this process of network-building in motion among nannies in the parks and playgrounds of New York City. As their young, mostly white charges play on swing sets and dangle from monkey bars, domestic workers gather together in small groups around the edges of playgrounds where they can keep their eyes on the children as they chat. Different sub-categories of domestic workers build networks in different ways, reflecting the varying structures of their work. Nannies often build relationship with other workers in the neighborhoods where they work, meeting each other in parks, playgrounds and bookstores. Elder care providers and housecleaners often labor with a greater degree of isolation from each other in the course of their normal working days, and so they more often turn to building networks in their communities of residence, through churches, ethnic networks and community events (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

These networks often trace along lines of region and nationality, drawn together by pre-existing relationships, cultural connections and the ability to speak in their native tongues (Das Gupta 2006). They provide social spaces in which women often share food, celebrate each other’s birthdays and plan work-related activities like play dates. But these social networks also provide spaces for workers to share stories about their jobs; they swap loving or critical stories about the people for whom they provide care, vent about frustrating experiences with their employers and share advice about how to improve their situations. Through these networks, workers learn the informally established standards in the industry and impart strategies for navigating the challenging dynamics on the job (Dill 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). As Tamara Mose Brown (2011) has pointed out, the breadth and strength of these networks challenges the perspective that the domestic work industry is characterized *only* by isolation. Rather, workers have built alternative structures that provide them with a space for a “hidden transcript” to which employers
have little or no access. These groups allow workers to begin to transform their individual experiences and challenges into collective assessments and strategies. This is a powerful example of what James Scott called “infrapolitics,” a way of engaging in contestations over power relations that “like infrared rays,” operates “beyond the visible end of the spectrum.”

**Stratification & Building the Occupational Ladder**

The decentralization of the domestic workplace is inextricably connected to the radical stratification of conditions in the industry. Decentralization makes it difficult for workers to collectively bargain to set industry standards, and it limits the capacity of the government to regulate industry standards. Given this context, working conditions are shaped through the dynamics between employers’ incomes, needs and attitudes and workers’ variable vulnerabilities and capacities to negotiate. Wages, hours, the scope of work and the level of respect with which workers are treated vary significantly between different tiers of the industry. These stratifications in working conditions often trace along the lines of race and nationality.

These stratifications have been most clearly explored with respect to nannies, while stratifications between housecleaners and elder care providers have been less frequently analyzed. Julia Wrigley (1995) provided an early framework for analyzing the racial stratification of nannying work between “high-status” and “low-status” jobs, a framework that correlated with what I observed about the broad strokes of the contemporary domestic work industry in New York City. On one end of the spectrum are the “high-status” nannies and au pairs who are generally European or white American women. Allison described this racial stratification in the industry, “I've always thought that if you’re from Europe or you look like
them, you make more money than folks who are Black or people of color. Not only do you make more money, but you are treated like one of them. We are not treated that way. So there’s that separation.” Higher-income employers want to use their resources to not only ensure their children’s health and safety, but also to cultivate their children’s cultural and educational capacities to ensure that they will succeed in school and in their future careers. Thus, they often seek “high-status” workers whom they believe are equipped to provide “professional” care for their children, whether that be a level of expertise with childhood development or culturally-relevant intellectual enrichment for their children. In order to identify those workers, employers often rely on racialized assumptions, hiring white American and European workers based on an unverified belief that these workers are more educated and therefore able to provide intellectual and cultural stimulation to the children in their care. These workers tend to be paid more, given a high level of autonomy in their work and encouraged to focus only on the work of childcare.

Meanwhile, employers’ racialized assumptions lead them to perceive immigrant women of color to be uneducated and thus only able to provide the practical or nurturant aspects of care for a child. This racialized logic relegates immigrant workers into what Wrigley called “low-status” jobs, where they are paid less and given less autonomy and where they are often expected to combine childcare with more menial tasks like cooking and cleaning. The most exploitative jobs tend to be live-in jobs, which are often occupied by women of color who have recently migrated to the United States, who are undocumented and who are not fluent in English. Wages are often set at or below the minimum wage. Benefits like sick days, paid vacation, health care or retirement rarely even register in the conversation over the terms of employment. Because live-in workers don’t leave the workplace at the end of the shift, their hours tend to extend well into the
night and through the weekend. Many employers often deduct estimated costs of “room and board” from pay, driving wages even further below the legal minimum. Relying on their employers for their room and board often presents other difficulties: some workers are expected to sleep on the floors of children’s bedrooms or in the family’s living room or basement while other workers told me about not being given enough food to satisfy their basic nutritional needs. These challenging material conditions are often matched by profoundly challenging interpersonal treatment: generalized disrespect, employers referring to workers using racial epithets or yelling at them. The emotional weight of this disrespect and abuse is exacerbated by workers’ isolation in private homes, an isolation that is even further compounded for live-in workers in the suburbs. These workers often do not know how to drive or have access to a car, and they had difficulty accessing the distant train stations that would take them to the city where they could connect with their families and friends. At their worst, the conditions in these lowest tiers of the domestic work industry deteriorate into physical and sexual abuse and even to cases of outright enslavement by employers who steal workers’ passports and use the threat of violence to hold workers hostage.

This kind of racial bifurcation is indeed significant in shaping the stratifications of domestic work in New York City, but the stratification in the industry is even more complex. While all of the lower tiers of the domestic work industry in the United States are characterized by material exploitation and racially coded disrespect, those lower tiers are themselves significantly stratified. Rhacel Parreñas (2001) has pointed out that there is a gray area of “better than low quality” jobs between the “high status” and “low status” jobs described by Wrigley, a gray area inhabited by immigrant workers who have been able to gain higher status, better wages and
improved working conditions. Many of the skills-based criteria that higher-income employers seek - concrete measures of professionalization like a college degree, professional training in child development or elder care, the ability to speak several languages and referrals from employers’ class peers - are within the reach of some immigrant women of color.

The leaders of Domestic Workers United told me story after story that complicated an overly binary analysis. While the broad structure of the industry is indeed racially stratified with white nannies at the top and undocumented immigrant women of color at the bottom, many workers of color were able to intentionally navigate their way from the industry’s lowest tiers up to jobs whose conditions mirrored the “better than low quality” jobs described by Parreñas. They moved from live-in work in the suburbs or the city’s middle-income neighborhoods to live-out work, often in Manhattan and the city’s higher-income neighborhoods. This gave them greater control over their hours and an ability to have an independent social life. They transitioned from doing all the care and cleaning work in a given household to focusing strictly on child care, one of the keys markers of the ”high-status” nanny jobs described by Wrigley. They gained higher wages and access to benefits like paid vacation and overtime. Many of them began to be paid on the books, receiving unemployment insurance and social security contributions from their employers. These differences may be invisible or seem negligible to the observer who, when looking at the industry from the outside, primarily sees the broad outlines of the material exploitation and racialized degradation of immigrant domestic workers of color. But these internal stratifications have serious impacts on the lives of domestic workers themselves. The difference between a wage of $2 an hour and $20 an hour is vast, as is the difference between a 40-hour week and a 70-hour week. Differences in the interpersonal dynamics of respect from
employers and access to free time and an ability to have their own social lives are deeply meaningful to the quality of workers’ lives (Hunter 1997).

But there is no automatic transition up the occupational ladder in the domestic work industry. In order to work their way up in the industry over time, workers have deployed a number of strategies to find better jobs with higher wages, more autonomy and a narrower range of responsibilities. I found that there were three related strategies that domestic workers deployed in their upward navigation of the industry: accessing better jobs through social networks, learning to negotiate effectively with employers and asserting a professional status in their work. These strategies reflect historic methods through which domestic workers have responded to the significant variability between the quality of various jobs and employers in the industry: building informal career ladders, leaving bad jobs and taking jobs with better conditions and more respectful employers. These patterns were well-explored by Bonnie Dill Thorton in her 1988 study of Black domestic workers in New York and Philadelphia in the 20th century, who argued that, although domestic workers face immense structural challenges in their work, they are also able exercise a good deal of agency to improve their working conditions.

Workers pass on these hard-learned strategies through their social networks, teaching each other how to effectively navigate the industry and, in so doing, transform individual success strategies into collective advancement (Dill 1988). I will explore each of these strategies in depth and then look at the way in which Domestic Workers United institutionalized these informal practices into its Nanny Course, disseminating these individual advancement strategies in order to promote collective advancement and to raise the broader standards in the industry.
Moving Between Jobs: Workers often access better jobs through the social networks they have built with other workers and with their employers, tapping into these networks to find out if their contacts know anyone who is hiring. For women in the lower tiers of the industries, these new references to new jobs often come from co-ethnic relatives and workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Workers who have made it to the higher tiers of the industry are often able to rely on the relationships with their employers when a job ends well, for example, if children have grown up or the family is moving. Jennifer described one of these transitions, “These people were always wonderful to me. When it came to an end, they didn’t just send me packing and say, ‘Okay. We're done with you. Go home.’ They found me something else to do, and we phased out nicely. Their kids were happy, and I always stayed in their lives.” Some nannies and housecleaners build reputations in a neighborhood for their skills; these workers told me stories about having to turn down many job offers from employers who approached them on the street. These kinds of referrals enabled workers who may not have access to formal credentials to work their way up through the industry based on their demonstrated skills in providing quality care.

While moving between jobs was a central strategy, workers taught each other how to do it deliberately. A key piece of advice was that it is best to keep your old job while you are looking for a better job. Myrna told me that advised some of the newer workers in her neighborhood that, if they were looking to leave a bad job, “Don't run from it. Make sure there's a way to get something else first. Then when you have a way out, you can go. Or else you’ll end up taking something worse because you need work.”
Negotiations: I came to understand that workers’ upward mobility in the industry relied centrally on developing the confidence to push back on employers and on learning how to negotiate. Many new workers initially accept whatever terms an employer offers. Workers have an initial fear of making demands on potential employers during interviews or during the first days on the job, worrying that they would not be offered jobs if they made these kinds of demands. These workers learned through hard experience that anything that was not laid out on the front end tended to be resolved in favor of the employer, like what would happen if an employer was running late or whether care workers would be expected to do housecleaning. But with the encouragement of their peers, they learned that many employers were open to negotiating the terms of employment. More experienced workers believed that their confidence and capacity to negotiate the terms of their employment on the front end meant that employers treated them with more respect throughout their job tenure. But even if decent contracts have been negotiated and signed, the terms of employment are always up for negotiation. Workers had to constantly negotiate over the boundaries of their job responsibilities, respectful treatment, the level of autonomy they were given on the job. They deployed both explicit and implicit forms of negotiations, dependent on the power dynamics of the given circumstance.

Many workers told stories in which employers would try to add new areas of work that went outside of the boundaries of the agreed-upon job description. One story I heard frequently was employers asking nannies and elder care providers to take on housecleaning tasks, but housecleaners also shared stories about being asked to help with elder care. This drive towards expanding work expectations was grating to workers, both because it placed a greater practical burden on their shoulders but also because it implied that they were lower-status workers who
should focus on tasks more menial than developing the children in their care. Meches described this dynamic,

The parents aren’t thinking about the kids. They just want to exploit you and find out how much they can get from you. One employer tried to get me to do everything, not just take care of the kids. They wanted me to do their laundry and clean the kitchen and all that. You can’t sit the children in front of the TV while you clean...especially when they’re little kids, they want everything in the world in their mouth. And we are there to help them grow. You can’t do everything at once. Now I know to say before I take a job to tell them that I don’t clean and I don’t cook. I just take care of the kids.

Bianca was proud to describe her ability to hold boundaries once she was on the job, “If I’ve been asked to do something which was not in my job description, especially at the beginning, I won’t do it. And I would speak my mind. I find a way to say, ‘Excuse me. That’s not part of my job. I’m sorry. I can’t do it.’”

Many employers of nannies and elder care providers see the work as an extension of their family responsibilities and don’t think of themselves as “employers.” Instead of treating the work as a formal job, they expect workers to expand their hours and tasks to accommodate family demands, like family members would be expected to do. Many employers are offended when workers respond with formal negotiations. The projection of intimacy into the employment relationship grows out of the gendered division of labor in the home and the related attitude that caring labor in not “real work.” These gendered assumptions often intersect with the often-unstated expectation that workers will act with deference to their employers, an expectation that is rooted in the legacy of racialized servitude in the United States. When workers directly confront their employers, they challenge these expectations. That challenge can lead to high-pitched emotional battles and firings (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). These dynamics encourage workers to develop informal and implicit strategies for negotiations so as not to violate
employers’ expectations of the dynamics of the relationship (Rollins 1985). Bianca described this kind of indirect way of negotiating the boundaries of her job description.

I only had to do Rex’s [her charge’s] laundry. What would the mom do? She would hide clothing of hers under Rex’s clothes that she wanted me to wash. She did it once to me, and I did them. But the second time she tried to do it? I know there’s cameras in the apartment, so they can watch what I do. I started sorting the laundry in front of the camera, saying, ‘This is Rex’s. This is not!’” Her voice started to rise as she started to remember how frustrated she had been. “’Not mine! Not mine!’ I put it all back in her hamper. She never did it again. Oh, I was furious! Are you trying to trick me? If you want me to do something special, tell me to my face. Don’t try to trick me.

These kind of indirect challenges allow workers to establish boundaries without directly challenging the unstated expectations of deference (Rollins 1985).

In addition to these negotiations over wages and the scope of work, workers often have to negotiate over the interpersonal dynamics of respect. Sometimes, these negotiations became very explicit and confrontational. Jennifer told me a story of an emotional confrontation she had with an employer over a question of courtesy and respect. One morning, a late train made Jennifer ten minutes late to work. She called her employer to let her know, but the woman was frustrated and hung up on Jennifer.

So I got there, and I said, ‘Good morning.’ But she just looked at me, and she never answered me. I thought that was just so rude. So I wanted to make sure that she really did hear me. So when she walked past me another time, I said, ‘Good morning.’ And she looked at me, and she did not answer me. And that woke up all the demons in me. So I took my bag up, and I left, heading down the stairs. All those years I’d been there with those two babies, and you have the nerve to treat me that way? So I’m leaving, and she says, ‘Where are you going?’ I said, ‘Good morning to you.’ And I just kept going, and she still didn’t say, ‘Good morning.’ So I said, ‘Listen to me. You see, where I come from, if you walk into people’s home, and you say good morning, and they don’t answer you, you’re not welcome. I’m not welcome in your home.’ And I was gone. I went home.

The struggle continued through the next day, ending with an apologetic call from the husband and a reluctant apology from the woman. While their relationship continued to have challenges,
Jennifer felt that kind of challenge allowed her to maintain a sense of self-respect and to keep the relationship from deteriorating into degradation. But these types of negotiations over the dynamics of respect and deference are not always so explicit. Pat described a more indirect method of challenging disrespectful treatment from a child in her care. One day, the little girl in the family went into the linen closet and threw the clean sheets on the floor and said, “You have to pick them up because that’s what my mommy pays you to do.” The grandmother reprimanded the little girl, but she did not force her to pick them back up. Pat refused to pick the sheets, and they sat on the floor for weeks until eventually someone in the family put them away. Here refusal to respond to this kind of blatant disrespect was a silent but very clear method that allowed Pat to negotiate a more respectful dynamic in her relationship with that family.

Workers also need to negotiate to maintain a level of autonomy on the job, a key marker of high-status work in domestic work and for working people more broadly. Even employers who hire more experienced workers can adopt a tendency to micro-manage the workers in their employ, writing down a schedule of activities and a timeline for each activity. The importance of maintaining autonomy over her work was important to Myrna for two reasons. First, it marked her as a higher-status professional worker, and, secondly, because it challenged the dynamics of racialized degradation in the industry. She told me,

Long ago, when you look at The Help, they would have to say, ‘Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am.’ You know this kind of thing. And they're running and running. Now these days, we don't do that. So you should have the power to not to have to every little thing written down. You should have the power to know that you don't have to run, run, run and do every little thing on their time.

Myrna bristled at this practice, saying,
You have to take authority if you are in these jobs. You shouldn't be rude, but you can set them down. Don’t go making it look like you are the boss. You still work for them. But don't let they take authority over you to make sure you do every little thing they want.

As all of these stories show, workers’ capacity to consistently negotiate these dynamics of power and respect on the job is a central factor determining their conditions on the job and their position in the industry.

**Professionalization:** Asserting professionalism is another central strategy that workers use in their interviews and contract negotiations to gain better jobs and negotiate stronger contracts.

Allison described the impact of these kinds of assertions,

> When I walk in to any employer’s home and say, ‘My name is Allison, and I’m a professional,’ they immediately switch the way they start talking to me because I demand that from the first sentence. It sets the bar higher than if I said, ‘I’m just a nanny. And I just want to take care of your kids.’ I feel it gives the employer the notion to know that I have expertise, that I have the experience, and that I take my work seriously.

This assertion of professionalism is not just a declaration about an individual worker’s professional training and experience in the industry. Allison went on, “This work has been hidden for so long and undervalued for so long, and we are so ashamed about doing it. But I use ‘professional’ to describe my work because this is serious work. I think it’s probably the most important work. It’s my profession. It’s what I love doing.” These sorts of claims challenge the gendered devaluation of caring and cleaning labor as well as the racialized devaluation of the skills and labor of immigrant women of color. They help these workers to negotiate higher wages and better benefits and to establish relationships with more respect and autonomy.

Professionalization takes many forms in the domestic work industry. The most straight-forward is the acquisition of formal training relevant to the industry. Increasingly, employers are
requiring nannies and elder care providers to have a CPR (Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation) certification, in case their charges start to choke. But many workers take additional professional training courses in child development, play therapy, baby nursing, elder care, nursing, high-end household management and so on. They usually have to take these courses at night or on the weekends, making these upward mobility strategies inaccessible for many live-in workers. Others take pains to educate themselves informally, reading up on topics like working with hyperactive children or how to help a child develop creativity and critical thinking. It is significant that almost all of these educational strategies are only accessible to workers who are fluent in English, since few classes or child development books are easily available in languages other than English. Meches talked about the challenges this presents to recently immigrated Latina workers. “I walk into the child development section at Barnes and Noble, and there are hundreds of books. But none of them are in Spanish. It’s hard for women to get the information they need.”

Formal educational routes are not the only method for developing a professional level of expertise. Many nannies, for example, also develop highly specialized skills in child care though hands-on experience, Myrna said, “Raising my own child is where I learned to do all of that. My cousins, all of them had babies, too. So I read up, and I found out things about babies.” Through her own experience and through her formal training in baby-nursing, Myrna developed a high level of sensitivity to and knowledge about newborns, becoming a specialized baby nurses who helps new mother learn how to “sleep train” their children and how to understand babies’ cries. This level of expertise with child-rearing is both a source of pride and a resource for improving her status with respect to her employers who may be prone to dismissing child care as
“unskilled” labor. Myrna said, “Sometimes they think, ‘You are the nanny, and you need to do what I say. You have to follow my instruction.’ But you are helping them learn how to take care of their own child because they don't know. It’s a lot. So it’s a profession.” Many nannies, like Jennifer and Allison, developed a specialization working with children who had emotional or developmental challenges. Often, they had been hired to care for a child without being informed of a particular condition, but they discovered it over time. They worked with the parents, did their own research and built relationships with the other professionals who worked with those children in order to find a way to provide the best quality care possible. These experiences, in turn, led to these workers developing good reputations for working with these conditions, leading to either referrals to future jobs or to the ability to assert another realm of professional specialization in future job interviews. While these informal avenues are more available to nannies that they are to elder care providers and housecleaners, developing expertise through hands-on experience does enable these other sub-categories of workers to slowly work their way up the industry’s strata.

Workers also drew on other forms of education and expertise to assert their professional credentials. Although many employers’ racialized assumptions mean that they assume that immigrant women of color are uneducated, many workers had in fact attended college in their home nations. Nannies with college educations or professional backgrounds in their nations of origin will often inform employers about these credentials, knowing that employers are eager to hire workers who can supplement the practical aspects of childcare with educational activities. Workers who had been trained as nurses in their nations of origin found these skills to be an asset in applying for jobs in elder care. Fluent bilingual nannies can also offer to provide language
training to their charges, an appealing prospect to many higher-income employers. Formal education was not a useful asset for housecleaners, demonstrating a gap between the evaluation of the labor of care and the labor of cleaning.

*The Implications of Mobility:* Through these various upward mobility strategies, a significant number of immigrant domestic workers of color have been able to attain many of the conditions that reflect “high-status” domestic work. Nannies and elder care providers are seen as “professionals” who are not expected to do “menial” housecleaning because they are expected to focus on the labor of care. Housecleaners are treated as “household managers,” and they are given responsibility for a wider range of responsibilities in the household, including budgeting and liaising with other workers like landscapers. They are given autonomy in the management of their daily work. They have decent wages and working conditions, and they have been able to establish expectations of being treated with respect by their employers. Through their individual efforts, supplemented by their ethnically-based social networks, these women have not only improved their individual working conditions. They have been able to trouble the sharp racialized binary between high- and low-status domestic work. These women’s individual successes in improving, to a degree, the social status of the historically devalued reproductive labor of women of color has reshaped the industry in New York City to include this middle tier of jobs. This reshaping has the potential to benefit domestic workers across the industry.

But this reshaping has other potential consequences as well. While immigrant domestic workers of color *do* have a significant degree of shared experiences in their work, the fact that they inhabit significantly different tiers in the industry also creates the context for resentment and
competition between workers. Allison described these impacts, “When it comes to working conditions, it separates. The division starts in the workplace.” Newer workers can sometimes see more established workers as unfairly receiving higher wages or as doing inferior work. Workers who have been in the industry for years and who have, individually and collectively, slowly worked their way up the lower rungs of the industry see these newer groups of workers as competition, undermining more experienced workers’ ability to negotiate better wages and working conditions with their willingness to do more work for less money. These veteran workers often have a sense of pride in their journey up through the tiers of the domestic work industry, which manifests both as an individual sense of accomplishment and as a collective sense of nationality-based advancement in the industry. This pride can serve as a helpful tool in helping workers to confidently assert their professional credentials and to enable them to navigate the various forms of disrespect they face on the job. But it can also have a more troubling manifestation, showing up as a sense of pity, superiority, or contempt for workers who are in the lower tiers of the industry. Allison described this dynamic, “People think, ‘I work in a ritzier apartment than yours. My employers are nicer to me than yours are.’ And that’s the way a lot of it brews. People look down on each other.”

These dynamics are exacerbated by the instability in the industry. Domestic workers know that, however high up the domestic work ladder they have climbed, their positions are always unstable. In the wake of the economic crisis, conditions in the industry got tighter and more unstable. There were fewer jobs, and workers became more desperate for employment, making the industry into a buyer’s market. Employers could drive down wages and expect workers to perform more labor, either doubling up with other families or demanding housecleaning services
in addition to childcare. Knowing the difficult state of the market, many workers are less likely to ask for raises or demand rights like overtime. They fear that their employers may be tempted to fire them and hire a worker who will work for less. These are not imaginary fears, based in idle speculation. Pat’s winding path through the ranks of the industry illustrates this well. She had started as a live-in worker in the suburbs, working 12-hour days and taking care of all the household tasks in addition to childcare. Over time, she was able to find live-out work in the city and focus strictly on childcare. Her wages rose significantly. Together with her husband’s income, she was able to purchase a home in Brooklyn and another in Barbados. But she was fired just after the last economic crisis began, and she has not been able to find another job since. Her two homes went into foreclosure. Even if individual workers are not struggling with unemployment, they know other women who are slipping back down the ladder, and it is a terrifying prospect. In this context, downward-looking contempt and upward-looking resentment can develop into a real sense of antagonistic competition between workers. I will explore the ways in which DWU negotiated these tensions in greater depth in later chapters.

I also found that these dynamics contributed to workers interpreting the inter-class relations in the industry in complicated ways, often through individualized and personalized frames. Almost every domestic worker I met used the categories of “good employers” and “bad employers” as a primary frame through which to interpret the industry. “Good employers” were those who were relatively respectful of workers, who paid better and who ensured better working conditions. Workers tended to perceive good employers as more caring and generous human beings and as more educated people with better manners. Workers saw “bad employers” as greedy, rude and disrespectful. Nannies reflected that main concern of “bad employers” was to try to get as much
work as they could out of workers for as little money as possible, rather than ensuring the best possible care for their children. This “good employer” versus “bad employer” framework makes sense, given the structures of the industry. After all, the difference between two employers can be like night and day, and many of these differences are connected to employers’ individual values. But at the same time, an emphasis on “good” versus “bad” employers can promote a very individualized way of interpreting social relations, giving personal orientations and attitudes primacy over more structural dynamics. This framework, in turn, impacts the ways in which workers respond to their conditions, encouraging individualized strategies over collective organizing to challenge the larger dynamics that shape the conditions in the industry as a whole.

**From Infra-Politics to Organizing: Domestic Workers United**

Domestic workers have developed a number of effective methods of infra-political resistance: building networks that enable collective support in navigating a highly individualized industry; advocating, job by job, to improve working conditions and in so doing developing a middle tier of “better than low quality” jobs in the industry; and deploying a number of strategies to climb their way up the occupational ladder. These strategies are important pathways through which workers can improve their conditions, but they are limited in their ability to challenge the structural conditions in the industry. They leave unaddressed the question of why employers’ individual attitudes are allowed to have such weight in setting the standards in the industry, and they leave the poor conditions at the bottom of the industry in place. To respond to these gaps, Domestic Workers United builds on domestic workers’ infra-political models in its organizing work. DWU attempts to formalize these informal methods of resistance and to bring workers together across the lines of race and nationality in order to challenge the structural conditions
that shape their work. They also incorporate a more explicitly “political” approach to resistance by organizing to challenge the exclusion of domestic work from government regulation.

*Worker Testimonials:* As we have seen, domestic workers come together on a regular basis to informally share their stories and to support each other. This space for mutual support is an important mechanism of support and knowledge development that enables domestic workers to improve their standing in the industry, but there are significant limits to the informal practices as they have developed.

First, DWU organizers reflected that informal social-network-based conversations are often limited by culturally established norms of privacy, etiquette, and shame. Allison reflected,

> I could sit there with five Caribbean nannies from five different countries. Our job description is the same, but the pay varies across the board. But we are very secretive about our pay. I think it's because either we know we’ve bargained for less and we don't want to share that, or it’s because we’ve bargained for more and we don't want to share that to make the other person feel a certain way.

DWU is one of the few places in the industry where workers are encouraged to overcome cultural expectations about privacy and shame in order to speak very openly about their working experiences: naming their pay rates and talking clearly about benefits.

Even more significantly, while the cathartic and solidarity-building function of story-telling also manifests in the informal social networks that domestic workers build with each other in the city’s parks and playgrounds, those conversations tend to take place within racial and nationality-based networks. In those groups, cultural connections help to provide women with a sense of connection that makes it possible for them to share their stories. But building groups along racial
or national lines can also encourage workers to see themselves as allied only with other workers from their own region or nationality, to see themselves as competitive with other groups. I will explore this challenge in greater detail in later chapters.

DWU builds on the informal practice of small-group story-sharing by providing a formal space that encourages workers to talk openly about their working conditions, challenging the shame and secrecy that often limit informal conversations. Domestic Worker United is one of the only places where workers shared these kinds of stories across lines of race and nationality. This takes place through informal conversations in the organization and, more systematically, through a formal practice of worker testimonials. Worker testimonials about their experiences on the job were a part of every one of DWU’s monthly general meetings and many of its public events. These testimonials provide a space for building shared consciousness around workplace dynamics and relationships with employers and other workers. Each month, a worker would stand up in front of the assembled workers and tell her story. In one meeting, Sylvia testified about one of her most difficult working experiences:

I worked in Manhattan taking care of a baby boy. He was three months when I started taking care of him. I worked for very little money. They only paid me $240 to work from 8am till 6pm on Monday through Friday and on Saturday from 8am to 3pm. It was lot of hours. Later, the family moved to New Jersey, and they had another baby. I agreed that I would work with them as a live-in. When you’re a live-in, you work more hours, so they paid me a little more. Everything was good, until - one day - they went to work as always. I didn’t feel good that day. I went to play with the baby in the garden. And I kept feeling worse and worse. So I had to call the parents to come back to take care of the children because I was really sick and couldn’t keep working. They called an ambulance for me. The ambulance came before the parents got home. I went in the ambulance, and the neighbors took the little kids. I was unconscious. I was in a bad state. I couldn’t speak, and I couldn’t tell them how I felt or what was wrong with me. My employers got back in the afternoon, and they came to see me in the hospital. They told me I was in good hands at the hospital. I was there for three days. My family didn’t know where I was; my employers didn’t remember to tell them I was at the hospital. It’s hard to remember these things; it’s better to forget or to laugh. I couldn’t walk the day I left the
hospital. They picked me up and brought me back to the house. They told me that I had to decide if I was going to stay, or if I was going to go back home. But I couldn’t work so I told them that I was going to go back home. So they took me to the bus station, and they left me. They told me to get on the bus when it came. Thank god the people in the bus station helped me because I was still so sick. I couldn’t walk. I stayed home, trying to get better. The third day I was at home, my employers called me. They told me that they were letting me go because I wasn’t working. I felt really angry. We all have rights. We have the right to get sick. You can’t help it. Then those employers refused to pay me what they owed me; I had vacation time saved up, but they wouldn’t pay me. So I went to DWU, and I told them what had happened to me. We sued them so they would pay me what they owed me. Since that day, I have stayed with DWU not just because of what I went through, but also because so many other workers go through the same things. But they stay quiet because they don’t know what to do or because they are afraid because they don’t have documents. I am going to continue to fight with all of you until we all have rights. I want to help others like I was helped.

The themes that emerged out of these testimonials reflect the well-documented challenges in the domestic work industry: the absence of formal contracts; the difficulty in gaining benefits like vacation pay, paid sick days, unemployment and health insurance; the long hours worked without access to overtime pay; the arbitrary nature of the work schedule, subject to unannounced lateness, last-minute firings and unpaid vacations; the use of intimate relationships to pressure workers to accept even more challenging working conditions; the constant pressure toward the unremunerated expansion of job responsibilities; and the racially charged dynamics of control and disrespect that permeate the industry (Anderson 2000; Chang 2000; Colen 1995; Glenn 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Palmer 1989; Parreñas 2001; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; Wrigley 1995). The act of telling these stories helped workers to release the pain and shame that they carried from the humiliations and deprivations that they faced in their work. Telling and listening to these stories helped workers to understand that even their most isolating and painful experiences were not theirs alone, that other workers had gone through the same thing.
Allison described the impact of worker testimonials in promoting inter-racial solidarity between workers,

When workers are in the space, they’re opening up to share more about their work experiences as domestic workers. They begin to realize that we are together because of the things we share in common as workers. Workers who are in the space begin to build unity there and to understand the commonalities. I feel like that breaks the space where workers can realize that Latina, Caribbean, Filipina and whoever else... the work that we do is the same. That’s where it starts. And that’s one of the benefits to organizing, or to being in the group - that we can see the picture for really what it is and not for what we think it is.

Story-sharing was the basis of the organization’s process of building a shared “domestic worker” identity that expanded beyond the nationality-based support networks that many workers built on the job.\(^\text{20}\)

Beyond building a sense of shared experience, these stories also at times motivated new members to commit themselves to the organization out of a desire to support women who were in more difficult places. Jennifer told me the story of her first meeting,

When I walked into DWU, there was a girl telling her story. And everybody had tears in their eyes. It was an African girl telling her story... not much English, but enough to break anybody's heart. Her employer had violated her in a very intimate way. I remember walking out of there that day and saying, ‘I want to be a part of this. I want to help heal somebody’s heart that is so broken.’ I think at that moment - more than anything else - I felt compassion for her, without even knowing what the big picture was. And that was the start of it all.

Member after member told me this “origin story” about how a testimonial had motivated them to commit themselves to the organizing work. Myrna told me,

\(^\text{20}\) Although the shared identity that was being built through this process was clearly an identity as “domestic workers,” that shared identity was rarely articulated strictly along “class” lines. The dynamics of gender, racial degradation and workers struggles with immigration and documentation were ever-present in workers stories. Although differential racialization meant that women from different backgrounds experienced racism in different ways, the common experience of racialized degradation were central to the process of building unity across racial and national lines within the organization. I will explore the centrality of racial oppression and gender to the domestic work industry in greater depth in the next chapters.
A Spanish girl came, and she told her story. And I said that I had to go to God and pray for her. Because undocumented, being treated badly, her family’s story...it made me sad. She captured me with her story. And I said, ‘You know what? I’m going to join DWU for her.’

These women’s reactions highlight the importance of the emotional in the formation of workers struggles and class consciousness (Goodwin, et al. 2001). Although this formation of consciousness related to conditions in the workplace, it was more of an emotional appeal than an appeal to the “bread-and-butter” self-interest of workers.

This ritual of story-telling also helped workers to move beyond individualized perspectives on “good” and “bad” employers and to develop a larger perspectives on employers as a group. As we can see in Sylvia’s testimonial, these story-telling sessions motivated workers to commit themselves not only to improve their own working conditions by leaving bad employers and finding good employers, but also to find ways to begin to limit to ability of bad employers to be as “bad” as they are. These story-telling sessions created a context in which staff and experienced worker-leaders could draw out domestic workers’ organic knowledge of these broader forces, highlighting these larger dynamics and helping each other to deepen their commitment to collective struggle. The themes that echoed between stories helped workers to develop clarity about patterns of abuse in the industry, leading DWU members to develop a clearer sense of antagonism that moved beyond their individual employers and focused on employers’ impunity more generally and the structural forces that facilitate that impunity: the lack of state protections that facilitate that impunity and the gendered devaluation and racialized degradation of their labor. At the same time, there was a contradictory impact to the story-sharing. While many workers were deeply moved by the painful stories of other workers and motivated to join the organizing in response, this motivation was often described as a desire to
fight for those who are worse off or for those who have “no voice” and who “cannot help themselves.” This opens up the question of whether these women saw themselves as working in solidarity with their fellow workers or as providing charity to the less fortunate, which implies a distancing and dis-identification with the women. In all likelihood, this is not an either-or distinction; instead charity and solidarity, identification and dis-identification were simultaneous and in tension with each other in these women’s experiences.

**DWU’s Nanny Course:** Domestic Workers United also built on workers informal strategies for occupational advancement through its annual Nanny Course, a four-week weekend class designed to systematically pass on these strategies for advancement and to provide a grassroots method for credentialing workers. The Nanny Course provides introductory training in many of the core professional skills demanded by employers in the industry’s higher tiers, like CPR certification and basic training in pediatrics and child psychology. During the Nanny Course, workers learn additional strategies for upward mobility, like moving between jobs and building a solid set of references. Domestic Workers United supplements this professionalization training with political education and training in workers rights and the importance of worker organizing, working to combine individual advancement strategies with more collective strategies for change.

Every year, Domestic Workers United hosts a women who runs an employment referral service for high-status domestic workers, primarily for high-end household managers who work in the homes of the wealthy. She trains Nanny Course participants in the skills of professional advancement: how to present yourself as a professional, what benefits they could ask for, when
to ask for a raise and how to ensure a good list of references. To encourage workers to be intentional about building social networks for mutual support and for job referrals, this trainer hands out little blank booklets and instructs them to take down each other’s numbers and to stay in touch. By encouraging them to broaden worker-to-worker networks, DWU again helps to turn individual advancement strategies into a collaborative effort. By encouraging women to build networks that cross lines of race and nationality, they are promoting a distinct kind of mutual support and solidarity in the industry.

The Nanny Course provides a space for formal trainings in negotiations, but perhaps more important are the informal dialogues that take place during the Course during which workers encourage each other to hold the line in order to maintain the informal standards that workers have set in the industry. During the Nanny Course, Domestic Workers United members encourage their peers to intentionally use negotiations in order to both improve their material conditions and to shift the terms of employment away from deference towards respect. Allison told a story of one exchange that took place during a Nanny Course,

Let’s say that a Latina sister shares a story, and it’s the story of scrubbing the floor on her knees. Then the other workers would weigh in and give her feedback that she doesn’t need to clean the house like that....This forms that level of empowerment amongst the workers, and it helps them have that voice to step up on the job as well. That worker who was scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees, she knows that it wasn’t right, but that’s what the employer asked of her. But now she says to herself, “Oh, I did this once, but I’ll never do it again because I felt humiliated or I felt belittled.” That’s the kind of support that we want to give. I feel in DWU, we have that space where the workers are one unit, and they’re able to share their stories to negotiate and bargain for very similar or the same wages.

Through these conversations, workers develop a collective understanding of the informal industry standards and coach each other in how to negotiate to uphold those standards. It is these kinds of spaces for exchange and dialogue that transform the individual strategies for
advancement into a collective project. They help workers transform competition into mutual aid and support.

DWU’s Nanny Course also provides workers with an occupationally-specific professional certification. DWU partners with Cornell’s Institute of Labor Relations to run the course, so graduates receive a diploma from Cornell University that they can share with their employers. This accreditation from a prestigious U.S. university helps to validate their standing as professionals, since employers’ biases often lead them to see a nanny training diploma from Cornell as more legitimate than a university degree from a worker’s home nations. Conducted largely in English but simultaneously translated into Spanish, the Nanny Course is one of the few forms of professional certification available to Spanish-monolingual workers. The Nanny Course has been an important avenue for the organization to recruit new members and a valuable service for its existing members. By formalizing the often informal practice of worker-to-worker education about how to navigate the industry, DWU makes it possible for workers from a range of backgrounds to rise more quickly through the industry and, therefore, to raise industry standards more generally. These kinds of spaces open up the possibility for workers to begin to share these resources and knowledge more broadly across the standard lines established through informal nationality-based social networks between workers.

In the year after my research ended, DWU began to experiment with two similar training programs for workers in other sub-categories. They worked with the woman who ran the negotiations training for the Nanny Course to offer a course to train housecleaners to become high-end “household managers” who could manage household budgets, coordinate social events
for their employers and so on. This course did not succeed for several reasons: DWU has historically had a weak base among housecleaners; the organization’s members who worked in the caring sectors of the industry did not seem enthusiastic to transition into the sectors related to cleaning, no matter how high-end; and the costs of the training were prohibitive. The organization has also recently partnered with SEIU to explore the possibility of offering professional training for elder care providers, a rapidly growing section of the industry.

_Fighting Informalization:_ Helping workers to navigate the conditions of the domestic work industry as it is currently configured is one important aspect of DWU’s work, but it is not the only thing that the organization does to overcome the challenges presented by stratification and informalization. The organization sees the absence of government regulation as a definitional structural issue that creates those challenging working conditions. The extreme stratification of conditions in the industry, the abusive conditions in the lowest tiers of the industry and the non-enforcement of minimum rights and standards throughout the industry’s tiers are not circumstantial. They are all made possible by the effective absence of state regulation of the industry.

Domestic Workers United has focused the majority of its organizing efforts on the struggle to win inclusion of domestic workers in the standard package of worker rights and protections and to ensure the enforcement of those rights. This work, which focuses on influencing legislators and shaping the broader public debate, often takes a significantly different form than the internal programs that build on the organic infra-politics among domestic workers that have been described in this chapter. But while this work takes place in the realm of the “public transcript”
through more established mechanisms like lobbying and media advocacy, it still reflects the situated knowledge and visions of domestic workers. It challenges the established patterns of power and domination. Those efforts place the struggles against the racialized legacy of slavery in the industry and for the revaluing of cleaning and caring labor at their center. They place the struggle for respect and dignity on par with efforts to win bread-and-butter demands like higher wages and better hours. Rather than being defined by the limits of workers rights as they have historically been set in this country, they push against those limits by making demands for policies that reflect workers’ visions for a good life.

DWU sees inclusion in state protections and the recognition of domestic work as “real work” as inseparable phenomenon. At a press conference celebrating the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, Joyce described the significance of the victory, “Too long we have faced exclusions, but we are not longer invisible, we have emerged out of the shadows into the light. We are real workers.” The remainder of this dissertation will explore the processes by which domestic workers came to be implicitly and explicitly excluded from the standard package of worker rights and protections, the methods by which Domestic Workers United has challenged those exclusions and fought for enforcement of basic rights and the ways in which their work demonstrates the limits of those rights.

**Conclusion**

Through the practices of story-sharing and professional development programs, Domestic Workers United builds on and expands the organic strategies of resistance that domestic workers have developed to navigate the structural challenges of decentralization and stratification.
Building on the model of workers’ informal social networks, these programs help to transform individual advancement into collective struggle. These programs also encourage workers to move beyond individual analyses of worker-employer relations and racially divisive assessments of the relationships between workers. They promote more structural analyses of the dynamics in the industry and cultivate relationships between workers that cross lines of race and nationality. DWU’s public campaigns to bring domestic work under the reach of state regulation and into the realm of the formal economy allow the organization to begin to confront many of the structural conditions that have led to those challenging conditions.

Their model has both practical and conceptual implications about the need to re-orient approaches to worker organizing. On a practical level, in an increasingly decentralized and informal economy, their model suggests the need to develop worker organizing methodologies that weave together individual and collective forms of resistance. DWU’s models challenge false binaries between individual and collective forms of resistance and between the infra-political and the explicitly political. In so doing, DWU offers a helpfully integrative model for worker organizing that can effectively respond to the growing trends towards decentralization, stratification and informalization in the economy as a whole. On a more conceptual level, their models supports the long-standing argument that, if organizing models are to reflect the experiences and speak to the worldviews of oppressed people in more organic and rooted ways, explicit collective struggle needs to build upon the often-hidden and seemingly individualized ways in which working people resist their oppressive conditions (Kelley 1994).
CHAPTER 4: “Tell Dem Slavery Done:” DWU Grapples with the Echoes of Slavery

In 2011, one year after the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, more than a hundred domestic workers gathered together from around the metropolitan area for the second regional domestic workers convention: the *A New Day, A New Standard* Convention. As the meeting opened in a wood-paneled ballroom on the Upper East Side on a mild winter morning, the Convention’s Mistress of Ceremonies, Marlene reflected on the struggle for the Bill,

> In 2003, two hundred of us gathered from across the city for the first domestic workers convention to imagine a day when domestic workers would be valued equally....A year ago, I was one of the people who was able to be there when the governor signed the Bill. And I cried. I cried because it took seventy-five years for us to get recognition. On that day, we went from being servants, from being a slave in the master’s home and in the bedroom to being seen as real workers whose rights were recognized.

“Slavery” is one of the primary frames through which DWU members, both Caribbean workers of African descent and Latina workers, described their experiences in the industry. Workers constantly reference slavery as a living system rather than as a past historical moment. Pat Francois, a spirited Caribbean nanny who is a constant public presence for DWU, said, “These things happened in the 1600’s, and they are still happening today.” Many of the organization’s slogans, like “Tell Dem Slavery Done,” echo themes from the international struggle to abolish slavery and to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. “Slavery” provides a lens through which workers can make sense of their experiences with racialized disrespect and exploitation, and it also provides them a powerful basis from which to argue for their rights.
While workers primarily reference slavery symbolically, formal slavery does sporadically appear in the industry today. Almost every year, the tragic story of a domestic worker who has literally been enslaved by her employers breaks across the local news: locked in the home and unable to communicate with the outside world, forced to work 16 hour days and paid nothing for her labor, her passport stolen and often facing violence and abuse. However rare, these stories provide a terrifying reminder to today’s domestic workers that it is not just bad working conditions, but slavery itself that defines the very lowest tiers of the industry.

This awareness about the existence of formal slavery in the industry is particularly significant given the dynamic I explored in the last chapter: workers’ lived experiences working their way up from the bottom of the unstable stratifications in the industry. When workers told me stories of the jobs they had that they believed were “like slavery,” they were usually talking about their first jobs in the industry: the live-in jobs with long hours and low pay that many women take when they first migrate to the United States. So even though many of the women I interviewed were now in the middle tiers of the industry where they had better working conditions, they locate their experiences on a continuum of exploitation that includes jobs that they consider to be “like slavery” and, below those, examples of formal slavery. In the domestic work industry, “slavery” and “free labor” are not separate categories; they function more like the poles that define the edges of the continuum of conditions in the industry.

As noted in the introduction, it has been difficult for researchers to develop hard data on the number of workers in the domestic work industry, much less the numbers of workers who are in different tiers of the industry or who are formally enslaved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of formally enslaved domestic workers in New York City is very small, but the emotional power of these cases gives them a significant impact on workers’ consciousness.
Workers see themselves as having to constantly be on guard to keep themselves from slipping into the bottom end of this continuum of labor in the industry, and this experience imbues them with a deep antagonism towards employers as a group and towards the state for its failure to protect them from those intense forms of exploitation. This experience is intensified by the shock of moving between the racial orders of their nations of origin and that of the United States. These dynamics profoundly shape the experiences and worldviews of today’s domestic workers, making racial oppression foundational to these workers’ experiences of work and class relations. They create a context in which DWU approaches its work as a continuation and revival of the centuries-long struggle against slavery and segregation in the United States, centralizing the struggle against the racialized exclusion of domestic workers from the standard package of workers rights and protections. DWU grounds its work more in the history of the international abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights movement in the United States than in this country’s historic labor movement, which, with some significant and hopeful exceptions, has been criticized for not paying adequate attention to the fight for racial justice or the struggles of workers of color (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). DWU’s model suggests that we therefore need to see the struggle against racial oppression as central to the “class struggle” itself, placing these issues at the core of the work to reinvent worker organizing and to rebuild the labor movement in the contemporary United States.

The Echoes of Slavery

I intentionally use the word “echo” to describe the legacy of slavery in the domestic work industry because it denotes a reverberation from an originating sound, a reverberation that is less intense than its source but which follow its pattern. The conditions in the contemporary domestic
industry are egregious, but they are not equivalent to the conditions of chattel slavery in the
United States. Slavery was a uniquely horrendous institution in which the ownership of people of
African descent by white slave-owners was established by law and enforced through state
violence. Extreme violence and profound dehumanization were defining characteristics of
slavery in the United States. They were institutionalized in the law and in social practices that
defined people of African descent outside of the purview of human beings deserving of rights.

With the exception of the very small number of domestic workers who are held in captivity,
today’s domestic workers are technically “free.” There are innumerable degrading and
dehumanizing aspects of the work, but they are qualitatively different from the super-
exploitation, extreme violence and familial destruction that characterized slavery. The
experiences of domestic workers may be more accurately compared to the experiences of
indentured servants in the United States, who were severely exploited and poorly treated during
the period of their indenture. Indentured servants, however, had more rights than enslaved
people, and, more importantly, they were generally freed at the end of their tenure. If domestic
workers are not technically enslaved, what are we to make of workers’ deployment of “slavery”
as a symbol to interpret and explain their conditions? What does it tell us about the contemporary
domestic work industry and about broader racial and class relations in the United States? How
does it help these women to make sense of their working conditions, and how does it help them
to advocate for change in the industry?

There are political dangers to the use of “slavery” as a symbol to describe other forms of not-
quite-free labor. “Slavery” can become a stand-in for “particularly bad oppression,” thus erasing,
intentionally or not, the “singularity” of the horrors of slavery (Sexton 2010). While its deployment may imply a nascent form of identification and solidarity with historically enslaved people on the part of contemporary workers, it can also have the unintended effect of minimizing the severity of slavery as it actually was or obscuring its ongoing impact on Black communities in the United States.

I argue that, while these dangers are indeed present in domestic workers’ references to slavery, they also have a potentially progressive political potential that recognizes rather than erases the singularity of slavery in U.S. history. While these analogies do not tell us that the contemporary domestic work industry is in fact slavery, they do reveal the ways in which the history of racial slavery continues to shape contemporary U.S. racial and class relations. Slavery was a foundational institution in the United States. Its painful power has irreversibly shaped the political, economic and social structures of this nation, sending shockwaves through the centuries that continue to echo today. Slave labor produced the raw materials that drove the wealth of this nation, and the institution of legal slavery shaped the terrain of politics. As Saidiya Hartman (2007) wrote,

"Slavery...established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone....Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery - skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and imprisonment. (6)"

The weight of slavery’s afterlife falls heaviest on the shoulders of people of African descent and on African American people in particular, but its reach extends further. Many thinkers have argued that the “racial calculus and political arithmetic” of slavery have been foundational to formation of a broader racial logic in the United States, providing the foundation of oppressive..."
political arrangements and social relations (Du Bois 1969; Marable 2007; Winant 2004). The legal framework that established racial slavery irreversibly shaped the terrain of politics in the United States, setting the outline of stratified forms of citizenship. Slavery’s afterlife also shows up clearly in the racial division of labor, particularly in the structures and dynamics of the industries that were central to the system of plantation slavery in the South: agricultural work and domestic work. The domestic work industry came to be marked with the patterns of racialized servitude set during slavery (Du Bois and Eaton 1899; Rio 2000). This set up a vicious cycle in which Black women came to be associated with domestic work and therefore marked as “dirty” and in which the industry came to be racially marked as “Black” and further degraded by racialized cultural associations (Glenn 2010; Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985). In other words, servitude came to be racialized in the United States. That pattern continues to echo in the industry, even as many African American women left the industry and were replaced by immigrant workers from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. In order to explore the way in which the patterns of slavery and racialized servitude continues to echo in the industry, I will now turn back to the way in which DWU members talked about the legacies of slavery in the contemporary domestic work industry.

Echoes of Slavery in the Contemporary Domestic Work Industry

When workers would tell me stories about their experiences on the job, they would use the phrases “like a slave” and “less than human” almost interchangeably. When discussing egregious stories of exploitation in the industry, workers will sometimes alternate between the terms

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22 Slavery’s afterlife ripples out more broadly into low-wage service industries, reflecting the pattern of racialized servitude (Davis 2004; Glenn 1992). This investigation of one specific service industry where the residues of slavery are particularly clear is not intended to convey that domestic workers “have it worse” than all other workers; rather it is intended as an investigation of one site where we can excavate the ongoing impact on slavery’s racial logic on contemporary racial and class relations.
“employer” and “master.” These phrases came up most often when they spoke about employers’ sense of impunity over their time, expectations of social subordination, and a disregard of their basic survival needs and their family lives. They also regularly referenced slavery when they spoke about the government’s contribution to the degradation of domestic work, particularly when they spoke about the exclusion of domestic workers from the rights and protections established during the New Deal.

_Echoes of “Ownership:”_ Workers deployed allusions to slavery most frequently when they were talking about employers’ sense of control over their lives, which manifested most frequently around the dynamics of time and hours. Workers often told me stories about employers who expected them to stay past the end of their formal workday with little or no notice. Gabriela said it this way,

> Back home, you work for eight hours a day, and that’s it. If they want you to work more, they pay you more...Here, the slavery system is still on; it never ended...There are people that don’t respect us as human beings. They call us to work at any time. They want us to be available all the time. They don’t pay overtime. They think we belong to them, that we are their property.

There were other ways in which workers said that employers would act as if they “owned” them: employers would often dispatch workers to work in the houses of their friends or families without asking and without offering additional pay. These expansions of their job responsibilities were neither negotiated openly with the workers nor were they compensated with an increase in pay. After hearing these types of stories, DWU member would regularly connect these dynamics with the patterns of slavery, saying things like, “It’s the slave trade. It is just like the slave trade.” This sense of license over their time and tasks gave workers the feeling that employers believed that they owned the workers.
Employers’ attempts to exercise authority over workers lives as a whole implies a sense of authority over and “ownership” of domestic workers, a dynamic which these workers believe is connected to the history of slavery. These informal assertions of employers’ authority over workers are qualitatively different than the system of juridical slavery in which slave-owners were granted the legal rights of ownership over other human beings and had authority over their entire lives. Today’s domestic workers are not legally owned by their employers, but are rather hired to work. While it is often difficult for them to move between jobs because of financial constraints and immigration status, they are not prohibited from doing so by the force of law. But these workers are articulating that their experiences differ from the standard expectations of formally free labor, in which employers hire workers for a certain periods of time to do a defined sets of tasks in a given workplace. In this, they are pointing to the echoes of some of the social and cultural processes that characterize slavery, in which an enslaved person comes to be defined as a tool of another person, rather than as a full and independent human being with the right to a social existence outside of the relationship with the master (Patterson 1982).

*Racialized Subordination*: Workers also spoke bitterly of a number of practices that marked them as servants and as social subordinates in the employment relationship. They understood these as attempts to mark them as less than fully human and to assert the racialized form of subordination that developed along with slavery.

23 These dynamics, which appear in particular ways in the domestic work industry, are also echoed in the experiences of many other low-wage service workers. For example, McDonald’s workers in Michigan recently leveled a lawsuit against their employer for requiring them to come into work and wait to clock in until the employer decided they were needed. Similar dynamics impact on-call shift workers who are expected to keep their schedules open in case supervisors call them into work. This supports my assertion that the afterlife of slavery echoes throughout low-wage service industries, which are also racially marked and socially degraded.
One of the experiences that grated most on workers was the requirement by some employers to wear a uniform on the job. DWU’s staff organizer, Joyce, worked as a nanny in Manhattan for many years. As part of her agitations in meetings, Joyce often shares her story of the kind of degradation she faced on the job,

When I was a nanny, I had to dress in a white uniform and look after a little dog that had cancer, push it around in the stroller and so on. Those people would have parties for their dogs; we had to wear little hats. I felt dehumanized and treated like I was less than a human being, like I was their slave.

There were also certain job assignments that particularly implied social subordination to the workers, particularly tasks associated with cleaning (Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985). Time and time again, workers referenced employers asking that they clean the floor on their knees. Allison said, “Mops and brooms still work; scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush really is not necessary.” Workers felt that the request was not about trying to get a cleaner kitchen floor. Instead, to workers, this request was an attempt to exercise a demeaning type of authority over the worker, akin to requiring them to bow and kneel before the employer.

Employers’ terms for describing workers was another way of marking them as socially subordinate (Rollins 1985). One example was the expectation that workers, whom employers called by their first names, address their employers formally as “Mister” and “Miss.” Allison spoke to this experience.

