

June 2026

THE POWER ACT CAMPAIGN

A CASE STUDY IN LIVED EXPERIENCE,
WORKER LEADERSHIP, AND WORKER POWER

Laura Tatum



**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
WORKERS
ALLIANCE**



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ABOUT NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) works to win respect, recognition, and labor rights and protections for the nearly 2.5 million nannies, housecleaners, and homecare workers who do the essential work of caring for our loved ones and our homes. Every day, domestic workers do the work that makes all other work possible. They are the nannies that care for our children, the house cleaners that bring order to our home, and the care workers that ensure our loved ones can live with dignity and independence.

The majority of domestic workers sit at the center of some of our nation's most decisive issues because of who they are and what they do: they are women – mostly women of color, immigrants, mothers, and low-wage workers. They are impacted by almost every policy affecting the future of our economy, democracy and country.

www.domesticworkers.org.

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

A cross-sector coalition of marginalized Black and Latinx workers in Philadelphia achieved a groundbreaking victory in May 2025 with the passage of the POWER Act. The Protect Our Workers Enforce Rights (POWER) Act expands worker protections and strengthens labor enforcement for the city’s 750,000 workers. Domestic workers, restaurant workers, temporary workers, and other low-paid workers won the fight. It all began with domestic workers exercising their new rights under Philadelphia’s Domestic Worker Bill of Rights.

This case study tells the story of the POWER Act campaign—rooted in years of organizing by members of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)¹—focusing on the importance of lived experience, worker leadership, and worker power. The case study is based on secondary research and interviews with NDWA’s Pennsylvania Chapter Director Nicole Kligerman, NDWA’s former Senior Organizing Director Anna Duncan, NDWA Pennsylvania Chapter Member Lilia, and Philadelphia City Council Member Kendra Brooks.

This publication is part of a series of case studies from Workshop about people-centered policy.² Its purpose is to help inform future people-centered policy and organizing efforts and to surface the lessons of organizing that can strengthen policymaking.

When the POWER Act passed, Mercedes, a retired domestic worker and member of the Pennsylvania Chapter of NDWA, explained its importance. “This law would have changed my life. It will change the lives of so many workers now. We’re not asking for favors—we’re demanding justice. And today, we’ve made history.”³

PRE–EXISTING WORKER LEADERSHIP FACILITATED THE POWER ACT WIN

The 2025 POWER Act win built on (1) NDWA’s model of worker-led policy solutions and (2) NDWA-PA’s organizing in Philadelphia since 2018.

NDWA’S MODEL: DOMESTIC WORKERS DRIVE POLICY SOLUTIONS

Domestic workers lead NDWA’s work, building on the long-held tradition of Black domestic workers organizing for justice and dignity.⁴ The domestic work industry was built on the exploitation of Black women since slavery, but as *We Dream in Black*⁵ explains, “Black domestic workers have not been passive victims of substandard conditions on the job... The leadership and courage of Black domestic workers over many generations has paved the way for a contemporary movement.”⁶

NDWA’s current work is driven by the lived experiences and aspirations of domestic workers.⁷ It centers worker organizing and leadership development to win respect and labor protections for domestic workers—and a care economy that meets both workers’ and families’ needs.

In an interview, NDWA leaders emphasized that domestic workers themselves must lead on the policy solutions to improve their lives for many reasons, including: their expertise is needed to create effective policy; their influence is needed to win policymakers’ and public support; and their awareness and buy-in are needed for successful policy implementation.

Domestic Workers' Expertise Is Needed to Create Effective Policy

Creating effective policy requires expertise and, as Anna Duncan noted, “For any policy that is designed to meet the needs of a specific constituency, nobody is going to have more expertise about that constituency than the people who are themselves part of it.”⁸ Domestic workers themselves have the most expertise in the extreme marginalization they face—as disproportionately Black, brown, and immigrant women who are working without coworkers in private homes, excluded from many legal protections—and their highly specific needs. Policymakers may develop a one-size-fits-all approach that appears to work for all workers but, as Duncan said, “real feedback from the folks who are then going to have to live it” is “where you can learn the limitations around things that don't speak to that specific constituency.”

Kligerman highlighted that domestic workers' expertise is necessary to shape the specifics of a policy for it to work. “Policy can't be meaningful if it's not created by the people who live it because these things are really complicated and require the expertise of the people who are going through their lives being impacted.” She explained that without domestic workers getting into the specificity of policy, “It actually just won't work.”

