

Organizing Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia: Ways out of Precarity

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In 2005, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) embarked on an ambitious agenda to represent and organize domestic workers, despite them being legally and culturally considered non-workers and servants. Due to the exclusion of domestic workers from the local industrial relations and the non-traditional nature of domestic work, the formation of a functioning Domestic Workers' Association has yet to be fully achieved. The registration of the association has also been twice rejected by the State within the span of ten years. In response, MTUC focused on reforming the labour laws that excludes and restricts domestic workers to organize as workers by mobilizing its institutional and coalitional power resources. Successes were made in labour policy reforms such as allowing days off for domestic workers, depositing wages through the banks and the prohibition of the withholding of passports by employers. Internal organizational reforms were also undertaken to address the different precarities confronted by the mostly female and migrant domestic workers in Malaysia and to strengthen the capability of the union to build associational power. Based on field research and documentary analysis, this case study advances the strategic importance of understanding the dimensions of precarity specific to domestic workers; the organizational reforms MTUC underwent in addressing domestic worker issues; and how far the MTUC can reform and strategize to develop new power resources and capabilities in organizing domestic workers in Malaysia.

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