As I started being a nanny, there was this one woman, and she wanted me to call her ‘Miss’ and whatever her last name was. And that pissed me off to no end....I get the respect thing but at the same time I don’t get the ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’ thing. I feel like it connects with that of slavery. From reading and watching the slave movies, that’s the way that the servants had to respond to the masters and the missus.
Employers sometimes refused to recognize the given names of the workers in their employ. A Guatemalan nanny, Lizeth told me a story of an employer who said that she wanted to call her “Maria” because that was what she called all of her workers. This same employer told her that the Bible said that, “the Spanish were born to serve as a slave.” Pat described a transition in her relationship with one employer, which was marked by a shift in the way she was described. At first, this woman had been very friendly with her, giving her significant rest breaks each day. They built a personal relationship with Pat which even included watching the television version of Alex Haley’s *Roots* and crying over it together, seeming to signify an acknowledgement of some of the historical legacies of the power dynamics in their current relationship. But Pat said that this employer changed under the influence of a neighbor who criticized her for being too generous.

She was nice, but she had this friend across the street. And that friend came over, and she would say, “Where is the girl?” Or something rude like that, like, “Where is the maid?” And my employer told her that I was sleeping, and she said, “What do you mean? Why do you let her do that?” Then she started becoming different. They talked about how much to pay me. She started getting all of these ideas, and she started treating me differently. That was sad.

Here, naming Pat as “the girl” and “the maid” was one of the signifiers that marked the neighbor’s lack of respect, a social pressure which facilitated Pat’s employer’s shift from respect to dehumanization. These demeaning forms of naming intertwined with other forms of disrespectful verbal communication from employers. The list of different manifestations of verbal disrespect was endless: not being acknowledged when they came into the home at the beginning of the day, being screamed at by their employers, being spoken to as if they were stupid and more. These forms of verbal disrespect were particularly galling to Afro-Caribbean workers who, according to social norms in their nations of origins, tended to place a high premium on the mutual giving and receiving of respect. Sometimes, these verbal markers of
social degradation extended into explicit racial epithets; these insults were often accompanied by acts of outright physical abuse, demonstrating the deep connection between verbal and physical forms of domination. One painful example of this pattern can be seen in the story of Pat Francois, a vivacious Caribbean nanny who had a different hairstyle every time I saw her and who always brought spirit and light to DWU meetings. In 2008, Pat had tried to intervene when her male employer was mistreating his son. The employer turned on her, calling her a “black b***” and punching her in the face. He gave Pat a black eye, and the side of her face was bruised and swollen. Pat left that job, and DWU helped her to bring a lawsuit against her employer. After five years and a great deal of pressure from street protests in front of their homes and businesses, the employers finally settled. Pat told her story again and again to legislators during the Bill of Rights campaign, showing them pictures of her bruised face in order to underscore the violence and degradation that many workers have experienced (Poo 2010).

The segregation of the intimate space of the home was another site of social subordination in the employment relationship. Some said they were housed in uncomfortable places like the basement. Some nannies and elder care providers spoke of being told to sleep in the bedrooms of their charges in case they woke up and needed attention. Many times, these women would not be provided with a bed; instead they slept on the floor. This included restricting what facilities and appliances workers were entitled to use for their personal needs. This was particularly troubling for live-in workers, who were denied access to basic hygiene like the use of the families’ washer and dryer to launder their clothes or who were denied permission to take daily showers by employers who complained that it would take too much water.
Practices around food and mealtimes were another site where employers treated workers as social subordinates. Many workers told me stories in which they were expected to eat separately from their employers. At her first job, Jennifer was treated very differently when the husband was present, “The father was a very nice man, and he never made me feel less than anybody. He would...say that I was part of the family and I must eat with them and have dinner with them.” But when the husband was not present at mealtimes, things changed.

If he was not home, she’d put me in a corner with an open tray. She would just open that tray, and she’d say, “You can have your dinner there.” I was not allowed to sit with them. Many times, I would not eat that dinner. They had a dog named Sasha. I used to put the plate on the ground for the dog to eat it, and I would go up to my room.

Other workers spoke about being expected to eat after their employers. Pat described this dynamic at her first job, “She said to me, ‘You can eat when we’re finished eating.’ I was supposed to eat their leftovers. But no, I wasn’t going to do that. You can’t tell me I should eat after you and eat your leftovers.” Pat would bring her own food and eat that instead. Another woman said she watched her employer take the leftover food off of her son’s plate and put it on the plates she was giving the domestic workers in her employ; she refused to eat the family’s leftovers thereafter.

Judith Rollins has argued that these consistent performances of social subordination serve to bolster an employer’s sense of superiority and to devalue the worker in order to provide a justification for the exploitation embedded in the relationship. These expectation of deference and the intimate segregation that takes place inside of the home reflect and help to bolster the racial and class inequalities between the worker and the employer (Rollins 1985). This expectations of deference manifest in the dynamics of domestic work around the world, but they take on the particular historical legacies of the nations in which the work is taking place. In the
United States, that subordination is racialized; it generally takes places between a white employer and a worker of color. The racialization of deference and subordination carries the echoes of racial slavery, which was based on a worldview that enslaved people of African descent were inferior to their white owners and less than fully human.

*Disregard of Health and Survival Needs:* A number of workers told stories in which they had almost no access to food while on the job; this primarily impacted live-in workers who were dependent on their employers for their basic needs. Struggles with hunger echoed across the stories of workers who had worked as live-ins, tracing connections between workers experiences with the segregation of mealtimes and a lack of concern for their basic physical well-being.

Workers also felt dehumanized by the lack of concern for their basic physical health. Meches said, “The main problem is that you are not treated like a human being. You cannot get sick. You cannot have a personal day. How is it going to be that if you are going to get sick, you will not get paid? You are not a human being.” When workers did take time off for being sick, they stood at risk of losing their jobs. Sylvia’s testimony in the last chapter, about the time when she fell suddenly and seriously ill, conveys this neglect of workers health needs. Her employers expressed their sympathies, but they also fired her within the week.

Many workers knew women who had either died on the job or who had been unable to find the time or money to go to a doctor and had developed serious illnesses. Myrna began her interview with me by recounting two of these stories. One woman had cancer, but she wasn’t diagnosed for many months because she did not have health insurance. When Myrna asked if she’d been to the
doctor she said, “Yes, but I had to wait until I had the amount of money to pay for it.” By the time it was diagnosed, it had progressed to a terminal state. Myrna was with her in her last days, organizing prayer circles and finding ways to contact her family in Trinidad. Her other friend who passed had been young and, in Myrna’s words, “pretty like Jennifer Hudson.” Myrna said she’d been like a mother to this young woman. She had come from Trinidad to work because she couldn’t afford to take care of her baby daughter. She took a live-in job, where she had to sleep in a cold basement. The cold irritated her asthma, which was inflamed even further by the hair from the family’s pet cat. She told her employers that she was struggling with asthma, but they told her she would just have to continue to work. She was indebted to them for her travels to the United States, so she had little choice but to do what they said. By the time her illness escalated enough to go to the hospital, Myrna said, “It was too late. The asthma attack was so heavy that she passed.” Myrna and her fellow workers did not know how to contact her family in Trinidad, so she was buried in a pauper’s grave by the U.S. government. Her family in Trinidad was never notified. Stories like these spread through workers’ social networks, connecting with workers’ own experiences with employers who disregarded their health needs.

These kinds of stories help to create a shared sense that the lives of domestic workers are not valued, even at the most basic level of their physical survival. It is central to their assertions that they are facing conditions that are reminiscent of slavery. Slavery was built on violence and a profound disregard for Black life. That violence was used to promote the internalization of the idea that the enslaved person is both inferior and powerless (Patterson 1982). Today’s domestic workers are not subject to the extreme forms of violence that characterized slavery, but the sense
that they are physically disposable to their employers is still profoundly dehumanizing. It carries the echo of the profound disregard of the lives of enslaved people.

Disregard of Workers’ Families: Workers told me a number of stories in which their employers disregarded workers’ need to provide care to their own families, a particularly challenging experience since domestic workers’ labor is focused on providing support for the families of their employers. Sometimes, this manifested as challenges facing workers who had to neglect their own children because of the demands of employers. Pat told me a story that captured this dynamic,

One of the problems is when employers tell you at the last minute that they’re going to be late. Some people have children they have to go home to, so you have to give us notice....Some jobs, they come home late and they wouldn’t even call. I had to pick my son up, and she wouldn’t even call. She would just show up late. And I would have to pay extra money for the babysitter. We have a life too.

This kind of disregard implies that the families of the employers matters more than those of the worker. It suggests that workers’ families are, in fact, not significant at all.

Other workers had to leave their children behind in their nations of origin, either to earn money to fund their children’s education, and to finance their basic survival. They left these children in the care of friends or family members. Many of these stories were particularly heart-wrenching, full of lonely nights and tearful calls. Jennifer told me what it was like to leave her son behind when she first migrated to the United States.

We were apart for three years. And it seemed like the longest time in the world....We would talk on the phone every weekend. And my son and I would be crying on the phone like things were so wrong...You tend to feel so guilty as a parent, like it’s the worst thing you’re doing to your child. All you do is work, take the money, buy food, buy clothes, pack stuff, and send it back to these kids, but you’re not there for them the way they
would like you to be there for them. It was hard. It was hard. It was sad. It was wrong. It just didn’t seem right at all.

Whether is it the geographic separation of transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001) or the separation of workers from their families in the United States due to employers demands (Susser 1991), many workers are required to prioritize the families of their employers over their own families. Workers are aware that this reflects that their families are less socially valued than the families of their employers and that those differences reflect inequalities of power that trace along the lines of race, class and nationality.

This kind of “stratified reproduction” (Colen 1995) is one of the sites where we can again find the echoes of slavery. Today’s domestic workers are able to maintain contact with their children and aging relatives, so it is more of a distancing of ties than the “severing” of kinship ties that characterize slavery Patterson (1982). In the United States, enslaved mothers were prevented from providing care to their own children while being required to raise the children of slave-owners, and enslaved families were torn apart by the slave trade. But the disregard of their families and the required distancing from family ties communicates to workers that their employers see them as less than fully human.

_Denial of Identity:_ As the women told me their stories, two central themes emerged that reflected the theme of social death, the severing of workers’ past social relations. Many of the women I interviewed had gone to college and had worked as professionals in their nations of origins. These workers were proud of the education and their achievements, and they spoke nostalgically about the respect with which they had been treated. This contrasted sharply with their experiences in the United States. Workers often spoke bitterly of the fact that many of their
employers either ignored their college educations based on the assumption that immigrant
workers are uneducated, or they dismissed their education as an inferior or illegitimate form of
accreditation. Many women spoke with a similar pain and anger about employers who only saw
them as domestic workers, instead of seeing them as women who had worked as nurses, teachers,
business owners and government officials who had chosen to migrate in order to earn more
money than was possible in their own nations. They felt invisibilized, like their histories had
been erased. While, as I explored in the last chapter, workers would sometimes raise their college
educations in their interviews in order to assert their ability to provide educational development
to the children in their care, but there were often simultaneously unspoken expectations that they
should not speak of their educational and professional accomplishments too clearly with their
employers. These assertions could violate the implicitly racialized expectations of deference in
the industry. A dignified Filipina worker who was a member of Damayan, one of DWU’s sister
organizations that works with Filipina workers, told me that she had learned not to tell her
employers that she had been a French professor in the Philippines after she was fired by an
employer who was threatened by her advanced education.

In order to take on the role of “domestic worker,” these women had to sever themselves from
their past social positions. They were pressured into accepting their employers’ erasure of their
educational and occupational achievements. This erasure bolstered employers’ sense of class and
racial superiority, a worldview that justified their treatment of workers as social subordinates. At
the same time, workers had to suffer through a loss of identity and social status. These
experiences are significantly different from the experience of an enslaved person who was taken
by force and inserted into another society in a subordinate position, but there are echoes of the erasure of past social status and of identity that are defining features of slavery (Patterson 1982).

Government Policies: As much as they resent the degrading treatment they experience from their employers, DWU leaders do not place the responsibility for these dynamics on employers alone. They believe that the lack of effective government regulation in the industry is an essential element in ensuring the persistence of slavery-like conditions in the lower tiers of the domestic work industry. They regularly point towards the exclusion of domestic workers, together with farm workers, from worker rights and protections in the 1930s as one of the primary legacies of slavery in the industry, seeing it as one of the primary structural factors contributing to the degradation of their labor.

The explicit exclusion of domestic workers and farm-workers from New Deal legislation began with their exclusion from the Unemployment Insurance (UI) and Old Age Insurance (OAI) programs of the Social Security Act. These exclusions were then replicated in the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act (Kessler-Harris 2001). The occupational exclusion of domestic workers and farm workers was a thinly veiled racialized exclusion. Both farm work and domestic work were industries that were heavily populated by African American workers at the time. A full two-thirds of employed African American women at the time worked in domestic service. Domestic workers were included in the initially proposed version of Social Security legislation, but, when it came before the House Ways and Means committee, these workers came to be excluded through a collaboration between Northern policy makers and Southern legislators who were concerned with maintaining a disenfranchised Black workforce in
the South. These law-makers knew that they could not exclude Black workers on explicitly racial
grounds, so they argued for their exclusion based on the administrative impracticability of
including workers who made such low wages in a contributory insurance program. Their
argument thus reflected and helped to institutionalize the location of domestic workers in the
racialy defined lowest tiers of the economy, but it did so without naming them as a racially
defined group, providing us with an early expression of the political strategy of advancing racism
without naming race. The process by which this exclusion came to pass will be explored in
greater detail in Chapter 6.

Excluding domestic workers and farm workers from these foundational rights and protections
meant that most African American workers did not have access to the new forms of economic
citizenship established by the New Deal. The New Deal provided a floor of minimum standards
and channels for building power to raise standards above the minimum for white male industrial
workers while de facto excluding most workers of color and women workers, thus helping to
institutionalize a racially stratified form of economic citizenship (Kessler-Harris 2001;
Lichtenstein 2002). This stratified economic citizenship was a political institutionalization of the
racial logic that grew out of slavery: that Black workers should serve as a degraded, super-
exploited workforce who would be compelled to labor without the assurance of the basic
protections and rights assured to white workers. The framework established by the New Deal
both reflected the devaluation of these marginalized workers’ labor and helped to solidify their

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24 Here I am using the term “economic citizenship,” which Alice Kessler-Harris coined in In Pursuit of Equity (Kessler-Harris 2001). She was building on the original concept of “social citizenship” developed by T.H. Marshall (Marshall 1950), focusing on the forms of social citizenship that were established in the realm of the economy through the package of social welfare programs and worker rights and protections that was developed during the New Deal.
position at the bottom of the economic pyramid (Glenn 1992; Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris 2001; Lichtenstein 2002; Mettler 1998).

Domestic workers organized throughout the 20th century to win inclusion in these basic rights, and they succeeded in winning inclusion in the Fair Labor Standards Act, thereby earning the right to minimum wage and modified overtime protections (Nadasen 2012). But, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7, these laws are largely not enforced by state or federal Departments of Labor. Thus, even when domestic workers are technically included in worker rights and protections, they are excluded from those protections in practice.

Workers’ sense that the government is an active facilitator of their exploitative conditions is exacerbated by their experiences as immigrants, and their experiences as undocumented immigrants in particular. Many immigrant domestic workers are under the impression that they are excluded from protections under U.S. labor law because they are not citizens. While inaccurate since labor laws technically cover all workers in the United States, regardless of their status, this belief is reasonable, given that workers seldom see the government enforcing of those rights. At the same time, these workers do see that presence of the government in other arenas, specifically in immigration enforcement. Employers in the lowest tiers of the industry often use the threat of deportation in the attempt to frighten workers into submission, a threat which has an impact even when employers cannot follow through on that threat.

Together, these dynamics of exclusion, non-enforcement and the threat of deportation indicate to workers that, as in the time of slavery, the government helps to facilitate their racialized
exploitation and degradation. Workers often speak of the history of juridical slavery, the passage of the exclusionary New Deal policies and the present as if they were the same historical moment. Myrna once said to me, “Slavery’s not long ago. It’s the same thing happening today.” And another nanny described the passage of New Deal exclusions by saying, “Way back in slavery, the people who work on farms and who work in homes were excluded from labor laws.” These comparisons carry the danger of false conflations between the experiences of contemporary domestic workers and historically enslaved people in the United States, but they also succeed in naming the continuity of the racial logic that undergirds politics in the United States.

“When I didn’t know about all this racism until I got here”

These dynamics mean different things to different members of DWU, given their different connections to the history of racial slavery and relationships to domestic work in their nations of origin. While it was difficult for all of the women with whom I spoke to work in an industry that was redolent with the dynamics of slavery, it resonated in a particular way for the Caribbean workers, given the historical enslavement of people of African descent in the Caribbean. They often connected their experiences in the industry to the experiences of their ancestors in their nations of origin, and they drew lines between their organizing and the history of slave rebellions in the Caribbean. Although there were some significant differences in the patterns of slavery in the Caribbean and the United States,25 the diasporic identification with the experience of African slavery was deep.

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25 While Caribbean nations were also profoundly shaped by slavery, there were enough differences in the way in which slavery was structured to have significant differences on the racial orders in these two regions. For example, slave owners in the United States lived on the plantations where enslaved people worked, while slave owners in the Caribbean were often absentee, managing their estates through local overseers who were often free Black or mixed-
But at the same time as they articulated a deep identification with the historical legacies of slavery, many Caribbean workers also drew sharp contrasts between the racial order in the United States and those in their home nations. Many Caribbean workers asserted that racism did not exist in their home nations, in large part because their populations are majority people of African descent. Even though their nations have histories of slavery, the contemporary manifestations of that legacy are different in significant ways. Pat described Barbados to me in this way,

In our country, 95% of the people are black and 5% were white, so you never have the racial kind of stuff. People go to work together. And there were black people who were very rich, too, so it was like we didn’t know of all the racism. I didn’t know about all this racism until I got here. And here, I’m hearing about slavery and all of the ways that people didn’t treat the Black people right.

Speaking of Trinidad, Jennifer said something similar.

I only knew about racism when I came to this country. In my country, we had the Syrians, Lebanese, Chinese, the Indians, the Negroes... everybody lived as one. People were always very integrated. It was nothing like racism. I had never heard that word before. And when I came to the US, I was hearing a lot of it. And I had to learn how to deal with it.

Comparing Jamaica and the United States, Martina said,

This is practically a White man's country....This country is still in the 1940s, '50s era where the Black man is not valued. It’s different in Jamaica. You might have people who are high-colored, but...you don’t have the racism or the class difference as it is here. You have rich people who own lands...and they have people working in their homes. They don’t treat them like a member of the family, but at the same time they don’t look down their nose on you, as if you're nobody, or you're “just the maid.”
Some women would nod their heads vigorously and murmuring their agreement when their peers made these comparisons, but others would challenge them and argue that racial inequities were significant in their nations of origin. They would say that their peers were romanticizing the past and that racism was alive and well in Caribbean nations. They argued that racism manifested in the disproportionate numbers of white people in their nation’s economic elite, in the stratifications between people with different skin tones and in the internalization of these ideas which one worker called “the ‘massa’ mentality from back home.”

The relationship of Latina workers to these legacies of slavery in the industry was also quite complicated. On the one hand, they did not have a direct historical connection to the legacy of chattel slavery as it manifested in the United States and the Caribbean, so their identification with slavery in the contemporary industry was not ancestral in the same way. On the other hand, domestic work is much more widespread in contemporary Latin America than it is in the Caribbean. There it is also socially degraded labor, shaped by racial and regional inequalities. However, those degradations are rooted in a different history: the racial legacies of colonialism in the region and the paternalistic relations that emerged out of colonialism.

Some of the Latina members had worked as domestic workers in their nations of origins, while others had employed domestic workers in their homes. Often reflecting these classed divides, the Latina members would go back-and-forth with each other on the treatment of domestic workers in Latin American nations and whether or not it was “better” here. Gabriela spoke about it this way, “Once we had a domestic worker who lived with us, but she was one of us. You would sit down and have lunch with them. It’s mostly girls who come from the country, or girls who are
on vacation who come to work and then they don’t go back. We treat them like us.” Other workers challenged the idea that workers there were “one of the family;” they pointed out that that was the same narrative deployed by employers here in order to obscure exploitation and convince workers to work longer hours without additional pay. They talked about the racialized degradation of indigenous women in the industry and about how the term *domestica* itself was demeaning. In fact, the organization was careful to use the term *trabajadora del hogar*, or “household worker”, when speaking with to workers in Spanish because women would react against being described as a *domestica* or even a *trabajador domestico*.

Many of the Latina workers I interviewed talked clearly about the existence of racism in their nations of origin. None of them said the phrase that was common among so many of the Caribbean workers, that “I never knew racism until I came here.” Liliana, for example, talked at length about how angry she got at the subordination of Mayan people in Guatemala, including the treatment of indigenous domestic workers in the nation’s cities. But they almost all spoke about how the racism in their nations of origin was a different or lesser form of racism than what they experienced in the United States. They were shocked at what they saw as the implicit undertones of slavery in the domestic work industry and in society at large in the United States. Here, it was the difference of degree and form between those dynamics in their nations of origin and those in the United States that highlighted the injustices to Latin American workers.

So what are we to make of these comparisons of domestic work and racial class order across nations? It would be difficult to factually uphold the assertion that there racism does not exist or that domestic workers are treated much better in workers’ home nations. Evidence points to the
persistence of significant racial inequities and to the racialized degradation of domestic work in nations around the world (Anderson 2003; Gill 1994; Ray and Qayum 2009; Sanjek and Colen 1990). But, even though systems of racial inequality do persist in workers’ nations of origin, those systems are different, both in form and in degree.

It was the shock of transitioning between two different racial orders, or more specifically between two different racial class orders, that clarified the specific form that racial inequality takes in the United States. The primary difference that workers noted was the legacies of racial slavery in the United States, which, in their experience, manifested in a rigid racial hierarchy which seemed to use biological explanations to restrict class privileges to white people alone which particularly degraded the occupations that had historically been associated with slavery: farm work and domestic work. They were frustrated for example at the tendency for employers to view them as unintelligent because they were Black or to view them as inherently nurturing or docile because they were Latina. They felt essentially defined by their race in a way that they did not remember in their nations of origins.

This shock of the difference in the racial orders was often exacerbated by the fact that many workers had inhabited higher-class positions in their nations of origin, which often correlated with being located higher in the racial order in their nations. These differences in location had a significant influence on their understandings of the structure and severity of the different racial class orders. For example, Meches, who had grown up in a light-skinned, upper-class household in Guatemala whose family had employed indigenous women as domestic workers, told me that seeing race and class oppression from below in the United States shifted her perspective on what
she believed when she saw them from above in Guatemala. This did not weaken her critique of racial politics in the United States, but it did complicate her understanding of race and class in her nation of origin. The shock of transitioning between different racial orders does not only impact workers perspectives on race relations in the United State. It reverberates in their understanding of power relations in their nations of origins, demonstrating the transnational process of racial class formation.

Whether workers emphasized continuities or disjunctures between the structures of racial oppression in their nations of origin and the United States, these comparisons seem to provide workers with evidence that the structure of racial oppression and the racialized dynamics in the industry in the United States are neither natural nor inevitable. This gives them a basis from which to assert that those conditions can be improved. Whether they contain implicit critiques of their nations of origins or rely on semi-idealized reconstructions of the past, these comparisons serve as a strategic resource that helps workers to critique the industry and as a source of inspiration for changing it.

**Workers’ Daily Resistances to Racial Degradation:**

Workers experience the stratifications in the domestic work industry as a continuum between the degradation in the industry’s lowest tiers that carry the echoes of slavery and the dignity of work in its higher tiers. Many women enter the industry at the lowest tiers, often having to endure degrading treatment for months or years. And, as I explored in the last chapter, the decentralization of work and the lack of government intervention in the domestic work industry means that workers are left to rely on their own individual efforts, backed up by collective
networks of support, to climb out of the intensely exploitative conditions in the industry’s lowest
ties. From their perspective, they are only kept out of these bottom-tier positions based on their
individual capacities to hold the line and negotiate their way to better conditions. When workers
told me about their daily processes of struggle against employers’ attempts to subordinate them,
they would often described their stance in negotiations as a refusal to allow themselves to be
subjected to slavery. Pat told me, “They think you’re their slave and they can make you do
whatever they want. But I wouldn’t do it. I leave it right there. I’ll walk right off the job.”

Workers told me a number of stories of indirect resistance to employers’ expectations of
deferecence, the indirectness reflecting a response to the severe power imbalances embedded in the
employment relationship. For example, the women who told me that they often chose to go
hungry rather than eat the family’s leftovers did not explicitly challenge their employer’s
disrespect and neglect of their nutritional needs. Instead, they chose not to eat, believing this
would send an implicit message or at least preserve their sense of self. Allison, who was
offended by the employers who expected her to address them as “Mister” and “Miss,” told me
that she would just start her sentences in the middle, rather than address them with these
honorifics. When Lizeth’s employer insisted that she had to call her “Maria” she couldn’t
pronounce her name, Lizeth just repeated it again and again - “Lee-Zet. Lee-Zet. See it’s not that
hard,” until the employer had to concede. Although Lizeth believed it was actually a thinly
veiled attempt at racial subordination, she chose to act as if her employer was honestly not able
to correctly pronounce her name in order to not escalate the struggle.
Challenging scholar’s assertions that domestic workers cannot directly challenge expectations of deference, many workers also told me stories of explicit and confrontational challenges to employers’ racially coded forms of disrespect and attempts at subordination. Pat told me a story about an employer she had struggled with when was working as a live-in nanny in Long Island. “She told me she was going to make a room for me in the basement. And I said, ‘What? I would never sleep in this dungeon.’ The lady said, ‘You can’t talk like that.’ What do you mean I can’t talk like that? I’m not like that. I will tell you how I feel. I would not go for that.” Pat ended up getting what she called “a beautiful room, with these really good windows.” Jennifer told a similar story where she refused to take on cleaning tasks that she considered demeaning; in this case, the employer had told her to clean the baseboard around the house, a task that would have requires Jennifer to work on her hands and knees. “I said to her, ‘Do you clean the baseboard around the house?’ And she said, ‘Yes.’ I said ‘Well, I have news for you. Whenever you’re doing it, I’ll assist you. But I wouldn’t do it alone. If you’re doing it, I’ll assist you.”’ By saying she would collaborate in the cleaning of the baseboard, Jennifer demonstrated her willingness to participate in household cleaning on equal terms but refused to accept a task that demonstrated subordination. Jennifer told a similar story about pushing back against her employer's sense that they owned her and were in charge of all of her time rather than just her working hours. Describing a live-in job that she had taken in the suburbs of Long Island, she said,

One Friday, when I was ready to go home for the weekend, and my employer said to me, “You can’t go today. You have to stay. We're going to the temple, and you have to stay with Rachel [the daughter]. Rachel’s not feeling well.” And I said to her, “Well my family is looking forward to seeing me, and I have to go.” So she said to me, “Well. I’m not paying you. You can’t leave.” I said, “Okay.” And I started to pack my bag. There was no way to get to the train station unless I got a ride, but I decided she was not gonna keep me there. I decided if I had to walk it, I will. So I put my bag on my back, and I started walking.
On her way to the train station, she ran into the woman’s husband driving past. When he heard what had happened, he asked Jennifer to get back in the car and drive back to the house with him. She said,

He drove me back to the house, and he paid me while we were in the car. And he when we got to the house, he said, “Don’t you come out of this car.” But I could hear him screaming at his wife...And one of the things I heard him say is that, “She is a human being,” and that made me feel like at least somebody understands the isolation of being in their home and living in everyday and wanting to go home to my family.

The way in which Jennifer connects to this struggle over autonomy and time to a defense of her basic humanity captures the way in which workers see their individual negotiations as their primary form of defense from degradation into “slavery.”

Workers deploy these indirect and direct forms of confrontation to hold the line against racialized degradation within given jobs. Their desire to find more respectful employers who will treat them less “like slaves” is a central motivating factor in many women’s efforts to climb the industry’s informal occupational ladder. They believe that they are on their own in defending themselves against slavery, and many of them feel like they have had to fight their way out of “slavery” and into dignified work. These experiences profoundly shape the ways in which domestic workers think about relations in the industry, both their relationships with employers and their relationships with other workers. The racialization of these patterns make racial oppression the leading edge of the experience of domestic work, providing a powerful expression of Stuart Hall’s (1978) famous assertion that, “Race is...the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through.'” Here, racial consciousness does not undermine “class consciousness”, as many have argued. Rather, it expresses class consciousness as it is lived in a racially stratified class
order. Rather than serving as divisive or narrowing forces, racial and national pride can provide a motivating and consolidating force for workers struggle.

This consciousness of racial inequality helps workers to develop a clearer perspective on the structural class relations in this highly individualized industry. In the last chapter, I explored the tendency of workers to differentiate between “good employers” and “bad employers” in ways that seem to confines their assessments of relations within personalistic frames. These assessments of individual employers “goodness” or “badness” were centrally shaped by the degree to which employers deployed the forms of racialized degradation described in this chapter; this was clearly a question of degree, since few employers were seen as totally exempt from these practices. Workers were clear in their assessment that employers’ impunity to be “good” or “bad” employers was rooted in structural forms of racialized class privilege, centrally including the government’s tacit support for the exploitation of domestic workers (Rollins 1985). They believed that those structures predisposed employers towards the individual racist attitudes and the tendency to degrade workers. While DWU members did not articulate a deep sense of antagonism with every individual employer, they did speak of a deep sense of antagonism - which Rollins (1985) refers to as ressentiment - with the structural privileges of employers as a group, with the racial patterns of the industry and with the government’s facilitation of employers’ interests. In other words, while the decentralized structure of work can contribute towards individualized perspectives on employers and a sense of identification with individual employers, structural racism provides a lens through which workers assess employers as a class and a basis for developing a sense of antagonism with employers as a (racial) class.26 This is

26 Of course, not all employers of domestic workers are white, but - reflected to broad patterns in the industry - the overwhelming majority of DWU members had primarily worked for white employers. The fact that they generally
significant in a nation that tends to interpret class through individualistic frames and as a question of status and interpersonal relations, rather than through collective frames that attend to relationships of exploitation and antagonism between groups. Rather than acting as roadblock to the development of an awareness of their class interests and antagonisms, race seemed to provide a cogent avenue through which workers come to a collective assessment of their shared racialized class condition in the context of individualized employment relationships in a society that views class through a highly individualized lens.

At the same time, workers’ experiences with individualized resistance to racialized degradation on the job also shaped their perspectives on intra-class relations in contradictory ways. The individualization of resistance encouraged workers to see themselves as individually choosing not to be “slaves;” they chose to push back, they chose to leave an abusive employer, they chose to access the avenues for professionalization that helped them find a better job. This orientation has potentially problematic implications for these women’s perspectives on workers in the lower tiers of the industry and on their understanding of the experiences of historically enslaved people.

Many workers said things that implied that the women who remain in the slavery-like lower tiers of the industry are doing so volitionally, that they are accepting their assignation as de facto slaves. For example, in one political education session, a Jamaican elder care provider said, “Mexicans come here and take our jobs...They work for less, and make it harder for us to ask for more. They are bad for the industry and they take our jobs from us. I think that Mexicans are the described the few employers of color that they had worked for as “no different” strengthens this arguments that individual dynamics are less decisive than the broader patterns of racialized class relations that shape the industry as a whole.
new slaves.” I will explore the struggle that manifested over this statement in Chapter 9. But here we can see that this argument minimizes the vulnerabilities and structural constraints that limit the choices of the women who inhabit the lowest tiers of the domestic work industry: documentation status, limited language capacities and the threat of violence. These references tend to extend to assertions that these women can and should just make a different choice and that if they remain in those positions then it is, at least in part, their own fault.

The fact that workers could make these kinds of choices is a key signifier that these workers are not, in fact, subject to slavery in a formal sense, since slaves cannot *choose* to not be slaves but are rather physically coerced into slavery. Historically, enslaved people in the United States were subject to the force of the law and the threat of death if they attempt to escape. One Jamaican elder care provider explicitly articulated this troubling backwards-looking assessment. Reacting to the portrayals of Black domestic workers in *The Help*, she told me that Caribbean people would never have allowed themselves to be treated the way that African American people were treated in this country, seemingly dismissing the extreme violence that underlay the systems of slavery and segregation in this country. While this was not the perspective held by all members of DWU, this type of assessment implies a significant misinterpretation of the realities of historic slavery in the United States and a real challenge to the project of building solidarity between African American communities and immigrant workers, even those of African descent.

These slippages reveal the troubling underbelly of the use of “slavery” as a metaphor for the exploitation of juridically free workers. David Roediger (1991) explored these challenges in his study of the political construction of the white working class in the United States in 19th century.
In this time, white workers described themselves as having to resist being degraded into becoming slaves, using “slavery” as a symbol of the most extreme forms of exploitation.

Chattel slavery stood as the ultimate expression of the denial of liberty. While this could seem to imply a solidaristic identification with enslaved Africans, rhetorical references to slavery were often used to differentiate free white men from enslaved Africans, since they were “strong men” who would never “allow” themselves to be so degraded. Republicanism also suggested that the long acceptance of slavery betokened weakness, degradation and an unfitness for freedom. The Black population symbolized that degradation...Racism, slavery and republicanism thus combined to require comparisons of hirelings and slaves, but the combination also required white workers to distance themselves from Blacks even as the comparisons were being made. (66)

In these contemporary examples, domestic workers’ references to historically enslaved people accepting their enslavement and contemporary workers consenting to slavery-like conditions manifest along strikingly different racial lines, but these assertions still have troubling implications for the construction of solidarities between workers in the industry. They suggest that workers organizations need to be deliberate in unpacking the thinking that underlies allusions to the legacy of slavery in contemporary industries.

**Implications for the Organizing**

The dynamics of the domestic work industry make abundantly clear that the struggle against racism is far from over. Even as the historically explicit markers of juridical racism like state-sanctioned slavery and legal segregation have been overcome, their legacy continues to shape the racial division of labor and broader class relations in U.S. society. Reflecting these conditions, the struggle against racism stands at the center of DWU’s approach to worker organizing. This manifests in the ways in which DWU’s member-leaders talk about their work and in the organization’s political education. And it is captured clearly in the organization’s work to overcome the historic exclusion of domestic workers from worker rights and protections.
To these workers, the end of juridical slavery and legalized racism did not mean the end of the racial logic of slavery. Marlene’s words about the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, which opened the chapter, reflect a kind of direct identification with enslaved women, “I was one of the people who was able to be there when the governor signed the Bill. And I cried. I cried because it took seventy-five years for us to get recognition. On that day, we went from being servants, from being a slave in the masters home and in the bedroom to being seen as real workers whose rights were recognized.” Workers do not experience slavery as a by-gone moment, but as a living force that continues to shape their lives today.

Domestic Workers United encourages its members to systematically explore the continuities between the contemporary industry and the history of slavery in the United States. All of DWU’s leaders are required to go through the organization’s Leadership Course, and modules on the African slave trade and on the history of the domestic work industry in the United States are central to that course’s curriculum. In the History of the Domestic Work Industry training, worker-leaders are given a series of vignettes from the lives of domestic workers throughout U.S. history, including, among others, stories of an enslaved African woman in the South, an Irish cook in the Northeast, a free Black laundress in the post-bellum South and a Mexican housecleaner in Texas at the turn of the last century. The leaders are asked to act out the stories of these different workers’ experiences and then discuss their relationship to the contemporary industry. The enslaved women’s stories are excerpted here:

We Weren’t Allowed to Sit Down: When I was nine years old, they took me from my mother and sold me. Massa Tinsley made me the house girl. I had to make the beds, clean the house, and other things. After I finished my regular work, I would go to the mistress’s room, bow to her, and stand there till she noticed me. Then she would say, “Martha, are
you through with your work?” I’d say, “Yes mam.” She’d say, “No you ain’t. You haven’t lowered the shades.” I’d then lower the shades, fill the water pitcher, arrange the towels on the washstand, and anything else mistress wanted me to do. Then she would tell me that was about all to do in there. Then I would go to the other rooms in the house and do the same things. We weren’t allowed to sit down. We had to be doing something all day. Whenever we were in the presence of any white folks, we had to stand up.

(Excerpted from “We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century,” edited by Dorothy Sterling)

The Narrative of Bethany Veney, slave woman: Master Kibbler was a man of violent temper, ready to fight anybody who resisted his authority or crossed his path. His one redeeming quality was his love for his horses and dogs. These must be fed before his servants, and their comfort and health always considered. One day, he struck me with a nail-rod, making me so lame my mistress noticed it, and asked Matilda what was the matter with me; when she was told, she was troubled, and as I suppose spoke to Kibbler about it, for he called me to him, and bade me go into a field, and cut some sprouts there. But he followed me, and beat me severely, and then told me to "go tell my mistress that he had hit me, if I wanted to." Poor Miss Lucy! She was tender-hearted. She said she hated slavery, and wanted nothing to do with it; but she could see no way out of it. (Excerpted from the Narrative of Bethany Veney)

Embodying these women’s stories through performance has been a powerful method for exploring the relationships between history and the present. The skits would generally start with a lot of nervous laughter as the women got used to performing in front of their peers, but the energy would quickly shift as they would role-play the enslaved woman being driven to clean frantically by a domineering mistress. The re-enactment of physical abuse always cast a pall over the group, and the leaders would always have a visceral response. They would start to interject as the women finished their performances, saying things like, “The same thing happens today.” “They still treat us like slaves. They think they can do anything they want to us.” After the actors sat down, women would start to share experiences that echoed these histories: one woman employer who wouldn’t let her workers sit down while she was on the job, a woman who had been beaten by her male employer, the ways in which domestic workers were subtly or explicitly expected to show deference to their employers. When the training moved on to the stories of free Black women in the South after the end of slavery, the words of one woman, “Tho today we are
enjoying nominal freedom, we are literally slaves,” (excerpted from *Seven Days a Week* by David Katzman) always resonate deeply with the worker-leaders. Their experiences mirror this framing, that, while they are free in name, they still face the threat or reality of being treated as if they were slaves. The workshop would go on to explore the experiences of different domestic workers over the years, including stories of Irish immigrant women in the Northeast, Mexican workers in the Southwest and more, and they explore the exclusion of domestic workers from worker rights and protections during the New Deal. These trainings built on workers’ organic analyses of the racialized class dynamics in the industry, encouraging them to develop a sense of identification with enslaved Black women and immigrant domestic workers of decades past and to develop an understanding of the continuities in the racial logic of government policy and class relations in the United States.

DWU leaders often spoke of their work as a continuation of the centuries-long struggle to abolish slavery and of civil rights struggle to overcome racial segregation. For example, when Jennifer spoke about the organizing, she would often place it in that historical lineage.

With Domestic Workers United...I was able to go back and learn about the Harriet Tubman story. And it gives you such passion, you know, because this has been going on for so long. It makes me want to give more to DWU because I appreciate the people who started it so many years ago and just never really made it through. But they created a path....and here I am, continuing the path.

DWU’s most powerful slogans reflect these historical struggles: “Tell Dem Slavery Done!” and “We have a dream that one day all work will be valued equally.” “Tell Dem Slavery Done” is the title of a soca song from Barbados by Commander, which talks about the Middle Passage, plantation slavery and slave rebellions in the Caribbean and which emphasizes the ongoing duty of the descendants of enslaved people to challenge the legacy of slavery. Drawing on a song
from the Caribbean as a source for one of their most central slogans demonstrates the ways in which DWU’s Afro-Caribbean members, in particular, draw on a diasporic approach to understanding the struggle to overcome the legacies of slavery. They connect the struggle against slavery in their nations of origin to that same struggle in the United States.

“We have a dream that one day all work will be valued equally” is a reference to the well-known Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered during the March on Washington in 1963. That speech begins with a reflection on way in which slavery continued to shape the lives of African American people that speaks directly to DWU’s struggle against the living legacy of slavery, “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation....But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.” DWU adapted King’s famous speech to speak to the devaluation of caring labor, seeing itself as taking up the mantle of the Civil Rights movement’s turn towards issues of economic justice in its later years. These historical referents resonated strongly with DWU’s members, demonstrating the salience of explicitly naming the struggle against racial oppression in the organizing process. The historic slogans of the labor movement in the United States did not have the same kind of resonance for DWU members, perhaps reflecting the historical tendency of the union movement to downplay issues of race and gender in the name of building solidarity based on class (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008).

The campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights reversed this pattern, putting issues of racial oppression at the forefront, explicitly challenging the contemporary manifestations of the racial logic of slavery and identifying with the lineage of historic movements against slavery and
segregation. Equality and inclusion were the primary frames in the Bill of Rights campaign. In describing the Bill, Pat Francois said “The Bill will...give the respect and recognition to a work force that has been neglected by legislators since slavery.” The fact that domestic workers still had to fight for equal inclusion in labor protections, almost 150 years after the abolition of slavery in the United States and almost fifty years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, gave the campaign its moral power. Framing the Bill of Rights as a struggle for equality resonated strongly with workers, allies, the media and elected officials alike. In June 2010, the equality frame won the organization an endorsement from Editorial Board of the *New York Times*, “Domestic workers, like farm workers, have long struggled for equality in the workplace. Labor protections drafted in the New Deal specifically excluded both groups of workers, who remain highly vulnerable to exploitation.”

The historic struggle between exclusion and equality had echoes in the Senate debates over the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaign. As the Bill was coming up for a vote on the Senate floor, State Senator Schneiderman said,

> This bill is a bill that embodies the basic principles of the founding principles of our republic. This is a bill that takes another step towards realizing the dream that all men and women are created equal, not shop workers equal and domestic workers unequal, not building trades workers equal and farm workers unequal. There are more steps to take in this great American journey towards equality....and this is an extraordinarily American step.

After the Bill passed through the State Senate and Assembly, it was assumed that it would pass quickly through the Governor’s office because of Governor David Paterson’s long track record of advocating for civil rights. But there was a long period of silence from the Governor’s office. According to Ai-jen Poo, they heard their answer while waiting for a radio interview,
Right before our segment, Lehrer [the radio host] interviewed Governor Paterson via telephone. He mentioned to the Governor that we were in the studio and asked him what his position on the Bill of Rights was. The Governor replied, “The exclusion of domestic workers and farm workers from labor rights is the legacy of a long history of racism. When this bill comes to my desk, I will sign it”...We had never heard the Governor express support for the bill. In fact, we were concerned that his office was not going to support it. But not only did he back it...he framed it as part of a legacy of racism in labor laws. It was a sudden and unexpected victory (Poo 2010).

And, indeed, the main outcome of the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was a civil rights victory: the elimination of almost all of the remaining explicit exclusions of domestic workers from labor protections at the state level. As we shall see in later chapters, many of the more expansive provisions were cut from the Bill during legislative negotiations, but the provisions that related to equal inclusion were maintained.

A central theme in the celebrations in the wake of the Bill of Rights victory was that it was a triumph over the traces of slavery that were still embedded in the law. The Bill was signed at a community center in Harlem that stands in the shadow of a ten-foot-tall bronze statue of Harriet Tubman. That morning, DWU leaders gathered in front of the statue, their faces were shining with proud smiles and tears. In the quote that opened this work, during the ceremony celebrating signing of the Bill of Rights, Deloris highlighted the centrality of the Bill’s challenge to the history of racialized exclusions: “Domestic workers have toiled for centuries in the shadow of slavery. Seventy-five years ago, when labor laws were written, legislators didn’t think we were worthy of having rights. But today, after years of fighting for dignity and recognition, our day has finally come.” The exhilaration in the room the day of the Bill signing was profound, reflecting the fact that a small organization of Caribbean and Latina domestic workers had reversed one aspect of the legacy of hundreds of years of racialized labor laws in the United
States: their explicit exclusion, together with farm workers, from New Deal worker rights and protections.

What does DWU’s model imply for broader approaches to worker organizing? Even though race is rarely explicitly named in policies or social practices in this era of “color-blindness,” working people continue to experience the impacts of the racial logic of slavery every day, whether in the realm of government policy, in the conditions of their communities or in the workplace. If worker organizing is to be effective in a racialized class order like that of the United State, those experiences need to be reflected in the organizing process (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). DWU’s fight for the Bill of Rights demonstrated the tremendous depth and power of the fight against racial oppression and for equality. It enabled DWU to win a historic victory for workers rights in an era of union decline and anti-worker legislation. But there are also some significant limits to struggles for equality when the terms of that equality are themselves shaped by racial and gender logics. Those limits and DWU’s efforts to push beyond them are the subjects of the following chapters.
Marlene is in her late sixties, and she has been taking care of people for more than fifty of those years. She started working as a domestic worker at the age of 14, and then she raised her own family. She migrated to the United States to work as a domestic worker so she could buy a home that she could retire in so that she wouldn’t have to, in her words, “be a burden” to her children. Marlene’s first job in the United States was taking care of an elderly Jewish professor, named Doctor Schneider. He lived in his own home, and his years of working as a pediatrician meant that he had enough money to pay for round-the-clock private care in his home. When Marlene met Doctor Schneider, he had been home-bound for six years. He had become agoraphobic; that is, he had isolated in his own home for so long that he was scared to leave. In fact, he only stayed in one room on the second floor of his house, and the domestic worker who had preceded Marlene would bring him everything he needed and set it on a tray on his lap. But Marlene wasn’t having that. She told me,

On the first day, I went there, I looked at him sitting in his chair and I said to him, “Can you walk?” And he said, “Yes.” So I said, “Well, from today, you will be having your meals in the dining room.” And I fixed some lunch and I put it out on the table. And from then I had him coming to the table.

Over time, Marlene convinced Doctor Schneider to come down to the first floor, where he showed her around his office, talking about his old patients and showing her slides of different diseases. She coaxed him to sit on the patio and eventually to come to the front door. He was scared, but she convinced him to sit outside for two minutes, then five and then ten. And then she was able to get him to sit in his wheelchair while she pushed him around the block. Eventually, he became willing to engage with the world again, and he started going to weddings and bar mitzvahs.
They became incredibly close. She said, “After a while, it was like I was a part of him, and he was a part of me. Sometimes I would be sitting there at night, and I would get up and go make a cup of tea and bring it back to him. And he would ask, ‘How did you know I wanted that?’ And I would say, ‘I just know.’ And he would say, ‘Mental telepathy,’ which means we were thinking alike.” She would go check up on him on her days off, to make sure that the woman who worked with him on the weekends was taking good enough care of him. At one point, Doctor Schneider said, “If I was ten years younger, I would marry you. And you wouldn’t have to worry.” She reflected on that, “I don’t think he meant to be my husband in that way. I think he wanted to help me to get my green card and stuff like that. But he did love me.”

Marlene literally brought Doctor Schneider back into life, and then she shepherded his passing. He had turned 96, and his health started to get worse. He became more and more tired and developed a hacking cough. He started to ask Marlene for help with his basic hygiene: going to the bathroom, showering and getting dressed. He talked with her about his living will, and he told her that he did not want to be resuscitated. His family members started to come by to say goodbye and pay their last respects. As Marlene watched all of these things happen, she had a hard time dealing with the fact that the end was coming. It wasn’t until his son came to the house one day and started talking about preparing for a “death watch” that Marlene finally accepted what was happening. She stayed with him in his last days, because, as she said, “We had gotten so close. He didn’t want to die with nobody else but me.” She was in the house with him when he breathed his last breath. After sitting with him for a few minutes, she called his children and told them the news. Marlene stayed close with the family. At his funeral, Doctor Schneider’s
nephew approached Marlene and asked if she would consider taking care of the child that he and his wife were about to have. Marlene raised that little girl, whose name is Eleanor. She turned fifteen last year. When I visited Marlene at her house, she pointed out the large pictures of Doctor Schneider and Eleanor that she keeps on her mantle.

When Marlene tells me about her relationship with Doctor Schneider, the tenderness and the pride in her voice are palpable. Marlene is clearly proud of the work she does. She knows that she brings a valuable combination of practical caring skills and deep emotional connection with the people for whom she has provided care. She told me, “I cared for everybody that I worked for. I put my whole into it. I do the best job I can.” It’s a beautiful story, the story of the deep relationship that Marlene built with Doctor Schneider and his family in his final years. But it’s not where Marlene’s story ends. Marlene came to the United States to earn money for her retirement, knowing that she could make more money here than she could back home in Barbados. But she hasn’t been able to earn enough to save the kind of money she would need to buy a home where she can retire. So, even though she is 67, an age where she’d like to stop working, Marlene keeps going. She told me, “I decided that I would come here to work for five years, save my money and then go back home. I thought five years. But now it’s four fives and I’m still here....Money is all that stops me from going back. I just need a little money, and then I go home. I just need a little money so then I could take care of myself a bit and not have to work. I don’t know how long it will be. I don’t know for sure.” Rubbing her wrist, which is encased in a tight black brace, she told me, “I don’t know how long I can keep doing this work because I have carpal tunnel. I think it came from the poultry plant.” Marlene ended our first interview,
during which she told me this incredibly moving story of connection and care, by saying, “No one is gonna take care of me, so I got to keep going.”

The power of these kinds of stories resounded throughout my interviews as nannies and elder care providers told me about how much love they had for the children that they raised and the elders for whom they provided care. The deep meaning they found in their work showed up again and again in the stories they told me. But, more deeply than their words, it shone through their smiles and their laughter when they showed me picture of “their kids.” Their pride registered when they broadened their shoulders as they said things like, “That little girl....I took care of her from three years. She’s starting college this year.” It spoke through the warm tones in their voices and the far-away look in their eyes when they told me about the deep connections they had built with the elders for whom they had cared in their final days, about the honor they felt to be the ones who had sat with them in their final moments.

But pain also broke through in their stories: the themes of exploitation and disrespect and the patterns of disregard and of impoverishment that echoed through the last two chapters. The tensions between these two aspects of their stories reveals a deep structural contradiction in the industry between the profound relationships of love and care that exist in the industry and the devaluation of the commodified caring labor that is transferred across lines of race, class and nation. We can see this tension clearly in Marlene’s story; it shows itself in the contradiction between the powerful care that she provided to Doctor Schneider and the fact that she knows that “no one is gonna take care of me” as she ages. That contradiction is not circumstantial. It is structural, and it is relational. It is an expression of “stratified reproduction” (Colen 1995) in
which the ability of one group of people to grow up or to age in comfort is facilitated by the
denial of those experiences for the people who provide that care. The deep love that clearly
existed between Marlene and Dr. Schneider does not erase that the fact that their relationship was
embedded in exploitation. This chapter will describe some of the ways in which this
contradiction manifests in the lives of domestic workers, particularly nannies and elder care
providers who do the labor of care, and how it shapes their individual and collective struggles.

Organizers and scholars have often raised the concern that, in service work, love can often be
used as a smokescreen to obscure exploitation and racialized degradation. They have argued that
the personal relationships of care that develop in the course of service work make it harder for
workers to recognize that they are being exploited and that they will reduce the likelihood that
they will engage in struggle to challenge it. But this is an overly simplistic approach to
understanding the relationship between love and exploitation. If we want to deal with this
contradiction in the ways that reflect many workers’ experiences, we cannot ask ourselves, “Is
this love, or is this exploitation?” Both love and exploitation are true; they exist simultaneously.
But, when love develops in the context of exploitation and degradation, the meaning of that love
is open to political contestation.

In other words, domestic workers and employers do different things with the relationships of
love and care in the industry, reflecting their different positions and interests in the exploitative
relationship. While love and care are often treated as primordial expressions of a depoliticized
“humanity,” they are profoundly political. Many scholars have explored the ways in which

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27 While many housecleaners also have personal relationships with their employers, the fact that they are employed
to do the labor of cleaning rather than the labor of care necessarily means that they engage in these dynamics in a
different way.
employers will attempt to deploy these caring relationships as a tool to facilitate increased exploitation, and this is certainly an important aspect of workers’ experiences. At the same time, I found that workers utilized these caring relationships as sites where they could find meaning in their labor and develop pride in their work. These dynamics lent a complex and sometimes contradictory nature to domestic workers’ resistance. Many women did tell me stories in which they made decisions that went against their individual interests because of their personal connections with the people in their care, like staying in jobs that did not pay as well as they could or coming in to work when they weren’t being paid. But the depth and significance of these relationships often intensified their anger at the ways in which their work was devalued and in which they were personally disrespected. Rather than obscuring their recognition that they are being exploited and degraded, workers’ simultaneous experiences of love and disrespect, of affection and exploitation give them a deeper insight into the gendered and racialized social degradation of caring labor. Thus, while they were sometimes willing to make sacrifices on an individual level in the name of love, I found that these caring relationships seemed to intensify their commitment to the collective struggle to revalue their labors of love.

Domestic Workers United found ways to use this contradiction as a tool for that collective struggle. This lends a set of insights and nuances that can shape new paradigms of workers organizing, suggesting more complicated approaches to thinking about inter-class relationships and antagonisms in service industries and the centrality of efforts to revalue the gendered labor of care within the broader project of worker organizing.
Devalued and Degraded Labor on the Rise

Domestic workers have long been subject to a particular and profound devaluation and degradation of their labor. In addition to the residues of the racial slavery that were explored in the last chapter, this devaluation emerges from the gender division of labor which has characterized most capitalist societies: a division of labor which has historically located the labor of production outside of the home and assigned it to men while locating the labor of reproduction in the home and placed it in women’s hands (Leacock 1972; Rubin 1975). Spatially separated from the realm of production and operating largely outside of the market, women’s caring labor came to be defined outside of the realms of the economy and of “real work” and thus to be devalued in society (Dalla Costa and James 1973; Federici 2012; Mies 1986; Sacks 1984; Secombe 1974; Young 1981). In the United States, this gender division of labor primarily reflected the white middle class families around whom the “cult of domesticity” was built, an ideal based on a wage-earning husband and a stay-at-home housewife who raised the children. Though this ideological framework did not reflect the experiences of poorer women of color and immigrant women, who were often driven to work outside the home by economic necessity, these ideologies still negatively impacted their lives. They devalued all women’s labor, particularly their reproductive labor, whether it took place inside their own families or in the market. It placed women, whether wage earners or not, outside of the definition of real “workers” (Davis 1983; Glenn 1992; Hill Collins 2009; Mullings 1997).