Domestic Workers' Influence Is Needed to Win Policymakers' Support

Kligerman emphasized that domestic workers' engagement throughout the policy process is critical to influencing policymakers and winning their support. She noted, “It's not only the moral thing to do. It's not only the more effective thing to do. If our goal is to win policy that is actually materially impacting workers' lives on a day-to-day basis, it's also the winning thing to do.”

Kligerman provided an example from the Bill of Rights campaign of how domestic workers' leadership was critical to winning:

Our Bill of Rights was absolutely co-written by domestic workers—it was not a process of me and lawyers (I'm not a former domestic worker) in the city writing it. They [domestic workers] were absolutely at the table in hard negotiations and there were a bunch of things that we would've lost had they not been there. Specifically, we would not have won discrimination protections under the Bill of Rights if, when there was pushback, domestic workers were not like, “You're telling me I can get fired cause I'm Black? You're telling me I can't get hired because of my religion?” I can say the exact same words—but it really lands different.

Domestic Workers' Awareness and Buy-In Are Needed for Successful Policy Implementation

Effective implementation of a worker protection policy requires that workers are aware of their new rights, which is more likely if workers lead the policymaking effort. As Kligerman explained, "Even if it [a policy] is pretty on paper, if nobody knows about it and nobody feels bought into it, then it won't be applied." Duncan noted, "Rights on paper are meaningless if you don't have informed and organized workers upholding those rights, fighting to defend those rights."

NDWA-PA DEVELOPED WORKER LEADERSHIP & POWER IN PHILADELPHIA SINCE 2018

NDWA's work in Philadelphia since the chapter's creation in 2018 was critical to workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign.

NDWA-PA Centers Domestic Worker Engagement and Leadership

NDWA-PA's pre-existing membership base and leadership development programs facilitated workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign:

- **Membership base:** For years, NDWA-PA had conducted outreach to hundreds of domestic workers to teach them about their rights and invite them into the movement, building a broad, multiracial, multilingual membership base.⁹ Members participated in a range of activities including bilingual membership meetings (quarterly), monthly affinity group spaces, labor enforcement clinics, new membership orientations, Know Your Rights trainings, trainings on other topics of importance to members, and much more.¹⁰
- **Leadership development programs:** The chapter invested in leadership development programs. For example, NDWA-PA graduated at least 16 domestic worker member leaders from the Organize, Lead, and Amplify (OLA) paid leadership development program. These member leaders worked and learned 10 hours per week for 12 weeks.¹¹



Domestic Workers Were Indispensable to NDWA-PA's Previous Policy Wins

Before the POWER Act campaign, which began in 2022, domestic workers in Philadelphia campaigned to win various policies including the Philadelphia Domestic Worker Bill of Rights (DWBOR). The City Council unanimously passed the DWBOR in 2019,¹² and it went into effect in May 2020. Domestic workers were central to the process of developing the legislation. “In our negotiations, we had domestic workers at the literal table in City Hall every week for months talking through it,” Kligerman said. “It was really critical to make sure the lived experience of workers, and the knowledge and expertise that they bring, were centralized within the process.”¹³

Domestic workers also vigorously lobbied Councilmembers to support the DWBOR. Domestic workers “became fixtures every Thursday at City Council meetings for a year, arriving an hour before each session started, in matching t-shirts, to corner politicians and pitch their central demand: a domestic workers’ bill of rights that would provide benefits like paid time off and mandatory contracts with employers... ‘Our members know City Council and City Hall better than most people in the City of Philadelphia,’ Kligerman says.”¹⁴

Through the DWBOR and other campaigns in NDWA-PA's early years, domestic workers developed advocacy skills and experience, leadership, and relationships with local organizations and elected officials. They also won funds for workers and for NDWA-PA. These early policy victories included:

- In 2019, as part of the DWBOR, NDWA-PA won the creation of the Philadelphia Domestic Workers Standards and Implementation Task Force to craft and recommend policy to the City Council.¹⁵ The Task Force membership includes three NDWA-PA worker leaders as well as the NDWA-PA Director.^{16, 17}
- In 2020, NDWA-PA helped win a ballot initiative to create a permanent Philadelphia Department of Labor and an increase in the city's budget to enforce worker protection laws as steering committee leaders in the Coalition to Respect Every Worker (CREW) labor enforcement coalition.¹⁸
- In 2020, NDWA-PA worked with allied organizations to win and distribute over \$1.7 million in emergency cash assistance through the Mayoral Worker Relief Fund to workers who were excluded from COVID financial relief programs.¹⁹
- In 2022, NDWA-PA won over \$16,000 from the Office of Worker Protections Community Outreach and Education Fund, an initiative to partner with community organizations to protect workers.^{20, 21}



