

A Labor of Love by MAUREEN PURTILL

Yesterday, September 26, 2013, a mass movement succeeded in persuading Governor Jerry Brown to sign the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. How did they do it? By inventing a new way of combating injustice.

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Elizabeth Flores leaned forward to the microphone and fixed the crowd with a smile. “Why is it acceptable that dogs are treated with more dignity and respect than I am”, she said, “as an undocumented immigrant domestic worker in America?”

Half-laughing, she pulled away to watch the audience react. Her words might suggest a disempowered victim, but her smile and laughter said something more profound. Despite many years of abuse and exploitation by multiple employers, Elizabeth has struggled, fought, and organized with other women to bring recognition and value to the “work that makes all other work possible,” and has done so from a place of enduring dignity and love.

Flores, an El Salvadoran woman in her fifties, was speaking at a press conference organized by the “Alianza de Mujeres Activas y Solidarias” or ALMAS, a domestic worker organizing group based at the Graton Day Labor Center in Northern California. She and other domestic workers from the area were preparing to board a bus to join with hundreds more at the California State Capital in Sacramento. Once there, they called on Governor Jerry Brown to sign a new “Domestic Workers Bill of Rights” that would offer them more protection in terms of wages, overtime and other benefits. Yesterday, September 26th, 2013, Brown signed the new bill into law in his office, surrounded by representatives from the domestic workers who had campaigned so hard for this moment.

Flores and her colleagues form part of a growing movement of domestic workers in the USA and elsewhere who are developing a new way of combating injustice. It’s called “transformative organizing,” because it aims to re-orient relationships between workers, employers and others in society on the basis of equality and respect, as well as to empower people to lobby for improvements in the policies and laws that influence their lives. They believe that deeper shifts in the structures of society are more likely to be achieved if exploitation and abuse are addressed without demonizing those who are responsible, an approach that creates a much more positive atmosphere for change. It’s this atmosphere, created by domestic workers along with employers, politicians and civil society groups, that has made the Bill of Rights a reality in California.

Domestic workers like Flores see this approach as a better short-term strategy to improve

the ways they and their work are viewed, valued, treated and rewarded. But ultimately, their aim is to transform the ways in which people care for one another. Bringing more importance, recognition and dignity to the field of domestic work through improved wages and conditions represents a major shift. Calling for - and creating - relationships that are more just and loving is an even bigger change, but one that they believe is both necessary and achievable.

How does transformative organizing operate in practice? Flores' response at the ALMAS press conference provides the essential clue. Her smile and laughter filled the room with kindness, but the words she spoke gave voice to a deeply painful reality that must be confronted: American society continues to treat immigrant domestic workers so poorly because many of them are brown, because they are women, because they don't have the right papers, and because they do the work that other Americans don't want to do.

Flores first came to ALMAS in the middle of 2012. She had recently left a job as a live-in caregiver for a man in the town of Windsor, California. When she started working for him they agreed that she would be on duty five hours a day, with the rest of her time left free to obtain other part-time employment or to go to school. In fact he forced her to work ten hours a day with no additional payment in return for cooking, cleaning and other activities, even asking her to spend her leisure time with him.

According to their original agreement, Flores would have earned \$5 per hour, plus room and board. However, since she was forced to work double time she actually earned only \$2.50, and was prevented from obtaining any outside employment. In comparison with the California minimum wage of \$8 per hour and a living wage in the state that is estimated at \$10.69, her wages fell well below the poverty line for a single adult.

This experience is far from unique. A recent report on the conditions of Flores and her colleagues reveals that "despite their central role in the economy, domestic workers in the USA are often employed in substandard jobs. Working behind closed doors, beyond the reach of personnel policies, and often without employment contracts, they are subject to the whims of their employers." After several months of abuse and exploitation, Flores left her employer and approached ALMAS and the Graton Day Labor Center for support.

Through these connections, she engaged with other domestic workers in conversations about their experiences; about the need for more formal rights and protections in their industry; and about the need to maintain their self-respect and dignity by promoting the value of their work. Flores emerged from these conversations as a leader in the campaign to win approval for the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which now extends overtime protection to all domestic workers in the state. She also joined the National Domestic Workers Alliance in Washington DC to lobby for immigration reform on multiple occasions, and has become a major source of strength and resilience for other women in her community.

Eventually Flores decided to return to work for the employer who had previously exploited her, but only after demanding fair wages and better treatment on her job. His response was telling: "Well, now that you know your rights and are part of that organization (ALMAS), I guess I have to pay you what you deserve."

Domestic workers care for people's children, and for their homes, grandparents and family members who are ill or disabled on a daily basis. So it's no surprise that the organizing model they are developing is seen as a labor of love, and not just as a campaign for better wages. It's a model that places equal emphasis on individual rights

and collective liberation. Domestic workers in this movement are concerned not only for themselves, but also for their employers and for the future care and wellbeing of generations still to come.

Flores is living proof of what this movement represents in practice. When I first met her I was working as an organizer for ALMAS myself. She was soft-spoken, almost timid. I asked her if she wanted to submit a claim for the wages that her employer had stolen from her by doubling her hours of work without any extra payment, but she said she wasn't interested in harming him. "He's an elderly man with multiple illnesses and many problems", she told me, "I don't want to cause him any damage. I'm just here to look for work, and make sure that this doesn't happen to me or anyone else again."

I took her refusal to act as a sign that she was afraid. But over time I learned that Flores had something much bigger in mind than punishing her employer. Like thousands of other organized domestic workers in the USA she certainly wants to change the way her work is valued, but that's not enough. The ultimate goal is to transform the way we care for one another, and do so with love.