While this gender division of labor affects all women, the reproductive labor of women from different races, class and genders is not treated the same. The caring labor of white middle class women in the United States has been valorized and treated as a spiritual calling. Meanwhile, the
caring labor of poor women and women of color has been degraded and dismissed, including both their caring labor for their own families and the work they have done outside of the home for wages (Glenn 1992). In the United States, middle and upper class white women have historically transferred much of the “dirty work” of cleaning and care across race and class lines to domestic workers and other service workers (Palmer 1989). Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) called this the “racial division of reproductive labor,” pointing out that this division both reflected the racialized and gendered degradation of women of color’s caring labor and helped to fortify that degradation. These dynamics have longed shaped the domestic work industry, but, during the last century, these patterns were seen as marginal in an era defined by industrial production.

These dynamics have taken on a new level of social significance as reproductive labor has become increasingly commodified and as service industries have started to define the U.S. economy. The last several decades witnessed the massive influx of middle-class women in industrialized countries into full-time waged work, reflecting both the social and political impacts of the feminist movement and the economic pressures towards dual-income households in the face of declining real wages. Women became the majority of the nation’s workforce in 2010. But these women entered workplaces whose time and performance demands had been defined by the labor capacities of men with stay-at-home wives, what Hochschild (2000: 140) has called a “male-career pattern that has proven surprisingly resistance to change.” The hours are long and demanding, leaving little time or flexibility to meet the always-changing demands

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28 While this chapter does not explore the labor of housecleaners, it is significant to note here that, within the broad category of reproductive labor, cleaning labor has historically been even more socially degraded than the labor of care, both in the private family and in the domestic work industry. Phyllis Palmer’s foundational work, Domesticity and Dirt, explores the way that transferring the manual labor of cleaning across race and class marked both the domestic work industry and the women who worked in it as essentially “dirty” and inferior.
of family care provision. While this deficit could have been addressed through redistributing reproductive work within the family or by expanding government programs, the gender division of labor in the home has proven to be relatively inflexible, leaving middle-class women to manage the simultaneous burdens of work and family (Hochschild and Machung 1989). This contradiction between the increasing flexibility of the gender division of labor in the post-Fordist workplace and the rigidity of the Fordist division of labor in the home has been a key causal factor driving the commodification of reproductive labor (Holmes 2004). Service industries, including the domestic work industry, the restaurant industry and the health care industry, have rapidly expanded to meet the needs formerly filled by middle-class housewives (Blair-Loy and Jacobs 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Immigrant women and African-American make up the majority of the workers in the lower tiers of these consumption-based service industries (Glenn 1992). Though this labor is still provided in the home, it has been removed from its provision within the nuclear family and is instead provided through the market (Holmes 2004). The sexual division of labor has thus been maintained, but it has shifted so that, in many upper- and middle-class families in the United States, “women’s work in the home” is no longer provided by the wife or mother of the family but by a hired domestic worker and other low-wage service workers who are most likely an immigrant woman of color and who thus locate a more subordinate social position in terms of class, race and nationality (Glenn 1992). The burden of these transitions falls heaviest on the shoulders of the low-wage women of color and immigrant women who do the bulk of this commodified reproductive labor.

But these women are not just accepting reality in the terms that it is given. Domestic workers and workers in a number of other service industries are organizing and contesting the conditions of
their work. In so doing, they are contesting the long-standing social devaluation of reproductive labor and the racialized degradation of paid reproductive labor in particular. They are also challenging a number of the foundational assumptions of the factory paradigm of worker organizing, particularly the assumption that service workers are less likely to engage in collective organizing than other workers. In this line of thinking, service workers’ personal and emotional ties to their customers and employers will prevent them from understanding that they are being exploited and, therefore, from seeing their relationships with their employers as being one based on antagonism and oppositional interests. Many scholars and organizers have pointed out the recent upsurge in service workers’ organizing belies these assertions, and they have also pointed out that the importance of recognizing the ways in which these emergent organizing models trouble overly dichotomous ways of thinking about the impact of intimate relationships and of antagonism on the process of worker organizing (Cobble 2010). In order to accurately draw out the particular contributions that DWU’s organizing work can make to this conversation, it is important to begin with an exploration of the range of experiences that domestic workers have with care.

**Diverse Experiences of Care**

The dynamics of care are not monolithic for all domestic workers. They vary from job to job and from person to person. These dynamics varied between the different sectors and tiers of the domestic work industry, between the relationships that workers build with children as opposed to parents, and between the individuals for whom they provide care.
While all domestic workers meet their employers’ social reproduction needs, some domestic workers, including nannies and elder care providers, provide nurturant care while others, primarily housecleaners, do not. These are profoundly different experiences that are often lumped together under the category of “domestic work” (Macdonald 2011). While housecleaners, particularly live-in housecleaners, may still have personalistic and intimate relationships with their employers, they are less likely to develop the types of deep emotional bonds that grow between nannies and children or between seniors and elder care providers.

Sylvia believed that employers are more likely to mistreat housecleaners because there are fewer potential emotional consequences.

It’s different when you’re doing cleaning because they yell at you. They tell you to hurry, and they use bad words. Even though you’re upset while you’re working, you’re going to do your work. But when you’re taking care of children, they have to treat you well because you’re taking care of the kids. If they treat the nanny bad, she’ll get upset and treat the children bad. And the parents need the nanny more because they have to go to work, and they need the children to stay with the nanny. I think that’s why nannies get paid better.

These differences in the focus of their labor give these various sectors of domestic workers deeply different ways to find meaning and pride in their labor. It was consistently nannies and elder care providers who spoke with deep pride about the quality of care they provide and who found deeper meaning in the relationships they built with the people in their care. I will therefore focus this chapter primarily on the stories of nannies and elder care providers. This choice is facilitated by the fact that almost all DWU members worked in this sector of the industry, a possible indication that nurturant forms of care work may be more conducive to worker organizing than non-nurturant sectors of the industry.
Relatedly, when workers told me these stories about these types of relationships of care, they were often referring to the jobs they had later in their time in the domestic work industry, after they had been able to climb the ladder and acquire less demanding and better-remunerated jobs. Their relationships with their employers tended to be characterized by higher degrees of respect, and they were in more comfortable material situations: conditions that likely gave them more space to build emotional connections with the families for who they worked. These jobs, which tended to be focused strictly on care work rather than on cleaning, presumably gave them more time and energy to focus on the emotional aspects of their work.

Workers did not have monolithic relationships with different members of the families for whom they worked. Many of the nannies with whom I spoke had strong connections and feelings of love for the children in their care, but they had much more complicated relationships with their employers, relationships often fraught with struggle over wages, working conditions and respect. Myrna said, “You don't just love the kids when you’re being treated well. You love the kids in spite of being treated bad sometimes,” identifying that the feelings of care persist for the child even when the employers treat the workers poorly. Nannies never spoke of even their best employers in the same warm and intimate tones with which they spoke of the children in their care. Bianca made this clear when she told me, “They’ve been amazing, but I do care more for [the little boy].” Many women told me they had good personal relationships with their employers, particularly when they were both “good” employers in terms of wages and working conditions and when they made personal gestures that went beyond the standard limits of employment relationships. One nanny spoke of an employer who bought her son his first bike and who set up a savings account for his college education, telling him he would make a deposit
for every month that he stayed in school. Other workers spoke of employers who took care of them when they were sick, brought them home expensive gifts from their vacations or baked them cakes to celebrate their birthdays. But even as they appreciated these moments of personal recognition, they also expressed feelings of frustration and resentment with these same employers. Expressing deep appreciation for the family for whom she worked because they had cared for her when she had medical problems, Bianca said, “You grow attached to them. You truly do love them.” Almost immediately afterwards, she spoke of the “subtle forms of blackmail” that employers can deploy when these kinds of emotional bonds exist, illustrating the simultaneity of workers’ affection for and resentment of their employers.29

It was also clear that the differences between individual children shaped the quality of the relationships that nannies built with them. Many women told me stories of children who had been difficult when they first started working with them: poor discipline, embarrassing public outbursts, violence and more. Most of these women proudly told me about their long, slow work to help these children learn to control their outbursts and to be more polite and loving children. Other women told me stories of how they had developed an expertise in working with children with emotional or developmental disabilities. Their specialized child development skills were clearly a source of pride for these workers. But there were some children did not change and whose behaviors continued to be not only difficult but actively disrespectful. Some children would hit the nannies or boss them around and saying things like “My mommy pays you so you have to do what I say.” Most workers believed that these children were learning lessons in

29 Many scholars of domestic work, most centrally Judith Rollins (1985), have discussed the ways in which these personalistic gestures can serve to strengthen the inequalities in the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. Because these acts of generosity are often non-reciprocal, they illustrate a form of “maternalism” reminiscent of slavery and help to reinforce the feeling of superiority that employers have with respect to workers.
disrespect from their parents, but, in these cases, there was more distance between the workers and the children and more convergence between the ways that these workers felt about the children and their employers.

Elder care providers did not make this same type of differentiation between their employer and the person for whom they care. Given the structure of the industry, the employer and the recipient of care were generally the same person. Instead, they spoke about the differences between the individuals for whom they provided care. Some of the elders in their care were sensitive and caring people, while others were petty, mean or outright racist. Some had their mental faculties intact while others suffered from forms of dementia that made them verbally abusive or even violent. These differences led to radically different experiences for the workers providing care. Even if they found pride in providing quality care to an elder suffering from advanced dementia, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop the deep bonds of affection and mutual understanding that were possible with other elders. These workers did, however, sometimes find connection and comfort in the relationships they built with the elderly person’s children who were also struggling with how to relate to an aging parent.

The relationships of love and care that domestic workers build with the people for whom they provide care are far from monolithic. But regardless of these many axes of difference, it was clear that, whether those relationships were positive or challenging, the presence and quality of these interpersonal relationships were central to workers experience of their labor. It was also clear that what those relationships came to mean was not pre-determined. It was the subject of an active political struggle between workers and employers, each of whom sought to use these
emotional relationships in different ways to advance their sometimes unified but often opposing interests.

**Love as a Smokescreen: What Employers Do with Love**

I have already described the historic concern within the labor movement that these types of emotional ties can have a dampening effect on worker organizing, making it difficult for workers to see their exploitation clearly and to understand the ways in which their interests are oppositional to those of their employers. Bianca spoke to this concern, reflecting on the difference between the exploitation that takes place in a factory as opposed to the domestic work industry,

> You are working with a hundred other people. And your boss is up there, so you don’t grow attached to them. And - as long as you don’t grow attached to them - they can’t play with your feelings. They can’t blackmail you....But in the domestic work industry, exploitation can be more cruel because they are playing with your personal feelings.

In the last chapter, I explored the ways in which employers often deployed blatant and dehumanizing expressions of power and authority over the domestic workers in their employ, connecting these methods to the history of racial slavery in this country. This chapter explores more subtle methods, but those methods are not divorced from that same history of slavery. Whether consciously or unconsciously, many employers attempt to play on the emotions of domestic workers and their commitment to the people in their care to convince workers to accept longer hours, lower wages, greater flexibility and other challenging working conditions.

Scholars have shown the numerous ways in which employers have utilized the intimate nature of the work as a smokescreen to obscure the exploitative nature of the work and as a tool to facilitate even greater exploitation. Employers’ description of workers as “one of the family” is a
key example. While couched in terms of affective connection, employers often use this frame to justify demands that workers be imminently flexible, for example, extending their hours without notice or increased pay when the employers need them to do so, just as a parent would presumptively re-arrange his or her schedule if a child was sick and could not go to school. At the same time, the worker is expected to accept living conditions markedly below those of their employers: significantly lower wages, sub-standard housing, a lack of health insurance and so on. This has led workers, organizers and scholars to connect the idea that domestic workers are “one of the family” to the paternalistic dynamics that were a hallmark of slavery or, more accurately, since workers tend to be supervised by the woman in the household, to “maternalism” (Rollins 1985). These ideas serve to both assert the kind of de facto ownership over the worker that was explored in the last chapter and to bolster the idea that domestic work is not “real work” done for a wage, but rather that it is a natural compulsion or an emotional commitment that is done out of selfless altruism. In other words, employers are deploying love, or the appearance of love, to facilitate exploitation.30

These strategies echo a historic strategy that developed during slavery in the South: the “mammy” stereotype. In the words of historian Ida Jones (2011), the “mammy” mythology is a mythical stereotype of black women who were compelled, either by slavery or segregation, to serve white families. Portrayed as asexual, loyal, and contented caretakers of whites, the caricature of Mammy allowed mainstream America to ignore the systemic racism that bound black women to back-breaking, low paying jobs where employers routinely exploited them.

Micki McElya (2007) argues that the mammy mythology has been a key tool used to establish what she calls “affectionate segregation,” that is, to justify and harmonize structural inequities

30 Since innumerable other scholars have explored these dynamics, I chose not to share depthful ethnographic examples of these manipulative strategies.
through the claiming of intimate relationships between Black domestic workers and their white employers in the South.

Allusions to the mammy stereotype are generally salient in discussions of the domestic work industry, but they were particularly relevant during my fieldwork because the popular Hollywood movie, *The Help*, was released in the year that I was doing my research. *The Help* was an adaptation of a best-selling book which was based around the story of a young wealthy white Southern woman named Skeeter who, in an act of homage to the Black woman who raised her and of defiance of her town’s white elite, decides to document the stories and struggles of the African American domestic workers in her town. While segregation and the Civil Rights Movement serve as backdrops to the film, the two clearest themes in the storyline are the relationships of love that exist between the African American domestic workers and the white children in their care and the personal pettiness and racism of their white woman employers. The film was roundly criticized by progressive thinkers and cultural critics for its reliance on racialized stereotypes in its depictions of the African American women workers, for downplaying the violent abuses of segregation and domestic service and for failing to adequately portray the civil rights struggles that were taking place in Mississippi at the time. Perhaps the most central criticism of *The Help* was that it romanticized the relationships between domestic workers and white families in ways that critics felt downplayed the violence and coercion that underlay the domestic service relationships. Ida Jones (2011) called it “a disappointing resurrection of Mammy.”
Most of DWU’s membership went to see *The Help*, eager to see a mainstream depiction of the domestic work industry. The main concerns that I heard from workers were that the young white woman in the film made her career off the stories of domestic workers and, relatedly, that the proceeds from the film ultimately benefitted the book’s real-world white woman author. But many DWU leaders loved the film, feeling that it captured the complexity of their experiences in the industry. During our interview, Myrna constantly made references to *The Help*, citing both the representation of the loving relationships between the Black domestic workers and the children in their care and the rampant racism and segregation on the part of employers. She would constantly reference *The Help* when she was talking about employers’ attempts to enforce social subordination on workers. It was in one of these conversations that she told me, “Slavery’s not long ago. It’s the same thing happening today.” At the same time, she bristled when she heard the progressive critique of the film’s portrayal of loving relationships between the workers and the children. She said, “People may not like it, but it’s the truth in our industry.”

This struggle over how to interpret the film played out on a panel brought together to discuss the film by Melissa Harris Perry, a progressive Black scholar, to discuss the film on her progressive news analysis program on MSNBC. The panel included Micki McElya, a scholar who has focused on the Mammy trope, and Barbara Young, a former nanny from Barbados and a long-time member of Domestic Workers United. Their different perspectives on the film highlight the tension that underlies this chapter. McElya reflected on the challenges in the film’s representation of the relationships between the domestic workers and the white families for whom they worked. She said,

> It refits the Mammy archetype for the 21st century: that the black woman who is working a white household loves the people she works for there. Her work is not for wages, not
because she’s forced to be there but because she wants to be there, because she loves the people there. The film and book produce a story that is set in a context of the Civil Rights Movement and segregation, but - at the end of the day - these women will love the white people they work for.

Barbara had a different reaction to the relationships in the film. Barbara referenced one of the core scenes in the movie in which an abusive employer fires Aibileen Clark, the leading domestic worker character who is played by actress Viola Davis. She gets down on her knees to say good-bye the child that she had raised, reminding the little girl that she is loved even though her mother doesn’t show her any affection. Barbara said,

As a domestic worker myself, when I saw that aspect of the film, I was really moved. I was touched by the human feeling that they bring to the movie and to the child. When she got down on her knees - when she was about to be fired - to talk to the child, that brought me back to so much that I went through as a domestic worker. I was a nanny working for a family seven years, and I loved the children I worked with.

She went on to describe the challenges on that job, long hours and late nights, but she left out a part of the story that she often tells in other contexts: the story of how she lost her last job.

Barbara had worked for that family for eight years, raising the little girl from infancy. But, after a negotiation over her hours, her employers unilaterally fired her over the phone. They did not allow her to say goodbye to the little girl, and Barbara always tells that story with deep pain in her voice. Barbara spoke of the love that exists between many domestic workers and the people in their care, but she also talked about the exploitation and degradation that takes place in the work.

This exchange offers us an important insight into the contestation over the different roles that love plays in the domestic work industry. It is true that, reflecting the concerns of labor organizers and of critics of the mammy mythology, employers often attempt to use love as a “subtle form of blackmail” or as an ideological cover to romanticize a relationship based on
exploitation. But this is not the entirety of the truth. If we want to understand the breadth and complexity of domestic workers’ experiences in the industry and to grasp their complex motivations and methods in their process of struggle, we should not extend a critique of what employers try to do with the dynamics of love in the industry into a dismissal of the existence of those emotional connections in the industry at all. It is important that we not assume that what employers try to do is unilaterally successful, because workers are also attempting to use that love in different ways: as a source of meaning and pride in their work and as evidence that their labor has social value. I will now turn to how these relationships impact domestic workers’ approach to struggle and what these workers attempt to do with these relationships of love.

**Love as a Source of Pride: What Workers Do With Love**

While they acknowledge the existence of real love and affection for the people for they care, the women I spoke with regularly pushed back on these assertions that they were “one of the family.” Knowing that love doesn’t change the basic power imbalances in the relationship, these workers generally saw this rhetorical strategy for what it was: an attempt by employers to use their emotional attachments to facilitate increased exploitation. Bianca articulated this, saying, “You are their beloved nanny or housekeeper. They love you so much...until they do not need you anymore. Then you are forgotten. Totally. We are like diapers. We are disposable.” Workers’ affection for the people in their care does not neutralize their visceral understandings of the exploitation and racialized degradation they face every day. Indeed, these more emotional and personal aspects of their labor often highlighted the abuse and exploitation.
But even as they clearly articulated the structural inequities in the industry and employers’ attempts to manipulate their emotions, workers also told me about their internal struggles over how to negotiate the gaps between their interests as workers and the needs of the people for whom they provide care. This struggle appeared often in the stories of nannies who worked for “bad employers” but who were committed to the children for whom they cared. In these negotiations, the workers at times made compromises that went against their individual interests.

Jennifer told me a story of a nanny job where she worked for nine years. For the first two years, she worked with the couple’s first son. She had a series of struggles with the mother over respect and communication, struggles that she placed squarely in the category of the racialized disrespect that was shaped by the legacy of slavery in the industry. But she developed a tight emotional bond with the toddler. The couple eventually had a second baby, a little boy. They wanted Jennifer to care for him as well, but they did not offer her a raise to reflect the growth in her workload. Jennifer wanted to leave the job at that point, but she had grown very attached to the first child. She told me,

She was not fair to me when money was concerned. If I didn’t love that kid, I would have gone. There were many times I wanted to walk away, but my first thought was, “I have this baby from two months old. Who's gonna take him and treat him right? Who’s gonna love him like I do?” And those are the things that happen to a lot of domestic workers’ minds. They get so attached to these children, and they feel nobody is going be able to give them the love that they give. They know somebody else will take care of them, but nobody is going to love them like you do....I can’t walk away from this...That’s your first consideration, and you stay there. And you’re gonna complain about it all the time, but you take the less money.

Differentiating her feelings for the child and her employer, Jennifer is clear that she is not “one of the family.” But her emotional connection with the child is so strong that she is reluctant to leave him. At first, in order to maintain her connection with the first child without conceding to the expectation of an uncompensated expanded workload, Jennifer would only take care of the
toddler, leaving the care of the infant to the mother. She felt torn about her decision to hold that line,

By that time the wisdom is stepping in, about abuse of domestic workers, underpaid domestic workers. In my own head, I had my own questions going on, “Is this right, or is it not? Is it worth it, or is it not? Why don’t I get a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work?” But at the same time, how on earth do you do that? It’s the hardest thing for me to do to just sit there watch them and not to care for that little boy. Am I that mean? But there’s that’s that little whisper in my ear saying, “You’re not really mean. Do what you have to do.” So I’m listening to that little birdie and doing what I have to do.

So, for a time, Jennifer refrained from getting involved in the infant’s care. But the mother did not know how to handle the baby well, and Jennifer couldn’t stand to watch it. She felt that it violated what she referred to as her “passion,” that is, her desire to provide quality care to young people. One day, when the mother was struggling to give the baby a bath, Jennifer swooped in and took over. From then on, she started caring for both children, still without a raise in pay.

Shortly afterwards, the mother was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Again, Jennifer went through an internal struggle, resenting the situation but also feeling that she was in some ways responsible for the care of the children and for the now-disabled mother.

She needs me now. But why am I thinking about her? And all these things will go through my mind over and over and over. How can I be selfish and just think about me? But why do you want to work for someone who doesn’t want to give you an extra dollar for an extra child, even if they have Parkinson’s? You’re gonna be their next parent; you’re gonna have to spend long hours and days. I thought, “I just can’t walk away. I have to help.” So I’m stuck with the two children for 8.5 years. No raise of pay. No raise of pay.

Jennifer has a strong reputation in the industry, and she could, with relative ease, have found a job that paid quite well. But, she said,

I’m not doing this for money. If I was doing this for money, I could have a real comfortable life. But you know what? I put myself so deep into these children’s lives. I see that I am an asset to them, and I cannot just take that away from them. It's something that I'm sharing with them that is deep within me. So I make myself comfortable. It's enough money to keep me comfortable, but it's not what I’m really worth. But that's not going to take away from me.
Jennifer is not being paid what she is “really worth” on a material level, but she contrasts material needs with the children’s needs and with the feeling of purpose that comes from sharing what is “deep within” her. Jennifer sees herself as resisting the devaluation of her work by her employers by refusing to let the material expression of that devaluation move her from her chosen path. Saying “It's not what I’m really worth. But that’s not going to take away from me,” she expresses that she maintains the right to define what is valuable about her labor, centralizing the meaning she finds in the love she provides to the children over the material benefits she receives for that loving labor.

Jennifer does not deny that there is a tension between seeing domestic work as a source of income and as a source of personal meaning. As we can see throughout her description, she holds these two sometimes contradictory perspectives in dynamic tension,

I'm a working class woman. You have to work because of the society that you're in. You have to work, and you have to pay taxes. So there's certain things that the job has to do for you, and you have to be able to draw that line. There is a bottom line that you can't go below. But I still have the ability to put myself deeper than just work. I think that when you first start doing domestic, you do accept it as a job. But as you go from day to day, it becomes not just a job to you because you have to have the ability to love. So you're being a parent. You're being a psychologist. You are everything in one. But it doesn't always pay you as a job should. It's going to give you earnings for you to live by, but - deep inside - it's not just a job. It’s hard to find that balance...There are certain things that you want to give more of yourself, but you always have to remind yourself that this is a job. The love can take over everything else.

Jennifer’s story shows us that, at times, domestic workers do sacrifice their material interests in the name of love. These sacrifices are made out of an emotional commitment to the people for whom they provide care, but they are also made as a part of their quest for pride in their work. The emotional validation that workers receive from these relationships is perhaps the most central site from which workers derive a sense of deeper meaning and purpose in their labor. As
numerous organizers and scholars have argued, workers do not desire material benefits from their labor; they also search for self-realization, dignity, pride and social meaning in their labor (Boris and Klein 2012; Fine 2006; Hodson 2001). It would be inaccurate, therefore, to reduce their decisions to “workers acting against their own interests,” since finding pride and meaning in their work are also in their interests. On the other hand, as I have explored, these emotional connections can also serve as a balm that helps them to cope with their simultaneous experiences of material exploitation, interpersonal disrespect and social degradation (Parreñas 2001); workers will, at times, choose to act against their own individual material interests in the name of these loving relationships.

But, even if workers use these relationships to cope with their conditions, I found that workers’ deep feelings of love for the people for whom they provide care did not erase their analyses of exploitation and structural racism. Rather, these more emotional and personal aspects of their labor often highlighted the abuse and exploitation. Their decisions to make these sorts of sacrifices often heightened their clarity and resentment towards their exploitation and the broader devaluation of care that force them to make those decisions. As I described in the last chapter, workers are keenly aware of the racialized degradation that shape even the most positive of working relationships. Many workers also talked about the ways in which their labor materially benefits their employers. Bianca, a Uruguayan nanny who came to the work with a strong background in radical activism, articulated, “Through our work, we are enabling others to make more money. Yes, we are letting our bosses go out to work in order to make far more than what we make. If we make ten, it is because they are making one hundred.” But even though their labor was clearly more poorly remunerated and socially devalued than that of their employers,
workers continued to assert that their work was socially and spiritually significant. In doing so, they asserted a “moral economy” of care (Collins 2012; Piven 1985; Susser 2012) in the face of the social and material devaluation of their caring labor.

Myrna, for example, constantly speaks with deep passion and pride for her work providing care to young children. Myrna is a deeply religious woman, and she describes child care as her “passion” and her “calling,” a description she often connects to the story of her first nannying job. She said,

I didn’t come [to the United States] looking for a job. I came to go to school, to study my music. But God put me in the job....My cousin introduced me to this family...I went there, and Celia [the employer] was sitting on the low porch in front of the house with this child. And she said, “Myrna, You are a godsend.” She didn’t ask me, “How long have you worked? Do you have references?” Nothing. She just said my name out like that, “Myrna, you are a godsend.” She just knew. She just knew.

Whether or not this statement was intended to evoke this depth of reaction, being called a “godsend” clearly spoke deeply to Myrna’s faith. She continues to approach her nannying work as an expression of her religious faith, speaking of it similarly to the way she speaks of her service in her church. She says, “Why am I on the job? Because I think I’m called for it. I could do better, but I’m here because I think I’m called. It’s a calling I get.” This gives Myrna a profound sense of meaning and satisfaction in her work, a fact that radically improves her experience of the work.

Myrna finds joy and meaning in the relationships she builds with the children in her care. She laughs as she tells me the stories of the children she’s raised, and she sings as she tells me about the games she’s come up with to help children learn. She likes to start working with them when they are infants, so she can have a stronger influence over their development. She stays in touch with all of the children she’s raised, and she is proud of her role in their lives, “My first job out
in Long Island, that girl is 18 now. She just graduated. She’s driving now. That’s my girl. When these kids grow up, I can look them in the face. And they will say, ‘You taught me to be who I am today.’”

Myrna’s pride in her work comes from other sources as well; she has sought out a number of different professional training opportunities including formal training in baby nursing and becoming certified as a Certified Nurse Aide. She speaks with a deep pride about her extensive expertise working with newborn children. She has a strongly established reputation in Tribeca for helping train new parents to take care of their children, including an ability to “sleep train” babies so that they only wake up once per night.

You help them learn how to take care of their own child because they don't know. And that’s why they hire you - because they can't do better on their own. There is a wisdom that we have to have towards these things... That's why all of my clients - when I start with the newborns - I say, ‘Look. Listen to the cries. Sometimes you get six different cries: the cry of wet, the cry of hunger, the cry of pain, the cry of wanting you...’ So you have to know these things. It’s an art. It's an art.

At one point, Myrna decided that - with all of her formal education - she should get out of domestic work and do other kinds of care work that were more recognized as more professional. So, she went back to school and got her Certified Nursing Assistant certification. Then, she went to work in a nursing home, taking care of elderly people. While nursing home work is still socially degraded by its location in the realm of reproductive labor, its location outside of the private home and its requirement of professional certification make it a slightly more elevated than domestic work. But that wasn’t everything that mattered to Myrna.

I didn’t like what I saw in the nursing home. I thought, “I don’t think I could go further with this.” Because it’s going to be really hard for me, working with these people, and they need my attention and I can’t give them the attention that I need to give them. You have a certain amount of time to bathe them - like three minutes - and everything was so programmed in terms of the timing. But some of them would need more time. I could
give good care for one elderly person or maybe two, but - in a nursing home - you have seven to ten to deal with. And I said, “No. I wouldn’t go through that because it was too painful to watch these elderly people not being take care of like they are supposed to.”

She told a story that clearly pained her, of a woman who had developed gaping bedsores because she hadn’t been properly attended to, and she said,

So I saw all of these things, and I said, ‘Let me go back to my babies, and continue that.’ Other people say, ‘Why are you here? You go to school.’ But I say, ‘You know what? This is where I belong. This is where I belong.’ I can’t give them any other explanation. This is where I belong.

Myrna’s pride in her professionally and spiritually grounded capacity to provide care gave her a depth of meaning in her labor that trumped social validation, and the contradiction between these two aspects of the work provided a deep sense of motivation for her to become involved in organizing.

A number of other women who spoke about care work as their “calling” and their “passion” said that this helped them to find satisfaction in their work. Several women said they particularly found fulfillment in the dynamic and creative nature of care work. At one point, Meches was having a conversation about interviewing for jobs with Doriel, a round-faced Caribbean nanny. Doriel said, “I was at this interview, and the father kept asking me how I would handle his child. And I kept saying, ‘I don’t know. I would have to meet him.’ They are individuals. Every one is different, and you need to work with them in different ways.” Meches nodded her head vigorously and replied, “They are not machines. You can’t just plug them in a turn them on and do your work. They are human beings. Each one is different.”

Notably, most of the workers who expressed deep pride in their labor worked as nannies, a sentiment echoed by the women who worked as elder care providers. Many of these women said
that, if they were not working as nannies, they would still be engaged in some form of work with children or with providing care more generally. Meches said she’d like to go into play therapy; Myrna said she’d like to move home to Trinidad and open a care-intensive rest home for elders. Allison told me,

It is my passion. If you were to ask me tomorrow what I would want to be when I grow up, it would be a field dealing with kids...I have always wanted to own my own day care center. That’s the right place for me, to be that bright light in the life of so many kids.

This sense of vocational affiliation with the industry also helped these women present themselves as “professionals” in interviews and negotiations with employers. Allison said, “It’s knowing that this is my profession, that this is the work that I love, that makes me believe that it should be valued and should be seen in that way by everyone else.” Another nanny conjectured about the negative impact of a more transactional approach to the work, “If I go to an employer and I don’t feel comfortable about the work that I do, and I’m like, ‘I’m just doing this until I Friday when I get a paycheck,’ then that’s the way they’re going to treat you.”

This is complicated stance because that sort of vocational leaning is not easily generalizable. Many immigrant women do not choose domestic work because they feel personally drawn to the labor of care as a profession, but because they do not have other feasible employment options. To argue that they should feel drawn to this work suggests essentialized gender notions, that is, all women should automatically want to care for all children. It could imply that the alienation in the industry as it is currently configured is insignificant. Thus, while it would be difficult to justifiably argue that workers should be vocationally drawn to domestic work, it does seem to be clear that the women who do have a predilection for care work find more pride and fulfillment in
their work, even in the face of its many challenges, and that they are able to deploy that pride in order to improve their working conditions.

A final way in which workers’ pride in their labor manifested was in their comparisons with and critiques of the emotional presence and caring skills of their employers. Sometimes, this was a positive source of pride: being able to draw on their years of experience raising children to teach new parents the skills they need to care for their children or helping a middle-aged person learn how to relate with an aging parent who struggles with dementia. It also often manifested as criticisms of employers who did not know how to discipline their children, did not know how to draw out a reserved child and so on. Sharper criticisms were reserved for employers who seemed to not care for their children or aging parents: parents who chose to go out on the town instead of spending time with their children or who did not call to check in when they left their children with the nanny for days on end or adult children who never visited their parents. In these criticisms, the workers often articulated an inseparable connection between the way that the employers treated workers and the care they had for their children or aging parents. Describing this type of employer, Meches said, “Those parents don’t care about the kids. They care about money, more than the kids.” Gabriela echoed this, saying, “This business is funny. One day you’re part of the family, and the next day you’re out. You’re fired. They don’t care about you, and they don’t care about how the kids feel.” Here, the caring bond between the domestic worker and the child served to strengthen workers’ sense of antagonism with their employers, rather than to weaken it.
Care as a Motivation, Tool and Site of Struggle

The contradiction between the deep pride that they take in their caring labor and the societal devaluation of that labor served as a source of motivation for many of DWU’s leaders to get involved in organizing. Almost all of DWU’s members are either nannies or elder care providers; that is, they inhabit the nurturant sectors of the industry, suggesting that it is the contradictions embedded in the labor of nurturant care in particular, rather than domestic work per se, that shapes their motivation to organize and their method of struggle. These workers explicitly and proudly identify with the labor of care, and they feel personally offended by the way in which that identity is degraded in the broader society. Complicating the idea that workers’ investment in their personal relationships with the people for whom they care will tend to dampen workers struggle, it was often the same women who told me that they had made individual material sacrifices in the name of love who were some of the strongest leaders in DWU. It sometimes took workers time to make the leap from the individual act of self-sacrifice to an investment in collective struggle. Bianca told me,

It’s a very hard process because you have to put aside your personal feelings for the specific relationship that you’re in and think of the broader situation of the industry. It’s difficult to separate, but you have to be aware that you are not hurting the people you are working for.

But once they made that transition, these women were able to marshal that same love and pride as assets in the process of collective struggle for the revaluation of the labor of care.

The work to revalue the labor of care is central to DWU’s vision and organizing model. That work begins internally, focused on building spaces for the recognition and celebration of caring labor and encouraging workers to develop a sense of pride in their labor. During DWU meetings
and trainings, workers repeatedly speak to the pride that they take in their work, constructing the organization as a site where the socially devalued labor of care can be adequately valued. Almost any time a DWU member speaks, she begins by identifying as a “proud domestic worker,” proclaiming her identification with this devalued industry and challenging its degradation with her explicit pride in her work. This repetitive identification as “proud domestic workers” encourages other women who may be newer to the organization to develop a sense of pride in their labor. Many members told me that DWU was the first place where they heard people claim an identity as a domestic worker at all, since it is a profession that is often looked down upon. In one meeting, a Jamaican nanny spoke to this process, “At first, I was ashamed. I used to be a teacher back in Jamaica. But then I realized that all work is sacred. We make the world go.”

Historical references about the value of caring labor were often repeated in the organization. When Octavia Spencer won the Golden Globe awards for her role in The Help, she quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. in her acceptance speech, saying, “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.” This quote quickly became a reference point in DWU members’ public speeches and their agitations during meetings, seeming to indicate DWU members’ desires for ways to articulate the connections between the racial degradation and gendered devaluation of paid caring labor.

Every year, DWU makes it a point to celebrate Mother’s Day, the primary day of the year when mothering work is publicly recognized. The organization holds an internal celebration because

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31 This quote comes from one of King’s last speeches in 1968, which was delivered to SEIU 1999 during its Salute to Freedom celebration. It reflects King’s move beyond the struggle for legal equality through civil rights towards an emphasis on the struggle against poverty and economic injustice as a central tent of the struggle for equality.
the families for whom they provide caring labor rarely celebrate nannies on this day. That type of familial celebration might imply that nannies were as significant in children’s lives as biological mothers, an anathema to most employers who are dedicated to maintaining a primacy of place even when they are not the primary caregivers to their children (Macdonald 2011). So DWU celebrates its members for their work to raise both their own children and the children of their employers. The event has the feel of a Labor Day celebration. Special food is served; roses are distributed, and everyone greets each other with a kiss on the cheek, and “Happy Mother’s Day.” It could be a sad event because it is held in recognition of that fact that the people for whom these workers provide intimate kinds of care are contributing to the invisibilization of that caring labor. But it is quite a beautiful celebration because it indicates that workers can find and promote pride in their labor, regardless of the ways in which their employers treat them.

This internally-developed sense of pride is carried out into DWU’s campaigns and public education, which are largely framed around the value of the labor of care. Macdonald and Merrill (2002) have pointed out that care worker organizers, who are advocated for the revaluation of caring labor in terms of both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 1995), often deploy either a “vocabulary of virtue” which “emphasizes their nurturing capacities and willingness to make sacrifices for the benefit of care recipients” or a “vocabulary of skills” in which “training and credentialing, as well as identifiable skill sets to legitimate claims for higher wages.” Domestic Workers United’s members deploy both of these vocabularies in their public education work.

During the ceremony celebrating the signing of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, Deloris Wright, a long-time nanny from Jamaica, spoke to both of these themes. Saying “We give our
hearts and health to the families we work for, for the special bonds with the children we raise and for the elderly and the sick who we attend to. We leave our own families to care for others.”

Here, Deloris deployed the vocabulary of virtue, emphasizing the moral and emotional significance of domestic labor. She went on to say, “What I have most deserved was to be treated fairly, with dignity and respect, to be seen as providing a critical service, to have my profession, yes, my profession...recognized and protected by law, and we have finally accomplished that today,” deploying the vocabulary of skills by stressing the professional nature of caring labor.

DWU centered its efforts to revalue the labor of care on the process of building pride among care workers and in worker-led efforts to advocate to revalue the labor of care, and they also built alliances with a number of other social forces, most centrally employers. These alliances placed the relationships between care workers and the families for whom they provided care at the center of the organizing process, and this reflects the centrality of the emotional relationships in the industry. In 2010, Ai-jen Poo wrote a piece called “Organizing With Love” that reflected on the Bill of Rights campaign, drawing out this relationship-based organizing model. Much of the remainder of this chapter draws on that piece. Describing the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, Ai-jen (2010) wrote,

Domestic Workers United led a campaign that mobilized many different communities of people based on an expanded sense of self-interest that acknowledged our relationships and our interdependencies. During our campaigns, we learned that just about everyone is connected – in one way or another - to someone who works as a domestic worker...Whether they were raised by a domestic worker, or had relatives, or they themselves did this work at one point or another – everyone has a connection to this workforce. The personal connections that everyday people of all walks of life had to this workforce became one of the key mobilizing forces throughout the campaign. (9)
She reflected on the way in which the underlying assumptions of this organizing model differ significantly from worker organizing models that stress antagonism between workers and employers.

Given the stark racial and class inequities between domestic workers and their employers, it would have been easy to adopt an organizing model based on antagonism and resentment between these groups. But Domestic Workers United chose to maintain a space to build relationships and alliances with employers who wanted to find a way to be fair employers....We approached everyone – workers, employers, coalition partners, community leaders, and elected officials – with the same general assumptions: 1) Every one of us has needed care, provided care, or relied upon someone else for care at some point in our lives, 2) If we frame our work around values and create the right conditions, people will choose fairness and love even when it cuts against their immediate self-interest. (14)

Story-telling was the central method for building these alliances and for communicating their power in the course of the campaign: domestic workers telling their stories of love and abuse in the industry, employers talking about the invaluable role that domestic workers played in their family’s lives and about their struggles to figure out how to be a good employers, children who were raised by nannies talking about those women’s powerful role in their lives, the children of domestic workers talking about their mothers’ struggles. The following chapters will incorporate a number of these different stories, but, for the purposes of emphasizing the centrality of relationships of care in DWU’s organizing methodology, I want to share the story of the Children and Families March for Domestic Workers Rights that took place in the summer of 2009 as a part of the campaign for the Bill of Rights. The march, which brought together the children of domestic workers with the children for whom they provide paid care, began outside of city hall. Many of the children had made cards thanking their mothers and their nannies for their work, and they spoke about their love and appreciation for the women who had raised them. One of the most powerful speeches that day was given by a young white woman who had been raised by a Caribbean domestic worker named Joanie. As Ai-jen Poo quoted, she said,
Joanie raised me. Me and my sister. She is my first memory. She is who explained to me how it is, and how to love, and how to help another person through it all. My mother is a photographer, so there are pictures, many many pictures of us, Joanie and me—us in our bathing suits when I’m about 6, us napping with me lying on her back as a little kid, me in all the hairdos she gave me, done like a Black girl’s, pulled in tight, even lines from a hard comb, locked down in “bubbles” and elastics. Sometimes she even took me home with her for the weekend to Brooklyn, and then I would play with the other kids on the street, never wanting to leave. We were always close. To this day, her sister introduces me to someone and says: “This one is Joan’s heart.” Because Joanie took me on, she took me in. And for that, I have so much of myself I owe to her. She raised me—which is not the same thing as being paid to do a job. She taught me, she accepted me, and if I had not known her, if she had not supplied those things, I don’t know what I’d be now, or who.

The power of these kinds of stories of care was decisive in helping DWU to build a large coalition in support of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights and to convince legislators from across the political spectrum to support the Bill of Rights. Rather than undermining workers struggles, DWU found that, according to Ai-jen Poo, “These alliances proved to be crucial in both building the power we needed to win the Bill of Rights and in transforming relations within the industry.”

DWU’s political methodology emphasizes the value of care work and the significance of the relationships between workers and the people for whom they care. In many ways, this reflects the stories of countless women who have drawn on their relationships of care as a motivating source for their struggles and who have advocated for their caring labor to be valued, from working class housewives who led bread and meat boycotts during the Great Depression (Orleck 1993) to mothers who advocated for welfare in order to be able to provide care to their children (Nadasen 2005; Susser 2012) and social service workers who built on their caring roles in their families and for their extended communities as motivators to advocate for quality services (Gilkes 1988; Mullings 1997; Naples 2014). Significantly, however, these women were drawing
on relationships of care not for their own families and communities but for the families of their employers, usually crossing lines of race and class. This model is reflective of many service workers’ struggles that have sought to address the interests of both workers and the people for whom they provide care. This is most commonly recognized in the struggles of nurses, homecare workers and childcare workers (Cobble 2010), but it has also manifested in the struggles of government employees who linked their struggles as workers to community-based struggle calling for government services (Collins 2012; Piven 1985). This approach to alliance-building reflects an expansive social leadership approach to class politics, in which workers aim to lead a broad alliance of social forces for systemic transformation rather than advocate solely for their own material interests. This expansive approach is based on the organizations’ recognition of the moral and economic value of the labor of care.

DWU centers both its internal practices and external organizing around the work to revalue the labor of care. This manifests in intentional efforts to build worker pride and to recognize the contributions of domestic workers to families and to the broader society. It also shows up in the work to shift public opinion and to change policy to win value and recognition for the labor of care. It also influences the organization to move beyond a strictly oppositional approach to navigating the relationship between workers and employers. While the organization sometimes directly confronts the abusive practices of employers who clearly disregard the care workers in their employ, they also build campaigns that weave together the interests of care workers and the families for whom they provide care, arguing that all of these parties have a shared interest in increasing the social recognition of and resourcing for the labor of care. This complex approach to worker organizing suggests an expansive approach to class struggle that integrates both
antagonism and cooperation between workers and employers. This suggest that the dynamics of reproductive labor are likely to challenge historically developed approaches to workers’ struggles and analyses of class consciousness that have reflected the dynamics of production and that have been more strictly focused on antagonism.\(^{32}\)

\(^{32}\) It is again important to note here that, reflecting DWU’s composition, this chapter has focused on the labor, consciousness and organizing of nannies and elder care providers. The experiences and worldviews of housecleaners are likely to be significantly different, as are their approaches to worker organizing. This is a worthy area for future research and analysis.
Early in its history, in 2003, Domestic Workers United convened the “Having Your Say” convention, a day-long gathering of domestic workers from around the metropolitan region that brought DWU’s Latina and Caribbean base together with members of the other domestic worker organizations in the city that were rooted among Latina, Filipina workers and South Asian workers. DWU had just won its first legislative victory at the city level, having passed the bill that required domestic employment agencies to notify workers and employers about existent domestic workers’ rights. The organization was planning to build on that victory and introduce legislation at the state level. The Having Your Say Convention was organized to provide a space for discussion and dialogue among domestic workers from these many different constituencies so that they could determine the priorities to address in that new state-wide legislation. The convention was held in the cavernous marbled ballroom in the SEIU Local 32BJ building in lower Manhattan.\footnote{SEIU 32BJ is a union which represents building workers - like security guards and doormen - in New York City, many of whose rank-and-file members work as doormen in the same apartment buildings as domestic workers}

More than 200 women came together from around the metropolitan area for the convention. These workers hailed from dozens of nations: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Haiti, the Philippines, India, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and more. Although the dialogue that day took place in six different languages, the same themes echoed again and again as woman after woman shared her story of her experiences in the industry: the heartbreak of leaving her own children in their nations of origin to come to the United States to care for other peoples’ children.
the long hours without overtime pay, the surprise firings that came without notice and the consistent disrespect from the same employers who said that they were “part of the family.” Several workers shared stories of physical abuse, of sexual assault and of being forced to sleep on the floor behind a couch or in a cold basement that was prone to sewage leaks. Through collective reflection on these working conditions, the workers at the Having Your Say Convention identified a set of policy priorities to expand domestic workers right and protections on the job. These priorities were drafted into the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which was introduced to the New York State Legislature in 2004. The original Bill of Rights was expansive. It included a living wage of $14 an hour, an annual cost-of-living adjustment, inclusion in overtime protections, a minimum of one day of rest per week, paid holidays, paid leave, health care, notice of termination, severance pay and inclusion in protection from discrimination.

It took Domestic Workers United six years to convince the legislature to pass the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. During the legislative process, the most controversial aspects of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights were the provisions in the Bill that exceeded the normal realm of state labor protections: health insurance, a living wage, cost of living adjustments, paid vacation, notice of termination and severance. Legislators were concerned that they would be seen as “special protections” for domestic workers, since other workers are expected to win those rights through unionization and collective bargaining. Because domestic workers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act and New York’s State Employment Relations Act and thus from the right to collectively bargain, this legislative debate came down on the question of whether the New York State legislature should legislate these benefits in response to that
exclusion or whether instead that exclusion should be eliminated so that domestic workers could unionize and collectively bargain.

In the end, with one small but significant exception, the bill was negotiated down to reflect equal inclusion in the existent standards that are already assured to other workers. The final bill established the inclusion of domestic workers in anti-discrimination protections, inclusion in minimum wage for companions for the elderly and overtime protections for live-in workers for hours worked above 44 per week, a mandatory unpaid day of rest each week and three annual paid days of rest. A provision was also added to the Bill that required the Department of Labor to investigate the practicality of extending collective bargaining rights to domestic workers. Because it overcome many of the remaining explicit occupational exclusions that had blocked domestic workers from access to the foundational labor rights and protections since the 1930s, the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights has been widely celebrated as a victory for equality. This chapter will explore the simultaneous importance of and the limits to that struggle for equality.

The Bill of Rights began as a visionary proposal, reflecting the lived needs and hopes of domestic workers in ways that would have required an expansion of the boundaries of established worker rights. Over the course of the campaign, the Bill was shaped into legislation establishing equal inclusion in existent labor laws like minimum wage and overtime protections. Overcoming the undemocratic occupational exclusions of domestic workers from worker rights, an exclusion that was rooted in the legacies of racial slavery and the gendered devaluation of caring labor, is indeed a crucial political project. It provided some of the most exploited workers in the nation with access to new channels for improving their conditions, and the victory gave many workers the kind of empowerment and dignity that comes from being recognized by the
government and included in the basic rights of a society. But a deep analysis of the process of winning that inclusion exposes the limitations of those rights themselves. The provisions of the Bill would not be sufficient to improve the working conditions of many domestic workers above the poverty standards ensured by the minimal floor of state protections. That package of worker rights and protections was built on a set of assumptions about work and worker power that do not fit with the structures and dynamics of the domestic work industry, a reflection of the long-standing racial and gender hierarchies that were built into the New Deal model of economic citizenship.

Today, changes in the economy have stretched that model to the breaking point. Equal inclusion in that constraining and outdated form of economic citizenship is insufficient for today’s workers. Rather than return to an idealized notion of the protections provided to workers under the New Deal, today’s workers will have overcome these historic constraints and stratifications and develop a new framework for workers rights for the twenty-first century. It is the more implicit limits of those rights that must be overcome in order to adequately address the particular challenges facing today’s domestic workers and the broader challenges that face growing sections of today’s working classes. This chapter will trace the historical process by which that framework was developed and the ways in which it conditioned the struggle for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in order to provide the raw material needed for the process of constructing a new framework for worker rights and power that can meet the needs of today’s working classes.
I begin this chapter with an overview of the basic framework for labor rights and protections in the United States, which was first established during the New Deal in the 1930s. I then step back and trace the political processes through which New Deal labor rights and protections were developed in the 1930s and through which the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was negotiated today. I explore these historical processes to unearth the ways in which race and gender helped to shape historical labor rights and to explore the ways in which these historical dynamics reverberated in the contemporary struggle for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

New Deal Framework of Worker Rights and Protections

The foundation of contemporary labor law and economic citizenship was laid by the Roosevelt administration during the New Deal in the 1930s, in response to the economic earthquakes of the Great Depression and the upsurge in organizing among workers and the unemployed. The Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act were the three landmark pieces of legislation that defined the particular framework for the social safety net, employment rights and protections and government-sanctioned avenues for advancing worker power in the United States.

Preceding these three pieces of landmark legislation was the National Industrial Relations Act (NIRA) of 1933. The NIRA was an early attempt to establish workers’ rights to unionize and collectively bargain at the federal level. It established the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which was designed to set up industry specific agreements establishing codes on minimum wages and working hours. Domestic workers were not excluded by name from the
NIRA, but the NRA refused to develop agreements for the industry. The Supreme Court found NIRA to be unconstitutional in 1935. It was later replaced by the National Labor Relations Act.

The Social Security Act, initiated in 1934 and passed in 1935, established the first federal social welfare safety net in U.S. history. It included both contributory insurance programs like Unemployment Insurance and Old Age Insurance, the program that has become “Social Security” as we know it today, and government-funded public assistance programs like Old Age Assistance and Aid to Dependent Children, which later become Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The insurance programs were to be administered at the federal level, while the assistance programs were to be administered at the state level, subject to standards determined by different states. As I have already described, domestic workers and farm workers, most of whom were African American at the time, were excluded by name from the insurance programs, establishing a precedent that would be replicated in future pieces of New Deal legislation (Hart 1994; Mettler 1998; Poole 2006).

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which was also passed in 1935, established workers’ rights to organize unions and to use workplace tactics like strikes, boycotts and pickets. It restricted employer retaliation against workers engaged in union activities, and it made “company unions” illegal. Once a union won the support of the majority of workers in a workplace, the NLRA required employers to engage in collective bargaining with that union. The NLRA provided an unprecedented government-sanctioned channel for building collective worker power, opening space for several decades of impressive victories on the part of the union movement. The NLRA adopted the explicit exclusions of domestic workers and farm workers as
developed in the Social Security Act, and its coverage was restricted to workers who were engaged in activities related to “inter-state commerce.” Thus, these channels for building power were not made available to all workers in the United States.

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which passed in 1938, abolished child labor and established a federally-mandated minimum wage and overtime protections for workers. Previous to the FLSA, minimum wage protections were seen as an unconstitutional over-reach of government into the economic realm. Overtime protections tended to be provided at the state level and to be restricted to women and children based on “maternalist” arguments that the state needed to protect these presumptively weaker workers. The Fair Labor Standards Act also only protected workers who were engaged in inter-state commerce. Building on the model established by the Social Security Act and NLRA, domestic workers and farm workers were explicitly exempted from inclusion, and these exclusions were expanded to include a number of other workers including, among other groups, food processing workers and tobacco workers.

New Deal policies carved out an expanded form of economic citizenship for working class people in the United States, assuring them the right to a decent standard of living through workplace standards and social welfare programs and providing them with a legitimated channel through which to advocate for themselves in the workplace. As I explored in Chapter 4, those rights were not assured equally to all citizens; they were stratified along racial and gender lines. The exclusions described here, along with a series of more implicit limits that will be explored later in this chapter, meant that these new federal rights and protections were disproportionately provided to white male workers, particularly those who worked in industrial settings. Many
women workers and workers of color remained subject to state-level policies which were far less expansive and empowering in their scope. Thus, the New Deal, which has come to be seen as the benchmark of progressive legislation in the United States, had stratified forms of economic citizenship written into its DNA (Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris 2001; Mettler 1998; Nadasen 2012).

In this chapter, I will build on the insights of numerous feminist scholars who have argued that this stratified form of economic citizenship both reflected and helped to strengthen the racially and gender stratified class structure that characterizes the political economy of the United States (Glenn 2002; Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris 2001; Mettler 1998; Nadasen 2012).

But this stratified form of economic citizenship has implications that reach beyond the restriction of rights for women workers and workers of color. The limits that were written into New Deal legislation also shaped the limits of struggle for all workers in this country. In studying this dynamic, I will build on W.E.B. DuBois’s framework, as developed in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1969) and elaborated by David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) and *Working Towards Whiteness* (2006) and Joel Olson in *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004), that racial stratifications within the working classes serve to not only limit the struggles of racially oppressed workers but also to constrain the struggles of racially privileged workers. Drawing on Gramsci’s (1972) analysis of the constraining nature of concessions, I argue that the expanded set of rights granted to white male workers should be analyzed not only as privileges granted to those workers in the interests of maintaining racial and gender inequalities but also as mechanisms for constraining the struggles of those more privileged workers. These new rights channeled militant workers’ struggles into avenues that were more acceptable for the ongoing functioning of the capitalist system, directing worker militancy into government-regulated
contract fights and undercutting the development of more radical political movements (Piven and Cloward 1977). Rather than seeing democratic class struggle and racialized and gendered exclusions as contradictory phenomenon or as strictly privileging white male workers, I hope to demonstrate that they are, in fact, mutually constitutive of a circumscribed form of economic citizenship and democratic class struggle. The form of economic citizenship that developed during the New Deal limited the terrain of workers struggle. This was accomplished by constraining the scope of social labor rights and protections, restricting workers’ struggles to the segregated realm of workplace organizing using a collective bargaining model designed to reflect the conditions of industrial workplaces and by relying on a racially and gender-inflected definition of “real work” as the basis of its legal framework. These stratifications and constraints continue to limit the struggles of today’s workers.

These racialized and gendered limits would become the target of the next wave of social movement agitation for expanded labor legislation. These efforts did not emerge out of the efforts of the union movement, but out of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting these political origins, most of this legislation emphasized rights and freedom from discrimination. A central piece of legislation was the passage of Title V11 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employers from discriminating against workers on the basis of “race, color, religion, sex or national origin.” These protections were only extended, however, to people who worked for employers who employed more than 15 workers, implicitly excluding almost all domestic workers from its purview. Following in the footsteps of farm-workers and service workers who had organized to challenge their exclusion from the FLSA, domestic workers organized to win inclusion in minimum wage and overtime protections, and they
succeeded in 1974 (Nadasen 2012). This inclusion was not, however, complete; companions for the elderly (a designation which came to be applied to home-care workers) remained excluded from both minimum wage and overtime protections until 2013, while live-in workers remained excluded from overtime protections. A great deal more work remained to be done to win equal inclusion of domestic workers in standard worker rights and protections.