LIVED EXPERIENCE ON CITY COUNCIL: WORKERS' PARTNERSHIP WITH COUNCILMEMBER KENDRA BROOKS

From early on, the push for the POWER Act was a partnership between workers and Councilmember Kendra Brooks, who led with her own lived experience from inside City Council. She had worked as a domestic worker to pay her way through the Community College of Philadelphia.²² Her grandmother and great-grandmother were also domestic workers.²³

Even before Councilmember Brooks' historic election to City Council in November 2019, winning an at-large seat as a Working Families Party candidate,²⁴ she was part of the fight for the DWBOR. She got involved with organizing and lobbying for the DWBOR as a community organizer with organizations in Philadelphia.²⁵ Then she came into office, and it became clear that more work was needed to make the promises of the DWBOR real. She explained, "Coming into office and identifying and seeing how it wasn't being enforced and having an opportunity to kind of jump back... put the band back together again, and move to the next iteration of it... We already were a part of each other. They didn't really have to find me; I was just already around."

Councilmember Brooks' experience as a former domestic worker gave her knowledge, conviction, and confidence to lead on the POWER Act:

As a former domestic worker myself, I know that labor violations are extremely common, and I know that women like me, Black and brown women, are the most impacted by workplace exploitation... My experience gave me the conviction and confidence I needed to lead on this bill... I know what goes on behind closed doors personally... Every part of organizing and introducing and even the opposition and the obstacles that we faced were personal to me. I could feel—I've experienced—the pain, the disrespect, and the burden that these women have faced or were currently facing. The stories hit home.

Councilmember Brooks believes that figuring out the best solution to any problem requires starting with the people who are most impacted:

When the folks that are directly impacted are telling their stories, they're telling them from lived real experience. It's not made up. I don't need you to tell my story. Allow me to tell my story, and collectively we can come up with a way to make things better. I think too often in politics, in legislating, in business, certain people have access to tell the story, but it is the story from their perspective, not from their own lived experience. For folks that are most impacted to be a part of legislation from beginning to end, it allows protections to be in place that are realistic... We saw that firsthand in this legislation.



WORKERS' LEADERSHIP IN THE FOUR PHASES OF THE POWER ACT POLICY CYCLE

The story of the POWER Act begins with domestic workers exercising their new rights under the DWBOR, demonstrating that policy change can be a cycle. This section analyzes workers' leadership throughout the four phases of the ongoing POWER Act policy cycle:

- I. Identifying and Analyzing the Problems
- II. Developing the Policy Solutions and Growing the Coalition
- III. Passing the Legislation
- IV. Implementing the Legislation

I. IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING THE PROBLEMS

The POWER Act campaign originated when domestic workers exercised their rights under the DWBOR and encountered major problems, particularly retaliation. The DWBOR went into effect in May 2020. As Duncan explained, it soon became apparent that workers “were facing significant barriers with actually being able to make their rights real... It [the POWER Act campaign] came from listening to workers every day about their experience and the challenges they were facing.”

NDWA-PA staff members learned about the problems workers were experiencing while staff connected with members, educated workers about the DWBOR, and supported workers with filing claims. Kligerman noted the variety of ways in which staff members heard about these problems:

We're a membership-based organization. So we heard from workers we talk to every day. We're constantly on the phone. In Philadelphia, we have a membership base of many hundreds of workers constantly in the mix. Our members do a lot of outreach and are very much out there pushing domestic worker organizing while they're in the nanny parks or they're cleaning or whatever the case may be. So these cases are coming from our members, or friends or domestic worker colleagues of our members. This is really a campaign that only is stemming from impacted workers speaking up.

Workers Asserting Their Rights Faced Retaliation

Domestic workers' primary complaint, as they exercised their rights under the DWBOR, was retaliation. They faced retaliation from their employers, threats of termination, and termination itself. As NDWA-PA organizer Adriana George explained:

As we worked to have this law [the DWBOR] be respected, employers failed to recognize their responsibilities under the law, leading to denied contracts, lack of paid rest breaks, and wrongful termination. When domestic workers asserted their rights, they risked retaliation, like getting fired without advance notice, blacklisted from jobs, and risked threats of immigration deportation. This is a clear violation of our Bill of Rights.²⁶

One particular retaliation case was a catalyst. As Kligerman said:

A member who is a nanny, a Black immigrant woman from the Caribbean, who was a nanny in the richest neighborhood in Philadelphia—she asked for a contract and lost her job. She got blacklisted on the local moms' Facebook groups. And [us] just being like, ok, this actually isn't working... This is not how we intended for this to work.

