



UDW Triennial Convention

Keynote Speech

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Thank you!

Sisters and Brothers, good morning.

What an honor and inspiration to be here today with you, in my home state, for your 16th triennial convention!

It is so exciting to look at this room. I see compassionate workers making it possible for the sick and elderly to live in their own homes, with comfort and dignity. Like my own grandmother, who lived years longer at home because of the personalized, individual home-based care she received right here in California, in Covina, not too far north of here. From what I know about this union, I know I'm among passionate union women—yay, so many union women!—and amazing social-justice activist men driving a movement to improve the lives of working people who provide a vital service to California families.

I see ***caregiver strong!*** I see union strong. Thanks so much for inviting me.

I wanted to bring some perspectives from the global experience of unions organizing around the world for so many of the things we are fighting for here—decent work with dignity, fairness, better lives for our families and our communities, and a democracy that works better for working people.

The Solidarity Center, the organization that I lead, is the largest U.S.-based, international worker rights organization assisting workers around the world. In 60 countries, we work with unions and worker organizations whose members face the same challenges as workers anywhere: poverty wages, lack of legal protections, discrimination, informal or isolated employment. We support their organizing and help them achieve collective bargaining. We help workers change the laws that do not protect them and the policies that exploit them. And we connect them to each other, across borders, to help support growth of a global labor movement.

Solidarity. Because the economy is global. The dynamics fueling wealth and income inequality and driving down wages and working conditions are global. And in more and more countries, wealth is being concentrated, and that leads to consolidation of political power and decision-making in the hands of fewer and fewer people. That's as true in California as it is in India or Brazil. And we need to say ENOUGH. And we need to say it loud, proud and TOGETHER. And that's why I'm here.

And that's why I'm so proud UDW is the newest union affiliate represented on our Board of Trustees, and the newest affiliate of the International Domestic Workers

Federation, the first domestic workers global union ever! More about that later.

But first, I'd like to share what else I see from my vantage point of the 60 countries where the Solidarity Center works, alongside about half a million workers and their unions every year, including 27 domestic workers unions in 22 countries.

What I see here—as I learn about the UDW and think about our global experience—is the future of the labor movement, not the past. Globally. You see, there's still a lot of what we call "unfinished business" in the labor movement. There are too many workers we have never tried to organize in any of our countries, too many workers who look like the membership of this great union. And too many of those workers are working harder, for less pay and in increasingly precarious circumstances. These workers are disproportionately disenfranchised in many ways. Low wages and precarious, unstable employment contracts. Maybe they are Moroccan restaurant workers living only on tips in Spain, rural workers on agricultural plantations in South Africa, or Afro-descendant low-wage contract workers in Brazil—and the labor movements and unions in all of these countries don't organize these workers. But they are the majority. And this is where we find our power.

Very often, these ignored, disenfranchised workers are domestic workers. Organizing domestic and other home-care workers is part of the global labor movement's unfinished business.

When union movements organize domestic workers, they rejuvenate labor movements—because it takes innovation and creativity to organize them. The workforce isn't located in one place (maybe they are Nicaraguan migrants cleaning homes in Costa Rica). The workforce often speaks many languages (maybe they are Filipino and Sri Lankan nurses caring for patients in a hospital in London or Amman, Jordan). And sometimes they are the working people who their fellow citizens just don't truly see because of historic discrimination.

A labor movement led by people committed to the idea that everyone has the right to organize; a movement that women, immigrants and men and women of color are increasingly leading, and a movement that stands for all workers, not just union members—that's the unfinished business of our labor movement. It's a labor movement on the forefront of the so-called future of work because we need to be out there, organized and helping make the rules of the economy we want—not just here, but around the world. That's the unfinished business of the labor movement, too.

Let me say it plainly from my perspective: No government ever woke up one morning and said, "Let's create a more fair economy today," or "Let's expand human rights." Markets and corporations don't magically conjure up shared prosperity, either. It is the agency of individual citizens coming together collectively—into trade unions, and worker centers and other organizations—that **push** governments and corporations to make changes to the

way our economies work and make them more fair. And when workers who have never had the benefit of union membership do that, we also make our labor movements more equal, more fair, more representative.

So you are part of a global network of domestic and home-care workers called the International Domestic Workers Federation, and IDWF is doing just that. It's the first global union built by women, migrants, informally employed people—and it is trying to organize and build power in almost every country, despite tremendous odds.

If we sometimes feel we are getting squeezed as workers in the U.S., we're not alone.

There is the global crackdown on human rights.

Just about everywhere. Anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment, xenophobia and racism, misogyny and anti-gay bias and violence. Also a real reduction in civil rights, especially the very basic rights to form or join organizations, and to protest.

The stakes are high for workers:

Labor rights globally are the most frequently violated category of human rights.

The majority of the world's workers are actively disenfranchised from their rights as workers.

- 65 percent of countries exclude some groups of workers from labor law, like domestic and contract workers.
- 87 percent of countries have violated the right to strike.

- 81 percent of countries deny some or all workers collective bargaining.
- The number of countries where workers were arrested and detained increased from 44 in 2017 to 59 in 2018.
- Last year, trade unionists were murdered in nine countries: Brazil, China, Colombia, Guatemala, Guinea, Mexico, Niger, Nigeria and Tanzania.

This human rights crackdown is taking place in the context of rising inequality

Most people living in increasingly unequal economies. Seven out of 10 people live in a country that has seen a rise in inequality in the last 30 years.