Understanding these technical provisions of New Deal labor legislation and of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights offers one kind of insight into the terrain and the boundaries of worker rights and protections in the United States, but, in order to gain deeper and more dynamic layers of insight, we have do an investigation of the contested political processes by which these laws were negotiated and these boundaries determined. During the formation of New Deal labor legislation in the 1930s and of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in the first decade of the 21st century, these boundaries were defined through a number of different struggles over the definition of “work” itself, over the racialized and gendered occupational exclusions embedded in state labor rights and protections, over the limits of state labor protections and over the form and efficacy of collective bargaining. I will tack back-and-forth between these two historical moments, drawing out the reverberations between the terms of the debate during the 1930s and those today in order to demonstrate the ways in which the assumptions and frameworks established during the New Deal continue to shape the terrain on which today’s workers struggle.34

34 While I was actively engaged in political work with Domestic Workers United during the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, my formal research took place in the year after the Bill’s passage. Thus, I was not engaged in formal ethnographic research during the period explored in this chapter. This chapter is thus less ethnographically rich than the rest of my dissertation, though I did make an effort to gather and communicate the reflections of campaign participants. In order to tell the story of the Bill, I am drawing on a combination of personal memory, written reflections by DWU’s then Lead Organizer, Ai-jen Poo (2010), interviews with worker leaders and
In my historical exploration of each of these sites of struggle, I will explore the relationships between Southern legislators, who played a well-recognized role in shaping this stratifying and constraining framework, and Northern legislators and policy-makers, whose role was equally formative but which has not been highlighted as clearly in many historical investigations. While the legacy of the Southern system of plantation slavery was a significant factor in shaping state labor protections, the collaboration between Northern and Southern interests reveals the centrality of white supremacy in the political and economic structure of the nation as a whole (Lassiter and Crespino 2010).

I will also attend to the role that organized labor played in these different sites of debate and struggle, highlighting the different positions taken by different sections of the labor movement in those processes both in the 1930s and in this contemporary domestic workers struggle. The structure of rights is not unilaterally imposed from above. Organized movements of workers are active participants in the process of the formation of state labor law and of broader class structures and relations (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Thompson 1963). The labor movement played an active role in shaping the form that state labor rights and protections took in the United States, helping to constitute a stratifying and constraining approach to labor organizing (Roediger 1991). Today’s labor organizers need to make intentional decisions about what roles they will play in helping to craft new frameworks for worker rights and protections that can respond to new political-economic conditions.

allies - including the campaign lobbyist, a closely allied labor lawyer and the then-leader of the New York Central Labor Council - who were active in the campaign. None of the historical data is my own; I build on the work of a number of powerful scholars who have studied the historical development of economic citizenship in the United States.
I conclude with an exploration of the ways in which the historically developed frameworks for labor law continue to limit contemporary workers struggles, drawing on the experiences of the struggle for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights to suggest some paths for overcoming those limitations.

**A Struggle Over the Definition of “Real Work”**

The boundaries of workers rights and protections are not pre-given; they are shaped by cultural struggles over what types of work, what types of workplaces and what types of workers are considered “real” enough to merit state recognition and protection. The limitations on domestic workers’ rights have, in many ways, been the product of racialized and gendered social norms about women workers, the home and the labor of care (Glenn 2000; Hart 1994). As I explored in the last chapters, domestic workers have been subject to a particular and profound erasure of their labor from the definition of “real work,” reflecting the devaluation of women’s reproductive labor in the home and the degradation of paid reproductive work which has been transferred across race and class lines. The idea that domestic work is not “real work” has lurked in the background of policy debates about domestic workers, from the time of the New Deal through the contemporary struggle for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. In turn, the exclusion of domestic workers from state rights and protections strengthens their exclusion from societal conceptions of “real work” and “real workers.”

*Defining Real Work in the New Deal Era:* The exclusion of domestic work from the definition of “real work” relied on the ideological contrast between women’s reproductive work in the home
and the “real work” done in the realms of production and commerce. In 1934, an economist explained the reasons why domestic workers were largely excluded from New Deal worker rights and protections, writing "The [legal] status of domestic servants is ... largely determined by the opinion in which domestic work is held. Domestic work - work in the service of consumption - is not regarded as productive work in the current sense of the term" (as quoted in Smith 1998: 43). This definition of real work manifested in a number of sites in New Deal rights and protections, perhaps most significantly in the New Deal’s restriction of labor rights and protections to the realm of “inter-state commerce” which reflected the definition of “real work” as that done in the realms of production and commerce. One of the most significant political shifts that occurred during the New Deal era was the expansion of the federal government’s authority to regulate economic relations based on the “inter-state commerce clause.” Previous interpretations of the inter-state commerce clause had only given the federal government a narrow power to regulate the transport of goods across state lines, along with the work related to that transport. But in 1937, under pressure from popular opinion and the Roosevelt administration, the Supreme Court expanded the inter-state commerce clause to include the production, manufacturing and mining of goods that were traded across state lines. This shift radically expanded the ability of the federal government to intervene in the economy, bringing economic and workplace rights into the realm of social citizenship in the United States. But this expansion did not give the federal government the authority to regulate conditions in all workplaces. Locally-based industries, for example, workplaces that produced goods for intra-state consumption, service workplaces and the private home, remained beyond of the reach of the federal government.
But even before the “inter-state” commerce clause became the basis of expanded federal intervention into the economy, government officials had already defined domestic work outside of the realm of recognized and protected work. The majority of efforts to win inclusion in minimum wage and overtime protections during the 1930s focused on winning recognition from the National Recovery Administration between 1933 and 1935. Domestic workers organizations, women’s groups and civil rights organizations lobbied the NRA to develop a code for domestic workers, conducting surveys to demonstrate the long hours and low pay of domestic workers and sponsoring a national letter-writing campaign. These advocates faced opposition from “traditionalist” employers who wanted to maintain their overwhelming authority over the working hours of their employees; the views of these women were articulated in both political debates and in popular forums like women’s magazines. Domestic workers employment agencies also played a role in lobbying to oppose wage and hour regulation in the industry. Advocates were not able to succeed in pressuring the NRA to develop codes for domestic workers; NRA administrators asserted that they did not consider domestic work a proper trade or industry (Smith 1998).

The definition of the “real workplace” was another site where cultural assumptions shaped labor law. The fact that domestic work is located in the home was one the primary explanations for its exclusion from labor rights and protections. Although the Supreme Court had expanded the reach of the federal government into the workplace, that reach ended at the door of the home, which was considered a sacrosanct realm of privacy. Policy-makers and legislators alike did not believe that the federal government had the right or the capacity to enforce its standards in private homes. The home was seen as a “rights-free enclave,” in the words of Vivien Hart (1994). For
example, the office of Hugh Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration, responded to requests for the protection of domestic workers by writing, “The homes of individual citizens cannot be made the subject of regulations or restrictions and even if this were feasible, the question of enforcement would be virtually impossible” (as quoted in Palmer 1989: 120). Thus, the NRA’s restrictive legal definitions of “real work” corresponded with the common cultural tropes that described domestic workers not as employees but as “part of the family” (Rollins 1985). Although the NRA was ruled unconstitutional in 1935, its exclusion of domestic workers set a precedent for their exclusion from all future New Deal legislation.

The New Deal was also built on a restrictive definition of the “real worker.” One of the foundational assumptions of New Deal legislation was the commitment to maintaining the nuclear family by establishing the male breadwinner as the “real worker.” Abraham Epstein, one of the architects of the Social Security Act, described the assumptions on which the idea of “security” was based as,

> The American standard assumes a normal family of man, wife and two or three children, with the father fully able to provide for them out of his income. This standard presupposed no supplementary earning from either the wife or young children....The wife is a homemaker rather than a wage-earner....The needs of these families must be considered paramount” (as quoted in Kessler-Harris, 2001, 84). 35

Leaders of the labor movement of the period echoed this prioritization of the male-breadwinner, and most unions fought to ensure that male workers were able to gain wages high enough to support their families. While the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was known for its historic opposition to women’s employment and its tendency to exclude women workers from its ranks,

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35 This assumption of a male bread-winner who earned wages high enough to support an entire family was not only a gendered assumption; it was also racialized. Most Black men in this era did not earn high enough wages to support an entire family, so Black family income also depended on the wage labor of Black mothers and children. Historically, most Black women in the United States have been both home-makers and wage-earners (Davis 1983; Hill Collins 2009; Mullings 1997).
the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) had a more complicated position. The CIO was formally committed to the organization of women workers, but it still placed the fight for the male worker and the family wage at the center of its struggle. John Lewis, leader of the CIO, reflected,

A husband and father should be able to earn enough to support his family. This does not mean, of course, that I am opposed to the employment of women, or even of wives, when this is the result of their free choice. But I am violently opposed to a system, which by degrading the earnings of adult males makes it economically necessary for wives and children to become supplementary wage earners. (as quoted in Hart: 166)

This commitment to the male family wage shaped the priorities of the labor leaders, policy makers and legislators who constructed the New Deal, driving them to place the needs of “bread-winning” male workers over the needs of women workers, whose labor was considered secondary at best. Workers employed in full-time, secure, higher-waged employment were prioritized. This impacted both women workers and Black workers, who tended to labor in high turnover, part-time and seasonal low-wage labor and who were thus implicitly written out of the category of legitimate “worker” by most New Deal legislation. Domestic work was the archetype of these marginalized categories of labor, and this was one of the reasons why domestic workers were excluded, both implicitly and explicitly, from the rights and the protections of the New Deal (Glenn 2000; Hart 1994; Mettler 1998).

These norms provided many of the implicit assumptions that shaped the framework of worker rights and protections during the New Deal, but that framework was not only shaped by vague and abstract social norms. Legislators often referenced questions and concerns that emerged from their own employment of domestic workers during policy debates, bringing their own self-interest into policy debates. For example, a report by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of
America on its lobbying for the FLSA stated that, “One $10,000 a year Congressman told a delegate that he would not vote for the bill because it might make him pay his maid $15.00 a week” (as quoted in Mettler, 1998, 194). In many ways, legislators constituted a *de facto* opposition group, drawing on their own self-interest and cultural assumptions to restrict the rights of domestic workers.

*Redefining Real Work:* Cultural and ideological struggle to validate domestic labor as “real work” and to challenge the social and cultural legacies of racialized servitude has long been a crucial site of struggle for domestic workers and their supporters (Nadasen 2012; Palmer 1989). Domestic workers and middle-class reformers working through the YWCA during World War I used studies, surveys and community education to promote the idea that domestic work was a profession that should be subject to job standards like any other industry (Palmer 1989). Describing the organizing of domestic workers in the 1970s to win inclusion in the Fair Labor Standards Act, Premilla Nadasen (2012) explained that,

> Domestic workers had an expansive definition of labor that challenged fundamental assumptions about work enshrined in the New Deal....Domestic workers’ claim for social citizenship largely came from the idea that household work was like any other work performed and that it ought to be treated as such.

As explored in the last chapter, these themes reverberate in Domestic Workers United’s contemporary organizing. The campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was simultaneously a fight for state protections and a platform for challenging social norms about the value of domestic work. In the last chapter, I explored DWU’s deployment of the vocabularies of virtue and of skill in their efforts to advocate for the societal revaluation of domestic work. Significantly, DWU also deployed arguments that stressed the social and economic significance of domestic labor during the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaign, highlighting the
importance of domestic work to the functioning of the broader economy. This idea is captured on another one of DWU’s key slogans, “We do the work that makes all other work possible,” that challenges the artificial separation between the labor done in private homes and the work done in the public economy. Deloris spoke to this theme in her remarks at the Bill signing,

Despite the hardship, we take great and I mean great pride in the work that we do because we know that we are the backbone of this society. We know our work is important. We make homes function so that all other work outside the home can be possible. This city, this state would not run without us.

As she spoke these last words, the dozens of domestic workers who were present at the Bill’s signing ceremony burst into rowdy applause that took several moments to subside, signaling the pride that they have in the fact that their labor enables the functioning of the broader economy and their awareness of the latent power they have to disrupt that economy. This combination of different types of messages demonstrates that DWU saw its campaign as more than just a legislative effort; it approached the Bill of Rights campaign as an opportunity to do broad public education to bring domestic workers’ invisibilized labor to light, demonstrating its importance on both interpersonal and economic levels. The Bill Assembly sponsor, Keith Wright, echoed this theme, saying, “Domestic workers are finally being recognized for the important work that they do. What if they decided to strike, and not to go to work? This city would come to a standstill.”

Even when legislators recognized domestic work as real work, they challenged some of the provisions in the Bill of Rights because of the particular dynamics that emerge from the nature of the workplace, that is, the work’s location within the family and inside the private home. The provisions covering notice of termination and severance had passed through the Senate but were cut in the Assembly version; they became some of the most heavily-debated provisions in the Bill. Ultimately they were cut based on the arguments that employers needed to be able to let
workers go immediately if they were concerned for the safety of their children without being limited by these kinds of legal restrictions. These issues could have been addressed differently; for example, employers could have been given the right to terminate workers without notice but they could still have been required to provide severance pay. But the fact that domestic work is done in the presumably sacrosanct realms of the home and the family meant that the interests of parent-employers trumped workers’ rights.

In a contradictory turn, many legislators voiced the belief that domestic workers don’t need these types of legal protections because they are like “members of the family.” In one legislative visit, an Assemblyman from the Upper West Side listened with sympathy to Sylvia’s story about her sudden illness and her summary dismissal without severance. But he looked confused during the presentation about the rights and protections that were to be included in the Bill. Looking around the room in a seemingly honest attempt to connect with the room that was crowded with domestic workers and their supporters, he said, “My family employs a nanny. But we don’t treat her like that. She’s part of our family. She comes on vacation with us. We know her children. We love her.” Sylvia smiled tensely, covering the grimace that the phrase “part of the family” tends to provoke among DWU’s domestic worker leaders, and asked, “Does your family have health insurance?” He replied, “Of course, we do.” She pursued further, “Is your domestic worker part of your family health insurance policy? Or do you pay for her health insurance?” This caused the Assemblyman to pause and offer a tentative, “No,” followed a few seconds later by a hesitant explanation, “It’s quite expensive to pay for health insurance for an individual, you know.” Sylvia and the other supporters in the room used this as a chance to explain why the kinds of protections embedded in the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights were necessary: while many
employers may indeed have meaningful personal relationships with the workers in their employ, those connections often do not extend to considerations of their economic well-being or their lives outside of work. Domestic workers continue to be defined out of the category of real worker because of the intimate nature of their labor and its location in the private home. Dialogues around these issues were common throughout the campaign, revealing the interplay between social norms, self-interest and policy decisions.

The voices of employers played a crucial role in the campaign for the Bill of Rights. They asserted that domestic work was indeed “real work.” They argued that they needed government guidance to promote fair standards of employment, and they argued for government regulation of this seemingly private realm. During a Human Rights Tribunal organized by DWU to publicize the regular human rights violations that took place in the industry, Gayle Kirschenbaum, one of the employers who supported the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, explained this issue from a personal perspective:

The first time I heard Debbie - our son’s caregiver - refer to me as her boss, I was taken aback. The word seemed too formal. I had hopes for the kind of intimacy I’d known other parents and nannies to experience, and I wanted Debbie to relate to me as someone other than her employer. I’ve now come to see that - whether an employer hopes to replicate the mistress-servant dynamic, or tries to negate the power relationship altogether - both attitudes can undermine the rights of a domestic worker. Without workplace standards, which kind of employer she ends up with is wholly arbitrary. Debbie ended up with me; my resistance to seeing myself as an employer meant that it took too long for Debbie to be treated like an employee. Rather than signing a contract and agreeing to the terms of work on day one, we talked about benefits casually, after she’d already started work. I would not have tolerated such lack of professionalism in my own job. (as quoted in Poo 2010: 14)

These kinds of cultural and ideological struggles over the definition of real work were an important ingredient in the fight for the successful passage of the Bill of Rights. This victory, in turn, represented a validation by the state that domestic work is indeed real work that should be
recognized. This public recognition was incredibly meaningful to workers whose labor has been constantly invisibilized and degraded. Joyce opened a July victory rally celebrating the passage of the bill through the Senate. Referencing DWU’s slogan that “We have a dream that one day all work will be valued equally,” she said, “We have a dream that is now becoming a reality.” Then Jennifer spoke about what the bill meant to her, “For the first time, as a domestic worker, I can stand proud of my work.”

A Fight Against Exclusion
I will now explore the process by which the explicit exclusion of domestic workers from worker rights and protections came to pass, exploring the informal collusion that emerged between Northern policymakers advocating for administrative efficiency and political expediency and Southern legislators interested in maintaining the Southern racial social and economic order.

There were a number of different opinions within the Roosevelt administration as to whether domestic workers and farm workers should be included in federal labor rights and protections. President Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins seem to have supported their inclusion, and the original Social Security Act that was presented to Congress included domestic workers and farm workers in Act’s lucrative contributory insurance programs. At the same time, the administration made it clear to its Congressional allies that inclusion of these two populations should be considered expendable bargaining chips in the legislative process (Mettler 1998). The Act made it through the Senate with the inclusion of farm workers and domestic workers intact. But when it came before the House Ways and Means committee, which was predominantly composed of Southern New Deal Democrats, these workers came to be excluded. The lobbying
of a leading representative of the New Deal administration, Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, was decisive in advancing these exclusions. Morgenthau, himself the owner of a farm in New York State, argued that it was administratively impracticable to include these workers in the Act, given their low wages relative to the costs of administering the annuities (Poole 2006). This pragmatic argument was adopted by the Southern leaders of the Ways and Means committee members in defending the exclusion on the House floor. It is likely that legislators knew that explicit racial agendas would have been found to be in violation of the fourteenth amendment, so they spoke in the language of pragmatic necessity rather than that of explicit racism. But the impact was the same. These exclusions were incorporated into the Social Security Act with very little debate on the House floor, setting the precedent for similar exclusions in the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act.

While these exclusions can be most easily metaphorically understood as a legacy of Southern slavery, the political process by which they were institutionalized, which centrally involved the efforts of Northern policy-makers, allows us to understand the centrality of racial inequality to

36 This masking of racial agendas played out in an exchange between the explicitly segregationist Virginia Representative, Howard Smith, and Ohio Representation Thomas Jenkins over whether states could differentiate between different classes of people in their provision of old age benefits:

Mr. Smith. Of course, in the South we have a great many colored people, and they are largely of the laboring class.

Mr. Jenkins. That is what I thought the gentleman had in mind. I should like to ask the gentleman, and also any member of this committee, whether in this law it is contemplated that there be any loophole by which any state could discriminate against any class of people?

Mr. Smith. No, sir; I do not think so, and you will not find in my remarks any suggestion to that effect. It just so happens that that race is in our State very much of the laboring class and farm laboring class. But you will find no suggestion in my remarks of any suggested amendment that would be unconstitutional, if I may use that expression (as quoted in Lieberman 1998: 52-53).

Historians have debated whether these exclusions, in fact, represented racism on the part of policymakers, given that their primary arguments seem to have been pragmatic in nature (Davies and Derthick 1997; DeWitt 2010). It is important to note that - while these policymaker’s advocacy for exclusion was not based on explicitly racist political arguments but on pragmatic ones - that pragmatism was based on an assessment and acceptance of the state of racial politics in Congress and of the low wages earned by workers in these racially degraded industries (Lieberman 1998; Poole 2006; Quadagno 1994)
the political and economic structure of the United States as a whole (Kessler-Harris 2001; Poole 2006). When the New York State Labor Relations Act was enacted in 1937, it replicated the exclusion of domestic workers and farm workers from the right to organize and collectively bargain, demonstrating the salience of racially stratified labor protections outside of the former slave states in the South. Thus, the legacy of African slavery was embedded in federal labor legislation seventy years after its formal abolition and extended to Northern labor protections almost immediately after.

In addition to these explicit occupational exclusions, there was also a series of implicitly racialized and gendered exclusions embedded in the New Deal’s definition of recognized work (Lieberman 1998). These explicit exclusion reflect the boundaries of the definition of “real work” and real “workplace” explored in the last section. These definitions were traced around the model white male industrial employment; women and workers of color were left outside of the emergent definitions of “real workers” deserving of state recognition and protection. The Unemployment Insurance and Old Age Insurance programs only covered workers who labored in workplaces with eight or more employees and who were stably employed by the same

37 In his exploration of the limits of the conceptual polarization between de facto segregation in the South and de jure segregation in the North, Lassiter (2010) points out that - while Northern white liberal policy-makers opposed Jim Crow segregation in the South - they simultaneously naturalized and advanced racially inflected policies across the nation. He argues that, by pulling back the veil on this “effort to preserve white racial innocence...by shielding a liberal national narrative...that can only survive through the constant renewal of Southern exceptionalism...[and] that requires an oppositional region to remain intact,” that we can come to more clearly understand the realities of the “American national identity that is still discovering itself down in the Jim Crow South” (43 - 44). In other words, in order to understand the true dynamics of racial politics in the United States, we must undo the artificial binary that is drawn between Northern and Southern models of race relations and attend instead to the deep historic connections and synergies between these regions. The story of the institutionalization of the racially implicit exclusions embedded in New Deal legislation - which were seemingly reflective of the Southern system of racial slavery but which were in fact politically advanced by white liberal Northern policy makers - provides an important site for this type of cross-regional analysis of the development of the national racial order.

38 This was not based on a cookie-cutter adoption of the federal law at the state level. While SERA drew significantly from the model of the NLRA, it was adapted to address the relatively decentralized, smaller workplaces common to New York City.
employers for more than thirteen weeks per year. This restriction effectively excluded the majority of women workers and workers of color from coverage since they tended to labor in small workplaces and experienced higher rates of turnover between employers. Social Security thus excluded 55% of African American workers, 80% of women workers and 87% of age-earning African American women workers. These workers were relegated out of Social Security’s federal insurance programs and into public assistance programs, which were to be administered at the state level. Many of these state-level relief programs, particularly in the South, replicated restrictive gender norms and racial inequality, providing differential benefits to white and Black recipients (Lieberman 1998; Mettler 1998).

Similarly, the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act only covered workers engaged in “interstate commerce,” while the regulation of the working conditions of intra-state commerce remained in the hands of state governments. Inter-state commerce effectively included all workers in mass production industries like mining and manufacturing, but it left out the retail and service industries in which the majority of workers of color and women workers labored in the 1930s. Workers who were engaged in “intra-state commerce,” like retail and service, were to be protected through state-level policies. As a result, the Fair Labor Standards Act only covered only 14% of working women and almost completely excluded Black workers of both genders, although these workers needed wage protections more than the white male industrial workers who were covered by the Act. This seemingly race- and gender-neutral division between state and federal authority thus inscribed gendered and racialized distinctions in federal economic citizenship, leaving many women workers and workers of color
subject to regional variations in racial, gender and class relations (Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris 2001; Mettler 1998).

The Contemporary Struggle Over Exclusions: In Chapter 4, I described the powerful impact of DWU’s decision to frame the fight for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights as a struggle against exclusions and for equality; this strategy drew in the support of civil rights advocates, the mainstream media and many other social forces. The fact that domestic workers remained excluded from the right to organize played a particularly significant role in building up the labor movement’s support for the Bill. When DWU needed to convince the Rochester-based Chair of the State Assembly’s Labor Committee to move the Bill of Rights forward, they turned to Rochester’s labor federation. DWU sent a delegation, made of Ai-jen, Joyce and Deloris, to meet with the federation’s executive committee. The meeting was held in the office of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the leadership of the local federation was made up primarily of the leaders of the building trades unions, sectors of the labor movement that have long been criticized for practices of racial and gender exclusion. Ai-jen, Deloris and Joyce were nervous, when they walked into a room filled with the brawny white men who made up the leadership of the local labor federation; they did not know how workers whose experiences were so different from their own would receive them. But after Joyce and Deloris shared their stories of abuse and exploitation in the industry and explained that, after so many years, domestic workers were still excluded from the most basic labor protections, the union leaders were completely outraged. According to Ai-jen, they were shocked “at the slavery-like conditions in industry.” It took them a while to understand why domestic workers did not unionize in order to improve their conditions. But Ai-jen said that, once they realized that
domestic workers were excluded by name from the right to organize, “a committee member passionately remarked, ‘It is outrageous in this day and age that there are workers excluded from labor laws and our sisters are still dealing with these conditions.’” They immediately agreed to call the Assembly’s Labor Chair in support of the Bill of Rights, the Bill finally moved out of the Labor committee.

But, as powerfully as the call for equality resonated across different social forces, there was not unilateral support for ending the stratification of worker rights and protections. The historic tendency towards racialized exclusions had echoes in the Senate debate over the Bill. As the Bill was coming up for a vote on the Senate floor, two Senators raised objections that it would provide protections for undocumented workers. Senator John Bonacic, a Senator from upstate New York, said, “I think this bill is bad legislation. I think it sends the wrong message....Ninety percent of [these workers], according to the sponsor, are illegal aliens. I don’t know of any state that is unilaterally giving labor benefits to illegals...And for that reason, I’m voting no.” Here, the Senator’s use of the term “illegal” focuses on questions of citizenship and legal presence in the United States, allowing the Senator to invoke race without being explicit (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Sen and Mamdouh 2008). This again reflects contemporary “color-blind” racism and mirrors the formally racially neutral but deeply racially inflected historical exclusions embedded in New Deal legislation.

The Bill’s Senate Sponsor, Diane Savino, challenged Bonacic, pointing out that all labor protections are in fact already assured to immigrants, whether they are documented or not. Then adopting the “equality” frame that had been deployed by DWU throughout the campaign, she
said, “The message of justice and dignity for workers is never the wrong message.” A number of Senators stepped forward to echo the call for equal protections for all workers, regardless of their immigration status. For example Senator Krueger, who represents the east side of Manhattan, said, “There is nothing in this bill that talks about your legal status. This bill talks about your right to be treated well as a worker under U.S. law, your right to be treated with equal rights and equal treatment and to be assured some fundamental labor protections and respect for people.” And Senator Parker who represents the heavily Latino and Caribbean districts of central Brooklyn said, “We need a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights so that the women...who work hard as domestic workers in cities all over this country are in fact protected...because that’s what the American experiment was founded on.” He went on to call for a national conversation on immigration reform, a challenge to Bonacic’s racialized innuendos. Senator Klein, a Senator who represents the Bronx, closed out the arguments with a similar connection between the struggle for equality and the need to challenge the degradation of immigrant workers,

I think that most of us forget that each and every one of us came from somewhere else. The immigrant experience is what made our country great. Somewhere in each of our past, there was an immigrant woman with a bundle on her back, a baby in her arms and tears in her eyes because she was afraid of the land she was entering. To deny individuals like that in the present day basic rights is bordering on criminal today, we are sending a strong message that - no matter what it is that you do - you deserve basic rights as workers.

The struggle for equality won the day in the Senate debate, and the main policy victory of the campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was a civil rights victory: the elimination of almost all of the remaining explicit exclusions of domestic workers from labor protections at the state level. The struggle for equality won the day in the struggle for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, but the campaign was just as much a struggle against the limits of that equality.
A Fight Against the Limits of State Labor Protections

While framing around the legacy of slavery and inclusion in basic workers rights was central to the Bill of Rights campaign, the original Domestic Workers Bill of Rights legislation proposed an expansion of rights beyond inclusion in minimum standards. It called for employers to provide health insurance, a living wage, notice of termination, and paid vacation, and these benefits were to be mandated through legislation rather than through collective bargaining. This demand for the expansion of labor rights and protections became a central point of struggle and negotiation of the campaign, as legislators and organizers debated whether domestic workers should gain these kinds of protections through legislation or through collective bargaining. Arguing that the legislature could not provide “special protections” to domestic workers that it does not ensure for other sectors of workers, legislators stripped and downgraded provision after provision from the Bill. Although DWU was aiming to expand labor protections enough to improve working conditions above minimal standards, they were channeled into a struggle for inclusion and equality within the rights established through New Deal legislation in the 1930s.

Historic Limits on State Protections in the United States: The social safety net and worker protections developed in the United States were remarkably limited, relative to other industrial nations of the time. Many of the benefits, like health care and old age pensions that were provided to European workers as a right of citizenship by their social-democratic governments, were relegated to the realm of industry-based collective bargaining in the United States (Davis 1986). There are significant differences between struggling for higher standards through government protections and struggling for higher standards through contracts with employers. State-mandated worker protections provide protections to all workers on a social or class-wide
level, while collectively bargained contracts benefit the workers in the specific workplace or industry within which they are bargained, allowing for wide variability in the working and living conditions among working class people. Thus, while the victories of the 1930s led to important gains for many industrial workers, they limited the more social or class levels of workers struggles in the United States (Lichtenstein 2002).

The originally proposed Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a government-mandated floor for wages and working hours, was more robust than the bill that was actually passed in 1937. These more robust proposals were not foreclosed through the predictable opposition of the wealthy alone. The racial concerns of Southern legislators and the gendered concerns of the trade union movement played crucial roles in weakening the social safety net and lowering the floor of state protections. Southern legislators were deeply opposed to federal social legislation that mandated equality and threatened the Southern racial order. Meanwhile, sections of the labor movement organized against these types of government standard-setting policies, which they saw as a threat to the “masculine” independence of the trade union movement and the virility of their male union members. In these cases, political agendas design to shore up racial oppression and patriarchal gender roles led to the constraint of a broader class struggle.

Southern legislators saw the Fair Labor Standards Act as more threatening than earlier pieces of legislation like the Social Security Act or the National Labor Relations Act because social standard-setting legislation challenges both inequitable economic and social relations. The FLSA’s establishment of new rights and protections were seen as “racial legislation” because “what is prescribed for one race must be prescribed for the others, and you cannot prescribe the
same wages for the black man as for the white man,” in the words of Martin Dies from Texas (Katznelson 2005). Even though domestic workers were excluded from the FLSA by name, rumors swirled about the South that the FLSA would require domestic employers to “pay your negro girl eleven dollars a week,” prompting a response from President Roosevelt himself that “no law ever suggested intended a minimum wage and hour bill to apply to domestic help” (as quoted in Hart 1994: 166). 

Even though the FLSA contained the explicit exclusion of farm workers and domestic workers and maintained state-level authority over labor laws protecting many other workers of color and women workers who were engaged in intra-state industries, many Southern lawmakers were still actively opposed to the idea that federal laws would govern the wages of any workers in their states. They objected to the fact that this kind of social legislation empowered the federal government to establish basic social standards. They feared that these kinds of federal labor protections would threaten the social, political and economic structure of the South that relied on an inequality of rights between Black and white people in the South and the super-exploitation of Black labor. In the words of Representative James Wilcox from Florida,

So long as Florida people are permitted to handle the matter, the delicate and perplexing problem can be adjusted; but the Federal Government knows no color line and of necessity it cannot make any distinction between the races. We may rest assured, therefore, that when we turn over to a federal bureau or board the power to fix wages, it will prescribe the same wage for the Negro that it prescribes for the white man. Now, such a plan might work in some sections of the United States but those of us who know the true situation know that it just will not work in the South. You cannot put the Negro and the white man on the same basis and get away with it. (as quoted in Katznelson 2005: 60)

Southern legislators had hoped to amend the FLSA so that, instead of a federal minimum wage, it would serve as a federal mandate for states to set minimum wages laws, a compromise which
would have allowed the Southern states to keep control over their regional low-wage economies and to maintain racial stratification. While this option was rejected, several key compromises were made to the Act that narrowed its reach and dropped its bar. Several new sectors of workers were named as explicitly excluded, mainly sectors which were central to the low-wage economies of the South like food processing workers, tobacco processing and textile workers. This was also one of the reasons for the reduction of the original minimum wage rate from 40 cents per hour to 25 cents per hour.

Even if it was not to be realized in the FLSA itself, the potential for more radical changes in the future was not lost on Georgia’s Representative Edward Cox, “It will...render easier the elimination and disappearance of racial and social distinctions, and...throw into the political field the determination of the standards and the customs which shall determine the relationship of our various groups of people in the South” (as quoted in Katznelson 2005: 60). By legislating equality over wages, the federal government opened up the federal state as a legitimate site of struggle over the racially stratified class structure. And confirming the racial fears of these legislators, federal labor protections would indeed become the site of civil rights struggle in the decades to come. The Civil Rights Movement and women’s movements in the 1970s challenged both the explicit and the implicit exclusions embedded in the Fair Labor Standards Act, bringing farm workers, retail workers, service workers and most domestic workers into its reach (Palmer 1989).

Southern legislators were not alone in advocating for a lower wage rate in the FLSA. They were joined by a seemingly unlikely ally: the American Federation of Labor. The AFL primarily
represented skilled white native-born male workers; its members tended to be the most privileged strata of the working classes. They had won those privileges through often hard-fought struggles with employers, and they maintained them through the exclusion of less-privileged workers, including women, immigrants and Black workers, from their ranks. The AFL was, by and large, opposed to the idea of improving workers' lives through state programs and policies. Trade unionists had accumulated years of bitter experiences with state repression against striking workers, and they believed the government was fundamentally on the side of the bosses and could not be won over to support workers in a meaningful way. Instead, the AFL was committed to “voluntarism,” that is, the idea that workers should win improvements in their lives and working conditions through their voluntary participation in unions and through direct struggle with their employers, remaining independent of both employers and the government. While the AFL was moderately supportive of the then-common approach of providing state-based protections, like minimum wage and maximum hours laws, for women and children based on the belief that women were weaker and less likely to organize (Hart 1994), the federation strongly advocated for men to win their gains through collective bargaining. They were opposed to the idea of government social programs and protections because they believed these types of benefits should be tied to union membership. If benefits were freely available to all workers regardless of their union membership, workers would be less motivated to organize through their unions. They believed that government programs would create dependency and weakness, rather than developing the independence and strength that workers could acquire through engaging in independent struggle and collective bargaining. According to Kessler-Harris (2001: 68) this orientation was connected to “a uniquely American version of manhood” which was “closely tied to American notions of self-sufficiency and upward mobility....American trade unionists
believed ‘socialistic’ programs that create universal entitlements would undermine manhood by producing dependent and cringing males.” Illustrating this point, Samuel Gompers, founder of the AFL, once said that government-provided health insurance would produce “a weakening of spirit and virility.”

The AFL actively opposed the Fair Labor Standards Act, seeing it as a threat to unions’ ability to use collective bargaining to set wages and hours. During the FLSA debates, the AFL set out to “safeguard collective bargaining and limit the scope of government regulation to those fields wherein collective bargaining machinery is ineffective or difficult of functioning and only until collective bargaining has substantially covered the field” (as expressed during the 1937 AFL Convention and as quoted in Horowitz 1978: 187). They ended their opposition to the FLSA only after the wage rate was reduced so significantly (that is, to 25 cents per hour, a rate which was to be raised over the course of several years to 40 cents per hour) so as not to impact industries in which unions were strong and where workers had acquired higher wages through collective bargaining (Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris).

But the union movement of the period was not united in opposing the Fair Labor Standards Act. In 1935, a number of industrial-based unions, including the United Mine Workers and the

39 The AFL also fought for the stratification of the Social Security Act. They advocated for its strongest programs - Old Age Insurance and Unemployment Insurance - which would serve higher-wage workers to be built based on contributory insurance programs. The contributory model was seen as promoting worker’s independence in contrast to the government relief-based programs of the Act - like Old Age Assistance - which would serve lower-income and presumably “unorganizable” sectors of workers, like women and Black workers. This ended up valorizing white male industrial workers through the mechanisms of the contributory insurance programs - which were administered at the federal level - and degraded African American workers and women workers through the mechanisms of public assistance programs - which were to be administered at the state level. In addition to the material differences in the benefits provided by insurance policies as compared to assistance programs, this distinction had important social and cultural implications. Contributory insurance programs were seen as promoting workers independence and autonomy, while assistance programs - which were administered at the state level - were seen as promoting dependency (Hart 1994; Kessler-Harris; Mettler 1998).
International Ladies Garment Workers Union among others, left the AFL and founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). While the CIO primarily represented white male immigrant industrial workers, it was significantly more receptive to the participation of women workers and Black workers than was the AFL. The CIO believed that the government could be pressured to help working people, and they believed that standard-setting legislation could benefit working people and strengthen their hand in workplace-based organizing. While the new federation still saw collective bargaining as the main engine for improving workers lives, they believed that government standards, like the minimum wage, set a floor on which collective bargaining could build, rather than the AFL’s assertion that a minimum wage would serve as a ceiling that would limit wages. John Lewis described the Fair Labor Standards Act as “the beginning of an industrial bill of rights for workers as against industry,” (as quoted in Hart 1994: 159) pointing towards future plans to expand the realm of state labor rights and protections.

Within the CIO, it was the unions based among immigrant women workers who labored in garment and textile sweatshops, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), that worked most actively for the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Their members were some of the only workers who were simultaneously covered through its restriction to covering interstate commerce and whose wages were actually low enough to benefit from its relatively low floor of protections, since most other industrial workers already received wages above the minimum (Hart 1994; Mettler 1998).

The support of the CIO was decisive in helping the FLSA to pass, but the gendered opposition of the AFL, together with the racialized opposition of Southern legislators, helped to ensure that the minimum wage floor would be set at near-poverty levels and that the reach of state-mandated
worker protections would remain limited. Women workers and workers of color would largely be excluded from the benefits of the federal insurance programs and protection from federal standards, and they would instead be directed into stigmatized and regionally variant realm of state-based labor protections and relief programs. This turn away from a meaningful social safety net and meaningful job standards, a turn driven by racialized and gendered motives, channeled workers toward workplace-based struggles for higher wages and benefits, a model that would present particular challenges to the process of building solidarity between workers (Lichtenstein 2002).  

State Protections and the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights: This low bar for state-mandated workplace standards and the weakness of the social safety net were the primary factors that shaped the final form of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. The original bill included a much more expansive range of benefits that had been identified by domestic workers themselves: health care, notice of termination, severance pay and a living wage. But these needs transcended the constraining framework of state-mandated worker rights and protections that was developed during the New Deal, so the legislative process channeled Domestic Workers United’s expansive vision into a struggle for equal inclusion in these limited standards.

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40 It is notable that the year in which the FLSA was signed was the same year in which the House Committee on Un-American Activities was formed, at which point Communists began to be purged from the labor movement in large numbers. Communists had been crucial to the early organizing among industrial workers, providing much of the frontline organizing energy that built the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). In their early worker organizing, they had explicitly connected the immediate demands of workers for wages, benefits and improved working conditions to a more radical vision of social transformation in which the state would serve as a mechanism for the systematic redistribution of wealth. As the Party gained influence inside of the CIO during the 1930s, it muted its more explicit political critiques and its advocacy for worker militancy. Regardless, once the CIO was firmly established and an accord had been reached between labor and capital through New Deal polices, the organizing energies of Communists were deemed to be more of a threat than an asset. (Levine 1988) That this purging timed with the granting of a minimal floor of state-mandated worker protections is striking not because it demonstrates a political conspiracy, but for the way in which it illustrates the relationship between the granting of concessions and the constraining of radical struggle (Piven and Cloward 1977).
When they first introduced the Bill, many legislators and policy-makers dismissed it as an unrealistic piece of legislation. It took several years for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights to gain real traction in the state legislature. The strongest initial opposition came from the labor council to the Assembly, Charlotte Hitchcock, a former UAW leader who had a long history with the trade union movement in the state. Hitchcock objected to the idea that the state would intervene in the realm of negotiations over wages and benefits, seeing it as both a violation of the law and as impractical. She believed that the Bill of Rights threatened to take the power to negotiate wages and benefits through collective bargaining out of the hands of unions and, thus, to drive down wages and benefits for unionized workers. Her personal opposition stalled the Bill for many months.

Once the bill was introduced, it was the wage rate and health care that were the hot button issues that blocked the Bill from moving forward, although a number of other provisions also exceeded the standard realm of state protections. The Speaker of the Assembly, Sheldon Silver, encouraged DWU to amend its bill away from expanded protections and towards equal inclusion, “I can’t mandate a wage rate. I can’t mandate health insurance. But anything that’s about eliminating the discrimination in the law, we can work with a product like that.” In order to break this impasse, Domestic Workers United decided to remove the living wage provision, the cost of living adjustment and the health care provision. The new version of the Bill instead focused on expanding minimum wage protections to companions for the elderly and providing overtime protections to live-in workers. These amendments helped legislators to see the Bill as a more realistic piece of legislation, and it started to gain traction.
But the provisions that continued to exceed existent standards remained controversial: paid vacation, notice of termination and severance pay. Ai-jen Poo remembered the challenging dynamics of their dialogues on this topic with legislators, “We were told, ‘Look, honey, the guy that pumps your gas doesn’t get these things by law. Why should the babysitter get them?’” It was the support of labor leaders that helped to break this impasse when they supported the Bill’s expansion into realms historically governed through collective bargaining. John Sweeney’s trip to Albany in support of the Bill of Rights helped to convince legislators that it was a serious piece of legislation. When Sweeney came to Albany to signal the broader labor movement’s support for the Bill of Rights, he talked about how his mother had worked as a domestic worker in New York City for 40 years.

I remember my mother sometimes had to struggle to get the pay she was owed. She would arrive at the home of one of the families she worked for only to find they had moved—giving her no advanced notice that she had effectively lost her job. My father, on the other hand, had his union. He would always say “God bless the union,” because it protected him and provided him with decent wages and paid time off. I always felt my mother deserved the same, but domestic workers can’t form unions because they’re not covered under labor law. That didn’t seem fair to me (Unions.org 2010).

Local labor leaders also played an important behind-the-scenes role during lobby visits, challenging the argument that unionized workers would be upstet if they saw the legislature providing “special protections” to domestic workers. Ai-jen Poo (2010) reflected on a meeting with the Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver,

We explained the significance of the Bill to him. He listened, and then said, “You know, what you’re asking for, no other workers receive by law.” And that’s when Hector Figueroa, a union leader [then Secretary Treasurer of SEIU Local 32BJ, a progressive union representing building and janitorial workers in New York City] stepped in and said, “Other workers are able to collectively bargain for basic rights. That is impossible for this workforce because of the nature of the industry. Legislation is really necessary.” No rebuttal was possible. (16)
The active participation of union leaders on both sides of this debate, some of whom tried blocked it from ever coming before the Assembly and many others of whom helped to shepherd its passage, demonstrates that the traditional labor movement is itself in a process of struggle over the limits of contemporary labor laws and over the best solutions to address those limits.

As the Bill moved through the Senate and the Assembly, legislators started to remove its more expansive provisions. The Assembly first passed a version of the Bill that removed paid vacation, notice of termination and severance pay and included domestic workers in the right to collectively bargain. The Senate passed a more expansive version of the Bill that included notice of termination, six paid holidays, five vacation days, seven paid sick days and expanded enforcement powers. The reconciliation between the Senate and the Assembly over these two versions eventually led to the removal of paid vacation and holidays, notice of termination and severance pay and the inclusion of three annual paid “days of rest” after workers had worked for the same employer for more than one year. Rather than granting inclusion in collective bargaining, the final version required the Department of Labor to research whether collective bargaining would be feasible in the domestic work industry.

These compromises were controversial inside of Domestic Workers United and within its allied coalition of domestic workers organizations. The internal debate about whether to accept the compromised version of the bill or to ask its sponsors to have it pulled was heated. Everyone agreed that these standards were insufficient to ensure decent working conditions for all domestic workers, but they were all equally aware that the compromised Bill was all that they

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41 “Days of rest” was an amended way of describing paid vacation and paid sick days that was considered more acceptable for legislative mandate because it avoided the question of whether government should legislate these more standard benefits.
would be able to convince the legislature to pass, given their current level of organized power and political influence in Albany. There were, however, significant differences on how to handle those realities. Some workers argued that it was a good “foot in the door,” putting domestic workers on the political map and starting an incremental process that would eventually lead to more expansive legislation if the organization continued to build its power and influence. This was the predominant position of the leading members of Domestic Workers United, particularly those who had been most active in the lobbying process and had a deep sense of the political terrain in Albany. Others argued that the standards in this version of the Bill were below those that many workers in the industry already received and that it would actually encourage employers to lower wages and benefits down to this minimal floor. This was a contentious and complicated point, since the wages and benefits vary so widely in the industry, a variation that often traces along the lines of race, documentation status and language. While many of the English-speaking documented workers from the Caribbean and the Philippines received wages well above the federal minimum, many undocumented monolingual Latina workers received wages radically below the minimum. The strongest opposition to the compromises came from the leaders of Damayan, the organization rooted among Filipina workers in Queens, a reflection both of the status of Filipino workers in the industry and of the influence of the radical political movements in the Philippines in which many of its leading members had been active. There was a vast gap between the standards that would be necessary to substantively improve the lives of the majority of domestic workers and the kind of legislation that was politically feasible in Albany. In the end, the coalition voted to support the compromised legislation and to return to Albany to fight for more expansive legislation in the future.
This process of compromise, during which the bill was negotiated from a comprehensive package reflecting the lived needs of domestic workers into inclusion in the minimal floor of basic worker rights, reveals the constraining assumptions the underlie the established framework of worker rights and protections. By cutting the more expansive provisions from the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, the New York State Legislature narrowed Domestic Workers United’s fight from a struggle to expand the limited terrain of state labor protections into a struggle for inclusion into already established rights and protections. But, because the campaign succeeded in including the one exceptional provision of three paid “days of rest” into the final Bill, it also indicated a path forward: future struggles to expand the realm of state-mandated standards. This alternative strategic path is significantly different than the paradigm of worker organizing that was established in the 1930s, which was based on workplace-based organizing for unionization and collective bargaining.

A Struggle Over the Efficacy of Collective Bargaining

The campaign also opened up the question of whether or not the historically established channels for worker power could function for domestic workers, given the structure and dynamics of their industry. A consideration of this potential strategic trajectory requires a historical exploration of the development of collective bargaining in the United States: how it came to be structured, how it developed over time, the impact it had on the labor movement, and how it shaped and was shaped by racial and gender inequalities.

*History of Collective Bargaining:* On a basic level, collective bargaining is the process through which workers in a given workplace or occupation band together as a group to negotiate
contracts with their employers to regulate wages and working conditions. The form of collective bargaining that exists in the United States was established by the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) in 1935, which codified legally sanctioned methods of unionization and collective bargaining and prohibited employers from retaliating against workers for engagement in union activities.

Both the AFL and the CIO saw collective bargaining as the most effective methodology for improving wages and working conditions because it provided a formal mechanism through which workers could institutionalize the gains won through conflicts with their employers and because the struggle to win those benefits offered to simultaneously increase the autonomous power of the unions in the process. Millions of workers around the country, particularly industrial workers, engaged in thousands of strikes during the early to mid-1930s, responding to the dire state of the economy and building on the limited right to organize that had been established by the National Recovery Act (NRA) in 1933. This level of social struggle seriously impacted the national economy, pressuring Congress and the Roosevelt administration to establish a better mechanism for ensuring industrial and political stability.

The National Labor Relations Act was that mechanism. It expanded the limited right to organize that had been established through the NRA (which had been ruled unconstitutional by the recalcitrant Supreme Court). It legitimated union organizing, which had often been criminalized and violently repressed in the past, by providing government sanction for the right to organize and collectively bargain. It prohibited “company unions” that were initiated and controlled by employers. It required employers to sit down and negotiate with unions that had won majority
support from workers in a given workplace and, in so doing, helped to establish contract
unionism as the primary channel through which workers could improve their conditions above
the minimum floor provided by the FLSA. This political channel was co-constructed by elected
officials and labor leaders, particularly leaders from the CIO’s emergent industrial unions.

Collective bargaining did indeed prove to be a powerful tool for advancing the interests of
unionized workers for several decades after the passage of the Wagner Act. The AFL and the
CIO were able to build on these new rights to recruit millions of new members. And unionized
blue-collar workers in the United States were able to win higher wages and better benefits than
their counterparts in the industrialized nations of Europe whose benefits were largely provided
through government programs rather than through collectively-bargained contracts (Lichtenstein
2002). But at the same time, the NLRA contributed towards the institutionalization of worker
organizing that had previously manifested as a social movement. By setting restrictions on
spontaneous resistance, like wildcat strikes, and the level of militancy that unions could deploy
in their struggles with employers once a contract had been negotiated, it “rescripted and limited
the industrial workers’ repertoire” (Piven and Cloward, 2000: 419). Thus, the NLRA was both a
facilitating factor and a limiting influence on worker organizing, regulating workers’ resistance
by shaping the particular form through which their struggles could manifest.

In addition to these racialized and gendered restrictions on the right to organize, the turn towards
collective bargaining as the primary mode of workers struggle helped to replicate and, in some
cases, to expand extant racial and gender inequalities within the working classes. Because
workplaces were largely segregated by race and gender, the prioritization of workplace
organizing and collective bargaining meant that workers struggles in the United States manifested primarily on a segregated terrain. This workplace focus encouraged white male workers to focus on improving their own conditions and to leave the interests of workers of color and women workers, who generally did not labor in the same workplaces or industries, aside. Even though the explicit ideology of much industrial unionism encouraged unity between Black and white workers (in the language of the time), the terms of that struggle often served to separate the struggles of white workers from workers of color and those of working men from working women (Roediger 2006). Lichtenstein (2002) has argued that this factionalized approach to struggle helped to transform unions in the United States from functioning as a social movement to functioning as a narrow interest group.

In addition to promoting a segregating approach to workers struggles, the structure of the NLRA helped to exacerbate racial and gender stratifications in the economy by prioritizing certain types of workplaces over others. The NLRA’s framework for collective bargaining rights was developed in response to the struggles of industrial workers, and it was constructed to correspond to the structures and dynamics of industrial workplaces. Collective bargaining thus assumed stable employment in large centralized public workplaces with high worker-employer ratios. Because the structure of the collective bargaining rights established by the National Labor Relations Act privileged organizing in the type of industrial workplaces that were primarily populated by white male workers, these protections *de facto* privileged white male industrial workers and helped to institutionalize the “factory paradigm” of worker organizing. Women

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42 The AFL which used a craft model of unionism - that is, a model that organized workers across workplaces based on their shared trade or role (e.g. electricians) - argued that the National Labor Relations Board was biased towards the CIO’s model of industrial unionism in which unions organized all the workers in a given workplaces, across trade lines (Lichtenstein 2002).
workers and workers of color have historically labored in high-turnover, decentralized and informal workplaces, often in the service industries, making it difficult for many to exercise these established channels for worker power, even when they were technically included in the right to organize (Cobble 1994).43

But, for all of these challenges, the collective bargaining model established by the NLRA and the industrial organizing model of the CIO was elastic enough to provide a mechanism for multi-racial organizing in workplaces that employed both Black and white laborers, an elasticity that the labor movement engaged when it launched Operation Dixie in 1946. Operation Dixie was a drive to organize Black and white textile workers in the South, which had some initial moments of success. But once it became clear that industrial unionism could provide a mechanism for the empowerment of Black industrial workers in the South, Southern Democrats, who had previously voted for the Wagner Act, broke with the New Deal coalition by supporting the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, giving the Act enough votes to over-ride a potential presidential veto (Katznelson 2005).

The Taft-Hartley Act represented a major reversal of the labor rights that had characterized the New Deal. Taft-Hartley permitted states to adopt “right-to-work” laws, which significantly weakened union rights and which were primarily adopted in Southern and Western states. This

43 These challenges are connected with the assertions of many union leaders at the time that women workers and workers of color were “unorganizable.” These beliefs about unorganizability was sometimes a reflection on the structure of the industries in which these workers labored, which presented significant challenges to established organizing methodologies. At other times, they were statements on the supposed inherent characteristics of these workers. For example, a 1912 AFL Convention report read, “Women do not organize as readily or as ably as men. They are, therefore, more easily exploited” (as quoted in Hart 1994: 78). These assumptions ran deep in the labor movement, and they contributed to the construction of a model of unionization and collective bargaining that implicitly privileged white male workers (Roediger 2006).
effectively broke the back of the labor movement in the South. Taft-Hartley also required union leaders to sign affidavits that they were not Communists, leading to mass purges of radicals from the union movement and depriving the union movement of many of its most dedicated organizers. Finally, Taft-Hartley expanded the federal government’s ability to use strikebreaking injunctions if workers’ strikes were deemed to be threatening to the national economy or security. It radically curtailed the repertoire of strategies that unions were sanctioned to exercise, making sit-down strikes and wildcat strikes illegal. Taft-Hartley’s prohibition of secondary boycotts and pickets and solidarity strikes⁴⁴ constrained solidarity efforts between workers in different industries. This helped channel unions away from a class-wide form of struggle into a narrow sectoral focus. Over time, these dynamics led to the development of a more limited and accommodationist form of unionism in the United States (Lichtenstein 2002). According to Voss and Sherman (2000),

The labor movement lost much of its oppositional edge, modifying its disruptive tactics and reducing its primary goals to gaining better contracts for members and influencing routine politics through regular channels. The prevailing method of representing members was “business unionism,” in which union business agents “serviced” workers, resolving shop-floor and other problems for them. (310)

However inequitably, the NLRA had provided a channel through which workers could advance their interests. But when Black workers in the South began to use the NLRA to organize, it came under attack from Southern legislators who were dedicated to maintaining the Southern racial order. In the interests of defending Jim Crow in the South, these legislators put constraints on the ability of the labor movement to effectively organize workers on a national level. While white male workers in the United States continued to benefit from a model of worker rights that was racially and gender-biased, they also saw those rights eroded in the interest of maintaining racial

⁴⁴ Boycotts, pickets and strikes are considered “secondary” when they are carried out by a union in solidarity with workers in another union.
inequality. Here we can clearly see the ways in which political efforts to maintain and advance racial inequality led to constraints on the rights and power of all workers in the United States.

