

Premilla Nadasen

Queens College, City University of New York

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6th, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

Power, Intimacy, and Contestation: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the 1960s

In the 1960s African American domestic workers, inspired by the civil rights movement which opened up creative space for organizing, came together to address issues of low pay, forced overtime, and mistreatment. They established training centers to professionalize the occupation, pushed for labor protections, and started “honor days” to bring recognition to domestic service work. Domestic work became a battleground fraught with the politics of race, class, and gender as middle class white women and poor black women--both of whom saw household work as a source of oppression—sought to redefine their relationship to domestic work.

The intimate relations that structured domestic service work were clearly an arena of disempowerment for women employees as well as a source of power. It isolated domestic workers from one another, enabling employers to wield considerable control over the work process as well as monitor the personal behavior of their workers. The intimate nature of the work also led to a discounting of domestic work as “real work” fostering an expectation that employees would simply do what needed to be done rather than confine their tasks to a specific job description. It also deterred employers from recognizing the power inherent in their relations with the women who worked for them. Yet the intimate nature of the work they performed also nurtured a political activism among employees who recognized the dependency of middle class families on domestic service work. African American women used the power of intimate labor to upgrade the occupation, fight for basic legal protections, and bring greater recognition and dignity to their labor. For household employees in the 1960s, domestic work became a site of struggle where they could define the terms of and challenge the historically paternalistic character of domestic service work.