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Tilden J. LeMelle, *Chairman*  
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## **DOMESTIC WORKERS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA**

**A National Tour by Florence De Villiers, General Secretary of the  
South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) October 9 - 20, 1995**

**National Tour Coordinator: Mike Fleshman (212) 962-1210**

The General Secretary of the South African Domestic Workers Union, Ms. Florence De Villiers, will visit New York City, Washington DC, Chicago and Detroit from October 9-20. Ms. De Villiers will meet with women active in the U.S. trade union, women's and civil rights movements to learn more about women's political, feminist and social empowerment efforts here and share her rich experience as a leader of the trade union, women's and anti-apartheid movements in South Africa.

She is particularly interested in learning more about African American women's struggles for racial and economic equality, political advocacy, and efforts to secure equal protection under law. A second focus is to exchange views with trade unionists and others who organize or provide services to household workers, such as home health care workers.

### **Background on Domestic Workers and the South African Domestic Workers Union**

For the outside world one of the enduring symbols of Black dispossession and white supremacy in apartheid South Africa was that of the Black maid and her domineering white madam. Today, that oppressive image survives not as symbol of the past but as daily reality for hundreds of thousands of Black women employed as domestic servants in white households. But through the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) domestic workers are empowering themselves as women and as workers to challenge the oppressive status quo and take their rightful place in a free and democratic South Africa.

The political invisibility of domestic workers belies both their numbers and the economic importance of domestic employment to Black women in South Africa. Indeed, with estimates of the total number of persons employed as domestics at 800,000, household labor comprises the single largest employer of Black women in South Africa outside of subsistence agriculture. Wages run as low as \$20 - \$30 per month for labor that by law can extend to 14 hours per day, six days per week.

Many domestics live at their places of employment, most often in cramped backyard sheds away from children, husbands and friends. Their right to receive visitors or leave the premises is often sharply restricted by employers, on pain of dismissal. By any measure, domestic workers are among the lowest paid and most marginalized of all South Africans.

IN THE FACE OF THESE OBSTACLES, THE SOUTH AFRICAN DOMESTIC WORKERS UNION (SADWU) continues its important work of empowering domestic workers for full participation in the construction of a new South Africa. SADWU assists members in resolving disputes, filing grievances and winning back pay, benefits and severance packages. Because job dismissal often causes homelessness and absolute destitution, the union attempts to arrange housing and emergency assistance, identify new employment or training opportunities, and assist with unemployment insurance claims and pension applications.

The story of SADWU is a story of resistance, of determined efforts by women to organize themselves in defense of their rights as human beings and as workers. Many SADWU leaders are former domestic workers who have endured dismissal and intimidation. They have taught themselves to organize and to bargain with abusive racist and sexist employers.

SADWU is part of the broader history of women's emancipation, union organizing and anti-apartheid opposition in South Africa. During the women's Defiance Campaign against the pass laws in the 1950s, the involvement of domestic workers was so overwhelming that one white newspaper headlined a story about a protest march "No Nannies Today." It has also been an integral part of the South African labor movement for many years. While industrial union drives targeted the largest factories and corporations, SADWU organizers had to build the union one household at a time. The difficulties inherent in organizing workers employed individually inside the home, combined with deeply entrenched racism and sexism and the extreme vulnerability of domestics to intimidation, are among SADWU's greatest challenges.

It was only in 1993, after years of campaigning, that the thin protection of existing South African labor legislation was extended to domestic workers. Enforcement of such basic provisions as minimum wages, hours and vacations has proven virtually impossible. The few domestic workers aware of their new rights, and brave enough to pursue them have routinely been dismissed and thrown out of their houses, and in extreme cases even detained and beaten by their employers. With the white minority still largely in control of the courts, the police and the legal system, it has proven difficult to secure legal protection of domestics' rights. Even within the ANC government and the labor movement, it has been difficult to focus the attention of male leaders on the plight of these women workers.

Operating under very difficult circumstances, SADWU struggles to secure justice for low wage women workers in a field that will continue to employ large numbers of unskilled Black South African women for the foreseeable future. Despite very limited resources, SADWU attempts to meet the full range of needs of its desperately poor, often illiterate members, including assistance with child care, literacy and health.

SADWU is affiliated to the 1.3 million member Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and sits on the federation's governing Central Executive Committee.

Ms. De Villiers' curriculum vitae and national tour dates are attached.

**Florence De Villiers**  
**South African Domestic Workers Union**

**Personal Details :****Position :** General Secretary**Affiliated to:** Cosatu Federation**For a period of :** 8 years**Marital status :** Married**Family :** 1 son and 3 daughters**Particulars :**

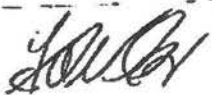
I serve on the Central Executive Committee as well as the International Committee of the Federation, i.e. Cosatu.

I serve on the Development Chamber of the National Economic Development and Labour Council ( NEDLAC ). This body consists of representatives from the Government Business and Labour.

I am committed to serving on the above mentioned structure for the betterment and upliftment of the society as a whole.

Constitutional information will be sent to you via the post. This will give you a clearer understanding of what my position entails.

Thanking you.

**Mrs. F. De Villiers**

# A lifetime of struggle

*Florrie de Villiers, General Secretary of the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) has spent her life juggling the demands of her commitment to the struggle and her home life.*



**"I** was born on one of those apple farms in the Elgin, Grabouw area. We were nine kids. When I was two years old my father decided we should move, as we were not going to get a good education on the farm. So I grew up in a village called Hawston, where I attended the Anglican missionary school.