Collective Bargaining and the Domestic Work Industry Today: The discrepancy between the structure of collective bargaining as developed in the NLRA and the structure of the domestic work industry is particularly extreme. Hundreds of thousands of workers labor in the isolation of private homes for hundreds of thousands of different employers. These workers face highly informal conditions of employment and a high rate of turnover. These dynamics have led the historic labor movement to consider the domestic work industry “unorganizable” and to therefore help perpetuate the ongoing devaluation of domestic work (Boris and Nadasen 2008; Jackson 1940). But the fact that organizing among domestic workers has grown in recent years while the traditional union movement is experiencing widespread attrition has challenged this assumption of unorganizability.

Ai-jen Poo (2011) reflected on the challenges of applying the existent collective bargaining model for the industry.

Even if domestic workers were included, the dynamics of their employment makes it difficult (if not impossible) to engage in collective bargaining in the traditional sense. Domestic workers labor in private homes which function as separate workplaces; there is no collective workforce nor is there a central employer with whom to bargain. When individual workers try to bargain with their employers, termination is the standard result since employers can simply hire another worker. In the context of such extreme inequality in the bargaining power between domestic workers and their employers, workers cannot simply organize and bargain “like other workers.”

These challenges have pushed domestic workers organizers to re-imagine methods for worker organizing, and the Bill of Rights campaign served as one site of that re-imagining. Over the course of the Bill of Rights campaign, organizers and workers debated with legislators over
whether domestic workers could or should obtain the protections in the Bill through legislation or collective bargaining. The tendency to maintain the established paradigm of collective bargaining as the only method for winning higher standards was strong among not only among Republican legislators but also among Democratic legislators and staffers who had close relationships with the labor movement. These legislators were pushed, by domestic workers and labor leaders alike, to consider the serious misfit between the framework of collective bargaining and the structure of the industry. That pressure proved crucial in helping DWU to win the legislative mandate for employers to provide three paid sick days per year. But the pull towards the collective bargaining paradigm remained strong, resulting in the elimination of other expansive provisions from the Bill and the commissioning of the Department of Labor report on the feasibility of collective bargaining for the industry.

The ambivalence of that report, released in November 2010 and entitled The Feasibility of Domestic Worker Collective Bargaining, is striking. After detailing a number of particular challenges in the industry, decentralization, isolation, the location of the worksite in private home, personalistic relationships between workers and employers, the limited incomes and administrative capacities of many domestic employers and the particular vulnerabilities facing live-in domestic workers, the report acknowledges that,

While the statutory amendment [to include domestic workers in standard collective bargaining rights] would be simple and straightforward, the implementation of collective bargaining for domestic workers, while feasible, would be much more complicated. (3)

I will explore this report in more detail in the following chapter but here I will just note that it remained equivocal on which of these solutions would be most effective, leaving the conclusion to be determined through ongoing struggles and joint efforts between domestic workers and their
employers. This equivocation on the part of the Department of Labor is one sign among many of the increasing tenuousness of the relevance of the NLRA’s collective bargaining framework for the working classes of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaign highlighted the fact that the structure and dynamics of the new economy require a transformation of the current framework of labor and employment law. A central site of that transformation is a re-imagining of collective bargaining as we know it. There is a growing gap between the underlying assumptions of contemporary labor law, that workers have stable jobs in public centralized workplaces where they can exercise their collective power in order to pressure a central and identifiable employer to negotiate contracts, and the current dynamics of the U.S. economy. The current structure of labor rights and employment protections lag behind the times (Piven and Cloward 2000; Sockell 1989). The struggle to re-imagine and redefine that structure must be a central aspect of contemporary worker struggles, including both the existent framework for collective bargaining and the low floor of social labor protections. The campaign for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights was one site of that re-imagination, both in its attempt to raise the standard floor of state protections and in the debate over whether or not collective bargaining could serve as an effective methodology for domestic workers. Winning inclusion of domestic workers in collective bargaining rights in New York State could be a relatively easy and straightforward process at this point. But the process of reconfiguring collective bargaining so that it can function for domestic workers, a process that I will explore more deeply in Chapter 7, presents a much higher hurdle to Domestic Workers United. The primary insight to be drawn from the Bill of Rights campaign is that we
need to look outside of industry-based collective bargaining for alternative avenues for improving the conditions of today’s workers. The Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaign pointed towards one such alternative: radically raising the floor of state labor protections.

The original Bill of Rights called for a radical expansion of the scope of state labor protections to include benefits that are normally established through collectively bargained contracts: living wages, cost of living allowances, paid vacation, paid sick days, severance, notice of termination and health care. While the final bill eliminated almost all of these more expansive provisions, the incorporation of three paid days of rest is significant. Although the provision itself is relatively minor, it is suggestive of the ways in which labor law needs to change to address the dynamics of the many decentralized informal sectors of the contemporary economy. It suggests that it may be possible to win a broader range of social protections and a greater degree of state intervention that go beyond the historic constraints of the framework first developed during the New Deal.
CHAPTER 7: “We Are Going to Have to be the Ones to Enforce It:” Domestic Workers United Works to Enforce the Bill of Rights

In the months after the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, Domestic Workers United was in a high tide of celebration. Every DWU meeting would begin and end with workers standing up and testifying about how they had made history by passing the Bill. “For too long, we have faced exclusions, but we are not longer invisible. We have emerged out of the shadows into the light. We are real workers today.” And, “We went from having no place in the labor law to winning coverage for over 200,000 nannies, housecleaners and elder caregivers for the first time in the history of the United States. And we did that. We did that.” As these themes were repeated in agitation after agitation, some of the ladies would stand up and burst into applause while others just nodded their heads slowly with a clear sense of pride shining through their smiles. There was a palpable sense of possibility and opportunity that lasted for many months.

But a number of significant challenges were also brewing. As more and more members reported that many workers in the industry did not know about their new rights, DWU members’ initial excitement about the Bill began to fade. New reports stared to come out during meetings like, “These ladies where I work, they’ve never even heard about the Bill. They’re taking wages way below the minimum,” and, “No one knows what it means to get paid overtime. They think it’s alright if they get paid a little extra when they’re asked to work for three more hours, but that’s not overtime. They’re just making what they get paid per hour. It’s never time-and-a-half.”

And it was not just workers who did not know about their rights. Many employers remained either ignorant of the Bill’s provisions or willfully non-compliant. Park Slope Parents (PSP) is an
online “information exchange” for parents that has a huge reach and a strong reputation among employers in one of the city’s most progressive neighborhoods. PSP conducted a survey of employers, asking what they knew about domestic workers’ rights and whether or not they upheld them. They found that only 37% of employers in Park Slope knew about the Bill and believed themselves to be in compliance. About 22% of employers reported that they had never heard about the Bill. About 41% said that they had heard about the Bill, but they either did not think it applied to them or did not think they were in compliance. This willful non-compliance was reflected in reports from DWU members who had informed their employers about the new law. “My boss heard about the law and said, ‘I don’t care.’ People are still having to work 12 hours without getting paid any overtime.” And,

My boss said that the law only applied to people who were making $7.25 an hour. He learned the truth, and now he’s paying me overtime, but it’s scary. I’m worried that he’s going to fire me and hire someone who’s willing to be paid less than me. The reality is that there are other people out there who are willing to work for less, no matter what the law says.

As these stories emerged, it became clear that the New York State Department of Labor could not effectively enforce these hard-fought rights. But the fact that the Bill of Rights was not enforced is not the entire story. When confronted with the reality of the Department of Labor’s non-enforcement of the Bill Of Rights, Domestic Workers United developed a neighborhood-based, worker-led approach to enforcement that was designed fill the gaps left by the limited reach of the Department of Labor. This neighborhood-based approach to outreach was built to respond to the decentralization and isolation of domestic workers into hundreds of thousands of private homes. It capitalized on the public spaces through which domestic workers travel and in which they gather while on the job.
In this chapter, I will examine the reasons why the Department of Labor was unable to effectively enforce the Bill of Rights. This failing was a reflection of two forces: the limits of historically established frameworks of workplace regulation in the United States and the weakening of the labor inspectorate due to the successful advance of the neoliberal project. I will examine both the detrimental impacts of the neoliberal project on workers’ lives and the ways in which they respond to those impacts and, in so doing, challenge not only neoliberalism but also long-standing structures of inequality. Many scholars have pointed out the importance of attending to contestations and limits of the neoliberal project. They argue that this attention does more than convey noble stories of inevitably doomed resistance to the neoliberal juggernaut; rather, these stories offer to help us see the fracture points within the neoliberal project and begin to conceptualize an alternative political future. They encourage us to attend to the alternative imaginaries that accompany these struggles in order to begin to construct a vision for a world beyond neoliberalism (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Leitner, et al. 2007). Following this line of analysis, I place DWU’s responses to the state’s non-enforcement of the Bill at the center of this chapter. Although their efforts are still nascent, they suggest an imaginary of a transformed approach to labor regulation. That transformed approach would not only roll back neoliberal cuts to the labor inspectorate but would expand beyond the limits of the New Deal regulatory regime by engaging worker organizations as active agents in the enforcement process. Their efforts also suggest the re-imagination of approaches to worker organizing that push against the limits of the factory paradigm of worker organizing, approaches which include geographically-based methods that transcend the constraints of workplace-based organizing and bottom-up approaches to worker organizing that challenge business unionism. Thus, while the neoliberal project has wrought undeniably negative effects on the working conditions of low-wage workers, it has also
created the context for the development of new forms of political struggle and for the development of state forms and functions that have the potential to go beyond the limits of historically established paradigms.

**The Limits of State Enforcement Efforts**

At first, DWU members were baffled at the increasingly apparent reality of non-enforcement, and they had good reason to be confused. The New York State Department of Labor is one of the most robust in the nation, reflecting the state’s historically strong labor movement and its generally progressive orientation. Labor analysts (Bernhardt, et al. 2010) have called the agency a “national model of enforcement reform” for its innovative efforts to develop a stronger enforcement infrastructure that is better suited to the conditions and dynamics of low-wage industries: adopting a proactive approach to enforcement rather than relying on complaints, developing a Bureau of Immigrant Workers’ Rights in order to strengthen the agency’s relationship with immigrant communities, and partnering with worker centers and immigrant organizations to strengthen enforcement efforts. And indeed, the staff members at the New York State Department of Labor were individually invested in enforcing the Bill, engaging in regular dialogue with DWU in order to identify effective strategies for education and enforcement. In these meetings, they expressed that they were doing their best to carry out education among both workers and employers: developing educational materials in eight languages for workers and employers detailing domestic workers’ newly-established rights, coordinating efforts across their various divisions, and attempting to expedite the progress of domestic worker cases through the Department.
But hopes for comprehensive oversight or enforcement were confounded by the limited staff capacity of the Department and the industry’s high level of decentralization and informalization. During one meeting between DWU and the Department, DOL staffers listened to the issues that continued to face workers: overtime violations, concerns that complaints were taking months to settle, and a lack of clarity for how workers could file for unemployment or workers compensation. The staff listened patiently and sympathetically to these concerns, directing DWU leaders to the appropriate agencies and staff people. But they also encouraged the leaders to have patience with their slow pace since the Department of Labor was under-staffed, saying things like, “We only have one inspector to deal with those issues for all the workers in the entire state, so we need a lot of advance notice to fit this into her schedule.” The low numbers of Departmental staff that were available to process violations stood in sharp contrast to the hundreds of thousands of workplaces to be overseen in the industry.

This is reflective of broader trends in employment rights enforcement. There is a growing gap between the numbers of low-wage workers, the population that benefits most from the enforcement of minimum wage and overtime protections, and the inspection capacity of state and federal Departments of Labor. At the same time, reflecting the neoliberal turn in government funding priorities over the last several decades, there has been a downward trend in funding for the Department of Labor. The number of labor inspectors has gone through an extended period of significant decline (Bernhardt, et al. 2007; Wial 1999). Between 2003-2006, the New York
State Department of Labor had only 100 investigators who were expected to meet the needs of approximately half a million workers (Bernhardt, et al. 2007).45

The reach of this dwindling inspectorate was further limited by the decentralization of work and the resultant growth in the number of workplaces that require oversight. Analysts of labor enforcement argue that proactive investigation is a far more effective enforcement strategy than relying on voluntary complaints from workers whose rights have been violated (Fine and Gordon 2010). But the profusion of worksites make these kind of proactive strategies daunting; the Department of Labor would have to investigate tens of thousands of homes to comprehensively enforce the Bill. Departmental access was further complicated by the location of workplaces in employers’ private homes and by the informal payment structure of the industry, which make it difficult to collect fines from individuals who refused to comply with judgments. The Department of Labor was beginning to look into the process of levying delinquent employers’ bank accounts, but they were predicting challenges with even locating these private accounts. The Department of Labor decided to rely on public education and a complaint-driven model for enforcement in the industry. They promised to expedite cases in the domestic work industry in the first years following the Bill’s passage. They agreed to work with DWU to identify several representative cases for high-profile prosecution, which they could publicize in order to inform the public about the new laws and the Department’s commitment to punishing violators.

45 This trend went through a short reversal when, under the short administration of pro-labor Governor Eliot Spitzer, the state Department’s inspectorate grew. But those short-term gains were not sufficient to roll-back the long-term decline or to address the growing needs of the swelling ranks of the low-wage workforce. And they were easily reversed; the State Department has lost 15 inspectors since 2007 (Bernhardt, et al. 2010).
In order to facilitate the complaint process, DWU partnered with a local advocacy organization, the Urban Justice Center, to set up a legal clinic to help workers to register complaints when their rights had been violated. But in the first year, only nine cases made their way through this legal clinic to the Department. While Department inspectors had followed up on almost all of the cases, none of them had been resolved within the first year after the Bill’s passage. Department officials attributed this delay to the large backlog of complaints that were in the Department’s queue before the passage of the Bill of Rights and the limited number of investigators who were available to process the cases.

As the months went on, news about these gaps in enforcement appeared first in progressive media outlets like the Nation (Lerner 2012) and Huffington Post (Virtanen and Watson 2012) and then in mainstream news sources like the New York Times (Semple 2011) and the Daily News (Croghan and Connor 2012). It started to become clear that the Department of Labor was not going to be able to adequately enforce the Bill, regardless of the good intentions of departmental staff members or the Department’s explicit commitment to prioritizing enforcement of the new law. DWU members grew increasingly frustrated. During one conversation, Meches gestured at the framed copy of the Bill of Rights that was proudly displayed at the DWU office, saying, “If we can’t enforce the Bill of Rights, it isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on. It’s just a piece of paper that we could make into a ball and throw into the trash.” Priscilla reflected that, “Winning the Bill of Rights was important, but it is not enough. The Bill of Rights doesn’t mean anything unless we can enforce it.” That growing frustration motivated the organization to take on enforcement efforts itself, turning the challenge of the state’s inability to enforce the law into an opportunity. Domestic Workers United began to build its own enforcement infrastructure.
Meches captured this moment well, “If the Bill is going to be enforced, we are going to have to be the ones to enforce it.”

Grassroots Enforcement and Geographic Organizing

The organization’s leaders began to grapple with strategies for reaching the hundreds of thousands of domestic workers who labored in homes across the metropolitan region. They worked with allied organizations to develop a series of educational resources designed to inform workers about their rights, including a detailed “Know Your Rights” booklet written with the support of the National Employment Law Project, a “Know Your Rights” website developed with a progressive design organization called the Center for Urban Pedagogy and a “Know your Rights” hotline primarily developed by a veteran DWU member who had been working with an independent media production organization called the Peoples’ Production House.

But the organization had few avenues for distributing these resources to workers en masse. To effectively educate workers about their new rights, DWU’s outreach efforts would need to radically expand. “We need an army of us who are out there who are recognized by workers and employers to make sure the Bill of Rights is being respected and upheld,” Allison reflected. But DWU’s organizing model had historically focused on the high-level participation of a small group of leaders, not on building the kind of large-scale outreach capacity that would enable them to reach thousands of domestic workers to inform them about their rights and to monitor conditions in the industry.
As they struggled with how to broaden their reach, DWU found inspiration in the union movement. Given the historic marginalization of domestic workers within the traditional union movement and the recent decline in union density, this may seem like an unlikely source of inspiration. But the union movement’s support for the Bill of Rights had meant a great deal to DWU members. Many union leaders had supported their cause, tipping the political balance at some crucial moments in their fight. Even in its precipitous decline, the union movement is still one of the most powerful forces in the progressive movement in the United States. And it was important to DWU’s leaders that the union movement’s power and influence ultimately came from its membership base, made up of hundreds of thousands of working people. Additionally, several DWU members had been active as shop stewards in the labor movements in their nations of origins, and they were proud to carry that legacy on to their work in the United States.

DWU drew on the model of the “shop steward” in which a rank-and-file member of the union serves as liaison between the union and the other workers in her workplace. Shop stewards have been historically defined by their location on the “shop floor,” a shared workplace where they could support their fellow workers in dealing with their grievances with their common employer. However, as we have seen, the domestic work industry is defined by its location in decentralized private homes and therefore by its lack of a shared workplace or a common employer. Meches reflected on this, “We are inventing a new model. There is no factory anymore, so it’s harder to find people. This is something new.” The shop steward model could not be adopted wholesale; it would have to be adapted in order to be relevant to domestic work. Priscilla described how DWU started to think about adapting this model to their industry,

The role of the ‘shop steward is to be the representative of the union at the workplace. We liked that concept, so we wanted to think about a similar model where we have
domestic workers who are representatives of DWU who have been trained to support workers in the area where they’re working or living.

DWU drew on its knowledge of the dynamics of the industry and its historic approach to outreach in order to develop a relevant shop steward model. For years, DWU members had been carrying organizational materials with them on the job, talking with other workers about their rights as they sat together on park benches, passing out organizational leaflets to women pushing strollers bearing children of lighter skin tones and getting up early on Monday mornings to talk to live-in workers as they boarded the trains to Long Island for the workweek. This approach drew on workers’ organic knowledge of the industry; they knew which parks were full at what times of the day, what trains women rode to work and which women were the de facto leaders of the small social cliques that developed among workers in different neighborhoods. DWU drew on that knowledge in its adaption of the shop steward model; in place of a shared “shop floor” of a workplace, social networks and public spaces would serve as DWU’s “shop floors.” This model suggests a potentially significant expansion of our understanding of the nature of the workplace in the domestic work industry from the formal workplace of the home to the broader geographic region in which the home is located.46

The result of this re-invention was the “Ambassadors Program,” in which DWU’s worker-leaders would volunteer to take responsibility for systematically educating the workers in the neighborhoods where they worked, making sure that more workers knew about their newly-won rights and that they knew to contact the organization in case their rights had been violated. DWU members were reluctant to use the formal title of “shop steward” to describe these rank-and-file

46 This relates to historic theories and models of working class organizing that recognized the struggles of working people must necessarily extend beyond the workplace, building on community-based networks (Nash 1979; Susser 2012). Here, an interesting complication is the way in which DWU’s community-based work was a reflection of its intuitive and expansive understanding that the community was itself part of the workplace.
worker organizers. Some DWU members who were union members in the past had critiques of traditional unions, specifically that they did not feel that their voices mattered in those unions. Other DWU members said that they believed it would be presumptuous or technically inaccurate to describe DWU as a “union,” given the exclusion of domestic workers from the right to collectively bargain and DWU’s small scale. Myrna suggested the “Ambassadors” name. The volunteer missionary program at her Evangelical church, which was called “Ambassadors for Christ,” was her inspiration. This illustrates the many experiences from which DWU members draw in their work. DWU members ultimately felt more comfortable seeing themselves as “Ambassadors” who would bring the word of the organization out to the other workers in the industry, some appreciating its connection with Evangelicism and others its implication that they were the “official” representatives the organization.

In conceptualizing the Ambassadors program, DWU leaders debated whether to focus on neighborhoods where workers worked, like Park Slope, Brooklyn Heights, the Upper West Side and Tribeca, or neighborhoods where they lived, like Sunset Park, Jackson Heights, Flatbush and the South Bronx. They considered the potential benefits of residential neighborhood organizing: that they could tap into social institutions like the churches and stores that workers frequented, that workers would be less fearful of being seen talking to DWU organizers by their employers and that residential neighborhoods would provide more culturally and linguistically cohesive units than would workplace neighborhoods. This approach would have largely reflected the model of organizing through ethnically-based social networks that has been adopted by many other worker centers (Das Gupta 2006; Ness 2005). But the decision ultimately tipped towards workplace neighborhood organizing. DWU leaders believed that residential neighborhood
organizing would pull towards ethnically-based forms of organization while workplace neighborhood organizing would be more likely to be multi-racial, and the organization’s leaders were strongly committed to maintaining and promoting its multi-racial composition.

Almost all of the other domestic worker organizations that have emerged in the United States over the last decade have developed as outgrowths of ethnically-specific immigrant women’s service organizations. But DWU was an exception to that pattern. They came together around a shared identity as “workers” and as women of color, and it is still one of the only multi-racial domestic workers’ organizations in the country. Their multi-racial composition is particularly significant in an industry that is stratified along racial and linguistic lines and in which employers often use differences of race, language and documentation status to drive down standards in the industry. DWU’s leaders felt it was crucial to maintain its multi-racial approach to organizing in order to combat these patterns of divisions between workers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. So the organization decided to prioritize workplace neighborhood organizing, turning the city’s parks and playgrounds into a new kind of shop floor.

Hidden in this decision to prioritize workplace neighborhood organizing over residential neighborhood organizing was an implicit decision to prioritize organizing nannies over reaching out to elder care providers and housecleaners. It is primarily nannies who gather in the public spaces in the neighborhoods in which they work. They meet each other waiting to pick children up from school, in parks and playgrounds, in bookstores and on play dates.47 Elder care

47 This is similar to the ways in which working class women build familial and community relationships and social networks through cooperating with each other to provide child care, as described in Ida Susser’s *Norman Street*. The class relationship here is different. The nannies are not the parents of the children for whom they are providing care, and there are significant differences of race and class between them. The neighborhoods in which they are building
providers, in comparison, are often employed to care for homebound charges, and their work is therefore done with a greater degree of isolation. The labor of housecleaners is defined by its strict location within the physical space of the home; the only reason to leave the home in the course of work would be to go to another house to clean. Given this structure for the workday, housecleaners and elder care providers often do not develop their social networks in the neighborhoods in which they work. Instead, they develop them in their residential neighborhoods and ethnic communities, through hometown and family networks, churches and so on. That DWU made its decision without discussing these implications reflects its tendency to prioritize the working experiences of its established base among nannies. While this does not necessarily reflect the kind of power-laden priorities that have characterized other marginalizations in the historic labor movement in the United States, it does make it more difficult for DWU to organize workers across all the sub-sectors of the industry.

DWU model of worker-to-worker outreach is a more bottom-up approach to outreach than has become common in the union movement or in the non-profit based community organizing world, both of which tend to rely on paid professional staff organizers to conduct outreach to workers. DWU leaders are fiercely committed to promoting worker leadership in the organization, for both political and practical reasons. The organization has found that many domestic workers feel more at ease talking with other workers about their experiences. “Outsiders” may be perceived as employers, and government officials often represent the threat of immigration enforcement. Joyce described this dynamic. “They feel more comfortable talking with us because we have

relationships are not their residential communities, but neighborhoods to which they commute for work. But the similarities between the networks that women built in these two very different situations demonstrate a significant pattern in the provision of reproductive labor: that child-rearing is not done in isolation in the private home but is rather a social process that takes place within the broader community. It is a social, not a private function.
been there as well. They feel more secure and at ease, knowing that they have somewhere to come and tell their stories.”

Thirteen women signed up to serve as Ambassadors: nine Caribbean women and four Latina women, all of whom worked as nannies. They came from a wide range of backgrounds in their nations of origin; their backgrounds informed their participation in the Ambassadors program in a number of different ways. Several women had worked with the labor movement or other social movements before their migration; these worker-leaders saw their participation in the Ambassadors program as an extension of that work. For example, Marlene had served as a shop-steward in a poultry processing plant in Barbados for more than a decade, while Gabriela was active in anti-corruption movements in Peru before she migrated to the United States. Other worker-leaders had worked as various types of professionals in their nations of origin Jennifer had worked as a government accountant who had supported workers cooperatives in Trinidad before she migrated. She regularly expressed pride in her new position as an envoy of the organization to workers and employers and connected this to her past experiences in Trinidad. Bianca brought a similar level of experience with school administration and education. Some Ambassadors, like Sylvia, came from more working-class backgrounds in their nations of origins. They had been peasants, factory workers or domestic workers. These Ambassadors often talked about their commitment to overcoming the legacies of oppression and exploitation that had plagued their families for decades. Other Ambassadors drew on other arenas of leadership; Myrna, for example, drew on her experiences doing missionary work with her church. DWU’s Ambassadors were thus drawing both on their experiences working as domestic workers in the
United States and their diverse experiences in their nations of origin in their organizing efforts, providing them with a varied set of motivations and a wide range of capacities and knowledge.

While several of these workers had been members of DWU for many years, most of the Ambassadors joined the organization after the passage of the Bill of Rights. The Ambassadors program was their first leadership opportunity within the organization. In applying to the program, they talked about the ways in which the organization had given them a sense of personal empowerment, expressing a desire to help other workers access the same kind of confidence. One woman said, “I became a DWU member because I wanted to be educated about the industry. Being a member has made me more bold and not afraid to fight for my rights. I want to be more involved and educated, so I can help other women do the same.” Another said, “DWU has made me be a stronger person, and to be able to help others empower themselves would be great. I want to be an Ambassador so that I can do more to improve the lives of other workers.” One of the longer-term-members spoke about the need to build the organization and to build collective power, “We need to have more power in the organization because there is a great deal of abuse in this line of work,” and “We need to bring in more members and fight for the rights of all.”

For four weeks in the chilly month of February, these thirteen women would get up early on Saturday mornings and travel into Manhattan to attend intensive trainings to prepare them for their new roles as Ambassadors. They learned the ins-and-outs of the new Bill, drawing on their own working experiences as raw material to understand its provisions. “If I get $400 per week, what should my overtime pay be?” “My last employer fired me on a Friday and told me not to
come back on Monday. Does the Bill cover that?” They learned about the organization’s history and the Bill of Rights campaign so they would be able to help other workers understand that their new rights had been won by the collective efforts of domestic workers themselves. They talked about their fears of doing outreach: that their employers would see them or hear about their efforts, that other workers would think they were pushy and that they might feel rejected by their own communities. They practiced role plays to learn how to overcome these fears, alternating between friendly and challenging scenarios and often dissolving into laughter as all-too-familiar dynamics of rejection and fear played out in exaggerated form in their re-enactments. Latina and Caribbean workers taught each other key phrases in English and Spanish, like “Hello. I am an Ambassador for Domestic Workers United” which became “Hola. Soy una embajadora de Trabajadoras de Casa Unidas.” The women laughed as they stumbled over the unfamiliar words. These practical skills trainings often served as openings for much deeper dialogue. When learning to translate “domestic worker,” the Latina workers warned their fellow workers who spoke English not to use the term “trabajadora domestica” because “domestica” is a demeaning term in Latin America. They discussed the connection between colonization and racially degraded servitude in Latin America. The Caribbean workers listened to their impassioned arguments, and one Caribbean woman closed the conversation by saying, “We all have the experience of colonialism, so we understand each other.”

These trainings built a sense of cohesion and momentum among DWU’S new Ambassadors, and they left the course excited and ready to educate the workers in their neighborhoods. They were equipped with clipboards and palm cards that outlined domestic workers rights under the law and that instructed workers whose rights had been violated to contact the DWU office. Each
Ambassadors was responsible for reaching workers in a specific neighborhood with a high density of domestic workers, neighborhoods like Park Slope, the Upper East Side, Tribeca, Brooklyn Heights and Midwood. Each Ambassador was supposed to speak to at least fifty workers in their neighborhood every month, educating them about their rights and making sure they knew where to access services if their rights had been violated. If they could convince workers to give them their numbers, they were also expected to do follow-up calls to build relationships with them and to try to recruit them to come to a DWU meeting.

Each month, the Ambassadors would reconvene to reflect on their experiences and to keep each other committed to their work. During these meetings, they would share stories of conversations they’d had with workers, comparing notes on the different issues that workers raised in their conversations. It was immediately clear that very few workers knew about the Bill of Rights and that even those workers who had heard of the Bill did not know the specific provisions. One specific trend that emerged was that the overwhelming majority of workers, including the workers who received wages well above the minimum, did not receive overtime pay. Ambassadors often found it difficult to help workers figure out if they had experienced overtime violations because many workers are paid a lump sum each week, a sort of proto-salary, which is often negotiated to cover a work-week that exceeds forty hours. For example, a worker may get paid $500 a week for a fifty-hour work-week. While it is straightforward to determine whether employers are paying a minimum wage in this context, it is more difficult to determine workers’ hourly rate, since the bottom line expectation itself includes overtime work that should be paid at a higher rate. Many workers believed that they received “overtime pay” if they received any pay for hours worked beyond the agreed-upon norm, even if that pay was below the rate of time-and-
a-half. This is a reflection of the fact that many employers expect domestic workers to work extra hours without additional pay, either because they see them as “salaried” workers or as “part of the family” and therefore willing to accommodate the employers’ schedules. It became clear that education and contestation over overtime would need to be a major front of DWU’s enforcement work.

Another important pattern that emerged was that workers in different neighborhoods faced significantly different conditions. Workers in high-income neighborhoods like Park Slope and Tribeca generally received base wages above the minimum, but they faced overtime violations. They tended to be more concerned about other issues like access to health care and disrespectful treatment by their employers. Meanwhile, workers in relatively lower-income neighborhoods like Midwood often worked excessively long hours and did not even receive the minimum wage. While DWU knew that conditions in the industry were highly stratified and varied radically between households, the neighborhood-based organization of the Ambassadors’ work made the geographic organization of those stratifications increasingly clear.

Ambassadors told each other stories about workers who avoided them out of fear of being seen talking to a DWU member by their employers and about workers who sneaked them their contact information while their employers looked the other way. They expressed frustration that some workers did not want to get involved in the organizing work because they “have their mind just on money,” and they reminded each other to remember to “listen to them and connect to what people care about and why people want the money. People take jobs with these low salaries because they need to take care of their families. You have to pay rent here, and you need money
for food. It’s a necessity.” They gave each other advice on how to be more effective in approaching and engaging their fellow workers: “People talk to me better if I was with my kid in a stroller because they could see that I’m doing the same work as them,” and “We need to remember to listen to them more than we talk. It’s easy to forget and spend all our time talking about the Bill. But we need to hear their stories.”

One of the common challenges that Ambassadors faced is that many workers would talk with them and take the organization’s materials, thanking them for their work but saying that they don’t need to get involved because they have a “good employer.” The Ambassadors would often express frustration that these workers were focused on their own livelihoods and weren’t “looking out for their sisters who were less fortunate.” But Joyce, DWU’s staff organizer who had been doing organizational outreach for years, would remind them to keep the long-term view in mind, “Sometimes people don’t come right away, but if you plant the seeds now, the buds will develop later.” Often, women would keep the organization’s materials stored carefully in their apartments. When things went wrong with their supposedly “good employer,” they would call on the organization for support.

Over the course of the first year of the Ambassadors program, three effective models for workers education and enforcement developed. Educating individual worker about their rights and referring them to the organization’s legal services was the first important role that the Ambassadors program played. Doriel, a round-faced Barbadian nanny with a tentative smile, was one of the quietest but most persistent Ambassadors. She would stand on the street corners of the Upper West Side day after day, distributing Know Your Rights material to the Caribbean and
Latina woman she saw caring for the white children of that high-income neighborhood. She proudly shared a representative story,

   A girl called me the other day. I had talked with her a long time ago. She said, “Do you remember me? You gave me your number a long time ago. I have a problem now.” And I passed her on to the office to get legal help. She came to a membership meeting last week. Three women who I’ve talked to have gotten their cases solved. And that’s what it’s all about.

DWU’s legal clinic served a little over thirty workers in the year after the Bill of Rights. The most common issues that workers brought to the clinic were unpaid wages and unfair termination. In the process of documenting their stories, it also became clear that almost all the workers had also experienced overtime violations. The legal clinic resolved the majority of these cases through direct communication with the delinquent employers, sending the remaining complaints to the Department of Labor.

There are regularly struggles between leaders in the DWU, some of whom are concerned that workers who come in for services are “using” the organization and others of whom believe that part of the organization’s purpose is to provide services and that it is the members’ responsibility to walk the people who come in for services through the process of seeing the importance of political work and getting engaged. This model of grassroots worker education and legal service provision is common among independent worker centers that have focused on enforcing minimum standards among the low-wage immigrant workers who labor in informal industries (Fine 2006). Many of these organizations have struggled with the tension between the individualizing and potentially disempowering impacts of these much-needed legal services and their desire to promote collective forms of worker organizing (Gordon 2005).
There were other models of grassroots enforcement that developed through the Ambassadors program. Myrna played a role as an individual leader who helped to build local networks and promote neighborhood standards; this approach connected workers’ individual grievances with informal methods of collective enforcement. One shiny summer day, I sat with Myrna in a local park that was full with shouting children while parents and nannies fill the benches that line the park. She alternated between chatting with the multi-racial clique of Trinidadian nannies who are her core social network in the neighborhood and surveying the crowd, pointing out different workers and talking about their various issues.

You see those Tibetan girls over there? All the employers want to hire Tibetan women these days, because they’ll work for less money. You know, you come in the country and need the money, and there’s no negotiation. You just go right ahead, and you accept what these people say. You never ask them for a contract. You might have family over here or family over there, so you got to get the money and you take the abuse.

She pointed to a Caribbean woman on the other side of the park, “Last week, she was so proud. She told she was getting $600 a week. And I was like, ‘$600? How much hours you work?’ And it was 10 or 11 hours a day. I said, ‘Wow. Do you ever calculate how much that is per hour?’ It’s not that much, but they feel good about the $600 because it sounds like a lot of money.” Myrna kept an eye on the dynamics in the neighborhood, and she gave workers one-on-one support to help them understand the law and to encourage new workers to uphold the standards that workers had informally established in the neighborhood over time.

I’m the police down here. People tell other workers to talk to me if they have a problem. Even employers come and ask me for advice. Everybody tells new workers to come talk to me. New workers come in and take low wages at first. But they come and talk to me, and it gets better over time.

This informal approach to enforcement approach reflects historical strategies deployed by African American domestic workers in Washington DC and Atlanta in the late 1800’s. Drawing on their existent social networks, these workers would set informal policies for the industry by
boycotting abusive employers and setting an informal minimum wage that workers were expected to uphold in their individual negotiations. In so doing, they were able to, in the words of Tera Hunter (1997), “[transform] individual grievances into collective dissent.” Although still in a nascent stage, Myrna’s work suggested just this kind of transformation: building on the informal relationships between workers to offer a potential bridge between the advocacy needs of individual workers and the potential for more transformative worker-led organizing.

As the program developed, some Ambassadors started to experiment with different approaches to the work of base-building. Meches was one of the most motivated Ambassadors, bringing information about DWU wherever she went. When her employers decided to move, she lost her job as a nanny in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, and she lost regular contact with the domestic workers in that neighborhood. In the absence of a regular connection to a neighborhood with a high rate of domestic worker employment, Meches started to experiment with doing outreach in Sunset Park, a neighborhood where many Latina workers live. For several weeks, Meches walked around the area, approaching women on the street and talking to people at the local churches. She found that many of the domestic workers who lived in Sunset Park worked as housecleaners, giving her a connection to a different sector of the industry than DWU’s historically strong base among nannies. Because she was talking to workers away from their worksites in their own neighborhoods, Meches did not have to contend with workers’ fears about being seen talking to someone from DWU. The women she approached were quick to talk about their troubles: many of them were either unemployed or under-employed, and they often worked for wages for below the minimum. Meches, a natural community-builder, was quickly able to build relationships with a dozen women, and she decided to bring them together. Meches
turned to a friend of hers in the neighborhood, a Guatemalan woman who had turned part of her loft apartment into an informal community center for local residents. She agreed to let Meches use her space for regular meetings. From the group’s first meeting, the women built a strong bond, sharing their stories with each other. They talked about their struggles with unemployment and exploitation on the job, but they also moved beyond workplace issues to talk about immigration, their struggles with their husbands and their feelings of isolation in a city that felt anonymous and lonely. Meches reflected on these dialogues, “We can’t just deal with them as workers. They are women. They are immigrants. It’s all of it.” The group agreed to come together each month for meetings. The group came up with different ways to support each other: they developed flyers advertising their housecleaning services to post in neighborhoods around Brooklyn to help each other find work; they would meet each other in the Laundromat to chat while they washed their clothes; and they helped each other with childcare. Meches said, “They are so happy now. If one of them needs someone to pick her kid up from school, then someone else can help her. They love seeing each other on the street. They don’t feel alone anymore.” As the months went on, individual women started to advocate for their rights on the job with increased confidence. “There was one worker who felt empowered after meeting with other workers. So she approached her employer and asked her for a Metrocard, and she got it. So she increased her wages that way.”

The group grew organically, as the women brought their friends and as the meetings gained the support of the local church. A local priest who ran Spanish-language prayer groups around the city offered to help Meches spread the small group model around the city through his networks. The potential impact of this base-building model started to stir excitement inside of DWU,
particularly as it became clear that many Ambassadors were having a difficult time consistently integrating widespread outreach into their work-days and that it was hard to recruit convince workers to come to the organization’s monthly meeting in Brooklyn. DWU started to consider adapting the Ambassadors program to focus more on building locally based small groups rather than on broad outreach. “We are going to cover the whole city with small groups of DWU,” imagined one Ambassador during an evaluation meeting. DWU’s re-orientation away from public education towards outreach through social networks and localized group-building was still in development at the conclusion of my research, and it began to overlap with DWU’s emergent thinking on how to raise industry standards above the minimum. This process will be addressed in the next chapter.

Around the same time as this new model was emerging, Priscilla traveled to India and met with an organization of Indian sex workers which used a similar base-building model. There, workers were encouraged to bring a small group of their friends together for regular meetings that combined workers rights education and mutual support. Those workers were encouraged to, in turn, invite their friends to the next meeting. When a circle of workers grew to be larger than ten, it had to split in half and each circle of five workers would continue to grow through its social networks. This organic base-building model enabled this organization to grow its membership rapidly, into the thousands, while maintaining small enough units of membership so that the women could maintain a personal connection to and sense of ownership over their local meeting. Through their participation in international efforts to establish a Convention for Domestic Workers through the International Labor Organization, DWU members learned that a domestic workers union in Kenya, KUDEIHA, also deploys a similar organizing model. They divided
different urban areas up into units of 100 households, and they hold a local weekly meeting for workers in every unit. While union staff support these meetings, they are directly managed by workers who are also responsible for reaching out to other workers in their units. Each worker is expected to bring another worker to the meeting each week. This organizing model allowed KUDEIHA to grow from a membership of 15 in 2007 to more than 22,000 by 2012. The degree of similarity between these international experiments suggests that there are some emergent patterns within organizing among informal workers who are based in reproductive industries, patterns that will be explored more deeply in the conclusion to this chapter.

DWU’s Ambassadors program did not produce the kind of rapid growth that these international workers organizations experienced. In the first year, DWU was able to reach about 2,000 workers to inform them about their newly-won rights. While this was a significant expansion in the organization’s base-building capacity, it barely scratched the surface of the domestic workforce in the city, which DWU estimates to include approximately 200,000 workers. A significant amount of work remains to build the kind of reach that will be necessary to effectively enforce the Bill. While much work remains to be done to consolidate these new models and efforts, the underlying vision which DWU has developed provide some initial visions for the development of new approaches of building power among low-wage immigrant workers: bottom-up enforcement, geographically-based worker-led base-building work and the development of local worker organizations.
Learning From Domestic Workers United’s Enforcement Efforts

The inability of the Department of Labor to comprehensively enforce the Bill of Rights and DWU’s efforts to build an alternative enforcement apparatus provides us with a window into the past, present and future of labor regulation. The neoliberal project has hollowed out the state’s enforcement capacities and in so doing facilitated the growth of the informal economy. Its impacts have also exposed the limits of the historically established approach to enforcement and spurred new forms of organizing among workers in the informal economy. These new forms of organizing suggest alternative imaginaries for the reconfiguration of state labor enforcement and for more expansive approaches to worker organizing.

Although the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights represented a significant victory for the movement for domestic workers rights in the United States, the passage of the Bill did not assure that these new rights would become a practicable reality in workers lives. The non-implementation of the Bill of Rights indicates a gap in the enforcement capacity of the New York State Department of Labor, a gap that reveals yet another way in which the structures of contemporary worker rights and protections are out of step with current conditions. This non-alignment emerges from two sources: the out-dated and constraining New Deal-era assumptions on which current models of labor enforcement are built and the weakening of the labor inspectorate that has been driven by the neoliberal project.

The enforcement mechanisms that we have today were originally institutionalized through the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. Most other industrial nations at the time adopted a tri-partite approach to enforcement, in which the government, unions and employers negotiated over
standards and collaborated on enforcement efforts. Following this model, the original draft of the FLSA was built on an approach to enforcement that would have enabled unions to serve as partners in setting future wage and hour standards and in enforcement efforts. However, reflecting the pattern of a constraining approach to worker rights that was explored in the last chapter, the final version of the Act located all standard-setting powers in the hands of the legislature and placed enforcement powers in the hands of government agencies (O'Brien 2001). This limited workers’ organizations’ influence over the enforcement process, writing worker empowerment out of this crucial arena. However, this approach to enforcement was still able to function relatively well in the large and centralized public workplaces that characterized industrial production. These workplaces were accessible to state inspectors, enabling an efficient approach to enforcement, while unions played an active role in enforcing workplace standards through grievance procedures established through collective bargaining agreements.

Today, structural changes in the economy, specifically, the decentralization and informalization of work, have rendered current labor enforcement mechanisms ineffective for the domestic work industry as well as for many other workers. This historical mismatch has been exacerbated by the anti-labor policies that have been central to the neoliberal project in the United States. Funding for the labor inspectorate has been cut at the same time as the demand for enforcement has grown. As more and more groups of workers won inclusion in the protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the number of workers covered by minimum wage protections and who are therefore entitled to enforcement oversight has grown. Bernhardt, et al. (2007)) estimate that, since 1980, the number of federal workplace inspectors has declined by 14% percent while the number of workers to be covered grew by 55%. And since the 1980s, the proportion of those
workers who labor in low-wage industries, the primary group of workers that benefits from the
enforcement of minimum standards, has grown even more rapidly (Wial 1992). The
decentralization of work complicates this issue still further. Additionally, there have been a
series of court decisions that have limited immigrant workers’ rights in the workplace.
Workplace immigration raids over the last decades have instilled a legacy of fear, radically
reducing the likelihood that the undocumented workers who populate the nation’s low-wage
economies will approach government agencies to complain about rights violations (Gordon
2005).

This gap in the enforcement capacities of the state presented an immediate challenge to Domestic
Workers United, motivating them to develop a grassroots model of enforcement in order to
educate workers about their rights so that their hard-fought victory would make a material
difference in workers’ lives. Workers’ organizations around the country have come up against
this same challenge, and enforcement efforts are definitional to the organizing models of worker
centers, particularly “Know Your Rights” trainings, legal clinics and campaigns around wage
theft (Fine 2006). The need for this type of grassroots enforcement represents both a challenge
and an opportunity for workers’ organizations. On the one hand, it forces these organizations to
expend their limited resources and capacities on efforts that have historically been located in
state agencies, demonstrating one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism: the devolution of the state’s
social welfare functions into private hands (Harvey 2005). On the other hand, these gaps also
present some significant opportunities. These gaps in enforcement open the political space for
organizations to re-imagine and contest the limits of the current enforcement paradigm. DWU’s
relative success with grassroots worker education efforts and their ability to identify cases of
abuse through social networks suggests that workers’ organizations should be incorporated into enforcement processes and that they should be empowered and resourced to educate workers and employers and to identify cases of abuses. This reflects Fine and Gordon’s (2010) assertion that, “Worker centers and unions have access to information about sectors that are otherwise hard for the government to penetrate, knowledge about industry structures and the capacity to reach workers and document complicated cases” (575-576).

These efforts imply that simply increasing funding and adding more inspectors into the current regulatory regime would not be an adequate response to the changing structure and dynamics of contemporary workplaces. The regulatory regime must be reconfigured to empower workers organizations to participate directly in enforcement efforts. As Fine and Gordon (2010) argue, bottom-up efforts like DWU’s suggest the need to revive the “tri-partite” enforcement model that was cut from the original FLSA, in which workers’ organizations, employers and state agencies mutually conceptualize and carry out enforcement efforts. This kind of transformation of the regulatory regime would not only challenge the anti-labor aspects of the neoliberal agenda; it would push beyond the limiting political boundaries that were institutionalized into the framework of labor enforcement during the New Deal era.

In addition to the transformations of the regulatory regime that DWU’s enforcements suggest, they also point towards new imaginaries for paradigms of worker organizing that are better fit to contemporary conditions. One of the most central aspects of this new paradigm is a prioritization of worker leadership and bottom-up organizing. Domestic Workers United has been committed to direct worker leadership since its founding, and people who encounter the organization are
often moved by the power and clarity of its worker-leaders. Although DWU has always had paid staff organizers, DWU’s leaders play a central role in setting the direction for and carrying out the work of the organization. When the organization faced the new political imperative to conduct the large-scale outreach that would be necessary to effectively enforce the Bill of Rights in the year after the Bill of Rights, DWU took its commitment to worker leadership to a deeper level by training worker leaders to serve as Ambassadors. This commitment to worker leadership is a part of a broader trend towards rank-and-file worker leadership in the contemporary labor movement. This model harkens back to an earlier era of the union movement, when shop stewards were shop-floor militants who organized their fellow workers to use direct action to pressure management to address their grievances.

Some of this commitment to bottom-up worker-led leadership comes from the orientation of DWU’s staff members. As Brodkin (2007) and Fine (2006) have pointed out, the founding staff leaders of many worker centers, DWU included, came out of the identity-based social movements of the 1990s. Many are the first- and second-children of immigrant workers who have not themselves worked in the industries in which they organize. But their immigrant roots facilitate a strong commitment supporting the leadership of immigrant workers themselves. These patterns correlate with the backgrounds and political commitments of DWU’s leading staff members, Ai-jen and Priscilla, who are both children of immigrants. They both have deeply facilitative leadership styles, regularly deferring speaking opportunities to enable worker-leaders to have a public voice and encouraging DWU’s worker-members to take on significant leadership roles.
But another internal factor that does not often register in analyses of the origins of social justice unionism was the vision, ambitions and capacities of DWU’s worker-leaders themselves. As is true in many other worker centers (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005), several of DWU’s core member-leaders came to the organization with significant political experiences in their nations of origin; they had worked as shop stewards, political party organizers and more. They brought those experiences to bear in their political leadership at DWU. They both expected and demanded that those leadership capacities be respected and given space. Other women had worked as professionals in their nations of origin before migrating to the United States. The fact that their professional backgrounds are invisibilized in their new social positions as domestic workers in the United States is a constant source of frustration and humiliation for many workers, and many women articulated that Domestic Workers United was a space where they could practice those skills and demonstrate that they would not allow themselves to be defined by their current occupation alone. Many of DWU’s worker-leaders see DWU as a chance to remember and revitalize those aspects of their histories and to redeem their downward social mobility. The DWU leaders who were raised in more working class backgrounds in their nations of origins drew on those experiences as sources of motivation in their organizing efforts, and many of these workers saw the organization as a space where they could develop new capacities that had been denied them in the past because of limited educational opportunities.48

This prioritization of bottom-up worker leadership is also a response to the changing structure of work. The decentralization of work, of which domestic work is the most extreme expression, necessitates the development of more decentralized organizing methods. Without central

48 These dynamics are, of course, not without their complexities and contradictions; I will explore these issues more deeply in Chapter 10.
workplaces, it is no longer practicable for one or two paid union organizers to wait outside of the proverbial factory gates to reach workers. Worker organizers have turned to community institutions, social relationships and ethnic networks to reach workers. These avenues encourage the direct participation and leadership of workers themselves, since they have direct knowledge about these informal avenues and the legitimacy and relationships to access them effectively. I will now turn to an exploration of the ways in which these dynamics have also promoted the development of geographically based models of worker organizing and how these models offer to move beyond the limits of workplace based organizing.

*Organizing Beyond a Narrow Definition of the Workplace:* Lydia Savage (1998) has argued that, “Organizing strategies that were created for the manufacturing sector must change to take account of the different spatial arrangements (i.e. factory floor versus individual offices) and geographies of service workplaces” (226). DWU’s enforcement efforts represent one experiment that can help facilitate the development of this kind of spatially sensitive organizing model. Rather than collapsing into the long-standing assertion that domestic workers’ location in private homes and their lack of a shared workplace makes them “unorganizable,” Domestic Workers United responded to the unique structure of their industry by approaching the neighborhood rather than the workplace as the site for worker organization and developing a geographically-based model for worker organizing. Overcoming the mystification of the formal workplace as the only possible site for worker organization allowed DWU to identify other effective sites for reaching workers. Rather than going door-to-door to find workers in unmarked, private homes, DWU Ambassadors found nannies where they gathered while on the job: in the parks and playgrounds, in the museums and the libraries. By working within these spaces where one sub-
sector of domestic workers build collectivity and mutual support, DWU demonstrated its grounded understanding of the structure and dynamics of the industry. This knowledge allowed them to effectively reach unorganized workers, to build avenues to connect workers with legal advocacy in order to help enforce the new law and to begin to build informal enforcement networks among workers in different neighborhoods.

Similarly, the singular experiment with residential neighborhood organizing in Sunset Park revealed another method for reaching other sectors of domestic workers. The assumption that workers gathered in public spaces with the children in their care only applied to nannies, not to housecleaners or elder care providers. These workers tend to labor with a greater degree of isolation, since the dynamics of their work do not facilitate building community in public spaces while on the job. Many of these workers struggle with isolation on the job, an experience expressed by many of the women in Sunset Park. When they build community and mutual support in their residential neighborhoods, they tend to do so through their churches and through social networks (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). To the extent that they already exist, these social support networks can serve as potential sites through which worker-organizers can identify and reach workers. The experience in Sunset Park demonstrates that, to the extent that those support networks do not exist, workers organizations can provide a much-needed service to workers by helping to build them and, in so doing, contribute to the process of building both community and collective power. All of these experiences suggest that, for domestic workers, the “workplace” transcends the formal worksite of the home and extends into the broader community in which they are employed and into the metropolitan regions in which they live. The labor of reproduction is not conducted in presumptively private spaces alone; it is conducted, at least in
part, in public space. This, in turn, suggests that, while the labor of reproduction has historically been treated as private, it is fundamentally a social phenomenon, reflecting a long-standing assertion of feminist scholars. Challenging the ideologically-crafted conceptualization that the work of reproduction happens only in the home opens up new political possibilities for the organization of reproductive workers and for the more equitable re-organization of reproductive labor. These implications will be explored more deeply in the following chapter.

In addition to challenging a narrow conceptualization of the workplace and providing more effective sites for worker outreach, the Ambassadors program highlighted another spatial dynamic in the industry: the geographical stratifications of the industry. The lack of established standards and the absence of effective regulation mean that there is a significant degree of variation in the conditions that worker face between different households within a given neighborhood. But the experience of the DWU Ambassadors implies that there is a more generalizable stratification between the conditions facing workers who work in higher-income neighborhoods like Tribeca and Park Slope and those in more middle-income neighborhoods like Midwood. The primary enforcement issues that these workers face are different, for example, the need to enforce the minimum wage in more middle-income neighborhoods as opposed to the need to enforce overtime protections in higher-income neighborhoods. This has significant implications for organizing efforts. While workers in more affluent neighborhoods like Park Slope may be able to engage in relatively friendly negotiations with sympathetic groups of employers who have a degree of economic latitude, this may not be an effective model for organizing in lower-income neighborhoods. These distinctions helped to shape DWU’s
exploratory thinking about developing a modified form of neighborhood-based collective bargaining, which will also be explored in the next chapter.

By attending to the particular spatial organization of the domestic work industry, Domestic Workers United began the process of developing a model that was effective for its presumptively unorganizable industry. Specifically, they moved beyond the formal workplace to treat public space and social networks as crucial sites in the labor process, and they acknowledged the geographical stratifications within the domestic work industry. In so doing, they contributed towards the development of new spatially sensitive paradigms of workers organizing that can respond to the structural and geographic re-organization of labor. While the exact method of organizing may not be replicable in other service industries or other decentralized industries, the social and spatial sensitivity that DWU’s model reflects must be replicated in other organizing efforts if they are to succeed in developing historically relevant models for organizing workers in the new economy.  

Taken together, these trends suggest that the conditions and dynamics that have been facilitated by the advance of the neoliberal project, specifically the weakening of the state’s enforcement capacities, the growth of immigrant workforces and the decentralization of work, are pushing worker organizers to challenge the factory paradigms of worker organizing and labor regulation that developed over the course of the 20th century. These pressures have encouraged the development of more inclusive approaches to labor enforcement as well as bottom-up

49 Attention to the spatial variations in the treatment of domestic work and the strategies which workers develop to contest those varying conditions could also provide valuable insights into the scholars who examine the spatial dynamics of labor and workers organization (Herod 1998) particularly since much of this work has focused on the spatial organization of formally productive labor rather than on the organization of reproductive labor.
approaches to worker organizing. They have brought new political resources to bear to worker
organizing in the United States, specifically the significant political resources that immigrant
workers bring from their home nation to their current struggles in the United States. They have
necessitated the decentralization of worker organizing and the development of models that
transcend the limits of narrowly defined workplace-based organizing. Thus, the neoliberal
project has done much that is destructive: tearing apart the historically established social safety
net and undermining traditional models of worker power. But it has also led to the formation of
new political actors, new organizing methodologies and new political imaginaries that have the
potential to both contest the neoliberal agenda and also to challenge longer-standing inequalities
and political constraints.
CHAPTER 8: “This is Only the Beginning:” Domestic Workers Forge New Paths to Raise Working Standards Above the Minimum

At the same time as Domestic Workers United was working to build up its capacity to enforce the minimum standards that they had won through the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, they were also working to develop a vision for improving standards in the industry beyond the legally-mandated minimum. During one of the muggiest days of July, DWU members met at a newly renovated playground in Park Slope; they were there to survey domestic workers to learn their hopes for raising standards in the domestic work industry and to see their reactions to different strategies for winning those changes. Park Slope is a high-income neighborhood in Brooklyn that is known both for its progressive orientation and for being family-friendly. Its streets are constantly filled with parents and nannies pushing strollers and walking with toddlers. There are dozens of quirky businesses offering services like baby yoga classes and stylish stores selling organic children’s clothes and artisanally produced toys. It is both a neighborhood with a high rate of employment of nannies and one with relatively good working standards; most employers in Park Slope report that they pay workers above the minimum wage and offer benefits like paid vacation. Because it is a neighborhood where nannies are more likely to already have access to the legally established minimum standards, it was a good site for DWU to investigate the possibility of building a campaign for winning higher standards.

