

**Joint Conference-Workshop on
“Building Visibility and Voice through Responsive Homebased
Workers’ Organizations in Asia: Focus on ILO Convention 177 on
Home Work”
2-3 August 2010, Claremont Room, Discovery Suites,
Pasig, Metro Manila, Philippines**

Towards an International Movement of Home Workers

by Dan Gallin, Global Labour Institute

Sisters and Brothers,
Friends and Comrades,

I thank you for the invitation to participate in this meeting and I am glad to be again with you in our common endeavour to advance the cause of home workers.

Since I am participating here in the name of WIEGO, I thought I should give you some information, as briefly as I can, about recent developments in our activity.

As some of you know, WIEGO activities are currently conducted under five programs: **Urban Policies**, which deals primarily with the interests of street and market vendors and with their relations to municipal authorities; **Social Protection**, which seeks to develop the social safety net and insurance systems all informal workers should be covered by; **Global Markets**, which seeks to identify outlets for self-employed home workers creating artisanal products; **Statistics**, which renders visible the great, submerged mass of informal workers and, finally, **Organization and Representation**, which is about organizing informal workers, particularly women, in whatever form of democratic organization that is most appropriate for defending their interests in their specific situation – it could be unions, or co-operatives, or other forms of democratic association. That is the program I am associated with.

WIEGO recently had its General Assembly – that is our congress, which meets every four years. We met in the city of Belo Horizonte, in Brazil, last April. Our host was an organization in a new WIEGO constituency, the waste collectors, who are very well organized in Brazil and in several other Latin American countries. Our aim is to help them establish a world-wide network.

Also in Belo Horizonte, another new constituency made its appearance: the domestic workers. They had already established their international network early this year, in preparation for the debates at the International Labour Conference about the adoption of a convention, which we hope to secure next year.

Their contribution, like that of the waste collectors’, were enthusiastic and were warmly received. It was wonderful to see how these new contributions widened our horizon and strengthened our base.

In October the WIEGO Board - that is our larger governing body – will meet in Madrid, in the school of the General Union of Workers (UGT), where we will also meet its affiliate, the Unión Profesional de Trabajadores Autónomos – that is the union of self-employed workers. This union is already a member of StreetNet and we hope it will also be the first direct affiliate in Europe.

To round out the picture: in May, I participated in a seminar on home workers in Bulgaria. This was a regional seminar for the Balkans, with participation from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia, about “Home-Based Workers: an Informal Economy in South-Eastern Europe”. Like our seminar today, it was supported by the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation as well as by the principal Bulgarian trade union federation, the KNSB, and by the Bulgarian Association of Homeworkers, which is an associate member – it cannot as yet be a full member because Bulgarian labour legislation does not recognize unions of self-employed workers.

Now you have surely heard that Bulgaria is one of the countries that have recently ratified Convention 177. This was achieved after a campaign of over six years by the Association and by the KNSB.

This means that in Bulgaria they have now reached the follow-up stage, that of drafting national law incorporating the provisions of C. 177. This is done by a bi-partite committee, where unions, including the Association, and employers’ organizations are represented, A bill on home work is to be submitted to Parliament later this year.

I was surprised to see that the Association is not only affiliated to the KNSB, but also to an employers’ association, the Confederation of Employers and Industrialists (CEIBG). This kind of double affiliation across class lines is highly unusual, as you can imagine, and probably unique. It is understandable only in the context of the transition from a centrally-administered economy under bureaucratic collectivism to a free-for-all capitalist system, where the identity and the roles of employers’ organizations, as well as unions, are not totally clear and have weak historical roots.

There is also the important fact that the CEIBG is only one of several employers’ associations, and represents those who have decided to engage constructively with the trade union movement. Contrary to the other employers’ associations, it has supported the ratification of the Home Work Convention and now participates in the drafting of the national legislation.

Nonetheless, one has to ask oneself whose interest is being served here? I did ask the CEIBG and the Association what they got out of their mutual relationship. The employers said that they found the flexibility of homework convenient for subcontracting, but they did not want it to be entirely deregulated for fear of disloyal competition. The Association said that affiliation with the CEIBG provided access to orders, meaning jobs, and access to markets and fairs. This obviously only applies to its self-employed membership.