My father was a farmer, but when we moved off the farm he did all types of work. We had our own big grounds that he worked on. At night he would go fishing. He also cut wood. I would go with him to sell wood and vegetables at the market.

My childhood was poor, but stable. My parents taught me to respect and care about other people. My mother would never cook a

pot of food for us only – she always cooked for those who were on the road who you didn't know, but were still coming. She was the midwife in the village. My father passed away about 21 years ago. My mother is 80 now. She lives in the same village and visits all the children she brought into the world.

I did well at school – I passed standard six at the age of 13 – but my parents could not afford high school. My aunt got me a job in Cape Town. You can imagine my frustration – I was only 15, but in those days there were no bursaries.

My aunt was a domestic worker. I helped her and looked after her employer's children. From there I automatically went into domestic work. Although I enjoyed the work

sometimes, I became very frustrated. After some years I got out and got married. At the age of 19 – this is no age to get married! I immediately had four kids, one after the other – three girls and one boy. I had a double role – I had to work and I had to look after my family's needs.

*We looked for a place to operate from. We went to the church, but they said no. People heard this is a Russian thing coming! So the church avoided us.*

In 1969 I met some people from the Christian Institute. I worked there for eight years until it was banned in October 1977. They had started a restaurant, where people of all races could go. While I was working at the Institute I went to night school and passed Standard Eight.

I became an activist in 1973, when the students of the University of Western Cape walked off campus. At the same time I got involved in SASO and joined the Black Consciousness movement with Steve Biko. In 1974 I served on the bus boycott committee. In 1975 I joined the Black Women's Federation (also banned in 1977).

In 1976 I stopped working in the restaurant and worked for the Institute in the squatter camps. We resisted attempts to tear families apart by moving people back to the Transkei.

### **Domestic workers organise**

In October 1977, when the organisations were banned, something went through my soul. I said: "I am not going to work for somebody who is going to exploit me." I called on other women who were active and we decided to come together to form DWA

(Domestic Workers Association – the forerunner of SADWU). I used the money that the Christian Institute had given me when they closed down to start the union.

We walked the streets. We talked to people. We asked them: "What is your situation; your working conditions; how do you live; are you satisfied with your salary?" We explained what we intended doing. We looked for a place to operate from. We went to the church, but they said no. People heard this is a Russian thing coming! So the church avoided us.

We met on the streets, in parks and in gardens where people worked. Sometimes there were

dogs. Employers would not allow you on their premises. But we managed. We found ways and means of getting onto these properties.

There was no international money. We had to raise money ourselves. We baked bread and sold it. I would go to the farm where my brother-in-law worked and get some apples and beans and sell them. My cousin was working in a printing factory. We used their off-cuts to make pamphlets.

That is how we started the union. Then I heard that people had similar problems in other regions. We received a letter from another organisation in Port Elizabeth. We also received a letter from Natal. I went to Natal and stayed in Inanda.

In Port Elizabeth I stayed in New Brighton. I couldn't understand this thing of "I am not a Xhosa, I am a Zulu." I am everybody. It was easy for me to communicate with people.

We used to get together, in Port Elizabeth, Natal and Cape Town. We discussed a national minimum wage. In 1980 we sent a memorandum to the Minister of Manpower, who was then Pieter du Plessis. He did not respond and in 1984 we went to Pretoria to



deliver a memorandum. We used another trade unionist and a lawyer to assist us in writing a constitution. We were fortunate that they did not charge us a cent!

In 1986 I got an opportunity to study at Oxford University. SACTU told me "No, go and get that union off the ground, so we can come home!" If I wasn't committed I would have taken that chance to go to Oxford for three years! Instead I got myself totally involved in the political situation and in SADWU.

In 1987 I moved the union into COSATU. I had to explain why we should do this. People were scared, they thought they would go to jail if they joined COSATU.

### Double role

All my activities made life tough at home. My husband would have preferred me to stay at home, like his mother. He went to my mother and complained. My mother supported him. She was scared I would be detained.

I was picked up by the security police in Cape Town. Although I had been released they told my husband I was still in detention. The security police went to my kids' school and my husband's work, and started harassing them. The school started failing my kids, and they had to change schools.

Fortunately, my kids also started to get involved, in 1976. There was just something in me that said, I cannot go back, I am going to fight. Nobody could change my mind. My sister-in-law pleaded with me, and said I should think of the family name. I said, then tell them I am not your family!

### Issues facing SADWU

Over the years, SADWU has had 500 000 members on record. At this point in time we have 28 000 paid-up members. The main issue for us is the lack of legislation. People have a

deep-grounded fear printed into them by their employers. They have been harassed by the police. If you do not do your job properly, the police will come and remove you from the premises. You are dealing with thousands of different employers, with no legislation. You have to use your common sense in dealing with each case, because the lawyers can't say, this is what the law is saying.

Many of the regions were not aware of what trade unionism is. I was fortunate, because I went to London for courses and I also attended courses in Cape Town given by people like Gordon Young. We need to move in the direction of real trade union methods. We need a better deal on working hours, working conditions and things like paid maternity leave.

The big thing for me is that domestic workers should come out of the backyard, live a normal life and have their own homes. We also have to work on alternatives. Once the Wage Act is passed for domestic workers, and employers decide to terminate the services of a worker, what do you do as a union?

*The big thing for me is that domestic workers should come out of the backyard, live a normal life and have their own homes.*

We need to prepare programmes and projects, where people are skilled to do other work. We need education programmes, where people will learn their rights.

Some people are blaming the ANC for all the troubles we have now. This is not the right approach. The past is to be blamed. We must all work together and make a contribution to change in this country to achieve true democracy." ★