At the playground, children in bathing suits ran screaming through the sprinklers, while other kids chased each other around the steamy jumble of swing sets and monkey bars. The benches that lined the edges of the park were filled with parents and nannies, grouped together largely along racial lines. The women were seeking a bit of shade and refuge from the summer heat,
chatting with each other as they kept their eyes on the children running around the playground. The survey team approached the small groups of Caribbean, Latina and Nepali women that sat together around the edges of the park, asking if they were nannies and if they’d be willing to answer a few questions to help Domestic Workers United to be more effective in its work. I sat with a Mexicana nanny from DWU as she spoke with a striking woman from Trinidad with long locks piled high on her head. They walked through the survey, which started with questions about wages and benefits. As the survey moved on to complicated questions about effective strategies for improving the industry, the Trinidadian woman took the survey out of the DWU member’s hands and started reading the questions out loud herself and then giving her answers. When she got to the section of the survey that explored different strategies for improving conditions in the industry, she read out, “Negotiating a contract together.” She shook her head, and said, “Oh no, that would be a terrible idea. It would be so much worse than what I get right now.” The DWU member asked how she negotiated her contract. She said, “I know what I’m doing. I don’t let them push me around. I know my rights, and I know what I’m worth. When they asked me what my rate was, I looked them in the eye and told them. That let them know I was a professional, and they respected that.” She paused reflectively, and then complicated her answer a bit, “The negotiation did not end there; it never does. They’re always trying to change my hours because something comes up for them. But I know how to stand my ground. If they want me to work extra hours, they need to warn me in advance and they need to pay me well for my time. I used to work for less. I didn’t know any better.” She gestures around the playground as she says, “I see some of these new girls come in, and they don’t know how to get what they’re worth. They let the employers push them around; they let them make them work on their knees. You need to know how to tell them that’s not acceptable. You need to know your worth.”
Conversations like these happened again and again as the leaders of Domestic Workers United turned to the question of how to raise standards in the industry. Workers’ voiced a belief in the effectiveness of the individualized strategies that they deployed to improve their standing in an industry characterized by decentralized employment, personalized relationships and informal bargaining. While these strategies have proven effective for many individual domestic workers, they leave broad strokes of the power dynamics in the industry intact; they allow employers to play on workers’ fears and vulnerabilities and to encourage a sense of competition between workers. The leaders of Domestic Workers United believed that more formally collectivized strategies would be necessary to raise standards in the industry as a whole. But they found themselves once again face-to-face with the same strategic quandary that had been so important in the campaign for the Bill of Rights: Would it be more effective to organize to raise standards for domestic workers by pushing against the historically prescribed limits to legislatively-established employment rights, engaging in campaigns to convince the state legislature to establish a living wage for domestic workers or to mandate paid sick days for all workers in New York? Or would it be more effective to put their energies into workplace-based organizing, developing a modified form of collective bargaining that could actually work for the domestic work industry? Both paths would be uphill journeys, requiring a great deal of political ingenuity and a much greater capacity to exercise power.

In this chapter, I will explore DWU’s efforts to develop strategies that would enable them to raise standards above the minimum, and I will argue that the location of the domestic work industry in the gendered sphere of reproductive labor is the definitional structural condition that
has forced domestic worker organizers to develop new models for worker organizing. As has been well-explored in earlier chapters, the factory paradigm of worker organizing does not correlate with the structure and dynamics of the domestic work industry. The factory paradigm has a strong emphasis on the formal workplace as the proper site for worker organizing, and it was based on the assumption that the concentration of a large number of workers in a centralized workplace provided the basis of worker power (Cobble 2010). When we look at the labor of domestic workers through a lens which assumes its restriction to the level of the individual workplace and the private home, what comes into view are the impact of workers’ labor on the individual family, constraining power dynamics that play out in highly personalized relationships between workers and employers, and limited possibilities for worker organizing or worker power.

But when we lift out of a strict focus on the private home and place these workers’ labor in its social context, new things come into view: the broader social impact of reproductive labor, a brewing social crisis over the re-organization of reproductive labor and an expanded potential basis for collective worker power. In the year after the Bill of Rights, Domestic Workers United considered three broader terrains on which to struggle; they considered collective bargaining at the level of the neighborhood, the exercise of collective worker power at the level of the urban and advocating for expansive social legislation at the federal level. All of these experiments suggest that domestic workers will only be able to raise standards above the legally-established minimum if they move beyond the scale of the individual workplace and engage in organizing at a larger scale.
In order to explore the implications of these experiments in worker organizing, I will draw inspiration from geographical approaches to analyzing “scales” and on the political impact of “jumping scales.” A scalar approach is helpful because it helps to analyze the formal workplace of domestic labor, the private household, in relationship to other “scales” of social organization such as the neighborhood, the urban and the national (Smith 1992), thus supporting the development of a clearer analysis about the range of scales at which reproductive labor functions (Marston 2000; Marston and Smith 2001; Smith 1992). It also encourages us to attend to the ways in which political actors may “jump scale” in order to open up new political possibilities (Smith 1992). This approach provides a framework to analyze DWU’s strategic decision to move beyond the scale of the individual workplace and the home to struggles on the terrain of the neighborhood, the urban and the national. But it also encourages us to analyze this move as more than a tactical response to the structural challenges that domestic work presents to worker organizing; it encourages us to see that it is also a broader political challenge to the social construction of reproductive labor in the United States.

This chapter will begin with a summation of the New York State Department of Labor’s report on the feasibility of collective bargaining for domestic workers in order to clarify the structural challenges that domestic workers face in exercising this standard channel for worker organizing. It will then describe Domestic Workers United’s process of imagining and experimenting with alternative methods to win higher standards. While it would be impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about the most effective paths forward, these exploratory processes do highlight some of the ways in which political, economic and social transitions are necessitating the development of a new framework for worker rights, and they offer some interesting insights into
the changing nature of worker power. I will conclude the chapter with reflections on the implications of DWU’s experiments in scale-jumping for broader social struggles over the nature and organization of reproductive labor.

**The Department of Labor Considers Collective Bargaining**

As I described in Chapter 6, the New York State legislature included a provision in the final version of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights requiring the state Department of Labor to conduct a study on the feasibility of collective bargaining for the industry. That study was intended to shape the legislature’s future approach to standards-setting in the domestic work industry, influencing whether they would pass new legislation including domestic workers in collective bargaining rights or if they would reconsider the possibility of expanding state protections beyond the standard minimum. The Department of Labor completed its study on the practicability of collective bargaining for the domestic work industry, titled *Feasibility of Domestic Worker Collective Bargaining (2010)*, in the months after the Bill of Rights passed. That report recommended including domestic workers in the right to collective bargaining in New York State. But it also clearly acknowledged that it would be difficult for domestic workers to utilize the established framework of collective bargaining and that it would take significant innovations in both organizing methodologies and administrative frameworks to make it at all practicable for the industry. I will briefly review the structural challenges highlighted by the report.

It was clear to the Department that the challenges facing domestic worker collective bargaining were not just cosmetic or administrative; they were historical and structural. This historical mismatch was captured in the report,
At the time of their enactment, the NLRA and SERA were designed to address the labor relations needs of predominant industries of their era, such as manufacturing and construction. The domestic worker industry does not readily fit into the traditional organizing framework established under these laws.

As described in Chapter 6, the established framework of collective bargaining assumes long-term employment in a large public workplace, a context that enables workers to exercise their collective power vis-à-vis their common employer. The feasibility report recognized that these assumptions do not hold for domestic work, naming a number of additional challenges confronting the practicality of bargaining for the industry: the intimate nature of domestic employment which would complicate legalistic bargaining processes; the difficulty of exerting collective power when workers labor in individual workplaces; the limits of the states’ power to intervene in the homes and personal finances of employers; the fact that employers incomes are relatively inflexible; and the informal and underground nature of large sectors of the industry.

But the primary challenge with which the report grappled was the legal and political difficulty of determining whether domestic workers should be legally empowered to bargain with their individual employers or with groups of employers. The Department suggested that individual bargaining would be both ineffective in improving the conditions of domestic workers and administratively impracticable. From an administrative standpoint, the state labor board would face similar challenges to those facing the Department of Labor in enforcing domestic workers rights in thousands of different homes; the report stated that the State Labor Relations Board would not have the capacity to manage thousands of individual contracts. And from a worker organizing standpoint, individual contract negotiations would leave workers at the same risk of exposure and alienation from their employers that they already faced. Formalizing those contract
negotiations would not significantly improve the standing of domestic workers in their bargaining processes.

The other bargaining pathway that the report considered was the formation of “multi-employer” bargaining units with which workers could collectively negotiate contracts. The report noted a huge stumbling block in the way of this strategy, “Most domestic employers likely would not agree to voluntary recognition of the unit and agent, and it may be impossible under SERA to compel the unwilling employer to collectively bargain.” Because the State Employment Relations Act does not empower the state to compel individual employers to join these types of multi-employer units, this strategy would be limited to employers who would voluntarily come together and form an employers’ association to engage in collective bargaining with a group of domestic workers. The Department of Labor considered a number of reasons why employers would voluntarily elect to participate in bargaining: to avoid the often-awkward process of individual negotiations between people with intimate personal relationships, to access more professionalized and highly trained workers or to access more cost-effective systems for managing the employment of domestic worker like collective book-keeping or health insurance programs. But the Department reflected that voluntary employers’ associations would still only be likely to attract employers who were both relatively wealthy and sympathetic to workers’ issues. As a result, the benefits of collective bargaining likely only reach domestic workers at the upper tiers of the industry.

But regardless of these structural challenges, the Department reflected that, “Although organizing domestic workers does not fit conventional approaches to union organizing, it is
possible for domestic workers to form unions and bargain collectively by creating a legal structure as part of [the State Employment Relations Act].” The Department recommended that the legislature pass a new law that would eliminate the exclusions for domestic workers and that it consider amending the State Employment Relations Act to allow for the formation of multi-employer units. They argued that this would create political space for worker organizations to experiment with innovative approaches that could provide the foundation for future, more detailed legislation. The report concluded by saying,

At this time, although it is unclear which approach to organizing will emerge as the most effective strategy, including domestic workers within SERA’s coverage provides the opportunity for domestic workers and employers to begin the process of exploring these various approaches in an effort to ultimately achieve more harmonious labor relations. Both domestic workers and their employers must determine their best form of organization.

Closing the report with this frame demonstrates a remarkable degree of admission that the government lacked the ability to develop or implement a model of collective bargaining that would be effective for the industry. The amendments that the report proposes did not make their way to the legislative floor, but Domestic Workers United still responded to the challenge of “determining their best form of organization” by beginning a process of exploring new approaches to organizing workers and employers for informal bargaining.

From the Home to the Neighborhood: Experiments in Collective Bargaining

Organizing Workers for Bargaining: While the Department of Labor report primarily reflected on the difficulty of organizing employers, Domestic Workers United knew that there would also be significant challenges organizing workers for collective bargaining. Specifically, they would have to contend with the dynamics expressed in the story that opened this chapter: the ways in which workers’ isolation into individual workplaces and the stratified nature of the domestic
work industry shaped workers’ perspectives on collective bargaining. These dynamics encourage workers to view individual contract negotiations as the most effective route for improving their wages and working conditions. As I explored in Chapter 3, many workers have developed individual strategies for getting better contracts from their individual employers including professional certification, referral cultivation and effective negotiation strategies. Workers who have been in the industry for many years have lived through the process of working their way up the informal career ladder in the industry, and many express a simultaneous pride in their individual progress and a fear of having their gains undercut by newer workers who are willing to work for less.

Although domestic workers have informally collectivized these individualized strategies through their social networks, their successful deployment of these individualized strategies may cut against more formally collective strategies like unionization and collective bargaining. Workers, who are rightfully proud of their personal advancement and their strong individual contracts, often believe that collective contracts would be less generous than the contracts that they have negotiated individually. Even though the intent of these collective contracts would be to provide a floor on which workers could individually negotiate for better conditions, many workers believe that they would instead serve as a ceiling for the industry. ⁵⁰ And, in the absence of stories in which collective contracts have improved conditions in the industry, there is no concrete

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⁵⁰ This strategic direction is further complicated by the fact that workers have widely variant individual histories of work and class in their nations of origin, which can influence their orientation towards worker organizing and collective action in the United States. A worker who served as a shop steward in her factory’s union in Barbados is likely to have a different orientation to collective worker action than a woman who was a small business owner from Chile, though - as will be explored in the following chapter on the transnational dynamics of class - these dynamics and trajectories are contingent and dynamic. Finally, many workers have challenging experiences with unions - both in their nations of origin and in the United States - which make them less likely to support strategies that have the flavor of union organizing models.
evidence to the contrary. But the leaders of Domestic Workers United still believed that the broader standards in the industry would not improve significantly unless workers engaged in collective processes for change. They knew it would take creative thinking to develop an approach that addressed workers’ lived experiences with individual negotiations in the industry.

In particular, DWU’s leaders knew they would have to address the dynamic had been clarified through the Ambassadors Programs: that, while there are significant variations in the working conditions that domestic workers experience within neighborhoods, the variations *between* neighborhoods shape the broader patterns of stratification in the industry. DWU knew that any initial attempts to organize workers for collective bargaining would have to consider the informal standards that had been established in different neighborhoods. Their initial instinct was that a city-wide approach to bargaining would not be able to address the interests of workers who labor in different neighborhoods. A contract that would significantly improve the wages and working conditions of workers in lower-income areas would set a floor far below what workers in higher-income areas expected as a matter of course. The organization concluded that, if workers had more similarities of experience *within* neighborhoods than *between* them, then the organization could build neighborhood-based units through which workers could build collective power in order to shape local community standards.

DWU used the *New Day, New Standard* Convention as a site for exploring the implications of this geographic stratification on their visions for collective bargaining. At the Convention, Priscilla led a process of gathering workers into small groups based on the neighborhoods where they worked. She said,
Now there are some basic minimum rights in the law. But we know that’s not enough, and we are just getting started. We need more. That’s what we’re here to talk about today. Let’s take today to let our imaginations soar. This is a moment for us to really imagine and dream big. Today, we want to ask you to sit at the table with the name of the neighborhood where you work. In order to build the power we need to improve conditions in the industry, we need to build relationships and support each other where we work, and we need to have a shared vision so we can sit down and have dialogues with employers in our areas. So we want you to talk about the conditions in the neighborhood where you work. What are the problems? What are the main improvements you want to see?

The workers at the Convention chatted excitedly as they sorted themselves out into the different tables, slowly shaping themselves into a human map of the domestic work industry in New York City. Once seated, they started to share their experiences with their jobs and their hopes for improving conditions. Looking around the room, you could see women sighing and shaking their heads as too-familiar stories of disrespect and material hardship echoed again and again. But you could also see glimmers of excitement, heads nodding, eyes sparking and smiles spreading across workers’ faces, as the women at the tables started to envision the demands they’d like to make on the employers in their neighborhoods. Each table reported back to the Convention body, surfacing many common themes that transcended neighborhood boundaries. Group after group said that workers in their neighborhoods did not know about the Bill of Rights, and that its basic provisions were not being enforced. Unemployment and the need for health insurance resonated across neighborhoods. Group after group shared their daily experiences with difficult communication and disrespect from employers, some struggling to maintain clear boundaries between the duties of childcare and housecleaning and others struggling against humiliating working conditions. One Latina worker who worked in the suburbs of Long Islands shared a familiar story, “They force us to work on our knees without gloves, with our bare knees on the floor.”
But there were also significant differences facing workers in different areas of the city. All of the small groups shared that their wages were too low, but that meant different things to different workers. The live-in workers who labored in the suburbs and the lower-income neighborhoods of Brooklyn earned sub-minimum wages while the live-out workers in the more affluent parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn wanted to advocate for a living wage. Similarly, all of the groups said that workers in their neighborhoods did not receive overtime, but this was less of a concern to the lower-waged workers who were not even receiving the minimum wage. These differences could present serious challenges to an organization working to advance shared struggle between domestic workers, leading to unproductive struggles over priorities and effective strategies.

But DWU provided a solution to this potential for fragmentation by identifying the neighborhood as a site for standard-setting. Priscilla encouraged the workers at the Convention to imagine a modified approach to bargaining in which workers in various neighborhoods would identify shared baseline demands and develop collective strategies to turn those demands into reality.

What if we could take our negotiations - about out employment terms, our wages and benefits - out of the individual household and make them a collective community discussion? Can you imagine having a signed contract that actually contained benefits like health care? What if we got together in our neighborhoods and said, for example, that no domestic worker on the Upper West Side is going to work for less than $15 or $20 an hour, no matter what language you speak, no matter what your status is.

The women in the room burst into rowdy applause, and one worker called out, “This is only the beginning!” While this model is still incredibly nascent, existing more in the hopeful imaginary than in hard reality, it suggests the possibility of re-imagining collective bargaining in ways that speak to the conditions of the domestic work industry, shifting the site of bargaining from the workplace to the community in which the workplace is located.
Organizing Employers for Bargaining: At the same time as they were working to develop a relevant model for organizing workers to participate in informal bargaining efforts, the leaders of Domestic Workers United were also grappling with the challenge of engaging employers for bargaining. DWU turned to its allied organization, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), to partner in the process of developing an effective mechanism for organizing employers. JFREJ focused most of its efforts on working with individual progressive employers and with sympathetic congregations and organizations to set a bar of “community standards” that would be higher than the legal minimum established through the Bill of Rights. Once they established this higher bar, they would work to promote those standards through employers’ social networks.

Mirroring DWU’s dialogues with workers in Park Slope, JFREJ also chose to locate its first experiment with employer organizing for higher standards in this progressive Brooklyn neighborhood. They chose Park Slope for several reasons. On a practical level, it was the neighborhood in which most of JFREJ’s employer members lived. On a more strategic level, because the neighborhood already had relatively high working standards, they felt that a success in Park Slope could offer an ideal high-road model for employer organizing in other neighborhoods in New York City. JFREJ’s Community Organizer, Rachel, a young Jewish woman with a calming presence, who was herself raised by a domestic worker in Brooklyn, described the process of organizing progressive employers,

We brought together fifteen employers for dialogue to develop a two-page document called the “Code of Care,” modeled after codes of conduct, that we will use to organize employers. Codes of conduct are often used in labor negotiations as a step that leads up to the eventual signing of a formal contract in a workplace.
Building on the collaborative model of the Bill of Rights campaign, this Code of Care was intended to articulate the ways in which employers and workers have a shared interest in raising standards in the industry. Drafting the Code of Care was a process of opening up difficult conversations and excavating the often-fraught relationships between workers and employers.

Rachel described this process of dialogue,

> We asked employers questions that they’ve never been forced to answer. Like ‘How do you benefit from having a worker in your home? What are your hopes for that relationship? What do you think that you - as an employer - should not expect from the worker that works in your home?’ For example, she is not your “best friend” or a “member of your family” who you expect to work 80 hours a week for no additional pay.

Rachel worked with these employers to explore the costs and benefits of providing decent working standards,

> We asked them, “What sacrifices would you have to make to ensure that the worker that you employ will be guaranteed ten paid sick days a year?” If a worker takes a sick day, the employer will need to be able to accept the she or he needs to make that kind of sacrifice, too. At the same time, we ask them to reflect on, “How do you benefit from your worker having paid sick days?” Workers need to be healthy if they are going to provide quality care, and it’s not in the interest of the family to have sick worker caring for your child.

Employers’ responses formed the basis of the Code of Care. In contrast to the material interests that the Department Labor emphasized in its report, like the desire to reduce expenses through shared health care plans, JFREJ’s Code of Care emphasized moral and emotional interests.

> We believe that domestic employers and workers have a shared interest in an employer-employee relationship that is fair, respectful, and mutually beneficial. We want peace of mind when we leave our homes, and we know that a healthy, rested, and focused employee provides high-quality care for our children. Therefore, we are committed to providing decent workplace standards for domestic workers. These standards will establish a trusting partnership, with clear expectations for both employer and employee.

They also spoke to broader principles of fairness and reciprocity.

> We recognize that their work makes it possible for us to work, for our families to lead lives that are safer, fuller, and easier, and for our children to flourish. We want to ensure that we also enable our employees to live the full lives that we expect for
ourselves.....These arrangements are similar to those we seek when we take a job ourselves.

This moral framing is only half of the Code, which also includes a list of concrete standards to improve conditions in the industry, including paid vacation, notice of termination, a living wage and many of the other provisions that were cut from the Bill of Rights. Rachel described these standards as “lines in the sand,” drawn to “see what we can get employers to commit to and to start implementing in their homes.”

JFREJ intends to leverage the personal relationships of its members and the social influence of supportive synagogues and public officials to convince hundreds of employers in Park Slope to publicly commit to these standards. As a part of this organizing process, JFREJ and DWU plan to organize a series of “kitchen table dialogues” that would bring together employers and workers in more intimate settings. Priscilla Gonzalez described these dialogues,

> We want to bring workers and employers together to talk about what’s difficult in the employment relationship, to learn about the history of the domestic work industry in the United States, and to brainstorm together about agreements to improve the industry that would be of mutual benefit to both workers and employers.

The hope is that these dialogues and the Code of Care will establish these higher standards as the baseline norm for the neighborhood through localized relationship-building and social pressure. Once this community-based approach to setting standards in the industry has been tested in Park Slope, DWU and JFREJ hope it will either provide a “high-road” model for raising standards in the industry through social networks or that it will provide a prototype for constructing a more formal legal mechanism for collective bargaining, which can then be vetted through the Department of Labor and the New York State legislature.
The political assumptions that underlie this approach to organizing employers are clearly reflective of the caring sub-sectors of the industry, appealing to the moral and emotional aspects of employment relationship in the intimate realms of child care and elder care. It is not clear if it would be an effective model for influencing the employers of housecleaners, a sub-sector of the industry that is less impacted by questions of morality and intimacy. The differences between these sub-sectors change the basis on which it would be possible to build shared self-interest in good working conditions. Even in the caring sub-sectors for which this approach is likely to be more effective, there are innumerable questions and challenges within this model: How far can this kind of “shared interest” go? Can it push beyond the enforcement of minimum standards? How many employers would be willing to join such a collective? Will the majority of domestic workers in Park Slope support the idea of establishing baseline community standards, or will the tendency towards individual contract negotiation cut against these kinds of community standards? What are the mechanisms for enforcement of raised standards? Is this model replicable in neighborhoods without Park Slope’s affluence and liberal reputation?

These questions remain to be answered through experience, but DWU’s experimental efforts to raise standards in neighborhoods around the city through building relationships and dialogue between workers and JFREJ’s employer organizing represent an effort to move beyond the narrow and often very private channels through which standards in the industry are negotiated. Workers often tap into their social networks to determine average wage rates and benefits packages. Employers also tap into their social networks to try to determine the going rates for nannies, or they turn to online forums, like the Park Slope Parents website, with questions like, “Do I have to pay my nanny when we go on vacation?” These informally established standards
are then solidified through individual contracts. By breaking this process open, JFREJ and DWU are hoping to shift the standard-setting from the scale of the private home and the social network to the scale of the broader community.

There are many broader lessons to be drawn out of these experiments and dialogues. The decentralized and intimate nature of domestic employment and the lack of an identifiable central employer make it difficult to conceptualize deploying the formalized process of collective bargaining. In order to deal with these challenges, Domestic Workers United made a strategic turn towards geographically based experiments with bargaining. Domestic Workers United decided to build on one of the extent centralizing structures in the industry: the informal social networks that enable workers and employers, respectively, to assess the average terms of employment in given neighborhoods. Domestic Workers United experimented with bringing these informal conversations into a public dialogue: initiating conversations among workers to discuss bottom-line standards for different neighborhoods, bringing workers and employers together for dialogues about conditions in the industry and encouraging explicit discussions among employers towards establishing community-level standards. Formalizing those previously informal processes helps to challenge the mystification of reproductive labor as a private function that belongs only in the realm of the private family. This approach helps to reveal the social nature of reproductive labor, for example, the fact that employers and workers draw on social networks to set the terms of employment and that the terms of employment do not just vary between families but also between neighborhoods. It begins to imply that the problems in the industry cannot be solved through individual negotiations between workers and employers in separate workplaces; they are social problems that can only be effectively addressed at the social
level. While it remains unclear how strong of a collective “contract” could be negotiated on this basis or whether it would be enforced through innovative legal means or through social pressure, this strategy represents an attempt to transition domestic employment negotiations out of the hidden realm of the private family and to make them a public dialogue about community standards. We can expect these kinds of contestations to grow as the commodification of reproductive labor continues to advance.

Shifting the site of their struggle from the private home to the neighborhood represents one scale-jumping response to the limitations of the collective bargaining framework that came to shape worker organizing in the last century. This adapted bargaining strategy may, in turn, increase the pressure on the state to both expand its authority to intervene into the working conditions in private homes and to increase its support for social reproduction. It is to this struggle to connect workers issues with the expansion of the social safety net that I will now turn.

**From the Workplace to the State: Renegotiating the Social Contract**

Even as it attempted to clear a pathway for the possible exercise of a modified form of collective bargaining in the domestic work industry, Domestic Workers United did not foreclose the possibility of returning to fight on the terrain of state policy in order to push the limits of the law. There were several pieces of state-level legislation that DWU considered introducing to the legislature in the year after the Bill of Rights, primarily bills that would place the provisions that had been cut from the Bill of Rights back on the legislative table. The organization’s leaders felt like they had a good chance of winning a modified form of notice of termination and severance for nannies. As I described earlier, during the Bill of Rights campaign, legislators had objected to
the notice of termination, arguing that it would prevent parents from acting on their instincts if they felt something was potentially dangerous about a nanny. DWU considered introducing legislation that would allow employers to immediately dismiss workers, but that would require employers to pay severance to compensate for the lack of notice. This approach would have addressed both the concerns around parental authority and workers rights. DWU also supported existent statewide legislative campaigns that focused on lifting standards for all workers, including campaigns to win paid sick days and to raise the state minimum wage from $7.25 to $8.50.

But the organization’s more significant legislative efforts to expand workers rights and protections in the year after the Bill of Rights took place at the national rather than the state level, through the initiative of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). The Bill of Rights victory gave the entire domestic workers’ rights movement a boost, demonstrating that domestic workers did indeed have the capacity to organize and win victories that many had considered to be impossible. Drawing on this momentum, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, led by DWU’s former lead organizer, Ai-jen, initiated a national-level campaign called “Caring Across Generations,” which addresses the challenges faces the growing numbers of domestic workers who are working as caregivers for the elderly and for people with disabilities. During its national congresses, the leaders of the Alliance realized that more and more of their members were either being required to integrate caring for the aging parents of their employers into their jobs as nannies and housecleaners or they were taking full-time jobs as in-home care providers for the elderly. This led them to reflect on the potential impact of the coming “age wave,” the fact that, as the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement age, the United States is
going to see a rapid increase in the number of elderly people in need of long-term care. There is not currently an adequate infrastructure of care to meet the needs of this growing population: few families are able to provide full-time care on their own, and government programs are not adequate to respond to these growing pressures. The national alliance assessed that, if left unaddressed, this gap between the need for care and the availability of care could develop into a widespread social crisis. If current trajectories hold, the gap between the cost of quality care and the limited resources that seniors have to pay for their care will be filled through the deterioration of care for the aging and the further degradation of wages and working conditions in the care industries, like facility-based long-term care, home health care and privately-funded domestic workers.

Instead of struggling within the pre-given terrain of politics, in which care workers who are advocating for higher wages and better working conditions are pitted against seniors and people with disabilities who are struggling with limited resources, the national alliance worked to develop a more expansive model. That model was largely drawn from the Bill of Rights campaign, in which workers joined together with employers, the children who were being raised by nannies and the adult children of domestic workers in order to advance their shared vision. Reflecting this model of cross-class solidarity, the Caring Across Generations campaign brought together an unlikely alliance of constituencies: domestic workers, home care workers, people with disabilities, seniors and their families. The coalition worked out an integrated platform that advances workers’ interests by calling on the federal government to fund the development of two million new quality jobs in the long-term care industry and to ensure that these new workers will have the right to unionize, that they will have access to a career ladder and that undocumented
immigrant care workers will be given a path to legalization. At the same time, the policy platform also addresses the interests of seniors and people with disabilities by calling for expanded state subsidies for people in need of long-term care and by requiring in-depth job training to ensure the provision of quality care. Even though its policy platform spoke to the issues of all these different constituencies, the Alliance knew that it would be difficult to hold its coalition together based on a policy agenda or abstract notions of solidarity. In order to establish a foundation for their joint work, the Caring Across Generations campaign was launched through a series of regional “Care Congresses,” designed to bring domestic workers and home healthcare workers together with seniors and people with disabilities in order to build one-on-one relationships across their different experiences.

Domestic Workers United played a central role in the New York City Care Congress, which took place in the cavernous gymnasium at Pace University, which stands between City Hall and the Brooklyn Bridge in lower Manhattan. More than five hundred participants came to the Congress, and they were seated around tables in mixed groups that included care workers, employers and advocates. The Congress was organized in order to build support for the Caring Across Generations policy agenda, but the day was not defined by the hard details of statistics and legislative strategies. Instead, reflecting the model that DWU had developed in the Bill of Rights campaign, the Congress was organized around sharing stories about the relationships that people built through the labor of care. A slender Latina home health care worker, a member of New York’s SEIU 1199 local, opened the Congress by sharing the story of her relationship with an elderly man for whom she had provided care for five and a half years.

This man, he was a senior and a veteran. He was also a popular person in the neighborhood. He knew everyone, and he really liked the ladies. But he was also very
stubborn. It was difficult to work with him, at first. He always wanted to do things his way. He needed care, but he didn’t want to listen to me. It was difficult to give him the care he needed. But he was a very special person, and, over time, we grew close and we developed a better understanding. One day, I was in his room and he said, “I’m going to die soon.” I tried to encourage him not to. But he wouldn’t change his mind, and he died. I was heartbroken because you grow close to the people you work with. Even though it’s your job, you grow close to them. It doesn’t matter if it’s a job. The government should do more for older people and people with disabilities, especially for our veterans who serve and defend our country.

Her story was followed by many more. An aging gay Jewish man shared the story of his best friend’s last days which were spent isolated in a long-term care facility because his support network could not afford to pay for private care in his home after AIDS-related illnesses led to his paralysis. A woman who used a wheelchair spoke about her struggle to afford quality care for herself and her partner who was partially paralyzed. A middle-aged white woman spoke of the central role played by care workers in her family: the nanny who had raised her and the nanny who had raised her son, the housecleaner that manages her home and the elder care provider who enabled her mother-in-law to spend her last years living in her own home. Marlene shared her story of the love and pride she carried from her years providing care to Doctor Schneider. In between these stories, the Congress participants were encouraged to share their own stories of giving and receiving care, of struggling to afford to pay for quality care or struggling to survive on the low wages afforded to care workers. Caring Across Generation’s organizers deploy this kind of story-sharing as their central method for constructing a sense of shared interest between different stakeholders in the movement to transform the care industry. They believe that this kind of relationship-building will ultimately help these different forces to stay unified even through there are very real differences in interest that often manifest within the industry as it is currently configured. That intentional commitment to building solidarity is made possible by lifting out of a strict focus on the worker-employer relationship and focusing on a shared struggle for the
equitable reorganization of reproductive labor. Again, this is particularly powerful for (and perhaps only possible within) the caring sub-sectors of the domestic work industry.

At one level, DWU’s strategic decision to focus on struggles over state policy is a tactical call, reflecting the structural challenges that domestic workers face in workplace-based organizing explored in the last section. This reflects a similar trend in many low-wage worker organizations, a strategic decision that is often understood as response to the decentralized dynamics of the low-wage industries in which these organizations are based. Because the workplaces are disaggregated and employment is unstable, it is more straightforward for workers in these industries to build sustained collective power to pressure state officials than it is to organize workplace-by-workplace (Fine 2006; Jenkins 2002). Seen at this level of analysis, this represents a relatively straight-forward example of workers’ organizations “jumping scales” in order to leverage power more effectively (Herod 1998).

I believe that there is an even deeper political process in motion. As I began to argue in Chapter 6, these types of efforts suggest a contest for a new and more expansive social contract. If we look closely at the model of the Caring Across Generations campaign, we can begin to see the outlines of a vision for that new social contract. The vision that is emerging in these struggles does more than roll back the cuts wrought by the advance of the neoliberal project and return us to the New Deal. It goes beyond the assumptions and limits that were written into that social contract. It raises the floor of worker rights and protections above a poverty threshold. Instead of consigning the labor of reproduction to a naturalized function of the private family, it clearly recognizes its social necessity.
Struggles over state-mandated standards and social programs are one front of the broader social struggle over the reorganization of reproductive labor. Over the last several decades, the reorganization of reproductive labor has largely manifested through the commodification of that labor. As a result, it has largely helped to deepen and widen social divides. Those divides have, in turn, created the context for the development of new, more expansive social struggles and political visions. The Caring Across Generations campaign recognizes that the reorganization of reproductive labor is not a private crisis, but that it is rather a significant social crisis that impacts both workers and families. The Caring Across Generations campaign argues that relying on the market to provide care is untenable for workers and employers alike. It advocates that the best solution to this social crisis is government intervention in the form of an integrated package of expanded workers rights and a stronger safety net. While this campaign focused on the issue of elder care in particular, its logic could easily be expanded to cover child care and, probably to a lesser degree, housecleaning. Taken to its logical conclusion, this campaign aims to expand the state’s responsibility for the resourcing of the labor of reproduction. It thus challenges both the neoliberal “individual responsibility” approach that devolved responsibility for reproduction from the state to the family and the longer-standing beliefs that undergirded much of the New Deal: that caring labor is a private function of the individual family, that reproductive labor is not “real work” and that the home is a sacrosanct realm which the government cannot regulate. It thus speaks to long-standing feminist advocacy for the recognition and revaluation of reproductive labor.
Feminist scholars and activists have argued that caring labor is not a private function, but that it is a publicly necessary good that should be recognized and supported by the state. Whether it was women calling for a welfare or a guaranteed national income to recognize and resource their work as mothers (Nadasen 2005; Piven 1985; Susser 2012), feminist activists calling on the government to pay “Wages for Housework” (Dalla Costa and James 1973; Federici 2012) or feminist economists and activists advocating for the inclusion of caring labor in economic analyses (England and Folbre 1999; Steinem 1994), the idea that the labor of care should be socially recognized and resourced by the government is not new. What is new, however, is the political-economic context, specifically, the fact that women are now the majority of the paid workforce, that care work has become increasingly commodified and that care workers are an increasingly significant proportion of the workforce. Zimmerman, et al. (2006) point out that the commodification of care does not inevitably have a negative impact on women’s lives. If this commodification takes place in the context of what they call a “woman-friendly state” that treats the financing of care work as an obligation of the state, then care work is more likely to be a positive force in the lives of both worker and employers. But, if the commodification of care work unfolds in the context of an unregulated market driven solely by profit, then it is more likely to present challenges to women on both sides of the employment spectrum. Which model a society takes is not inevitable; the choice between “the woman-friendly state” or the profit-driven commodification of care is a question of political struggle.

The Caring Across Generations campaign is based on the belief that it is, in fact, possible to build a successful political challenge to the profit-driven nature of the nation’s current care model, largely because the damages it has wrought have expanded the number of potential stake-
holders who have an interest in government support for the labor of care. A successful transition towards state support for reproductive labor could only be won though a joint struggle between workers and their employers; neither party has sufficient social power on its own. This approach to organizing thus expands the nature of workers struggle, opening up an additional front in which workers and employers can engage in a shared struggle with the state over the organization of and resourcing for reproductive labor. Seen from this angle, the locus of struggle is not strictly between workers and employers over the conditions of work in a given workplace. While it would be politically dangerous to forget or erase the very real tensions between workers and employers, this campaign seeks to take the negotiations over those tensions out of a zero-sum context by expanding the pool of resources available for the labor of care. Through this campaign, domestic worker organizers “jumped scale” by taking their struggle from the realm of the individual employment negotiations within the private home to the level of a struggle with the state over the recognition and resourcing of the labor of care. This scale-jumping thus represents more than a tactical maneuver to deal with the challenges facing workers who labor in informal and disaggregated workplaces; it represents an engagement in a much larger political struggle over the social organization of reproductive labor.

From the Workplace to the Urban: New Imaginaries of Worker Power

Behind all of these interesting organizing experiments is a strategic question that begs exploration: What kind of power do domestic workers actually have? When veteran union organizers reflect on the prospects of organizing in the domestic work industry, it is common to see them shaking their heads, sighing and saying things like, “When it comes down to it, domestic workers don’t have any real power in the workplace. It’s one worker for every boss.
You just don’t have much power in that situation. Policy work is their only option.” And, on the surface, this assertion makes sense, given the ways in which the factory paradigm of worker organizing has shaped our understanding of worker power; in this model, workers’ power relies on their ability to leverage their collective power in their shared workplaces to disrupt production. But as effective as that model of power was for industrial workers in the United States in the 20th century, it is this often-invisible set of assumptions that make it difficult for us to think clearly about the potential power of domestic workers and other workers in low-wage reproductive industries. I believe that, if we attend carefully to the initial process of re-imagining worker power inside of today’s new wave of worker organizations, we can begin to discern the emergence of a new paradigm of worker power that is more relevant for workers in the reproductive industries.

That process of re-imagination requires us to clearly name and to interrogate the hidden assumptions of the previous models of worker power. Erik Olin Wright (2000) developed one of the best-known frameworks for understanding worker power, which is based on two different categories of power: “associational power” which he defined as “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organization of workers,” that is, workers’ formation into unions, political parties and social movements and “structural power” which “results simply from the location of workers in the economic system” (962). He elaborates two forms of structural power: “marketplace bargaining power,” which is based on tight labor markets in which workers can either maintain a monopoly on specialized skills or leverage low levels of unemployment, and “workplace bargaining power,” which is based on workers’ location in
workplaces where they have the ability to stop production in one location and thereby disrupt the broader production process.

Based on this model, workers who labor in small, decentralized service workplaces are often assessed to lack any form of structural power. They seem to lack marketplace bargaining power because their labor is considered unskilled and because there is a constant stream of new workers entering the market. They seem to lack workplace bargaining power because workers are isolated in private homes and therefore cannot exercise collective power in their workplaces and because there is no “production” for workers to disrupt. Standard repertoires for exerting worker power do seem particularly challenging for the domestic work industry, given the many vulnerabilities these workers face: economic instability, documentation challenges and low worker-to-employer ratios. It is therefore assumed that they should rely solely on associational power, that is, their ability to mobilize as a social movement, to build coalitions and to engage in mobilizations and protests in order to shift public opinion. This method of power-building has indeed proven important in DWU’s experiences from the Bill of Rights campaign to their employer organizing and the Caring Across Generations campaign. Similar methods have been crucial in the successes of many other sectors of low-wage workers who are also considered to lack structural power, as in the much-lauded example of the Justice for Janitors campaign which relied on mass mobilizations and creative direct action and the success of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in their campaigns targeting corporate grocers and restaurant chains to improve working conditions for farm workers. But I believe that it is too soon to shut the door on the idea that domestic workers and other low-wage workers can also exercise forms of “structural power,” that is, power based on their position in the economy. Building on Dorothy Cobble’s (2010)
work, I argue that the “worksite” orientation of the industrial model is a key assumption that limits our ability to think about the power of domestic workers. And I also argue that the elision of reproductive labor from the purview of past paradigms of worker power is a key theoretical assumption that must be challenged if we are to develop a full view of the potentials of worker power today.

While Domestic Workers United has not engaged in systematic organizational discussions about what “worker power” means in the domestic work industry, that dialogue implicitly breaks through in many moments in the organization’s work. One site for that exploration is an imaginary exercise that takes place each year during their leadership training program, during a workshop on the role of domestic work in the “global city,” a term popularized by scholar Saskia Sassen (1991) which has proven helpful to DWU in understanding its work. During the workshop, DWU members discuss New York City’s role as a global city, using visual representations of skyscrapers and corporate logos to make the city’s role as a “command post of the world economy” clear. On top of this visual mapping of the city, they place notes naming the high-tier professionals whose labor enables New York City to play its global role: the high-end professional workers who labor in corporate offices including CEOs and stockbrokers, corporate lawyers and media; and the creative professionals who head up the city’s luxury consumption industries like chefs and high-end yoga instructors, fashion designers and writers. Invariably at some point during this brainstorm, someone shouts out, “That’s our employers. That’s who we work for.” Then they turn to talking about the low-wage workers who directly service the corporations including secretaries, security guards, airport workers, couriers and janitors. They also name the workers who service the consumption and reproduction needs of the professional
elite like domestic workers, restaurant workers, taxi drivers and nail salon workers. They finish the conversation by calling out the workers who labor in the working class neighborhoods of the city: the childcare workers and retail workers, the garbage-men and the street vendors. They then step back and contemplate the map that they have built together: the geography of labor in the global city.

Then the workshop moves on to explore the role of low-wage workers in the global city: What connects these different sectors of low-wage workers to each other? What power do we have? “We are all in the same position. None of us are treated with respect.” “This city relies on us, but we all struggle.” When asked what would happen if all of these low-wage workers refused to work, the response is often a moment of silence filled with nervous laughter. And then someone inevitably says something like, “Everything would stop. The city couldn’t function without us.” “The world would be paralyzed without the work of the women here.” In order to give the members a space to explore this potential power, the workshop closes with a skit enacting a general strike of low-wage workers in the global city. The workers who are participating in the workshop take on different roles: a stockbroker father and his CEO boss, a media professional mother, a baby, a domestic worker, a porter, a taxi driver, a restaurant worker and a television reporter. They role-play out an ordinary day: the CEO calls the stockbroker into work early, the mother and father leave their child with the domestic worker while the porter calls a taxi, breakfast is served by the restaurant worker and life goes on as normal.

Then the group prepares for a very different scenario: “A Day Without a Nanny.” In this scenario, all the low-wage workers go out on strike together, throwing the life of the wealthy
family and the corporation into chaos. When the CEO calls the stockbroker into work, they call their domestic worker to come in early. But she informs them that she is on strike and so are all the other domestic workers who normally substitute for her when she takes a personal day. The media professional mother and stockbroker father argue over who will stay home with the baby, who screams uncontrollably for the nanny she knows and loves. Over the chaos, they call the porter to ask him to hail a cab for whichever parent wins the argument, but they cannot reach the porter since he is also out on strike. They run down to hail a cab on their own, but the cabs drive by them, holding “on strike” signs. They call the restaurant to try to order breakfast, but they are politely informed that the restaurant is closed today because of the strike. Their frustration and chaos increases as the phone continues to ring off the hook, as the irate CEO on the other end demands that the father come into work immediately. Each moment of refusal is met with rowdy laughter and applause from the DWU members who are observing the skit. They turn to each other, share knowing looks and laugh. And, when the skits concludes with a media interview of a domestic worker at an imaginary demonstration, the entire group usually ends up joining in to shout chants and hold up signs. A feeling of power and joy is palpable at the end of this informal performance each year, and there have been several years where the Leadership Program graduates have decided to re-enact it at their graduation ceremony during DWU’s monthly membership meetings. The idea that “The city could not run without us!” and that “If we went on strike, we could shut this city down!” have become standard components in workers’ public speeches and in their internal agitation. These types of reflections create an opening to begin to discuss the ways in which, although domestic workers and other low-wage workers are often seen as powerless, they have a profound potential power to interrupt the functioning of the city as a whole.
There are of course also different understandings of domestic workers’ power that emerge in other contexts. During the Ambassadors training program, there was a discussion on the importance of building a broad base of workers in the industry and on worker power. Priscilla opened the conversation by asking, “What power do domestic workers have?” The workers sat in silence for a moment or two, and then Meches raised her hand and said, “We have silent power.” Priscilla asked her to elaborate, and she said, “We have a power that no one recognizes. We have the power to raise these children differently, so they don’t keep these systems of inequality going.” The women around the room smiled and nodded in agreement, and the energy in the room started to warm up. Jennifer raised her hand, and said, “We have the power to negotiate better contracts. I know that I am good at what I do, and I know my worth. I can be strong and stand up for myself, and that gives me the power to make sure that I am getting paid what I deserve.” Again, the women nodded in agreement, reflecting their often-expressed pride in their confidence and the strong negotiation skills they have developed over the years. There was some back-and-forth conversation about who was responsible for women who got bad contracts, the employers or the women themselves. “The employers are always going to try to give you a bad deal. It’s up to us to stop them. If we don’t, they’ll just keep paying everyone lower and lower.” “But you have to understand, women take these jobs because they need the money for their families. And when they first get to the country, they don’t know that getting paid two dollars an hour isn’t right.” After a few minutes, Priscilla took the opportunity to raise the potential for collective bargaining, asking if the power to bargain contracts was a power that they held individually or whether it was a power that they had collectively. Multiple women responded, “Individually,” until Allison said, “If we were better organized, we could do that collectively.
But we would need a lot more workers to be able to do that. Us alone...,” she gestured around the room, “We couldn’t do it on our own.” She went on,” We have another kind of power, now that we have the Bill of Rights. We have the power to expose abuses in the industry. We can do that through lawsuits and through protests, like we’ve done in the past.” The conversation was starting to die down. Priscilla asked if there were any other kinds of power that domestic workers could exercise together. They looked at her with some confusion, knowing that she was looking for some particular answer but not knowing what it was. Joyce tried to help her out, “We have the power of our numbers. There are 200,000 domestic workers in this city, so we have the power of our numbers. But, we need a lot more people organized if we are going to use that power.” Priscilla finally asked directly about the “Day Without a Nanny” skit, about going on strike and shutting down the city. They laughed and said, “Sure. But we are nowhere near that.” “And who knows if we’ll ever get there? We would have to organize all the domestic workers.” “And so many of these women are too scared to lose their jobs.” “I don’t know if we could ever do that.” With that, the discussion on power ended. The group moved on to talk about the practical skills of outreach and base-building.

Domestic Workers United’s imaginary of a “Day Without a Nanny” demonstrates the structural significance of reproductive labor and of caring labor in particular. If the city’s domestic workers went on strike, it would create chaos for the city’s high-end corporate workers who are dependent on their labor. While it would, no doubt, be difficult to organize a large proportion of the workforce to engage in this sort of strike, it does demonstrate that domestic workers play a strategic role in what Beverly Silver (2003) called the “social division of labor.” In describing the structural power of teacher to impact the social division of labor, she writes, “Teachers’
strikes have ripple effects throughout the social division of labor, disrupting family routines and making it difficult for working people to do their own jobs” (117), a reflection that echoes in DWU’s imaginary skit. This kind of power to impact the social division of labor is possible because of workers’ location in the sphere of reproductive labor, a sphere which does not seem to appear in Wright’s assessment of the possibilities of workers’ “structural power.” The new models that domestic worker organizers are envisioning reveal the limited understanding that we have had about the structural centrality of reproductive labor in the economy. However, as reproductive labor becomes increasingly commodified and as service labor increasingly comes to define the broader nature of work in the United States, it is imperative that scholars and labor organizer alike interrogate the ways in which the historic focus on formally productive labor has placed limits on our understandings about the possibilities of reproductive workers’ power.

This conceptual transition compels us to be attentive, once again, to the scales at which we analyze worker power. Domestic workers may not be able to exercise significant structural power in their individual workplaces. Here, the individualized and personalized dynamics of the work compel them to rely on the types of strategies conveyed in the workers’ reflections on their “hidden power,” “emotional power” and “personal power.” An attempt to exercise more disruptive kinds of power at the level of the workplace would likely only result in minimal inconveniences to employers and in workers being fired. But if we shift our thinking from the scale of the workplace to the scale of the urban, we can see that domestic workers have a different kind of potential power. The “Day Without A Nanny” imaginary suggests that reproductive workers, who often have weak structural power in their individual workplaces, may still be able to exercise significant structural power at the urban level by disrupting the social
division of labor and thereby impacting broader economic processes. This perspective on domestic workers’ power highlights the fundamentally social nature of reproductive labor.

This potential power does not apply in the same way for all domestic workers. It was the screaming child who could not be left alone that made the family's situation untenable. One would presume that the family would not have had such a crisis if it was the housecleaner who had called out on strike for a day or two. Without her, the city would be dirtier, but it would keep going. This suggests that it is the labor of care that plays the decisive role in the social division of labor and that therefore care workers have greater potential structural power. This differentiation between the power of workers who inhabit different positions within an industry is nothing new. The success of the Flint sit-down strikes in 1937 relied on the particular position of the strikers in the process of production. Because the strike took place in the one location in the country that produced engines for General Motors, these workers had the capacity to shut down Ford's operations nationwide. They had a greater impact than a similar strike among the workers who assembled the bodies of the automobiles, for example, could have had (Silver 2003). However specific their position, the contract that was negotiated in the wake of the sit-down strike improved conditions for workers across the company and then across the entire auto industry.

The significant political question that emerges from this example is how workers who inhabit a sub-sector of an industry with greater potential structural power can leverage that power in the interests of their fellow workers more broadly.
Conclusion

All of the strategic repertoires with which DWU experimented in the year after the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights sought to transcend the scale of the home and the individual workplace, shifting the terrain of struggle to the neighborhood, the urban and the national. These experiments represent more than a tactical response to the decentralization of work. More importantly, these experiments represent a contestation over the “scale” at which reproductive labor is understood to take place. That is, they represent a challenge to the historically developed notion that reproduction takes place at the scale of the private home and that it is an issue to be resourced and resolved by the individual family (Marston 2000; Marston and Smith 2001; Smith 1992), and they push against the neoliberal devolution of responsibility for social reproduction from the state to the family. DWU’s work suggests that the challenges facing society in the context of the widespread reorganization of reproductive labor cannot be solved at the level of the individual family. Their work adds to the long-standing feminist assertion that reproductive labor is a social question that must be resolved at the level of the community, state and nation. Placing the struggle over the social reorganization of reproductive labor at the center of our understanding of contemporary labor struggle offers to profoundly transform our paradigmatic understandings of worker organizing.
CHAPTER 9: “We Have Differences, But in the End We are All Working for the Same Thing:” Struggling through Inter-racial Tensions between Domestic Workers

In the winter of 2011, twenty leaders from Domestic Workers United, primarily women from Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guatemala, Uruguay and Costa Rica, sat in a circle in a meeting room in the offices of the United Auto Workers, working their way through the workshop on the History of the Domestic Work Industry in the United States. They had already gone through the emotional stories of the lives of the enslaved women and impoverished European immigrants who had served as the earliest domestic workers in the U.S., and emotions were high. When they reached the more recent story of a Chicana woman who worked in Texas from 1915 till 1940, an evocative struggle emerged that revealed a great deal about the dynamics between workers of different racial and national backgrounds. That story read:

I lived in El Paso all my life….I have to work as a domestic worker to help my parents to take care of our family. I only got this job because the woman who worked for this family before, a German immigrant woman, is now employed at a factory. The family could not find another European immigrant to work for them. I get paid half of what she was getting paid! The boss treats me like a little girl, as if I am not cleaning his house or ironing his clothes. Also, they do not allow me to take care of the children although I have taken care of my three little brothers for years. Gerta, a woman from Ireland, takes care of the children and she earns much more than I do. Once when I asked the boss about the difference in wages because only I earn 50 cents per week, she said to me that I should be grateful for my job because it for helping to learn manners and workmanship.

Another student anthropologist - Helen Panagiotopoulos - was also present during this training. Helen is an Australian Greek immigrant woman who worked as a nanny for 19 years, towards the end of which she started a Masters Program in Cultural Anthropology at Hunter College. She also joined Domestic Workers United, becoming one of the only white domestic workers who was a long-term member. In 2012, she completed her master’s thesis - *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Constructing Identity in the United States Domestic Workers Movement* - on the work of Domestic Workers United. She subsequently enrolled in the same Cultural Anthropology PhD program at the CUNY Graduate Center in which I am enrolled, facilitating the development of a multi-layered level of political and theoretical exchange between us about the work of DWU. Helen also wrote about this struggle in her thesis, and - while she had a very different interpretation of this struggle than I do - our exchange on our differences has provided me with a rich source of insight. I hope to explore these different perspectives in a future co-authored work with Helen. She also graciously shared her field notes from this encounter with me, enabling me to capture a wider range of statements from DWU members than I had been able to record on my own. All quotes in this chapter should be considered a composite of our different field notes.

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This story of racial inequality between domestic workers who labored in the same home provoked a Jamaican elder care provider to reflect on the current dynamics in the industry, saying. “That happens today...Mexicans come here and take our jobs...They work for less, and make it harder for us to ask for more. They are bad for the industry, and they take our jobs from us. I think that Mexicans are the new slaves.”

Her words triggered a heated back-and-forth between the Latina and Caribbean workers in the room. The Caribbean women argued that Latinas took less money than they should, that they allowed themselves to be exploited more. As the conversation unfolded, they also started to reference other groups that were newer to the industry, like Filipinas and Nepalis. They felt that these women drove down standards in the industry, and they emphasized personal agency as the solution. One Caribbean woman told a story, “I was working at this one job, and there was a Spanish housecleaner there. I saw her paycheck, and I got so angry. And I grabbed her, and I told her, ‘You don’t have to take this. You should ask for more.’ She was scared to lose her job, but I told her she didn’t have to take it.”

The Latina workers in the room pushed back, saying that these arguments felt “discriminatory.” In addition to challenging the mischaracterization of all Latina workers as “Mexican,” they argued that it was important to think from the perspective of a newly arrived immigrant worker. Liliana, who was normally quiet in meetings but who got visibly angry during the course of the conversation, said,

You have to understand what these new immigrants are going through. In Latin America, the money is so low. Think about a domestic worker in Guatemala, her money is so low. She maybe made a dollar a day back in Guatemala. She comes here, and the employer
offers her 80 dollars a week, and it seems like so much money. It’s up to us as DWU to educate her so that she can get more.