In short, the Association views its affiliation to the CEIBG as a purely business relationship, while the CEIBG has a broader social policy agenda, viewing homework as a factor of flexibility.

This raises another question worth thinking about: is there something ambiguous in the situation of self-employed home workers, not just in Bulgaria but anywhere, some sort of in-between situation between workers and employers?

Interestingly enough, despite their affiliation to the CEIBG, the Association does not think so. Their self-employed members regard themselves as business women but also, and principally, as workers: that is their principal identity.

This is consistent with the position of the ILO which, at its International Labour Conference of 2002, adopted conclusions on informal work which explicitly recognized self-employed, or own-account, workers as workers with all the rights they are entitled to as workers.

The Association regards itself as a union, and it is structured and functions as a union. That, and its membership in KNSB, is the source of its strength.

Founded only eight years ago, it now has 3,500 members, who pay monthly dues amounting to one percent of the legal minimum wage. Like all unions, it functions on the basis of representative democracy, but it has no salaried employees and all the resources needed for its activities (meeting rooms, office facilities) are donated by its members or by the KNSB. Fifty-five percent of its members are self-employed, 45 percent are industrial outworkers, mostly in the shoe and garment industry.

To come back to the Home Work Convention: the decisive factors for securing the ratification in Bulgaria were the existence of this strong home workers' organization and strong support from the national trade unions. And, of course, the campaign was helped by the fact that at least one employers' association, uniquely in the whole world, actively supported ratification.

One of the outcomes of the seminar was to launch a regional campaign for the ratification of C. 177. The political situation is favourable: three countries in the region (Albania, Bosnia/Herzegovina and Bulgaria) have already ratified.

Another outcome, to my surprise, I have to admit, was a consensus that the way forward was to rebuild HomeNet International, together with the Asian HomeNets. That is a very positive development. I hope there will soon be an opportunity to get you to meet one another and to plan together the rebuilding of a world-wide democratic network of home workers.

Finally, it was recognized that any campaign to get C. 177 ratified needed to be driven by the labour movement to be successful. Each delegation from the four participating countries included at least one representative from the unions.

May I add some of my own observations about campaigning for C. 177, before concluding.

The first task remains to organize, and to do so in democratic, membership-driven, mass organizations, such as trade unions, because we are in a conflict situation. This means we have to prevail in a power struggle. The organization is our tool; without

organization we have no power and can achieve nothing. So, if you are an NGO, try to become an organization if circumstances permit, and if you are an organization, try to become as democratic, accountable, transparent and militant as you can.

Secondly, do not settle for national policies, even if they include many of the provisions of C. 177. I have said so before and I will say it again: national policy is no substitute for ratification.

When a country ratifies C. 177, it commits itself to international accountability, because it has to submit annual reports to the ILO on how the provisions of the convention are implemented. If a country adopts a national policy, it does not need to account to anyone about its implementation, except to its own citizens - if they are lucky.

So, if governments want to adopt progressive policies on home work, by all means encourage them to do so, but let it be clear that this is not the end of the struggle but only a stage in a process, where the objective remains ratification of the convention.

Thirdly, seek to involve the community in your campaign and create as broad alliances as you can: involve unions of course, but also, perhaps with their help, other influential actors, such as political groups, faith-based groups, women's movements. Create a public opinion in your support. The Bulgarian case makes me think that it might even be worthwhile in certain cases to engage with some employers. They may not everywhere be as united and hard-line reactionary as their ideologically driven international organizations would like them to be, and they always have a problem with totally unregulated cut-throat competition.

Finally, always be aware that there are millions like you all over the world and that when you unite, you will be a formidable movement. We need such a movement to defeat those who keep millions of home workers in poverty, we need such a movement not only to create "decent work" but to change our world so that all workers can gain control of their lives at work and in society.

I am looking forward to keep working with you to create such a movement and to bring about the better society we all need.

I thank you for your attention.