



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE FREY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Silvia Gomez, front, and others at the Long Branch Community Center in Silver Spring seek to raise awareness about the conditions they work in.

Domestic Workers Rally for 'Bill of Rights'

Improved Wages, Benefits Sought In Montgomery

By STEVEN GINSBERG
Washington Post Staff Writer

More than 100 women and their supporters held what they called the "largest gathering in the history of the United States" for domestic workers yesterday to gain backing for a measure that would require employers to pay higher wages and provide other benefits.

The event, organized by the Coalition to Support Domestic Workers, called on Montgomery County Council members to pass a "bill of rights" for household workers that would require employers to pay a minimum wage of \$10.50 an hour and provide two days off a week if requested, health insurance, paid sick days and paid holidays.

The legislation also would forbid discrimination and retaliation against workers who complain and authorize the county's Commission on Human Rights to adjudicate claims that workers' rights have been violated.

The gathering, held at the Long Branch Community Center in Silver Spring, included testimony



County Council member George L. Leventhal said the council isn't ready for a domestic workers bill, but he plans a survey on their working conditions.

domestic workers special treatment," said Elizabeth Keyes of CASA of Maryland. "It's about putting domestic workers on level with the vast majority of American workers. Anything less than what this law provides means we're not respecting the work of domestic workers."

The workers directed most of their frustration at council Vice President George L. Leventhal (D-

At Large), who chairs the council's Health and Human Services Committee. He held hearings on the abuse of domestic workers in February, but worker advocates have since grown frustrated with what they say has been a lack of action.

Leventhal, who attended yesterday's rally, said he was working with the organizers and wants to get more information before sup-

porting the legislation.

"I am trying to get a survey going of working conditions of domestic workers," Leventhal said. "I think the concerns are very real. There has been abuse of domestic workers, some cases that approximate slavery. But I don't know how widespread they are."

In fluent Spanish, Leventhal told the packed community center room that he does not believe "the County Council is ready right now for this bill. I'm going to sponsor a study of working conditions for domestic workers in Montgomery. I need you to have confidence in me now that working together, we can win."

Nonetheless, the room grew a little testy. One man called out: "You have not committed to anything."

Organizers then asked Leventhal whether he would support specific parts of the bill of rights, marking off his answers on giant pieces of paper. They also pressed him to give a definitive timeline for when the study would be done.

Leventhal said he believed it could be completed in about six months.

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The gathering, held at the Long Branch Community Center in Silver Spring, included testimony from several domestic workers who said they have suffered on the job.

The rally was the latest attempt by domestic workers to raise awareness about the conditions they work in, which they said often include long, lonely hours filled with abusive treatment.

"When I started work, I wasn't respected," Germania Velasco said through a translator. Velasco said she was working 13 hours a day and making "\$300 a month, and I wasn't getting health insurance. When I was sick, what can I do with \$300 a month? I had to borrow money from friends."

Carmen Oliva said through a translator that she worked "14 to 16 hours a day" when she started as a domestic worker. "I was earning less than minimum wage," she said. She has since moved into a better home where, she said, "at least I have the minimum rights I'm able to get in this country."

Antonia Pena said through a translator that she sometimes gets sick and "I don't even have time to go to the doctor." She said that in addition to low wages and long hours, "psychologically, I also face mistreatment."

Domestic workers and immigrant advocacy groups that support them said the bill of rights does nothing more than guarantee the same rights and protections that workers in other fields receive.

"This law is not about giving do-