They discussed additional challenges related to migration, like language and documentation. Meches said, “Employers take advantage of us when they pay us less money. They discriminate against us because we don’t speak English. They tell us we don’t clean the toilet well because we can’t speak English. Cleaning the toilet had nothing to do with how you speak English. That’s discrimination. You should be supporting us.”

The tension started to break after one Caribbean worker said, “We all went through this,” reflecting that she had faced many of these same challenges when she first moved to the United States. This moment of identification created space for alignment between both groups about how to relate with newer immigrant workers: that, rather than seeing them as competition, it would be more effective to reach out to these newer immigrant workers to help them learn how to navigate the industry. As this alignment came into focus, the tension started to die down. But the energy remained high as workers from both groups started to shift their attention to the responsibilities of employers for these poor conditions and for the divisions between workers. “It’s them that are taking advantage of us. It’s not because we are dumb or stupid. The people on top are exploiting us all.” This quickly shifted into explicit agitations like, “We have differences, but in the end we are all working for the same thing. We are all in the same place. We are all working class people.” “It is not a race thing. It is not a color thing. It is a class thing. We are all working class people. The rich just use color to divide us from each other.”

52 I share this story knowing that these statements so closely mirror traditional Marxist and left frameworks and rhetoric that they probably seem fabricated. They are, however, accurate representations of the conversation as it unfolded. To some extent, the explicitness of these workers statements suggest that these phrases are actually meaningful ways to articulate significant aspects of workers’ lived experiences, although they tend to be dismissed in the United States as strictly “ideological” frameworks. Additionally, it is important to recognize that class-based
sustained explicit agitation for class unity is rare inside of Domestic Workers United, whose leaders often emphasize a range of different shared identities like “immigrants,” “women” and “women of color.”

This story surfaces the historically contested question of the relationship between racial divisions and “class consciousness.” This relationship has long plagued left thinkers and organizers. In the words of Gerald Sider (1996),

Working people are often deeply ambivalent - with a suspicion rooted in intimacy- not only of the designs and policies of the liberal middle class but even more of each other, or more precisely people who are almost “each other” but differ in “race, creed or national origin.”

These kinds of ambivalence have long been a hurdle to political efforts to build unity between working people in order to challenge their shared structural exploitation. This has been a particular challenge in the United States, where race has been a key dividing line within the working classes (Brodkin 2011; Davis 1986; Du Bois 1969; Roediger 1991).

These kinds of ambivalences present particular political challenges to worker organizing, and there has been a tendency, in both left thought and left political practice, to interpret racial tensions between workers as expressions of “false consciousness.” In this view, workers have been misguided by individual biases, racial stereotypes and false ideas about competition between workers of different races, false ideas that have presumably been promoted by their employers. From this perspective, these incorrect ideas lead workers to fail to see their true structural conditions, that is, their exploitation by their employers, or to understand their frameworks are much more present in the political culture of many other nations than they are in the United States. Relatedly, immigrant domestic workers bring a range of political experiences to their organizing as workers. For example, one of the women in this training had been a part of an explicitly left organization in her nation of origin.
objective interest in building unity with other workers. Rather than having a “correct” form of class consciousness that highlights their shared interests as working people, they have a “false” form of consciousness that focuses only on their shared interests with people from their own racial or ethnic group. Seen from this angle, the political solution is to show workers that these racial antagonisms are not real and that they should instead embrace their true interest in working class unity.

While DWU was not explicitly guided by this method of analyzing class politics, this broad orientation manifested in the organization’s work. There was often an ambivalent sense of solidarity between members from different racial and regional backgrounds. On the one hand, the organization was explicitly dedicated to building unity between immigrant women of color, based on the belief that no one nationality or racial group could win transformation in the domestic work industry on its own. DWU’s leaders were clear in their belief that structural change would require the many different groups of workers who inhabited the industry’s lower tiers to work together. DWU’s leaders often spoke with pride about their multi-racial composition, and, as demonstrated by their decision to structure the DWU Ambassadors program in order to promote outreach to workers of different races and nationalities, they made multi-racial organizing a strategic priority in their work.

But DWU members’ commitment to multi-racial organizing did not erase the inter-racial tensions that permeate the industry. DWU members would often articulate critiques, resentments or feelings of competition with workers from other racial and regional backgrounds during meetings and trainings. Organizers often dismissed or challenged these issues with a rapid
assertion that "We shouldn’t divide. We are all in the same industry, and we need to work together to change these conditions." While these assertions of unity reflected an important aspect of the relationship between workers in the industry, they sidelined the more antagonistic aspects of those same relationships. Dismissing workers’ conflicted perspectives through calls for unity did not help them come to terms with the totality of their lived experiences in the industry. And because this approach did not fully represent workers’ lived experiences, the same issues would re-emerge in the next conversation. This approach reflected a “thin” type of solidarity, which required worker to put their perceived differences aside in the name of unity.

This approach of analyzing class consciousness as “true” or “false” and of treating unity and difference between workers as oppositional phenomenon has been critiqued from many perspectives. Stuart Hall (1986b) helpfully suggested that many of the ideas that have been dismissed as expressions of “false” consciousness are more accurately expressions of “partial” or “one-sided” consciousness. That is, they represent an understanding of one part of a larger reality and that, while those analyses may miss the totality of a given situation, they are not in themselves merely “subjective” or “false.” These partial perspectives tend to focus on the aspects of the totality which present themselves to workers on a daily basis, “what we are always seeing...what we encounter daily...which constantly engage us and which so manifestly announce their presence” (38). For example, competition between workers is not just imagined, and it is not just a false idea promoted by “the boss.” In fact, competition is built into the structural

53 There have been other racialized conflicts in the organization that I am not exploring here. Among the most central were tensions that emerged as the organization made efforts to shift its membership from being overwhelmingly composed of Caribbean workers to being more representative of both Caribbean and Latina workers. Caribbean workers’ feelings of displacement and Latina workers’ feelings of marginalization manifested in sometimes-hidden, sometimes-open struggles. These complicated conflicts will hopefully be explored in other places, whether by myself or by other allied writers.
dynamics of many industries. Similarly, it is neither accurate nor politically effectively to dismiss racial tensions between workers as an expression of “false” ideas that represent a misinterpretation of their structural realities. Racial stratifications and divisions are built into manifold aspects of work and society. It is not “false” for workers to recognize that these divisions have a material impact on their lives. While a focus on racial division does not tell the entire story of class relations, it does tell an important part of the story. It is more theoretically accurate and politically effective to try to understand the ways in which tensions between workers, at some level, reflect an assessment of structural dynamics and to try to grasp the complexities of class as it is really lived.

This more integrative approach to understanding “class consciousness” suggests alternative methods of engaging in building working class unity. Again, Gerald Sider aptly captured the importance of this approach to worker organizing (1996),

> The actual consciousness of specific working classes in specific times and places has often been irrationally disarticulated - taken apart into small categories, some ‘good,’ some ‘bad’ - rather than being analyzed and its progressive political potential strategized with and through its internal ruptures and antagonisms. The right-wing political elites have been far, far better at taking the complexities and ambivalences of working-class ideas and turning them against the working class than the left has been at recognizing, deeply, where people are and building progressive movements on that basis.

That is, instead of concluding that working people must overlook their experiences of competition and difference in order to find their way to unity, we are more likely to build meaningful solidarity if working people are able to see through those differences. This requires us to come to an understanding of the very real structural dynamics in various industries that promote competition and racial division. That understanding allows us to engage working people
in dialogue and critical reflection about those differences so they can construct a more grounded and representative form of unity, a form of unity that I will call a “deep solidarity.”

The trajectory of the struggle during the workshop, which moved from racialized tension to calls for class unity, suggests that a deeper sense of unity can be built between different groups of working people through a direct engagement with the racialized differences between workers. That struggle initially represented a moment of “internal rupture and antagonism.” But, through the course of that struggle, a “progressive political potential” came to be realized as these women worked “with and through” their different positions and experiences in the industry and found their way to a more meaningful and relevant basis of unity. Rather than dismiss the inter-racial tensions and contradictions between workers as an expression of “bad” ideas that should be replaced by “good” ideas, illustrated by the overly rapid dismissal of inter-racial tensions by the admonition that “we’re all on the same side,” this conflict demonstrated the political benefit of leaning into the tensions that workers express in order to excavate a deeper truth. A deeper unity could only be built when the space was created to acknowledge and work through these contradictions.

The struggle in the History of the Domestic Work Industry workshop revealed two of the structural dynamics at play in the domestic work industry: the competition between workers and the racial stratification of the industry’s lower tiers. By mining the process of that struggle and determining the process by which workers found their way to a sense of deep solidarity and

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54 Chandra Mohanty used this term in *Under Western Eyes Revisited* (2003), describing her belief in “the possibility of a decolonized, cross-border feminist community.” She argued that “common differences’ can form the basis of deep solidarity and that we have to struggle to achieve this in the face of unequal power relations among feminists.” Here I adapt this concept to the process of building deep solidarity between domestic workers across differences of race and region.
shared identity, I believe we can gain insights into the contradictions and complexities that exist within a group of workers who share experiences with exploitation and racialized degradation. We can also draw out valuable lessons about effective methodologies for dealing with the tensions that exist between workers who share a similar class position but who come from different racial or national backgrounds, lessons that speak to the often-elusive challenge of building deep solidarity among working people.

**Inter-racial Dynamics between Workers in the Domestic Work Industry**

This exploration must begin with an investigation into the ways in which racial tensions are structured into the domestic work industry. Most of the existent literature on domestic work has been focused on the experiences of particular racial groups or nationalities within the industry: Filipina workers (Parreñas 2001; Rodriguez 2010), Afro-Caribbean workers (Brown 2011; Colen 1995), Latina workers (Coll 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1992), African-American workers (Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985) and so on. This focus is valuable in that it enables authors to develop a coherent perspective into the experiences of particular groups in this incredibly complicated industry. But it has also more unfortunate side effects; it makes it difficult to understand the similarities, differences and relationships between different groups of women in the industry (Macdonald 2011). There are, however, a few works that have engaged these questions: Julia Wrigley’s *Other Peoples’ Children* (1995) which explored the stratifications between white *au pairs* and immigrant workers of color in New York City, Rhacel Parreñas’ *Servants of Globalization* (2001) which analyzed the location of Filipina workers in Los Angeles where the industry is multi-racial, Cameron MacDonald’s *Shadow Mothers* (2011) which analyzed the experiences of nannies in Boston across racial and national lines and Helen
Panagiotopoulos’ 2012 thesis, *Community Activism and Feminist Politics*, which examined the experiences of a multi-racial cross-section of workers in New York City. I will build on these works as the foundation of my exploration of inter-racial dynamics in the industry.

A first cut at understanding the racial dynamics in the industry must necessarily focus on the stratification between “high-status” white nannies and *au pairs* and “low-status” immigrant domestic workers of color. As explored in Chapter 3, these high-status workers, who hail from Western Europe and the United States, are presumptively hired for their cultural and educational qualifications. They are often well-compensated and treated as the social equals or, at least, as the “not-so-subordinates” of their employers. Regardless of their class and educational backgrounds, immigrant workers of color are perceived to be less educated than these white workers; they are slotted into lower-waged jobs in the industry which are often more physically demanding and less socially valued (Wrigley 1995). This binary categorization, while important, does not capture the complex dynamics of the industry. As Chapter 3 described, there is a significant degree of stratification *within* the industry’s lower tiers, which have significant material and social implications for domestic workers’ lives.

These stratifications in the lower tiers of the industry are also often traced along the lines of race and region. Although there is no systematic demographic documentation of the stratifications in the lower tiers of the domestic work industry, the anecdotal map of the industry which seems to be implicitly understood at DWU places Afro-Caribbean workers in the highest strata of the industry’s lowest tiers, below them are Filipina, Indian and some Central American workers and below them are Mexican workers, other Central American workers, Nepali workers and Tibetan
workers. These patterns are not hard and fast, and race is not the only explanatory factor. While immigrant women of color make up the bulk of these lower-status workers, there are also native-born African American women and Eastern European women who work as nannies, housecleaners and elder care providers. Scholars have pointed out that these women face a number of similar challenges in the workplace to those faced by immigrant women of color (Macdonald 2011; Panagiotopoulos 2012). There are significant differences between documented and undocumented workers from all races and regions, and there are also significant differences dependent on workers’ language capacities. There are, for example, a large number of Haitian women of African descent in the industry’s lowest strata, many of whom do not have legal documentation or English language fluency. And there are a number of bi-lingual Mexican and Central American women who are closer to the industry’s middle strata. But, even with these complications, race and nationality still play an important role in shaping the broad patterns in the industry. Race is the primary frame through which many domestic workers explain the dynamics of the industry, whether that manifests through frames about specific racial groups like “Latina workers” or “Caribbean workers” or through more inclusive frames like “immigrant workers” or “women of color.” Thus, while there are significant similarities in the experiences of the immigrant women of color who inhabit the lower tiers of the industry, the differences between them are also significant. Those differences are often understood through the lens of race and region.

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55 At the same time, regardless of their background, all of these women work in a segment of the industry that has historically been racially marked as degraded (Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985) and recently marked as “immigrant” (Nadasen 2012). Thus, the dynamics of race and nation impact all these women, to a degree, even if they do not themselves inhabit those marked categories.
Because DWU was overwhelmingly composed of Caribbean and Latina workers, dialogues about stratifications in the industry tended to focus on these two groups. It was common for DWU members of all racial backgrounds to reflect that Latina workers are located at the bottom of the industry’s tiers. For example, Allison said,

I could safely say that most Latinas are treated worst. They’re asked to do things that make me want to scream. They’re asked to go on the floor with their hands and knees and scrub the floor. That alone sends me back to 1920, and it makes me angry...Their hours are longer. Their job descriptions are ridiculous. Scrubbing the floors, scrubbing the deck, I mean…things that should not be within the job description of a nanny or of a housekeeper for that matter.

This perspective was sharply expressed during the conflict in the History of Domestic Work training when the Jamaican elder care provider referred to Mexican workers as “the new slaves.”

The fact that the stratifications in the industry roughly trace along the lines of race and region creates a ripe context for the development of racialized tensions between different groups of workers. The individualized and precarious conditions in the industry mean that, even when domestic workers have been able to work their way up the industry’s ladder and get a “good job,” their positions are deeply unstable. When workers look up or down the informal occupational ladder, they often see workers of other races and nationalities as their primary competition. This perspective can seen in the statement made during the conflict that “Mexicans come here and take our jobs...They work for less, and make it harder for us to ask for more. They are bad for the industry and they take our jobs from us.” Allison elaborated on the ways in which these tensions play out in the broader industry,

The Caribbean folks get frustrated at the Latinas for taking less money. Right or wrong, it’s seen that they’re being paid less. And sometimes that proves to be true, because, once the conversation is had, their wages are significantly lower. And that’s the frustration with Caribbean and Latino workers. The Caribbean workers feel like they are shortchanging the job or like they are bargaining for so much less. That cuts Caribbean
workers out of the ring completely. So there’s definitely tension between the Caribbean folks and the Latinas.

These feeling of competition, resentment and contempt with workers from different racial backgrounds showed up inside of DWU. Workers grappled with those perspectives as they engaged in the process of building multi-racial unity. Worker after worker told me a similar story: before she joined DWU, she had mainly built relationships with other workers from her own nation or region, and she had negative perceptions of workers from other groups. If she was in the lowest tiers of the industry, she tended to think that other groups of workers had it easier; if she was higher up the occupational ladder, she tended to think that workers from other groups were undermining conditions in the industry. It was only after they joined DWU and built relationships with women from a range of backgrounds that they realized that workers from different groups had similar experiences in the industry and that they had a shared interest in working together to improve conditions for all workers. As I described in Chapter 3, DWU’s practice of having workers testify to each other about their experiences in the industry provided a crucial space in which workers could come to recognize that, even though they had initially believed that different groups of workers had fundamentally different experiences in the industry, there was in fact a significant commonality of experiences between domestic workers from different regions and racial backgrounds.

But even as DWU members came to believe in their shared experience and in the importance of multi-racial unity, significant tensions between the Caribbean and Latina members persisted within the organization. These tensions reflected the broader tensions that exist between these groups in the broader domestic work industry. This sense of competition and tension between
women from different racial backgrounds is not inevitable; it emerges out of ways that workers come to understand the racial stratifications in the industry.

There are a number of possible explanatory factors for the racialization of the stratification in the lower tiers of the domestic work industry, many of which were articulated in the conflict that played out in training on the History of Domestic Work. I will explore a number of these different explanatory factors below, including workers’ beliefs in “inherent” racial traits or in socially-developed cultural differences between groups of workers, explanations which emphasize classed differences between workers from different nations and frameworks which emphasize workers’ tenure in the industry. Some of these frameworks focus on workers’ abilities and personal decisions, while others primarily focus on employers’ racialized preferences for different groups of workers.

Many domestic worker activists, sometimes the same workers who spoke explicitly in support of multi-racial organizing, accepted and emphasized essentialized messages about their own and other groups of workers, seeming to deploy these messages as a source of pride to redeem the regular disrespect they experience on the job (Parreñas 2001). For example, a Filipina worker from an organization that was allied with DWU once told me, “My employer told me that Filipinas work harder than any other group. That is why they prefer to hire us now.” At other times, workers drew on positive stereotypes about their own racial groups to explain their differentiation from other groups of workers: Caribbean women are stronger and more confident and know how to hold their ground with employers, Latinas are more nurturing with children and so on. Often, workers would link these expressions of pride to ideas that emphasized the
supposedly inherent negative qualities of other groups in order to explain the stratification in the industry: Latinas are in a weaker position in the industry because they are too timid to stand up for themselves, Caribbean women don’t work as hard as Latinas so they are losing their position at the top of the industry and so on. These beliefs about supposedly inherent racial differences intersected with a number of other explanatory axes.

One of these explanations, which was regularly articulated by Caribbean workers during my time with DWU, emphasized individual agency: Latina workers were allowing themselves to be exploited. This played out in a number of comments that opened the struggle during the History of Domestic Work training, when the Jamaican elder care provider said, “Mexicans come here and take our jobs...They work for less, and make it harder for us to ask for more, They are bad for the industry and they take our jobs from us.” In this framework, the problem is that individual domestic workers are making bad individual decisions and allowing themselves to be pushed around. Therefore, the solution is that workers should take the initiative to demand more from their employers. We can see this argument in the words of the Caribbean women who got frustrated that her Latina co-worker was being paid sub-standard wages, “I got so angry. And I grabbed her, and I told her, ‘You don’t have to take this. You should ask for more.’ She was scared to lose her job, but I told her she didn’t have to take it.” This perspective is encouraged by some employers who actively foment this sense of competition between workers to strengthen their hand in negotiations. For example, a Latina nanny once told me, “There is a Caribbean woman who works in my building. She asked her employer for a raise, and her boss told her he could always fire her and hire a Mexican worker who will do more work for less money.”
As I explored in Chapter 4, this emphasis on personal agency connects in complicated ways to the ways in which workers think about the persistence of “slavery” in the industry. That is, rather than attributing the existence of slavery-like conditions in the lowest tiers of the domestic work industry to structural constraints and vulnerabilities, workers who inhabit higher strata may attribute the persistence of these conditions to workers’ individual decisions to accept those conditions. This perspective can facilitate the development of a sense of deep antagonism between workers because, from this view, if workers in the lower strata accept these slavery-like conditions, it puts workers in the higher strata in a position where they must also accept those conditions or risk losing their jobs. While this perspective clearly misses many of the foundational structural dynamics in the industry, it is important to note that it is also based on a clear perception of one aspect of the dynamics in the industry: because of the individualized nature of the employment relations, the actions of individual domestic workers do have a significant impact on the conditions in the industry. Individual strategies like personal empowerment, contract negotiation, and day-to-day struggles with employers over wages and working conditions have collective implications. Thus, the emphasis on individual agency is less a “false” perspective on dynamics in the industry than it is a “partial” one.

The fact of racial stratification can also be explained through employers’ decisions and strategies: their tendency to exploit the workers’ vulnerabilities to procure more work for less money and their explicitly or implicitly racialized preferences for hiring different workers. These perspectives tend to incorporate more structural analyses of power relations in the industry than do explanations focused on racial stereotypes or on individual agency. DWU members generally agree that employers will do everything they can to take advantage of workers’ vulnerabilities:
their documentation status, their limited English language capacities and their economic desperation. Meches articulated some of this perspective when she said, “Employers take advantage of us when they pay us less money. They discriminate against us because we don’t speak English.”

Employers also deploy racial stereotypes as a stand-in for the traits that they are looking for in their workers, a practice which provides a partial explanation for the racial stratification of the industry. For example, in Rhacel Parrenas’ study of Filipina domestic workers in Los Angeles, she argued that, because Filipina workers were English language proficient and because many of them had a college education or had worked in professional occupations before migrating, they had access to the “high status” criteria that were sought after by wealthier employers. This led higher-income employers to choose to hire Filipina workers over Latina workers whom employers assumed to be uneducated monolingual Spanish speakers or Black workers who were assumed to lack access to a college education or other kinds of professional experiences. In Parrenas’ study, these classed differences between workers shaped employers’ racial differentiation of Filipinos as higher status, leading to racial stratification in the lower tiers of the industry in Los Angeles.

The relationship between employers’ racial attitudes and stratification in the industry is complicated in New York City, a city with the most diverse immigrant population in the nation (Foner 2001). First of all, it is difficult to use a framework to explain the location of Afro-Caribbean workers at the top of the industry’s lowest tiers, given the anti-Black racism that is deeply embedded in U.S. society. Further, while racial differentiation undeniably shaped the
perspectives of employers, it did not do so in only one way. I heard anecdotal evidence about employers’ preferences and beliefs about which workers were “higher-status” that cut in a number of different directions: the “strong” Caribbean worker, the “nurturing” Latina, the “hard-working” Filipina, the “spiritual” Tibetan and Nepali worker and so on. These stories demonstrated a virtual panoply of racist and essentialized attitudes about the many different groups of women who work in the industry. Whenever I heard anecdotes that implied that employers considered a certain groups of workers to be status symbols or the “best workers,” I would hear another story the next day that implied the opposite. Employers’ racialized attitudes are clearly a central factor explaining the relegation of immigrant workers of color to the lower tiers of the industry. But we cannot explain the distribution of different groups of workers within the stratified layers of those lower tiers strictly by pointing to employers’ attitudes, since those attitudes manifest in so many different ways.

Also, there was not a straight-forward correlation between workers’ racial and national backgrounds and their access to “high-status” professional skills in the industry in New York City. Workers come from a range of racial and class backgrounds in their nations of origin. For example, some Latina workers came from wealthier backgrounds and tend to be lighter-skinned, college-educated and bi-lingual. Other Latina workers from the same nations come from rural indigenous backgrounds, and these women tend to have much more limited experiences with formal education and to be monolingual speakers of Spanish or of indigenous languages. Many Caribbean workers had graduated from college and had worked as professionals in their nations of origin before migrating, while others had worked as factory workers or domestic workers. Differently from the racialized assumptions of U.S. society, which often treat communities of
color as monolithic units, there was not a strict racial or national line that determined which
groups of immigrant workers of color would have the “high-status” capacities that higher-income
employers sought. But, even though they come from a range of class backgrounds in their
nations of origin, workers from the same nation and region often still inhabited similar strata in
the lower tiers of the domestic work industry.

Each of these different explanations offers a partial insight into the reasons for the racialization
of the industry’s lower tiers, but a more integrated explanation emerged over the course of the
conflict in the History of Domestic Work training. Through the course of their struggle, workers
found their way to a shared analysis of the central importance of workers’ tenure in the domestic
work industry. That is, the longer immigrant workers are in the United States, the further they are
able to climb up the industry’s informal occupational ladder. The upward mobility strategies that
workers deploy to climb the occupational ladder in the domestic work industry all take time. It
takes years to learn the ropes of the industry, to build strong social networks with other workers
and employers, to develop the skills and confidence to negotiate effectively and to gain
professional accreditation and experience. Workers tenure in the industry is central in shaping
their location in the industry’s lower tiers. But why would tenure in the industry, which seems to
be a racially neutral factor, come to manifest in racial stratification?

Different regional and national groups have tended to immigrate and enter the industry in
different waves, beginning with Afro-Caribbean workers in the 1970s, followed by Central
American, Pilipino, Mexican, Nepali and Eastern European workers over time. Each of these
groups has a different tenure in the industry, and so the stratifications in the industry correlate
with race, region and nationality. Each of these waves of workers started at the bottom of the industry, often in low-wage live-in work with endless hours and few benefits. Myrna described these dynamics as she saw them playing out in Tribeca to me once, saying,

You know, you come into the country, and you need the money. So there’s no negotiation. You just go right ahead, and you accept what these people say. You never ask them for a contract. Right now, it’s the Tibetan women. The Filipinos go through it. The Spanish go through it. You are undocumented, and...you might have family over here or family over there. You’ve got to get the money, so you take whatever comes. And they take the abuse.

Over time, workers in each of these waves built networks with their national and regional peers to help them navigate the industry, learning the established standards and promoting the development of a collective sense of regional and national advancement along with their individual advancement (Das Gupta 2006). This can contribute towards the development of a region- or nationality-based sense of solidarity, which can simultaneously contribute towards the emergence of resentment or competition between workers from different regions and nationalities. Thus, while the stratifications in the industry correlate with the different tenures of different groups of workers in the industry, they manifest as racial stratifications between immigrant women of color from different regions and nations.

In addition to the time they need to climb the industry’s occupational ladder, tenure also impacts workers positions within the industry’s lower tiers because it take time for many newly immigrated workers to clear the first two hurdles they need to cross if they are going to escape the industry’s lowest tiers: legal residency and, for non-native speakers, English language fluency. A large proportion of the workers in the industry spend time working without legal documentation. It takes many workers years and even decades to procure legal residency, and even longer to gain citizenship. Undocumented workers are often hired by lower-income
employers. It is difficult for workers to get jobs in the industry’s middle strata without legal residency since many of these employers fear the legal ramifications of employing undocumented workers. Further, undocumented workers are often made more vulnerable, due to employers’ threats to “call immigration” or their reliance on particular employers’ sponsorship of their residency applications (Colen 1990; Panagiotopoulos 2012). Immigrant workers from all racial backgrounds and regions articulated these struggles, but the workers who had been in the country for longer were more likely to have gained residency or citizenship status. These developments gave them access to higher-waged jobs and more confidence in their negotiations with their employers.

Language fluency is a central and implicitly racialized factor shaping the location of workers in the industry’s stratified lower tiers, but it does not impact all immigrant workers in the same way. Language fluency provides a strong explanation for the location of Afro-Caribbean women and Filipinas above Latina workers in the industry’s lowest tiers, and stratification between Latina workers in the industry largely traces along the classed lines of bilingual capacities. The importance of English language fluency showed itself in the conflict during the History of Domestic Work training when Meches talked about employers discriminating against Latinas because they did not speak English. While some Latina workers enter the United States with bilingual capacities, many Latina workers are only able to develop English language fluency after migration, providing another example of the impact of tenure on their position in the industry.

56 Given the centrality of English language capacity to workers’ location in the industry, this is a topic that deserves more exploration than is possible here. The relationship between race, language, documentation status and stratification in the domestic work industry would be a rich area for future research and analysis.
Implications for the Organizing

This story reveals that worker solidarity is not spontaneous and it cannot be assumed, particularly in such an individualized and highly stratified industry. Solidarity must be treated as a process of continual contestation and construction. Workers’ organizations are an essential site for this process of engaging contradictions and building deep forms of solidarity (Fantasia 1988).

Allison captured this role well when she told me,

I feel - in DWU - we have that space where the workers are one unit, and they’re able to share their stories, to negotiate and bargain for very similar or the same wages. And that’s one of the benefits to organizing, to being in the group: that we can see the picture for really what it is and not for what we think it is.

But there are many ways to approach the process of building solidarity, and the particular paths that different organizations choose are decisive in shaping the kinds of solidarities that can be built. The conflict in the History of Domestic Work training reveals that it is more politically effective to approach these antagonisms as an expression of workers’ “partial” consciousness, rather than approaching workers’ feelings of antagonism as an expression of “false consciousness.” In this case, workers’ “partial consciousness” focused on one structural aspect of the industry: tenure-based racial stratification. Racial stratification does not explain everything about the industry, but it is a very real aspect of the industry that is readily apparent to workers on a daily basis. Racial stratification must be engaged by workers’ organizations if they are to speak to the ways in which workers actually experience class relations.

It can be tempting to avoid those kinds of tensions out of fear that they will harden the antagonisms between workers. But the process of conflict described here demonstrates that, rather than hardening that antagonism, explicit struggles over these dynamics give workers a space to work through the tensions that emerge out of the structural reality of racial
stratification. By opening up a dialogue about racialized tensions between Caribbean workers who tend to inhabit the higher strata within the lower tiers of the domestic industry and Latina women who labor in its lowest strata, a more complete narrative about the industry emerged. Caribbean women had also accepted sub-standard conditions when they first migrated, but they had generally been in the country for longer, and they had more time to climb the industry’s informal occupational ladder. Latinas tended to be newer to domestic work and therefore still in the early stages of navigating the industry’s tiers.

When Liliana spoke about the experience of newly immigrated Latina workers, saying, “You have to understand what these new immigrants are going through.” Describing the comparative wages workers receive in the United States as opposed to their nations of origin, she opened space for the Caribbean workers to reflect on their own experiences as new immigrant workers. When one Caribbean worker said, “We all went through this,” the focus of the dialogue shifted from a focus on their differences to an emphasis on their shared antagonisms with employers, “It’s them that are taking advantage of us. It’s not because we are dumb or stupid. The people on top are exploiting us all.” This shift highlighted the importance of building mutual support between newer and more seasoned workers across racial and regional lines.

This struggle took a partial truth about stratification, which was a static snapshot of a particular moment in the industry, and placed it in a dynamic, historical narrative that revealed a more complete truth about the ways in which immigration waves and occupational tenure shape the

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57 Here, I differ from Panagiotopoulos’s (2012) interpretation of this conflict. She viewed the conflict as an expression of racial divisiveness, a divisiveness which she attributes to an emphasis on racial oppression as opposed to class exploitation in DWU’s educational work. I view the conflict as a process through which workers worked through their feelings of racial antagonism - feelings which I attribute to the racial stratification of the industry’s lower tiers - in order to find their way to a deeper sense of class unity.
structure of the industry. By directly engaging their “internal ruptures and antagonisms,” the members of DWU came to understand that their shared experience was more about a *shared trajectory* in the industry over time than it was an experience of *shared position* in the current moment. This reframing helped DWU’s worker-leaders to work “with and through” the divisions that exist between workers from different regions and racial backgrounds. By reflecting on their shared experiences as immigrant workers, they were able to turn these potential sites of difference into a process of building a sense of shared identity with each other and of shared antagonism with their employers. Rather than “overlooking” their differences, they developed a way to “see through” them in order to find their way to a more integrative understanding of inter-racial dynamics between workers in the industry. This implies that directly engaging the differences and divisions between working people can contribute towards the development of a “deep solidarity” which can incorporate both commonalities and differences.

Building solidarity is a delicate process, and it relies on a sensitivity to the stratifications in the industry and their correlation with workers’ class backgrounds, tenure in the industry, migration patterns and the dynamics of race, region and nationality. Rather than dismissing the tensions that can emerge from these dynamics with pre-emptive calls for unity between workers based on their similar experiences, we are more likely to gain theoretical and political traction if we lean into the complications within workers’ consciousness, approaching these contradictions as the only reliable paths for building meaningful unity between working people. This can probably best be captured in the words of the worker who, at the end of this conflict, said, “We have differences, but in the end we are all working for the same thing...We are all working class people.”
One April afternoon, approximately 50 domestic workers gathered at a local labor college for DWU’s annual Nanny Course. They were going through a workshop on the relationship between globalization and the domestic work industry in New York City. At the beginning of the workshops, the workers talked about the work they had done in their nations of origin before they decided to migrate to the United States. The survey that emerged from that conversation demonstrated that, while they do similar work today, immigrant domestic workers came from a strikingly wide range of class backgrounds, reflecting the diverse composition of the broader domestic work industry. Ten women from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Honduras and Colombia were retail workers, while seven women from Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru and Trinidad owned their own businesses. Two women from Honduras labored in garment factories, while three women from the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Jamaica had been factory managers. Sixteen women from Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Trinidad, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Mexico and Peru had professional careers as government administrators, teachers and nurses while twelve women from Colombia, Trinidad, Jamaica, Mexico and St. Lucia had worked in manual labor jobs including agricultural work, hotel cleaning and domestic work.

In the here and now, they all work in the same profession, and they face similar challenges. Back home, some of these women would have supervised the others. Some of these women would have hired the others to raise their children and to clean their homes. But workers’ experiences with class in their nations of origins do not just live in the past. They persist as living realities
that continue to shape the experiences of workers who currently inhabit a shared class position in their work in the domestic work industry in the United States. As Roger Rouse (1992) has argued, we cannot accurately understand the ways in which today’s immigrant workers experience class by attending only to their experiences in their receiving nations. Past experiences shape the ways in which workers interpret their present. This influence is more than resides of past experiences shaping workers’ contemporary worldviews; it reflects the persistent transnational nature of workers class positions. Immigrant workers tend to remain closely connected, both economically and socially, with their nations of origin. Even if they intend to settle permanently in their new nations, many immigrant workers still return home for visits, speak regularly with friends and family members, send them money, buy property and help to seed businesses. Their social and economic lives are transnational. Their experiences of work and class in their nations of origin thus remain a living, rather than a residual, force in their lives.

These transnational experiences of class shape immigrant domestic workers’ experiences in the industry, particularly since many workers struggle to come to terms with their social degradation vis-à-vis their experiences in their nations of origin. Rhacel Parreñas (2001) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) used the term “contradictory class mobility” to describe the simultaneous upward economic mobility of migrant domestic workers and their downward social mobility. That is, many immigrant workers left their nations of origin because they were either not able to find work in their nations of origin or they could not find jobs that paid them sufficiently to maintain the lifestyle they desired. So they migrated in search of better-paid work. They often found that jobs in the domestic work industry were their only option. These jobs allowed them to earn higher wages vis-à-vis their nations of origin and therefore to procure upward economic
mobility. But, at the same time, domestic work is a socially degraded occupation; the work is not seen as professional or socially valued, and workers are often treated disrespectfully. Thus, while immigrant domestic workers experienced upward financial mobility, they also experienced downward social mobility.

These dynamics were painfully difficult for almost all of the domestic workers with whom I built relationships. Contending with the simultaneity of upward economic mobility and downward social mobility and with the simultaneity of their class positions in their nations of origin and the United States was often an overwhelming, frustrating and shame-inducing experience. Workers struggled to come to terms with their changing identities, grappling with profound shifts in their material conditions, in their experiences on the job and, perhaps most painfully, in the ways in which they were perceived by their families and communities in their nations of origin.

At the same time, however, as they were struggling with the pain of downward social mobility, workers were also able to mobilize their experiences in their nations of origins to put the nature of the domestic work industry in the United States into perspective. Rouse (1992) argued that

> Settlers can often draw more directly than citizens on practical knowledge of an alternative way of life...The images of an alternative way of life which settlers draw upon in responding to class-related discipline affect them not simply with the cloying power of a formative past but as vital aspects of their existing lives and crucial guides to future possibilities. (47)

Workers’ experiences from their past occupations in their nations of origin, their “practical knowledge of an alternative way of life,” served as evidence that workers could marshal to combat the corrosive effect of employers disrespectful and demeaning treatment. It clarified that their exploitation and degradation were not natural or inevitable. That knowledge served as a
valuable asset in workers individual negotiations and in the collective organizing process; in other words, it served as a “crucial [guide] to future possibilities.”

As we saw in the last chapter, we cannot accurately understand workers’ experiences by looking at structural position alone. People who share a common position in the class structure may share a set of experiences, but those experiences will be interpreted differently for reasons of culture, politics and ideology. These different interpretations can lead to different political subjectivities and approaches to struggle. Building the kind of shared identity and worldview that give “class” its political meaning is a highly contested social, cultural and political process (Hall 1986a; Przeworski 1977; Thompson 1963; Wacquant 1991). In this case, domestic workers’ experiences with their current class positions are complicated by their experiences with and beliefs about class in their nations of origin. We will misinterpret workers’ lives if we only look at a snapshot of their experiences in the current moment; we need to place those snapshots in more dynamic historical narrative of their experiences. We also need to lift up out of a strict focus on exploitation in the workplace. Workers’ relationships with their employers, of course, matter profoundly, both socially and materially. But, as feminist scholars have long reflected (Scott 1988; Steedman 1987), working peoples’ experiences with and analyses of class dynamics are also profoundly shaped by their social relationships with each other. Since immigrant workers’ experiences with class take place on a larger, transnational plane, they require us to lift far up out of the workplace in order to fully understand class relations. This chapter will work to excavate workers’ experiences with class in their nations of origin in order to explore the ways in which those experiences interact with and influence their current experiences in the domestic work industry. It will attend to the resonances and disjunctures between the experiences of workers
from different class origins, looking at how these differences shape the meanings that workers
give to their experiences in the workplace and how they influence their approaches to individual
and collective struggle.

Revisiting Workers’ Stories
To ground this exploration more deeply in the lived experiences of workers, I want to return to
some of the stories that opened this work. These stories reveal that these women came from an
astounding range of class origins in their home nations.

Allison, who grew up in a small fishing village on the coast of Barbados, comes from a long line
of domestic workers. Her grandmother worked for a wealthy white family in Barbados, and her
mother spent a number of years working as a domestic worker in the United States. Her
childhood memories of the ways in which they were treated by their employers motivate her
organizing today: that her grandmother could not be with her family on Christmas day because
she had to cook for her employers, that her mother deferentially referred to her employers as
“Mister” and “Missus.” Allison barely knew her father because he had migrated to New York
where he worked in the restaurant industry. When she graduated high school, she was
unceremoniously sent to New York City to live with her older sister, who also worked as a
domestic worker and who helped Allison find her first jobs in the industry.

Her story contrasts sharply with Meches’ experiences. Meches was raised in an upper-middle
class family in Guatemala. Her father was an engineer who managed a factory, and her mother
was a stay-at-home housewife. She remembers growing up in comfort and running safely
through the streets of her well-off neighborhood, even as many people in the rest of the country struggled with poverty and street violence. Meches’ family employed two domestic workers, indigenous women from the mountains who lived in their home. Her parents paid her way through college, expecting her to graduate, get married and raise children in the same pattern as she had been raised. After college, Meches worked as an *au pair* in France for a while, and she later migrated to the United States to study play therapy. While in school, she started working as a nanny. Meches appreciated the personal freedom she had in the United States, but, over time, she found herself stuck in the domestic work industry.

Martina has inhabited a number of different class positions over time. She grew up in relative poverty in a rural part of Jamaica. Her father migrated to England to work, and he sent money home. Her mother cleaned houses and took in laundry to make ends meet. Martina was a good student, and she won a scholarship to college. She became a teacher and an administrator of a Catholic school, where she relished the collaborative working environment and the social respect she received for her work. Martina bought land, and she started building a house where she could eventually retire. But her salary at the school was not enough to cover the rising construction costs. She started migrating to the United States during the summers to earn extra money as a domestic worker, and she eventually decided to stay year-round until she could earn enough money to pay off her house.

Bianca also worked as a teacher and a school administrator in Uruguay. She had been raised by a father and mother who built their successful businesses in electrical wiring and dress-making, respectively. Bianca also built her own business, a profitable language school that employed
seven workers. It was too much for her to manage all these professional tasks and her home at the same time, so she hired a domestic worker to take care of the housecleaning, cooking and some of her child care needs. When financial challenges and a personal crisis rocked Bianca’s life, she decided to leave Uruguay and come to the United States to live with her son who had migrated earlier in search of work. At first, she did temp work in factories and janitorial work, but she eventually found her way into the domestic work industry.

Each of these women has struggled to come to terms with her personal trajectory, as have the other women whose stories began this book: Pat who worked in a garment factory in Barbados, Marlene who worked in a poultry processing plant, Sylvia who had done farm work and domestic work in Mexico, Liliana who migrated as a teenager from Guatemala to help her family support her disabled brother, Myrna who had worked as a book-keeper and owned a cafeteria, Gabriela who owned a clothing store and Jennifer who had worked as an accountant for a government development agency. Regardless of their class backgrounds, all of these women entered the domestic work industry at the bottom of its ladder, either taking low-paid jobs as live-in workers or piecing together poorly paid part-time jobs. They had a remarkable level of similarity in their initial experiences in the industry: long hours without overtime pay, low wages that grew over time as they moved between jobs, the constant pressure from employers to take on more and more of the household’s work and painful stories of disrespect from their employers.

They also had similar tales of their intentional work to climb up through the ranks of the industry, but, notably, their class differences influenced the tools that they used in their climbing.
The women who grew up in more privileged homes drew on their class-inflected capacities, like college degrees, to assert their professionalism and therefore to advance through the ranks of the industry more quickly (Parreñas 2001). For example, Sylvia’s monolingualism limited her ability to climb very high in the industry, while Meches’ bilingualism made her ability to speak Spanish an asset in her job applications. But many of the women who been poor and working class in their nations of origins were also able to climb the industry’s ladder by taking professional development courses like baby nursing and child development at community colleges, by accumulating experience and building up strong résumés and by developing strong relationships with employers and extensive social relationships with other workers. So even though class background mattered in workers’ ability to effectively navigate the industry’s stratifications, it did not mechanically determine how high they were able to climb. What does, however, seem to be more directly shaped by their class backgrounds are the ways in which workers experienced downward social mobility and the ways in which they interpreted their work. While workers from all class backgrounds articulated struggles with shame and the stigmatization of servitude, the struggle with downward social mobility had a particular intensity for the domestic workers who had been middle class or professional workers in their nations of origin.

**Making Meaning out of Downward Mobility**

There were a number of themes that emerged in workers’ articulation of their struggles with downward mobility and their experiences of domestic work: changes in their material conditions, struggles over employers’ disrespect, shaming from their families and ethnic communities and personal struggles to come to terms with their changing identities.
At the most basic level, workers’ downward social mobility had material implications. Although almost all of the immigrant domestic workers I spoke with were making more money than they had been able to make in their nations of origin, this difference was only relative to their nations of origin. Their wages did not stretch as far in the United States. Thus, while they may have been upwardly financially mobile with respect to their nations of origin, illustrated by Martina’s ability to finance the construction of her new home, they lived in materially poorer circumstances in the United States. Bianca reflected, “This situation I am in is very humbling, because, until everything crumbled down, I had a very good income back home. And coming here and counting your pennies and sometimes having to borrow money, it was so tough.” Martina echoed this experience, “How I'm living here is way below how I used to live back home. It's like I came here to say I would get a better life, but the life here is not better. If I was back home, I would be living better.” When these hardships were understood to be a temporary period of difficulty that would end with upward financial mobility upon their return to their nations of origin, as it was in Martina’s case, workers could more easily cope with material deprivation. But when there was no end in sight, as in the case of Bianca who had not achieved upward mobility vis-à-vis her home nation and who therefore had no plans to return home, the pill of material deprivation was more bitter to swallow.

The women from working class origins did not share this same disorientation of having had material luxury in their nations of origin and facing poverty in the United States. But many women spoke wistfully about how, even though poor people in their nations had significant material challenges, they could supplement their low wages through mechanisms outside of the private market by eating fruit off the trees, growing their own food in kitchen gardens or accessing support through their social networks. The Caribbean workers spoke about the
differences in work hour expectations in their nations of origin that, even through the work was hard, the workday ended at 4pm, a significant contrast to the endless workdays faced by many domestic workers. And while past material comforts were not primary for these workers, many of them did negatively compare their present conditions with hoped-for comfortable futures. Pat dreamed of a peaceful retirement with her husband on the beaches of Barbados, while Sylvia looked forward to returning home to her soon-to-be college-educated son. When hope for these imagined futures evaporated, for example, when it became clear that Pat’s many years of hard work were no longer likely to manifest in a secure retirement and when Marlene reached retirement age but had not accumulated sufficient savings to retire comfortably, these experiences of exploitation and material deprivation in the United States became more difficult for them to accept.

An even more charged site where workers experienced downward social mobility was the shock of being treated disrespectfully by employers. Many women who had been business owners in their nations of origin were used to being treated with respect by their employees, and professional women were used to being respected for their professional skills. Both groups of women were used to a level of deference in their homes as employers of domestic workers themselves. These women expressed a great deal of anger and resentment at their current employers who, in Martina’s words, “treated us as less than we are.” Martina described the differences in her experiences as a schoolteacher to her experiences as an elder care provider,

Where I worked, we were like a family. We never do anything without consulting the others. We all worked together to figure out what should happen with the students, and everyone’s opinion mattered....Here, I’m taking care of somebody’s house, and then they don’t see me. I'm doing the work, but I'm invisible.
There were echoes of this experience in the stories of some of the domestic workers who had come from more working class backgrounds. Pat spoke about the positive relationship she had with the managers of the garment factory in which she had worked. While there were sometimes points of contention over issues like pay, hours and working conditions, she said that these issues had been able to be resolved through friendly negotiations. Pat contrasted these experiences with stories of outright disrespect and demeaning treatment by some of her employers here.

Workers from both working class and middle class origins were thus able to marshal the differences between their working experiences in their nations of origin and their work in the United States as a foundation on which to construct critiques of the domestic work industry. These strategic deployments of their past experiences with work inevitably took class-inflected forms. The former professionals drew on their experiences of autonomy at work and respect in their communities to help them understand and challenge their employers’ micro-managing tendencies and the shaming they received from their communities. The women who had worked in factories drew on their experiences with union organizing in order to facilitate their negotiations with their employers or their memories of a consistently shorter workday as sources of critique of the endless hours that they face in their current work. These comparisons safeguarded against an understanding that saw the dynamics of their current work as universal, inevitable or natural. Almost all of the workers drew on their memories of being treated with respect and dignity by their peers in their nations of origin as a resource that helped them on the job and in their organizing. Drawing on these contrasting experiences of class helped them to respond to these dynamics of material deprivation and disrespect from employers with anger and resentment, reactions that clearly placed the responsibility on the shoulders of their employers, as opposed to reacting with self-blame or shame or feelings of inadequacy.
It was more difficult, however, for workers to resist internalizing the negative feedback they received from their families and their communities of origin. These experiences often caused workers a great deal of pain, shame and suffering. Many workers who had been professionals in their nations of origin described the shift from being perceived with social respect for their work to being tainted by the stigma of servitude. Jennifer reflected that, “People who have known me in Trinidad and know the person that I am academically and that I worked for the government, they don't feel good as to I being a domestic worker.” Martina spoke wistfully about how she was seen by her community in Jamaica, “I, as a teacher, was seen as a middle class. People would look up to me, respect me...They would never say a bad word if they see a teacher or a nurse, or a police or so on because that level of respect was there.” This contrasted sharply with the degradation they experienced in the United States. Workers with college educations received a particularly sharp type of feedback from their families who saw the time and resources invested as a waste. Meches said, “It’s been really hard because I went to college, and now I am being a nanny. Sometimes my mom says, ‘I paid so much for your education. And you are just a nanny.’” Bianca echoed Meches’ experiences,

My mom still can’t make up her mind and accept the reality that I am a nanny and a housekeeper. She can’t. She says, “What did you go to college for? Why did you study so much? What did you go to England for?” So many times. “Why did you get a scholarship to go to the States when you were seventeen? Where did all that education go? What are you trading your education for?”

Worker after worker repeated this refrain. Myrna said that people she knows are always saying, “Why are you in this job? You go to school.” Women told me they sometimes avoided talking to friends and family or that they stretched the truth about what they did in order to avoid embarrassment from their peers, calling themselves “teachers” or “tutors” instead of “nannies” or “domestic workers.” For some, it was a reason for them to avoid family and friends from back
home altogether. In talking about whether she would return home to Uruguay one day, Bianca reflected that, “I can’t go back in defeat. I can’t go back and say that I was a housekeeper here. Nothing will happen, but I will feel so humiliated having to say that.” Even when they did not receive explicitly negative feedback from their friends and family about their work, the absence of the social respect they had received for their work in their nations of origins was a painful experience.

This shift was most disorienting for the workers, like Meches and Bianca, who had gone from employing domestic workers in their homes in their nations of origin to being domestic workers themselves. Meches reflected that, “It was hard for me to call myself a domestic worker at first because I came from the other side of that back home.” Bianca told a similar story,

> Whoo! That transition was tough, very tough! It was very humbling....It was challenging because I had always had - or for many years - had someone to help me at home. I had somebody full time. So, being on the other side of the road...I thought the world of myself. I thought that I could do whatever I wanted. I was enabled. I was educated. I was smart enough. And finding yourself cleaning some guy’s bathrooms and his toilets because that was the only option there was? Yes, it was tough.

This reversal of roles in the employment relationship shook the foundation of their identities and their understandings of self, leading to struggles with depression and shame. One woman said that, when she realized that she was likely to be a domestic worker for the rest of her life, she went through a long period of depression during which she contemplated suicide. It was hard for many workers to hold both of these experiences simultaneously, often leading workers to “split” their identities by choosing to either solely identify with their past lives or solely with their present. Many workers who were struggling with downward social mobility chose to emphasize the past. This was expressed clearly when Martina reflected on the difference between how she was treated in Jamaica as opposed to how she was treated in the United States, saying, “Here, I
am not me, as it were. Back home, I would be me.” Others leaned towards the present moment. For many years, Meches tried to cut herself off from her past and reinvent herself as if she was newly made in the United States in order to avoid the pain of downward mobility. For example, she consciously chose to avoid speaking Spanish whenever speaking in English was an option because it gave her a sense of distance from who she had been in Guatemala.

While the women who had come from more working class backgrounds, like Allison who had come from three generation of domestic workers, also had to struggle with disrespect and exploitation on the job, they did not have to struggle with this disorientation in class identity. Allison’s family history actually seemed to serve as a resource on which she could draw in order to help her advocate for respectful treatment on the job. She was able to contextualize her individual experiences in a broader set of class experiences that she had witnessed her whole life, watching her grandmother and mother struggle in their work as domestic workers. Allison recognized these forms of disrespect and degradation when she experienced them in her own work, and she drew on her childhood resentment in order to challenge her employers. Coming into the industry from a stance of class resentment as opposed to a sense of class shame seems to have served her well in her ability to advocate for respectful treatment from her employers. Unlike the workers from more middle class and professional origins, workers who came from working class origins did not have to struggle with a shift in class identity in order to become feel empowered as workers.

This is not to say that these workers did not struggle with their own experiences with downward social mobility and shaming from their communities. Like the women from more middle class
and professional backgrounds, these women also articulated struggles with social shaming from their families and peers. But, in contrast to the women from more privileged economic backgrounds, this shaming was not about downward occupational mobility. After all, these women remained in similar kinds of occupations after their migration. Instead it seemed to be criticism about the social degradation of domestic work in the United States. Allison described a regular stream of negative feedback, starting with her family members before she migrated.

Home, growing up, I would take care of the neighborhood kids....But my brother-in-law - whose two kids I used to take care of - was the one who said to me, “Oh, you’re going to America to be like the rest: to take care of those people’s kids.” And I said to him, “Look, I took care of your kids and I loved doing it for your kids until they could fend for themselves. Why is it not OK now that I’m getting paid to do it?” I was able to connect what I was doing here to what I was doing home. It was that same nurturing and caring for kids. But - for more than a year after he said that to me - I would be pushing a stroller in the city, and I would do it with such shame. Because it was like, “You’re really in America, the land of milk and honey, doing this?”

This kind of negative reaction continued for Allison throughout her years on the job.

At first, I feared judgment from other people I knew who weren’t doing this work, and I feared judgment from society as a whole because this work isn’t valued. I knew that this work wasn’t valued from the way people treated me on the street, but I knew that it wasn’t acceptable. That judgment is a force to be reckoned with. People of color would say things, “Why are you pushing that white child down the street?” Men of color would say, “Would you hold my hand, too?” or “Come take care of me.” White people would watch you in a nasty way and turn their noses up. It’s hard to put into words. So when I started doing nanny work, I was really embarrassed about the work that I did - really, really embarrassed about the work that I did. It was really because that’s what I was made to feel.

These negative reactions were not about downward shifts in occupation, but they were still about shifts in class position. That is, even when they remained in similar occupations after migration, workers from working class origins received negative feedback for taking those jobs in the United States, given the particular racialized degradation of domestic work in the United States. These negative reactions were not about downward shifts in occupation per se; rather they seemed to be about the downward mobility that resulted from moving between different racial
class orders. This type of shaming seemed more common for the Afro-Caribbean workers, a pattern which echoes the dynamics that drove the mass exodus of African American women from the domestic work industry in the 1970s. After the Civil Rights Movement opened up other employment opportunities, many native-born Black women left the industry, citing their desire to leave an industry that had been so deeply marked by the history of slavery (Glenn 1992). It was immigrant women who filled the employment vacuum, but the changing composition of the workforce did not change the social degradation of the labor (Nadasen 2012). As I explored in Chapter 4, while it was painful for all of the immigrant women I interviewed to work in an industry that was redolent with the dynamics of slavery, it was particularly challenging for the Afro-Caribbean women who had a much more direct connection to that history.

Women from working class origins articulated several other forms of shame in connection with their experiences in the industry. For example, Pat struggled with deep depression when she was unable to find a job for several years and faced foreclosure on the homes she had worked so hard to procure. While she knew that her last employer fired her for what she saw as one of her moral strengths, that is, her capacity to provide loving care and to connect deeply with a child, she still felt that her economic challenges reflected some kind of moral failing on her part. “It said in the Bible that a virtuous woman take care of her home and her family. I started feeling like I’m not a virtuous woman anymore because I’m not taking care of my home and my family.” Over time, she has talked to other people who are going through similar struggles, and she concluded that it was not her individual failing and that the problems were more structural,

You always think that other people aren’t going through what you’re going through. And then you talk to other people, and you realize that they are going through the same thing as you are. It makes you feel not alone. It’s the poor people and the colored people and it’s the recession. It hit so many people.
Implications for the Organizing

These intertwined dynamics of downward social mobility and class differentiation between domestic workers shaped the organizing work of Domestic Workers United. At times, these dynamics served as facilitating factors in the organizing process, while at other times they presented contradictions and challenges. While there were rarely, if ever, clear discussions of these dynamics during DWU events and meetings, they often manifested in subterranean ways.