- It is worse for women. Globally, women earn 30 percent of what men make for equal work. If current trends hold, it will take 170 years for women to be paid the same as men. And the pay gap is worse without unions.
- Violence and harassment against women at work is endemic. Gender-based violence is one of the most tolerated, hidden and underreported violations of workers' human rights in the world. We talk about #MeToo in the United States, but #MeToo is all over the world.
 - More than 60 percent of female garment workers in Bangladesh have been intimidated or threatened with violence at work.
 - 60 percent of women working in the catering industry in Nordic countries have experienced sexual harassment.

- 90 percent of waitresses in the U.S. have experienced sexual harassment or violence on the job.
- 35 percent of women over the age of 15 have experienced sexual or physical violence at home, in their communities or in the workplace. When it happens at work, it suppresses women's voices and intimidates them from joining or forming unions. That's our global experience.
- And we know how common violence and harassment are in the homecare industry.

Those are the statistics. How do we BUCK these trends? We build the kinds of organizations that have no fear. The kind of organizations led by the very people these trends are disproportionately disenfranchising.

For example, on the eastern coast of Kenya where jobs are few and poverty is endemic, many women migrate to Saudi Arabia for the promise of a good-paying job, a home-care job. An entire industry has been built to ship women overseas to clean and care for other people's families. Most have little choice but to leave; there is no other way to support their families and make a better life for their children.

And through our work in Kenya, we know that many of these women walk right into a trap set by unscrupulous labor brokers and employers. They arrive to find entirely different jobs than they were promised. They have their phones and passports confiscated. They are forced to work long hours and to sleep under the stairs or in the laundry

room. Many are subjected to violence and sexual abuse, and held as virtual prisoners—sometimes for years, incommunicado from their family—in a country where they do not speak the language. Their experience is not unique: 26 percent of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in the Middle East say they endure long working hours, 52 percent do not receive any days off, and [88 percent are not paid for overtime work](#).

Too many women have told us about their harrowing escapes, and about their shame of arriving home penniless because they had never been paid. And it's not because it is Saudi Arabia, or the Middle East. This isn't cultural or regionally specific. This happens here in the United States. It happens in Europe. It happens in Kenya, Thailand, Malaysia, everywhere.

The exploitation of women's labor, of the working poor, like this plays out every day. But that's not what the labor movement, what we are about. Not when we start cleaning up our unfinished business.

I want to show you one way we are addressing longstanding unfinished business, globally, on this issue of gender-based violence at work.

[TRANSITION TO [GBV VIDEO](#)]

This video is part of a global labor campaign to educate people about gender-based violence at work, and to mobilize people to support a global law by lobbying their governments to support it.

I just got back from the International Labor Organization's annual conference, where unions were meeting with employer associations and governments from all over the world to negotiate this new global law—and it was quite a scene. Actually, it was one of the most-inspiring moments of my life as a labor activist.

There, 200 trade unionists, delegations of unions led by women from around the world, including many domestic workers, helped negotiate a global standard recognizing the right to be free from harassment at work. Women-led unions demanded and helped craft the language, aligned across nationalities, for all of us. When this law goes into effect next year, we will have created a new internationally recognized human right to be free from harassment and violence at work, and we can use that to pressure our governments and employers to conform to it, all over the world.

That's the kind of thing we can all do together. When we come together across borders, we can dream bigger, we can create global standards of decency and we can hold employers and governments accountable to them.

So—back to Kenya: The domestic workers union there, KUDHEIHA, is one of the most important union affiliates of IDWF, just like UDW. We have worked with them for years. KUDHEIHA has taken on the exploitation of overseas domestic workers by organizing returned migrant domestic workers into their union and going door-to-door in poor neighborhoods to mobilize women and men, as well as partnering with tribal and religious leaders, to demand

change—more legal protections for migrants and better jobs at home—from their elected leaders. And they have brought about the first national minimum wage for domestic workers in that country's great history!

There are so many more stories! 750,000 of the 1 million domestic workers in Colombia are women, predominantly women of color. In 2013, Afro-descendent women formed their own domestic workers union to ensure their voices were heard and their labor rights protected, including weekly days off, limits to work hours, minimum wage coverage, overtime compensation and clear information on the terms and conditions of employment. Which meant that domestic workers reclaimed their rightful place as full participants in democratic society. And isn't that what we all want and deserve?

And in Mexico: "I am very excited for today because it is a historical victory for the domestic workers in Mexico," Isidra told us. She's a domestic worker who took part in the founding of Mexico's first domestic worker union. She added: "From now on, we will have rights, and no one will be able to take them away from us. Our rights will be respected, no more low salaries and disrespectful treatment. Our work is valuable."

In Brazil last month, some 40 domestic workers from 17 countries across the Americas—including UDW—and all affiliated to IDWF participated in a regional planning meeting. This was pure grassroots internationalism. The worker leaders shared organizing tactics, hammered out resolutions and participated in trainings on gender-based violence at work. I am proud our organization was there to

support them. I know UDW was in the house last month in Brazil, attending workshops and meetings focused on organizing, racial justice and rights for domestic workers who are immigrants.

Of course, in so many of our countries, no one's labor or human rights are secure. That is why we need to make common cause. That's why we need to take on *all this unfinished business of the labor movement*.

I believe this is labor's moment. I believe this is our moment.

We were born for these challenging times. This is WHY we exist.

The Solidarity Center is honored and committed to be a part of all of these struggles. Sisters and brothers, in closing I would just say that workers everywhere win when we have a deliberate agenda of inclusion for our labor movement, and when we fight for our right to form unions everywhere. And the Solidarity Center—with you, and with the dozens of unions and millions of workers we can ALL call allies—will double down to make sure it happens, now that we are in it with you.

Thank you.