The simultaneity of workers’ anger and resentment at the way in which they were treated by their employers and the shame and pain they felt with respect to their communities of origin provided a complicated and constantly shifting terrain on which the organizing took place. Members’ struggles to come to terms with their changing positions and identities shaped their motivations for becoming involved in organizing around domestic workers’ rights, playing out in a number of different struggles between members. In turn, the organizing work came to impact the ways in which DWU members understood themselves and made sense of their trajectories. Surfacing these issues enables us to develop a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of class at play in this seemingly class-homogenous workers’ organization.

In speaking about why they got involved in organizing around domestic workers’ rights, DWU members drew on both their experiences working as domestic workers in the United States and their experiences in their nations of origin. They spoke about their anger at the way that they were treated on the job: the exploitation and, just as centrally, the disrespectful treatment they experienced from their employers. That anger was shaped and intensified through their comparisons with their very different experiences with work in their nations of origin. The stigma of servitude was a site for resentment because it differed so clearly from many of their
past experiences. To draw on Rouse’s framing, their “practical knowledge of an alternative way of life” provided them with the tools to critique and to challenge the “class-related discipline” they experienced on the job, which they often experienced as an attempt to convince them that they were fully defined by their positions as domestic workers. DWU members drew on both the pride they carried from their previous experiences and their resentments at their new experiences with disrespect as sources of motivation in their organizing. These women joined Domestic Workers United to challenge the structural degradation of domestic work as a profession, that is, to reject the devaluation of their labor that resulted from their current class position in the United States. But they also got involved in order to challenge their personal degradation, that is, to challenge the ways in which they were individually devalued as a result of their downward social mobility with respect to their nations of origin. In other words, they chose to reject their individual degradation by engaging in collective work to challenge the social devaluation of the industry.

This motivation played out in ways that were inflected by workers’ class origins. Members from working class origins spoke about how their labor was difficult and how they struggled materially, but they often emphasized that their employers in their nations of origin had still treated them with more respect. Their class pride showed up clearly in many of these workers’ narratives: workers who had been union members in their nations of origin spoke about the continuity of their struggles while workers like Allison were motivated to engage in organizing to do honor to the struggles of their parents and grandparents. Their narratives generally emphasized that, "No one should be treated this way because everyone deserves respect.” The narratives of workers from middle class origins tended to emphasize the ways in which the
stigma of servitude rendered their education and professional credentials invisible. For example, Joyce agitated members about the experiences of workers from professional origins during a meeting saying, “People were lawyers, doctors, teachers, but they come here and they are domestic workers. Domestic workers may be more intelligent than their employers, but they are made to seem less.” These narratives often emphasized, “I should not be treated this way because my education and professional skills deserve respect.” This framing does two things at once. It challenges the devaluation of domestic work by exposing the ways in which the social dynamics that shape the industry in the United States obscure important aspects of reality: they limit employers’ abilities to accurately understand the experiences and capacities of the workers in their employ, and they constrain workers’ abilities to exercise those skills and capacities. At the same time, this framing can also implicitly maintain the devaluation of domestic work by emphasizing that the main reason that these particular women should not be treated poorly by their employers is because they are not, in fact, really domestic workers, unlike other women who are not college educated and who may have been domestic workers in their nations of origin. By emphasizing that they should not be treated as “less than we are” because they had been professionals in their nations of origins, there was often an unspoken implication that domestic work was not, in itself, an occupation that deserved respect. These interpretations, while contradictory, were often simultaneous in workers’ narratives, reflecting the simultaneity of their transnational experiences of class. These contradictory narratives were never explicitly engaged in DWU’s organizing. Left unexplored, they manifested in a number of inter-class tensions between DWU members, which I will explore later in this chapter.
The social shaming that many workers received about their work from their communities of origin also shaped DWU’s organizing in significant ways. These experiences with social shaming made it difficult for many women to comfortably claim an identity as domestic workers. Domestic Workers United responded to these dynamics by intentionally working to build pride in the identity of “domestic worker.” As I have noted in previous chapters, the organization’s leaders had a practice of starting every speech with the phrase, “My name is ______, and I am a proud domestic worker.” This statement alone would often be met with a loud burst of applause, reflecting workers’ pride in their labor and also reflecting support for the bravery of the women who are willing to publicly claim work that is so degraded in society. It was an emotional experience for new members to hear women speak about their work in this way. Meches described this process to me, “I used to be ashamed. But now I don’t care. Being at DWU, it makes it different. I feel everyone is so proud about what they do. I am a nanny, and I am proud of being a nanny.” When domestic workers publicly claim their work, it is a deeply political and emotional act. It helps workers to not only challenge the degradation of their labor, but also to overcome the shame of downward social mobility and, in so doing, to build a shared identity as domestic workers.

The organizing work itself often served as a site where DWU members could redeem the shame they received from their communities. The organization provided a space where workers could demonstrate that they were not defined by their degraded occupation and that they had additional capacities that allowed them to serve as advocates for their communities. As Susan Tucker (1988), Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (1996) and Tera Hunter (1997) have demonstrated, community institutions, whether in churches or political organizations, have long provided an arena where
domestic workers who face regular humiliation in their workplaces could find spaces for self-expression and could build racial and class pride. In DWU, the organizing work served as an arena of personal empowerment for women whose daily labor is constantly degraded, and it also served as a site for community recognition and social redemption. The impact of this community leadership role became clear when the organization gained international notoriety after the passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Word about the victory travelled through various transnational social networks, and DWU leaders started to receive affirmation and praise for their community leadership not only in New York, but also in their nations of origin. Jennifer told one such story,

People who have known me in Trinidad - the person that I am academically and that I worked for the Trinidad government - they don't feel good as to I being a domestic worker. But now that the Bill is passed, and they know that I have been a part of that trek to Albany, I get a different response from my friends, especially the girls who went to college with me. A lot of them have recently been in touch with me because they may have heard that I'm with Domestic Workers United, and we just got a Bill passed. They see this as a really great big step forward. For those who understand American history, it goes right back to Harriet Tubman days and all that. So they feel like this is a great big victory, and you're a part of that. So now they're going to really embrace you. Had we not gotten the bill passed, I don't know if they would feel the same way about me because of the job that I'm in.

Jennifer had a mixed reaction to this feedback. She was proud to place herself in the lineage of Black women who had worked to challenge the racial inequities that have historically plagued the United States; she would often reference Harriet Tubman when she was talking about her work with DWU. She appreciated that her efforts were being recognized. But she was also frustrated that the women in her home country had looked down on her for doing domestic work before her community leadership was validated in this public way. She said,

I don't appreciate people like that too much because you have not really embraced me for me. So, why now? It doesn't make a difference. To me, it's the people who understood all along, who I could always tell what I was doing, and they would understand what I was doing and they would love me anyways.
When she later returned from a trip to Trinidad, she told me excitedly, “People back home used to look down on domestic work, but it is different now. Everyone wants to talk about it.” This implied that the Bill of Rights victory did not just validate her as a community leader in the eyes of her compatriots who continued to look on domestic work itself with disdain, but that the perception of domestic work itself was beginning to shift. This shift, from being respected as a community advocate while being shamed for being a domestic worker to being respected for being an advocate and a domestic worker, helped Jennifer to more fully integrate these different aspects of her life and work. Other workers from Guatemala, Mexico and Barbados reported similar kinds of transnational praise for the Bill of Rights victory. This suggests that domestic worker organizing can have important impacts beyond improving the social estimation of domestic work and workers’ material conditions in the United States. Bringing social validation to domestic work can relieve some of the shame that domestic workers receive from their home communities, challenging the pain and angst that have so negatively impacted these women’s lives. This, in turn, could lead to domestic workers being more comfortable with publicly claiming an identity as domestic workers, allowing them to advocate for better conditions from a place of confidence and pride.

But the redemptive role of organizing work also opens up a series of complicated dynamics. Workers from middle class origins sometimes approached the organizing work as a way to prove that they were not “just workers” and to distinguish themselves from domestic workers from poorer origins. For years, the organization had focused its efforts on the kind of advocacy work necessary to pass legislation at the state level: lobbying elected officials, winning over community allies, giving testimony at public hearings and running press conferences. Unlike
some non-profit organizations that rely on native-born and elite-educated staffs to play these roles, DWU placed a high premium on engaging worker-leaders as advocates. All of these activities required skills, like public speaking and knowledge of the law and the legislative process, that often correlated with higher education and professional work. Participating in these activities thus gave many of DWU’s leaders a space to practice the professional skills and capacities that they had acquired in their nations of origin, a welcome relief from the mundanity of domestic work and a chance to re-validate these under-utilized skills. This work also put them in direct relationships with people with a significant amount of social recognition, privilege and power: elected officials, journalists and union and community leaders. Receiving respect and validation from these power-players was a source of real pride for DWU’s leaders and a balm for their regular experiences with disrespect. After years of shaming from their communities for participating in this stigmatized occupation, many DWU members were understandably hungry for this kind of affirmative feedback from people with social power in the United States and for recognition from their families and peers.

At the same time, this hunger led to competition between workers for these kinds of publicly affirmed roles. While this kind of competition emerges in almost all organizations, in DWU it often broke along the lines of classed and racialized inequities from workers’ nations of origin. Formerly professional workers frequently registered class-laden criticisms about the leadership of former domestic workers, but it was formally led by native-born, college educated women, including Ai-jen Poo and Priscilla Gonzalez, who was the native-born and college educated daughter of a domestic worker. While these two women did not abdicate all public leadership roles, they took a highly facilitative approach to worker leadership. While they each took on some of the public roles during the course of the campaign, but they focused on behind-the-scenes networking and relationship-building. Whenever possible, they would pass public roles on to worker-leaders or they would share the stage with a worker-leader. Since Ai-jen left DWU and took on a role as the Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, she has taken on a much more direct public role.

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As described in earlier chapters, DWU had several former domestic workers on staff, but it was formally led by native-born, college educated women, including Ai-jen Poo and Priscilla Gonzalez, who was the native-born and college educated daughter of a domestic worker. While these two women did not abdicate all public leadership roles, they took a highly facilitative approach to worker leadership. While they each took on some of the public roles during the course of the campaign, but they focused on behind-the-scenes networking and relationship-building. Whenever possible, they would pass public roles on to worker-leaders or they would share the stage with a worker-leader. Since Ai-jen left DWU and took on a role as the Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, she has taken on a much more direct public role.
capacities of women who were less educated or socially esteemed in their nations of origins. One woman who had previously been a government worker pulled me aside during a public meeting, complaining that the woman from working class origins who had just given a speech should not have been allowed to have that kind of public role, saying, “She doesn’t represent us well. Her English is so broken.” Similarly, anonymous complaints were lodged through the organization’s feedback system, criticizing the leadership of monolingual Spanish speakers in the organization. Often these were challenges to the idea that monolingual Spanish speakers could lead in a multilingual organization, but one complaint, written in Spanish, went even further. It said something along the lines of “She doesn’t even speak Spanish properly because she’s an Indian,” referencing the forms of racialized class contempt towards indigenous people that characterize many Latin American societies. One Barbadian woman who had worked in factories before she migrated spoke to me about how she experienced these dynamics, “They [the workers from professional origins] don’t think we’re good enough to sit at the same table as them.”

These classed contradictions between workers were exacerbated by DWU’s non-profit structure. There has been extensive writing about the ways in which the so-called “non-profit industrial complex” can help to strengthen class divides; several authors (Bierria 2007; Kivel 2007; Rojas 2007) in INCITE’s anthology, argue that the professional skills required to manage the technical aspects of non-profit organizations tend to privilege the leadership of people with college educations. DWU has tried to challenge this pattern by having a Board of Directors that is entirely composed of worker-leaders, by training their members in both political and technical skills and by bringing workers onto staff. But there were still significant tensions over hiring workers in staff positions. While everyone agreed that it was important to have some workers on
staff, there was debate about whether the entire staff needed to be composed of current or former domestic workers in order to be consistent with the organization’s commitment to worker leadership. This debate over worker leadership was complicated by racial tensions and by individual workers’ interests in gaining staff positions that were seen as an escape from the degradations of domestic work (Panagiotopoulos 2012). Workers’ class backgrounds would play out in explicit ways during these debates over worker leadership and staffing structures. When Sylvia said that she did not think that any member in the organization was qualified to serve as the organization’s director, the same former government worker who had disparaged the “broken English” of the former factory worker stood up and angrily said,

Maybe you can’t do it, but some of us can. Domestic workers can run this organization ourselves. We don’t need outsiders. People think we are stupid. People think we can’t run organizations like this, but we are not just domestic workers. We went to college, but our educations aren’t recognized here in the United States. We are professionals, and we used to do this kind of work before we came here. I did this already. I worked for the government. I did this work. We can run this organization ourselves.

This is a complicated argument: “Domestic workers can run this organization ourselves” because “we are not just domestic workers...we are professionals.” Here, worker leadership is defined as the professional staff leadership of a nonprofit. The argument for that leadership is premised on workers’ professional backgrounds rather than in their grounding in the industry or their ability to play a meaningful leadership role with other workers. Here, the assertion that workers have meaningful leadership skills is not articulated primarily in opposition to an employer or even a more privileged native-born college-educated person, but in opposition to another worker with less formal education and without professional experience. This struggle reveals much about the

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59 Panagiotopoulos (2012) has also described these conflicts, exploring the racialized tensions that played out as some of the organization’s long-standing Caribbean members argued that Latinas were not “women of color” and therefore did not count as “real domestic workers.” This analysis has some merit, but it is complicated by the fact that this was not a position held by the majority of the Caribbean workers in the organization and that even the workers who articulated these viewpoints did not use them consistently.
complicated and contradictory nature of the seemingly straightforward and coherent notion of “worker leadership.” There are various class-inflected kinds of leadership roles, and presumptively homogenous groups of workers have a range of class-inflected leadership capacities. These kinds of complexities, shaped by the organization’s non-profit structure and by the complicated transnational dynamics of class among domestic workers, must be understood and surfaced if we are to engage in an authentic dialogue about worker leadership and the process of building worker power among immigrant workers, in particular.

Indeed, if these contradictions are not deliberately engaged, the organizing work can serve as a site that implicitly echoes and strengthens the societal degradation of domestic work. And they can help to harden the classed inequalities between workers who currently inhabit a similar class position. Even beyond the discussion of staff roles, I found that a heavy reliance on advocacy methods sometimes reinforced the internal class stratification between domestic workers. When workers from middle class origins played roles as advocates, their main engagements were with legislators and the media, not other workers. Through these engagements, they seemed to become less identified with the domestic workers in the lower ranks of the industry, whom they often spoke of as if they were hapless victims. Instead, they came to see themselves as people who were more educated and empowered, and therefore able to speak on behalf of less privileged workers, whom they often described as “those who can’t speak for themselves.” This approach to worker leadership seemed to strengthen the tendency of these workers from professional origins to enact class-laden forms of contempt, differentiating themselves from their peers from poorer backgrounds in an attempt to redeem the pain of downward mobility.
At the same time, the organizing work can serve as a site for challenging this tendency towards internal class differentiation and contempt. Meches’ experiences in DWU highlight the ways in which organizing can be a space that helps workers to engage deliberately with the pain of downward social mobility. It can help them to integrate their contradictory experiences with class, thereby enabling the development of deeper unity between workers from different class origins. As I have already described, Meches had a hard time when she realized that it would be difficult for her to escape the industry. She coped by trying to cut herself off from her past, avoiding her family and refusing to speak in Spanish. Shortly after she got involved with DWU, she participated in a leadership program that was organized by the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which focused on healing and personal transformation as crucial aspects of the leadership development process. In these sessions, Meches had space to begin to work through her struggles with shame over her downward social mobility. At the same time, Meches started working other Latina domestic workers. Because she joined the organization in the wake of the Bill of Rights, Meches was not pulled into the individualizing advocacy-based forms of leadership that can tend to strengthen classed distinctions between workers. Instead, she started to organize in the predominantly Latino neighborhood of Sunset Park, reaching out to low-waged housecleaners who were struggling to piece together enough jobs to get by. These women came from poor backgrounds in the nations of origin, and, in them, Meches said that she saw the reflection of the indigenous women who had worked in her home when she was growing up. These interactions were crucial in helping Meches come to terms with the disjuncture between her past and her present. This transition solidified during what may seem like an unlikely moment, while Meches was watching the popular Hollywood film, *The Help*, which told the story of the relationships between Black domestic workers and white families in the segregated
South. She saw the film twice. The film’s treatment of segregation in the intimate space of the private home was a powerful narrative for Meches. She said that the first time she was watching it, she mainly identified with the workers who were struggling to provide loving care to the white children in their charge while struggling to deal with the racism and the disrespect of their employers. The second time she saw it, however, a new perspective came into view. The turning point for her was the movie’s subplot, in which a sub-set of white employers begin a campaign to encourage the construction of segregated toilets in their homes in order to deal with what they saw as the health risks associated with their Black domestic workers using their bathrooms.

Meches said that she shot bolt upright in her seat, as she realized that her family in Guatemala had also constructed separate bathrooms for their domestic workers. Suddenly, she started to see herself and her family in the portrayals of the white employers, who spent much of their copious free time micro-managing and complaining about their domestic workers. She said, “I realized that I was getting educated to be: a good wife and a good mom. And that meant to sit in a café and complain about my domestic workers. That’s what I was supposed to do. That is what all of my cousins are doing now and some of my friends.” Instead of being ashamed that she wasn’t following that path, Meches was now able to find pride in her own trajectory.

I knew I didn’t want to do that, and I moved away from that....I challenged the future, my future. Now I can organize in Spanish and I’m proud to say that I’m a domestic worker in Spanish. And that’s huge. It’s been so good to be alive now and to be able to figure it all out. It really was painful before.

Rather than valorizing her past position in distinction to her current role as a domestic worker, Meches came to critique the inequities embedded in her earlier life. She found confidence and pride in her current work. She has continued to challenge the organization’s tendency to prioritize professionalized advocacy roles as the highest expression of worker leadership,
pushing the organization to prioritize organizing with the women who work at the lowest rungs of the domestic work industry.

While the ways in which workers respond to class differentiation and downward mobility are conditioned by their structural context, the ways in which they manifest in political organizations are not pre-determined. What these dynamics come to mean is contingent, shaped by individuals’ processes of emotional engagement with the painful experiences of downward mobility and by the ways in which organizations engage with those experiences. If these issues are left unacknowledged, they will play out in subterranean ways that can have a corrosive effect on building meaningful unity in immigrant workers’ organizations. As we saw in the last chapter’s conclusions with respect to the inter-racial tensions between workers, these tensions need to be recognized and brought out into the open if they are to be engaged productively in the pursuit of deeper solidarity, power-building and transformation.
CHAPTER 11: Conclusion

The story of Domestic Workers United is a bold story of a small group of women who chose to directly confront the quotidian forms of disrespect and exploitation that they face on a daily basis and to challenge the long-standing belief that it is not possible to organize domestic workers. Their courage and tenacity are inspiring, but their story should be read for more than a moment of hope in hard times. It should be read as an experiment that can contribute towards the development of new approaches to class analysis and new models of worker organizing.

Domestic Workers United’s work highlights the constraining and stratified models of economic citizenship and worker organizing that shaped labor politics in the last century. Their experiments suggest the scaffolding of a framework of worker rights, protections and power that transcends the factory paradigm of worker organizing and the framework of New Deal labor legislation. Their developing frameworks are better suited to respond to contemporary political-economic dynamics. Underlying this need for a political re-conceptualization is a related need for a reworking of theory towards more integrative and dynamic approaches to analyzing class.

In this conclusion, I will delve into three core themes that run throughout this work, exploring the insights that DWU’s work presents at the levels of both theory and practice. First, I will deal with the importance of deeply integrating race and gender into our approaches to class analysis

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60 There are innumerable examples of worker in other sectors engaging in similar experiments that push the edges of the “factory paradigm” of worker organizing: janitors, homecare workers, restaurant workers, farm workers and many more. There are dozens of scholars who have taken up studies of these experiments and who are engaging in similar questions. Because of concerns about focus and length, this chapter will focus specifically on drawing out the principles developed by DWU leaders, rather than drawing out the patterns that resonate with other sectors. That kind of comparative view would be invaluable, but it is one that must be done in another place and time.
and worker organizing. Second, I will explore the need to re-imagine economic citizenship and to conceptualize a new social contract. Finally, I will delve into the demand for more complex and dynamic approaches to understanding class relations and workers’ struggles.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{Expanding Class Analysis & Class Struggle}

It would be impossible to understand the dynamics of the domestic work industry if we restricted our analysis to class alone and left aside the gendered devaluation of caring labor and the dynamics of racialized servitude. We would also not be able to truly understand the industry if we lacked an analysis of the dynamics of class at play in the industry or if we abstracted our analysis from the broader political-economic trends that are driving the growth of the industry and encouraging international migration. If we are to develop meaningful insight into the experiences of working people, historically or today, it is crucial to develop a more integrative approach to class analysis (Davis 1983; Hill Collins 2009; Sacks 1989).

In addition to demonstrating the need for more accurately-tuned tools to make sense of the experiences of working people, I have argued that Domestic Workers United’s model provides an example of an “intersectional” approach to worker organizing in which the incorporation of work to address racial and gender oppression expands the terrain of class struggle, rather than narrowing it (Aptheker 1982; Dill 1983; Hooks 2000; Sacks 1989). This expansion requires a political orientation to organizing around issues of racial and gender oppression that resists the

\textsuperscript{61} This is not an exhaustive treatment of the core themes in this work. I will not, for example, explore the relationship between domestic workers’ infrapolitics and their collective resistance, nor will I explore the question of worker power in the domestic work industry. Those themes will have to be explored more deeply at another time.
pull to make that work narrow and particularistic.\textsuperscript{62} This requires a shift in political perspective, away from focusing only on the experiences and struggles of particularly oppressed workers to thinking about how their experiences are connected to the experiences of broader cross-sections of working people. This approach attends to the ways in which the limits placed on racially and gender oppressed workers restrain the struggles of \textit{all} workers. It unearths demands that simultaneously address the concerns of these particular groups of workers \textit{and} improve the lives and working conditions of a wider range of people.

Domestic Workers United’s approach reflects this political orientation, sometimes explicitly and at other time implicitly. One of the clearest manifestations of this expansive approach is DWU’s work to address the devaluation of reproductive labor, which is a growing site of social tension. The devaluation of caring labor creates real difficulties in the working conditions and experiences of domestic workers. Domestic Workers United engaged in activities that spoke specifically to domestic workers: holding Mothers’ Day celebrations to honor their labor, encouraging members to identify proudly as domestic workers, protesting abusive employers and advocating for the expansion of government protections for domestic workers. But the organization also recognized that the devaluation of caring labor does not only impact the workers who provide care; it also impacts employers and people receiving care. These people are struggling with the structural challenges of a society that reduces care to a private familial responsibility rather than a social responsibility that merits government support. By placing social reproduction, which presents as a “gender” issue, at the center of their workers struggle, DWU did not narrow their organizing to focus strictly on women workers. Instead, they opened

\textsuperscript{62} This is not to say that there is never a reason to focus strictly on the particular experiences of specific groups of oppressed people. It is to say that those decisions should not be made based on an assumption that that kind of strict focus is the only possible route.
up the limited ways in which we understand work, the workplace, workers rights and worker power. They expanded the scope of demands that could be placed on the state, contributing towards the development of a vision for a new social contract that explicitly addresses issues of social reproduction. These transitions expand the terrain of class struggle rather than narrowing it.

A similar argument could be made about DWU’s prioritization of the struggle against racial oppression, given, for example, the impact of the legacies of racialized servitude on all workers who labor in the service industries in the United States. Later in this chapter, I will delve into the expansive impact of DWU’s struggle against the racialized exclusion of domestic workers from the form of economic citizenship that was crafted during the New Deal.

_From the Margins to the Center of Class Analysis and Workers Struggle._ I began this work with the argument that, in order to develop new paradigms for worker organizing, we have to place the struggles of the lowest tiers of the working classes at the center of our analysis. Whereas white male industrial workers were the paradigmatic workers of the 20th century, I believe that low-wage workers of color are the paradigmatic workers of the 21st century. Their working experiences serve as a bellwether for trends in the broader economy. I have explored these trends throughout this work: the restructuring of the workplace, the reorganization and widespread commodification of reproductive labor, the changing nature of the racial project, the neoliberalization of the state and the changing composition of the working classes. These transitions have disintegrated many of the assumptions and conditions that underlay the factory

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63 This subheading is a reference to bell hooks’ (2000) *Feminist theory: From Margin to Center.*
paradigm of worker organizing: workers’ long-term relationships with identifiable employers with whom they could bargain for wages and benefits; the existence of public and centralized workplaces; workers’ ability to leverage their collective power vis-à-vis their shared employer by disrupting production; and a state with meaningful social welfare functions and the capacity to enforce workers rights in the workplace.

These assumptions never fit for many workers, particularly the workers of color, immigrant workers and women workers who have labored in low-wage jobs and jobs in the service economy. Their working conditions have long been decentralized, and their work precarious. They were written out the stratified form of economic citizenship that was crafted in the 1930s, and many of these workers are still struggling for full inclusion in those rights. Domestic workers represent an extreme version of many of these patterns. Their work is profoundly decentralized, informal and precarious. They have faced exclusion from many foundational workplace protections, and the laws that have included them have rarely been enforced. Because their working conditions contrasted so sharply from these assumptions, domestic workers used to be seen as the prototype of marginalization and of “unorganizability.”

But conditions have changed. The service economy has grown, and precarious labor has become more commonplace. More workers labor in decentralized and informal workplaces. Neoliberalization has eroded the protectionist hand of the state, and the remaining rights assured to workers have become increasingly out-of-sync with our current political-economic dynamics. As a result, these workers have moved from the margins of the economy and of the labor movement to the center. Precarious work now impacts not only these marginalized sectors but
also increasing sections of the working classes, reaching well up into the higher strata of the middle class. Increasingly large cross-sections of workers have come to be excluded from stable jobs, historically standard employment benefits and the right to organize and collectively bargain. As Ruth Milkman (2011) has pointed out, somewhere between a quarter and a third of workers are now excluded from collective bargaining rights. And the advance of the “right-to-work” agenda means that those rights have become increasingly restricted for those workers who are included. Further, the workers who are technically included in collective bargaining rights are having an increasingly difficult time exercising those rights effectively because of the changing structure of the workplace, specifically the decentralization of work that reduces the power of workers with respect to their employers. The issues facing low-wage workers of color will, more and more, be the central concerns of the working classes as a whole. Whether this manifests in the small workplaces that characterize service work or the decentralization of work through subcontracting, we need new frameworks that can respond to these new realities.

This transition from seeing these workers as the marginalized “exceptions to the rule” to seeing them as the paradigmatic workforces and the leading edges of the labor movement requires a huge shift in theoretical outlook and political perspective. Given the dynamics of the industry, it is easy to focus on the extreme oppression of domestic workers and to analyze the differences between their experiences and those of all other workers. But, if we are to take up the task of building a new labor movement, we must instead focus on the ways in which the extreme conditions facing domestic workers highlight broader patterns in the economy. This enables us to recognize that the organizing methodologies that they have used to navigate these challenging
conditions have the potential to provide broader insight for other workforces that are facing some of these conditions for the first time.

*Race and Gender Must Become Central Issues for the Labor Movement:* While the contemporary union movement has historically treated issues of race and gender as secondary issues or as divisive to their class-based efforts (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008), DWU’s successful campaign demonstrates the possibility of opening up a more expansive form of class struggle if we acknowledge that racial and gender stratifications that have been built into the working classes and place the struggle to overcome the mechanisms of that stratification at the center of workers struggle.

The fight to overcome the racialized degradation and gendered devaluation of domestic work is at the center of Domestic Workers United’s model of workers’ struggle. Gaining government recognition was a crucial step in that process, validating domestic work as real work that merited state protections and recognizing domestic workers as legitimate workers with rights that the government was obliged to uphold. Even workers who receive relatively solid wages and benefits and who were thus were not likely to materially benefit from the Bill of Rights wept with joy during the bill signing ceremony, finding comfort and hope that their socially degraded work would finally be recognized and treated with respect. DWU’s call for racial and gender equality confronted the long history of stratified economic citizenship in the United States, a political stratification that has been a central mechanism for embedding racial and gender oppression into the structure of the U.S. economy.
These kinds of efforts will become increasingly important as service work, which has long been racially marked and shaped by gendered norms, continues to grow. The gendered nature of service work is coming to define the working conditions of more and more workers, regardless of the gender of the people who do this labor (Chatterji 2010). And as women and people of color come to make up a larger proportion of the workforce, issues of racial and gender oppression will increasingly become central “class” issues. The labor movement needs to step decisively into the fray in social struggles over racial and gender oppression.

This transition requires the labor movement to give the struggle for dignity a centrality of place in worker organizing. The struggle for dignity is inseparable from the struggles for material gains. Workers’ struggles that are confined to economic issues around wages and benefits, while crucial, do not speak to some of the most significant aspirations of workers. The call for dignity and respect have echoed across any number of workers’ struggles, from the industrial workers of the 1930s who called for industrial democracy in the face of arbitrary and severe management (Lichtenstein 2002) to Black workers who incorporate the struggle against racialized forms of disrespect into their organizing (Kelley 1994) and women service workers who contend with sexual harassment and degradation in their relationships with customers (Cobble 2010).

The aspiration to bring dignity, respect and recognition to domestic work, which has so long been affiliated with the traditions of slavery and servitude in the United States, was one of the most powerful themes in Domestic Workers United’s work. Domestic Workers United’s work during the Bill of Rights campaign took on a crucial aspect of this fight for dignity and respect: the work to visibilize and revalue the labor of care in order to counter the gendered and
racialized devaluation of their labor. They used a number of frames to argue for the value of their labor: the “vocabulary of skill” which emphasized their hard-won expertise and the professional nature of their work; the “vocabulary of virtue” which stressed the moral significance of their work and which was centered on the relationships of love that exist between workers and the people in their care; and the “vocabulary of economics” which sought to demonstrate the importance of domestic work in the broader economy. These efforts relied centrally on storytelling, drawing on the stories of workers, of employers, of children who had been raised by domestic workers and by the children of domestic workers themselves. Through these efforts, Domestic Workers United sought to bring their labor out from its unrecognized underground role in the economy into the light, endowing it with economic, social and moral recognition. These efforts were intended to not only influence legislators to support the Bill of Rights, but also to impact broader social conceptions of the labor of care and domestic work. They hoped that this would, in turn, improve conditions in the industry by encouraging individual employers to treat the domestic workers in their employ as real workers who deserved labor standards and respect. Underlying these public efforts was an internal effort to build a “domestic worker” identity that was defined by pride rather than by shame. DWU’s practice of having worker-leaders constantly introduce themselves as “proud domestic workers” was a straight-forward but crucial method that helped new members to develop a greater sense of identification with their work and to find dignity in their labor.

While the struggle for dignity and respect have always been core to worker organizing, they are likely to become increasingly crucial as the structures and dynamics of work change. Today’s workers are facing a decline in wages and a deterioration of their working conditions, and these
are not experienced only as material issues but also as social and cultural experiences. The rise in low-wage labor, the growth of unemployment and the emergence of informal and temporary employment all create conditions for the increased social degradation of labor and social shaming of working people. As reproductive labor is re-organized and increasingly commodified, these efforts will become more and more crucial as gendered service work defines the experiences of growing proportions of the workforce in the United States. The uphill struggle to promote the dignity of all labor will be fundamental to the rebuilding of an effective and grounded labor movement in this country.

Re-imagining Economic Citizenship

Much of Domestic Workers United’s work was framed as an attempt to overcome the exclusion of domestic workers from labor rights and protections, an exclusion that reflected the dual legacies of slavery and the devaluation of women’s work. But DWU has a vision that goes beyond winning inclusion in historic forms of economic citizenship. The organization is a site for the re-imagination of that citizenship. DWU’s work contests the limits of contemporary state labor rights and protections, exposing the limits of New Deal worker rights and protections and uncovering the ways in which those limits were developed in order to advance racial and gender inequalities. It offers a site through which to interrogate the ways in which the specific form of economic citizenship that developed in 1930s has constrained the struggles of all workers in this country, even those who were relatively privileged by its inequities. The struggle against stratified economic citizenship has long been a front of struggle for domestic workers and other workers marginalized by state labor policies; today the struggle to re-imagine and expand our current limited form of economic citizenship is an increasingly important site of struggle for
broad sections of working class people whose lived realities are more and more out of step with current labor rights and worker protections.

Building on the work of a number of feminist scholars, I have argued that the model of economic citizenship that was established by the New Deal was not made available to all working class people. It was stratified along racial and gender lines, primarily providing benefits and mechanisms for power-building primarily to white male industrial workers and restricting these rights for many women workers and workers of color. I have gone further to argue that those limits had negative political ramifications that went beyond the constraints on the rights of these groups of workers. Those limits became constraints on the rights and power of all working people in the United States. By restricting the scope of social labor rights and protections to a minimal level, the New Deal framework channeled class-wide forms of workers’ struggle into the segregated realm of workplace organizing. Widespread worker militancy was directed into a government-regulated model of collective bargaining built around the model of the industrial workplace. While this model worked well for some groups of workers for a period, the ways in which this model of economic citizenship has limited the struggles of all workers has become clearer. Economic conditions have changed and made those historic tools outdated. The stratifications and constraints built into the framework of the New Deal limit the struggles of today’s workers.

*The Limits Of Equality*: Domestic Workers United’s work demonstrates that the struggle for equality is a powerful front for workers struggles but that it is also limited in significant ways. This power of the struggle for equality gave the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaign
significant moral power that enabled the organization to mobilize a wide range of different social actors in support of the Bill. The power of this vision provided a deep level of motivation to DWU’s worker leaders who saw this campaign as a struggle for respect and recognition. It was the message of equality that appeared again and again in the mainstream media. Legislators who were resistant to the call for expanded worker protections could be won over to the idea that domestic workers should receive equal protections under the law. The call for the end to racialized and gendered exclusions spoke to issues of concern in the women’s movement and the racial justice movement, enabling DWU to build support in these sectors. And it was the injustice of domestic workers’ exclusion from collective bargaining rights that swayed many union leaders to support the campaign. The fact that DWU was able to use the demand for equality to leverage such a significant level of political momentum is particularly significant in the current political climate in which the traditional union movement has lost a significant degree of public support.

The Domestic Worker Bill of Rights victory for equal inclusion was significant on both cultural and economic levels. Gaining inclusion in the standard package of rights represented a significant step forward in the cultural validation of domestic work as “real work,” worthy of recognition and protection. Inclusion in these standard rights and protections opened up the potential for improving the working condition of the lowest tiers of the domestic workforce. But, because it was mostly limited to the terms of equal inclusion, this victory was also constrained in important ways. There was a significant gap between the frame of equality and the expansiveness of the demands embedded in the original Bill of Rights that exceeded the standard protection provided to workers by the state. Struggles for equality should not be confused with
the struggle for higher standards. They cannot substitute for the fight to transform the terms of equality. But they can play a crucial role in opening up space for those expanded fronts of struggle.

In this case, the gap between established minimum standards and the original vision of the Bill of Rights highlights the limited boundaries of equal rights. Once the explicit exclusions were eliminated, the low floor of state protections is more clearly exposed. The fact that these limitations and constraints were developed in order to maintain racial and gender inequalities can now be clarified because of the success of the struggle for equality. The ways in which existent frameworks for collective bargaining cannot meet the needs of many of today’s workers can now be seen more clearly. The fact that this package of rights is dwindling due to the neoliberal offensive begins to surface. All of these now starkly defined realities illuminate the need to break open the limits of the New Deal framework of workers rights and to develop new more expansive structures.

There are many conceptual questions embedded in this distinction between the struggle for equality of rights and the struggle to expand and transform those rights: the difference in the struggles for recognition and redistribution (Fraser 1995) the limitations of rights-based struggles (Lichtenstein 2002), the difference between the struggle for equality and the struggle for justice (Vaid 2012) and the need to differentiate between struggles for equality of rights and struggles for equality of conditions (Chomsky 1987). These questions are beyond the scope of this work, but here it is important to point out that there are also important related questions of organizing
and strategy, specifically how to approach the relationship between the struggle for equality and the struggle for transformation.

*The Fight for a New Social Contract:* On its surface, Domestic Workers United’s work appears to be about a series of concrete policy changes focused on improving the conditions of domestic workers. But if we mine those struggles more deeply, we can see a struggle to win a new social contract in the United States.\(^{64}\) There is a growing recognition of the need to re-imagine the social contract in the workers movement in the United States. The current framework for labor rights and employment protections was developed in response to the emergence of an industrial economy and the industrial workers’ strike movement. As I explored in Chapters 6 and 8, this framework had its benefits: the wages and benefits of unionized workers in the United States were higher than those received by workers in any other industrialized nation for much of the 20th century. But it also had its drawbacks: the social safety net in the United States was weaker than that in any other industrialized nation, many workers, particularly women workers and workers of color, were excluded from its benefits and this framework contributed to stratifications and divisions between workers. But regardless of its strengths and drawbacks, that framework was based on a series of historically specific assumptions. Those conditions have changed, and there is a growing gap between the underlying assumptions of contemporary labor law and the current dynamics of the U.S. economy. The struggle to re-imagine and redefine that legal framework itself must be a central aspect of contemporary worker struggles.

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\(^{64}\) Rina Agarwala (2008) has noted the emergence of a similar fight for a new social contract among informal workers in India.
DWU’s efforts indicate that, to respond to the dynamics of our times, we need to recalibrate the historic balance that was struck during the New Deal between state protections and collective bargaining between workers and employers. Specifically, their work suggests that we need to radically expand the realm of state protections. In the Bill of Rights campaign, DWU led with a vision that went far beyond inclusion in the standard package of minimum protections. They called for a higher baseline in their advocacy for a living wage with cost of living adjustments, and they pushed to expand the realm of state protections to include benefits like paid vacation, paid sick leave, health insurance, notice of termination and severance. While the final Bill eliminated almost all of these more expansive provisions, its incorporation of three paid days of rest is significant. Although the provision itself is relatively minor, it suggests that it is indeed possible to win a broader range of social protections and a greater degree of state intervention into the workplace that go beyond the historic constraints of the framework first developed during the New Deal.

There are a growing number of campaigns around the country to pass legislation to raise the historically low floor of state-mandated standards: efforts to raise the minimum wage at both state and federal levels (Cunningham-Cook 2012), local fights to win living wage ordinances (Luce 2004) and campaigns for paid sick days legislation (Milkman and Appelbaum 2013; Moberg 2011) among others. The Domestic Worker Bill of Rights fits into these efforts to re-imagine labor rights and protections. Taken together, these campaigns suggest that, rather than

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65 I do not seek to argue that these materially small victories indicate the definitive presence of a new labor moment with the ability to substantively rework the framework for state labor law, but rather to argue that the recent deployment of legislative strategies that seek to raise the floor of state protections to workers in decentralized and informal industries suggests the emergence of a more expansive approach to state labor relations that could be more effective in improving the lives of working people than industry-by-industry collective bargaining strategies, given the dynamics of the current economy.
fighting for inclusion in or defense of the rights and protections established by the New Deal, the struggle for a higher floor of standard protections and a more interventionist state may be the primary fronts of workers struggles in the coming years. This focus on state protections is a strategic response to the decentralization of work. Given that workers who labor in smaller workplaces have lower levels of collective power vis-à-vis their employers, they are better able to leverage their collective power vis-à-vis the government. A focus on raising the floor and expanding the reach of state protections has another potentially positive benefits: because struggles for social labor protections push against the segmentation of interests and stratification of rights that have historically characterized many workers’ struggles in the United States, they also offer an opportunity for building a more expansive and inclusionary labor movement.

DWU’s implicit vision for a new social contract also offers a space for contestation over the social organization of reproductive labor. The Caring Across Generations campaign speaks to the need to expand worker protections and the social safety net in order to address the reorganization of reproductive labor. This federal-level campaign connects efforts to win expanded protections for workers with the attempt to increase state subsidies for seniors and people with disabilities who are in need of long-term care. It attempts to ensure the provision of quality care by developing job training programs for home care workers. One of the assumptions of the New Deal social contract was that child care and elder care were the responsibilities of private families. Reproductive labor was to be carried out by unpaid housewives, and that labor was indirectly resourced by paying “family wages” to male workers. In the current era in the United States, declining male wages, the widespread entrance of women into full-time waged work and the resultant reorganization of the family and the gender division of labor have rendered those
assumptions historically obsolete. While reproductive work is still overwhelmingly done by women, family’s daily needs are increasingly being met outside of the family through the private market: through child care centers, domestic workers, restaurants, laundries and so on. But many families do not have the resources they need to afford these services, and the burden of that stretch falls largely on the shoulders of the working class women who do that labor, many of whom are women of color and immigrant women. Rather than accepting this situation as a zero-sum game, this campaign connects the needs of care workers and families in need of care by demanding an expansion of the social safety to reflect the reorganization of reproductive labor.

More broadly, DWU’s work demonstrates that reproductive labor is not a private matter that should be handled on a family level, but that is rather a profoundly social question that necessitates social solutions. This places them firmly in the long history of working class women’s organizing and feminist struggles that have called for a guaranteed national income, the expansion of welfare, wages for housework, subsidies for childcare and more, struggles which have all demanded social recognition of and governmental support for women’s reproductive labor in the family.

While DWU’s organizing suggests that we need to expand the realm of state protections instead of relegating all standards to the realm of collective bargaining, it also suggests that we need to transform the framework of collective bargaining in the United States in order to enable effective negotiations between workers and employers. While it is not at all clear what approaches to bargaining will be ultimately be effective in such a radically decentralized industry, it does seem clear that any effective approach to bargaining will necessarily have to transcend the individualized negotiations that take place between individual workers and their employers in
private homes. The first path that seems possible is geographically-based bargaining between groups of worker and groups of employers. In the current collective bargaining framework, multi-employer bargaining is strictly voluntary. That is, employers must freely elect to join the bargaining unit; they cannot be required to bargain by legal mandate. If collective bargaining is to be made meaningful for domestic workers, we need new legal frameworks that facilitate and even mandate multi-employer bargaining, rather than restricting it. It would also be conceivable to develop methods of bargaining with the state to set wages and working conditions in the domestic work industry. Ai-jen Poo has reflected that establishing legislation like the Bill of Right to ensure higher standards is a form of “collective bargaining of a new type,” suggesting that the state should serve as a collective “bargaining agent” for workers who labor in decentralized industries and that this type of legislation could serve as a different type of contract. This process of re-imagining collective bargaining to contend with the dynamics of the new economy must be given higher priority within the union movement, which, even in the face of its decline, continues to expend an enormous amount of time and resources working within the increasingly ineffective model of the NLRA (Rolf 2013).

Finally, DWU’s work suggests that we need to re-enter a conversation about the need for tri-partite models for standard-setting, regulation and enforcement if we are to adequately respond to the demands of the new economy. In the 1930s, workers organizations were effectively

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66 Another approach to this strategic path that seemed potentially hopeful was the model established during SEIU’s homecare worker organizing in which the union runs a campaign to establish the government as an “employer of record” with which home care workers could bargain, a model which has also been deployed in the childcare worker organizing. These experiments were able to leverage the fact that home care workers and childcare workers were ultimately financed through public money, in the form of Medicaid and AFDC (Boris and Klein 2012). However, the idea that workers who were engaged in providing the socially necessary labor of care should be entitled to bargain with the state as a representative of the broader social good is likely to play a significant role in future organizing among domestic workers.
blocked from systematic participation in the development and execution of workplace rights and standards; that power was located solely in the hands of the government, which at times collaborated strongly with employers and more weakly with unions to carry out its role. That model always had its limitations, but it is no longer effective in the new economy, particularly in the realm of enforcement. As I explored in Chapter 7, if even the most minimum standards are to be enforced in low-wage industries, the government will have to build structured collaborations with workers’ organizations. These organizations have knowledge, community relationships and access that will be essential if the government’s enforcement efforts are to be effective.

Taken together, these various reflections on DWU’s work suggest the broad outlines of a new social contract which radically expands the realm of state-ensured rights and protections to address both the decentralization of work and the commodification of reproductive labor, which transforms the framework of collective bargaining to enable workers to bargain at a higher scale beyond their individual employers and which directly engages workers’ organizations in the development and execution of government regulation of the workplace. While these visions can only be seen in a cloudy hoped-for future, they do offer some helpful ways to ground the emerging dialogues about the need for a new social contract in the United States.

**Class is Complex and Dynamic**

My investigation of DWU’s work demonstrates the importance of a dynamic and nuanced understanding of class, one that deals with class as a relational and contested process in motion. This project is intended to help contribute to the reinvigoration of the original Marxist approach to analyzing class, an approach that understood the immense historical variability of class
structures and that captured the contestations and shifts that take place in those structures over time. But this dynamic approach has often been lost in later Marxist analyses that have treated class as a static category, confusing “abstract structural” analyses of class relations with “concrete conjunctural” analyses and conflating the economic, cultural and political aspects of class (Gramsci 1972; Hall 1986b; Mullings 1997; Przeworski 1977; Thompson 1978; Wood 1990; Wright 1985). In this work, I have tried to convey that class can be better understood as a story in formation rather than as a snapshot in time. Towards this goal, I attended to changes at the macro-level of “class structure:” shifts in the structure and politics of work, historical continuities and shifts in racial project and the changing organization of reproductive labor. I explored how these structural shifts have changed the terrain of worker organizing and the broader class struggle.

But a more central contribution of this work has been to convey the contradictions and dynamism at the micro-level of workers experiences. Although the women who were the subjects of my research inhabited a similar class position as workers in the middle tiers of the domestic work industry, that position did not define the entirety of their experiences of class, nor did it determine what their currently shared location would come to mean to them politically. As I have described, domestic workers have built an informal occupational ladder that has enabled them to access better jobs that pay higher wages where they are treated with a greater degree of respect. That trajectory within the domestic work industry shapes their understanding of class and their relationship with other workers in different tiers of the industry.
The nature and meaning of class in the domestic work industry is further complicated by the transnational nature of domestic workers’ experiences with class. As I have shown, domestic workers come from a range of class origins in their nations of origin, and many of them had significant experiences working in their home nations prior to migration. Domestic workers maintain ongoing social and economic connections with their nations of origin. Many workers have achieved a level of upward financial mobility in their nations of origin, for example, buying property for rental or for their own use and providing financial support to help family members achieve upward mobility. But many have also experienced downward social mobility, losing the social status that came with their professional occupations and facing social shaming from their friends and family members.

These dynamics complicate a static view of domestic workers class location. There is a “temporal complexity” (Wright 2005) to domestic workers’ experiences of class. Among the workers in this study, there were temporal differences between their class positions in their nations of origin and their positions in the United States. There were also temporal disparities between their entrance into the lowest tiers of the domestic work industry and their current location in its middle tiers. These dynamics also challenge homogenizing analyses of domestic workers, given the significant differences among domestic workers, both in terms of their class origins and their current locations in the industry. These differences are further complicated by racial, regional and linguistic differences between workers and by the length of workers’ tenure in the United States. These complications lead to a level of uncertainty about how these workers come to interpret class: how they understand their relationships with other workers and with employers and what assessments they make about effective avenues for advancing their interests.
The outcome of this indeterminancy is subject to political struggle. Each of these differences and disjunctures can serve as openings that can expose the inequities of U.S. society. They can be motivators of struggle. But they can also serve as obscuring forces and sites of closure to connection and solidarity between workers. For example, I explored the impact of the differences between workers’ experiences of racial class relations in their nations of origin and in the United States, a difference which clarified the racial inequalities in the United States and which motivated workers to engage in collective struggle. But a different set of dynamics showed themselves in ways in which workers responded to the differences in their class origins. Sometimes, these differences motivated collective struggle and solidarity. At other times, they served as sources of shame that discouraged workers from engaging in public organizing and as sites of classed tensions between workers.

We need to attend to these kinds of dynamic and differentiating experiences if we are to have a complete sense of what class actually comes to mean to working people. This is not only true for immigrant workers who have transnational experiences with class, but for many other groups of working people who are struggling with individual and intergenerational experience of downward mobility. This theoretical dynamism and complexity has parallel political implications for the process of worker organizing. Specifically, workers’ organizations need to attend to the differences between workers, rather than only emphasizing similarities. They also need to acknowledge the trajectories within workers’ experiences of class instead of only focusing on workers’ current experiences in the workplace.
**Unearthing the Contradictions between Workers:** While DWU members were able to build sufficient unity in order to win some structural changes in the domestic work industry, there were always significant tensions, both subterranean and explicit, between the organizations’ members. While highly personalized, these tensions consistently manifested along two primary axes: lines of race and nationality and differences in workers’ class origins in their home nation. These frictions were, in many ways, an expression of workers’ lived experiences in the industry. The racial stratifications between workers from different races and nationalities had real material impacts on workers’ lives, and these material conditions created a context ripe for racialized competition and antagonism. Similarly, while many domestic workers had similar experiences in the industry, their interpretations of those experiences were profoundly shaped by their work and class locations in their nations of origins and by their struggles with downward social mobility and social shaming.

In both instances, when these issues were left unattended, they continued to simmer just below the surface of the organization’s formal politics. Constant agitations about the shared experiences between domestic workers and the need for multi-racial unity did not erase workers’ resentments and tensions with each other. It was only when those tensions were given space to come out into the open that they could be worked though. For example, workers came to realize that the racialized stratifications were reflections of workers’ tenure in the industry only after an open struggle over racial tensions in the industry. This moment of clear conflict gave workers a chance to see through their differences rather than to overlook them. There were no corollary moments of struggle during which the underlying tensions over class were given space for exploration. As
a result, the classed fractures among members plagued the organization in often invisible and profoundly damaging ways.

These experiences suggest the importance of developing models of worker organizing that can more deeply reflect the lived realities of workers lives, even when those realities seem to contradict pre-given notions of working class unity and worker solidarity. This necessitates a challenge to overly simplified perspectives on what may seem, from the outside, to be monolithic class groups, united by their shared experiences with extreme marginalization and exploitation. Meaningful forms of solidarity can only be built by working through the contradictions between workers.

**Looking Forward**

Domestic Workers United came into the political stage at a key moment in history. The labor movement in the United States is at a turning point. It has become more and more common to hear both labor leaders and scholars say that the labor movement must radically transform or else it will die. There is a growing convergence between the traditional union movement and the wave of independent workers’ organizations within which DWU has played a leading role. They are overcoming old tensions and building stronger collaborative relationships. They are increasingly asking the same political and strategic questions and drawing on each others’ models in the search for new and more powerful approaches to worker organizing. The labor movement in the United States has reached a new level of clarity about the need to develop models of worker organizing that can respond to the conditions of the twenty-first century economy.
For decades, there have been voices within the traditional union movement calling for re-evaluation and reinvention, arguing that the union movement needs to radically change course if it to respond effectively to the dynamics of the new world economy. Those voices have moved to center stage over the past several years. In his keynote address to the AFL-CIO’s national convention in 2013, the federation’s President Richard Trumka said,

We heard that all over America, workers are organizing in all kinds of ways, and they call their unity by all kinds of names—workers’ unions, associations, centers, networks....We heard that we have to change to reflect the times. The AFL and the CIO merged over 50 years ago, before the jumbo jet, before the cell phone, before the internet. We need to organize ourselves in ways that fit with the jobs people do now and how our economy works now...My friends, it is time for a new and stronger movement. What we’ve done yesterday cannot limit what we do tomorrow. Now is not the time to settle for small steps. If we are going to move forward, we have to challenge ourselves....Our job is to create a new working class movement strong enough to lift up all workers in this country.

A number of initiatives across the labor movement suggest that the significant resources and capacities of the established union movements are now being brought to bear on the question of developing new paradigms of worker organizing.

In the same period, the worker center movement has reached a new stage of maturity. Worker centers have started to exercise real power and influence at local and state levels, and they are starting to stretch towards national-level impact. A number of worker centers have federated into national alliances, first into sectoral alliances like the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the National Day Laborers Organizing Network and then across sectors into the United Workers Congress. The Congress came together based on a shared commitment to overcoming the historic legal exclusions that have limited their access to labor law and helped to marginalize them from the broader labor movement. But they also came together to build a strategic space
where the knowledge that they had gained in their specific struggles could be brought together to “develop and win a new framework for workers’ power in the 21st century” (UWC, et al. 2010). Through the maturation of their own organizing efforts and through their collective strategic dialogues, these organizations have started to push against the limits of their historic models. These organizations have historically been skilled at developing deep but small cores of worker-leaders. They are now working to build on that foundation in order to solve the puzzle of how to build worker power at much larger scales. They have moved from the terrain of local, city-based struggles to the national political stage. They have moved beyond their historic focus on winning equal inclusion and enforcement of the standard package of worker rights and protections; they are now taking up the challenge of waging fights to raise standards above the legal minimum, whether through new approaches to bargaining or through expanded legislation. Those strategic paths, however, are far from clear.

There are many ways in which the strategic questions and the organizing models of the union movement and the worker center movement are beginning to converge, as worker centers begin to engage with questions of bargaining and as the union movement experiments with social movement models of organizing. By drawing lessons out of the experiences of one of the flagship organizations of the worker center movement, I hope to provide timely support towards the deepening of political dialogue within and between these two worlds of worker organizing. This study of the work of Domestic Workers United, a single organization rooted in one sector of the new working classes, demonstrates that low-wage workers are developing profound insight and knowledge that offers to help the labor movement escape its historic impasse. If we pay close attention to the new tools that emergent workers’ organizations are developing to navigate
their changing conditions, we may be able identify a number of implicit patterns and themes that can serve as the foundation of new paradigms of worker organizing. They can guide us in the process of building a powerful labor movement for the twenty-first century.
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