NDWA-PA Members Surveyed 200 Domestic Workers to Investigate Problems on the Job

To learn more, NDWA-PA conducted a survey of 200 domestic workers to find out what problems they were experiencing at work. The member leader Organizing Committee led the way in surveying workers in 30-minute interviews. Survey results showed that the problems workers were naming were, for the most part, violations of existing law.²⁷ About 25% of workers surveyed reported that they had experienced wage theft and about 44% reported violations of the DWBOR.²⁸

NDWA-PA Staff and Member Leaders Analyzed the Problems and Brainstormed Causes

Next, NDWA-PA held retreats for about 20 member leaders to analyze the problems workers were experiencing, which boiled down to workers' rights on paper not translating into meaningful protections. This overall problem was clear from various sources including the 200-worker survey, conversations with workers, and conversations with legal service partners who were filing claims.

In these retreats, NDWA-PA staff and member leaders discussed the gap between the DWBOR and workers' current experiences—and potential causes for the disconnect.

A central problem was inadequate accountability for employers to follow the requirements of the DWBOR. As organizer Adriana George noted, “Employers are not being held accountable because there are no consequences... A law is only as strong as its enforcement. Bad employers continue to exploit workers knowing there are no consequences for violating labor laws.”²⁹

NDWA-PA staff and member leaders also discussed various enforcement-related problems that members and lawyers had flagged. These issues, too, became part of the emerging campaign. As Kligerman described:

We were able to really use the retaliation in particular as kind of the tip of the spear, and then drag the rest of the sludge along with us. The enforcement bridge-to-nowheres: there were no damages beyond returning what had already been stolen... There wasn't a way to take employers to court to collect if they refused after being found that they were wrong. There are different statutes of limitations for the different ordinances. Lots of different issues that lawyers knew about but that does not a campaign make—and that's really what's required to win those changes.

NDWA-PA Achieved Some Progress Through Existing Channels, but Structural Overhaul Was Needed

After identifying the problems, NDWA-PA staff and member leaders successfully resolved some issues by working through existing channels, including the domestic worker task force and relationships with OWP. For example, claim forms were originally available only in English, and NDWA-PA successfully pushed for translation of the forms into multiple languages. But it was clear to NDWA-PA that working through existing channels would not be sufficient to achieve “the kind of structural overhaul that we were looking for.”³⁰

II. DEVELOPING THE POLICY SOLUTIONS AND GROWING THE COALITION

NDWA-PA Brought People Together to Brainstorm and Test Ideas

Having identified and investigated a variety of problems and carefully analyzed existing law, NDWA-PA held weekly meetings for a year and a half to brainstorm, test, and draft policy solutions. These meetings included NDWA-PA staff, workers, lawyers from Community Legal Services and the Sheller Center for Social Justice at the Temple University Beasley School of Law, and sometimes organizers from across the city. The meetings focused on complex issues, and the conversations “would go at the pace of understanding” because it was essential for everyone to understand. Kligerman noted, “If only a trained employment attorney can understand this, that is not socializing and broadening labor rights to the level of the city. We actually need everybody, not just a labor rights organization, to understand this.”

The group brainstormed ideas and came up with solutions for the problems workers were experiencing. For example:

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
Some employers are repeat bad actors, and workers do not necessarily know which employers are repeat bad actors	Create a publicly-available bad actors database for abusive employers (“A worker can be like, ‘Do I want to work for Mr. Jones? I can look that up.’”)
When workers are retaliated against, they experience psychological and emotional abuse, and they—particularly if undocumented—may not have access to health insurance to help them access mental health services	Worker justice fund to compensate workers who face retaliation

Ideas from brainstorming sessions were tested by both lawyers and workers before being included in the draft legislation. Lawyers compared ideas against the Philadelphia city charter (constitution) and Pennsylvania preemption laws to make sure they were within the scope of City Council’s power—if not, lawyers looked for other ways to achieve the same goals. Workers tested ideas by evaluating them in the context of their lived experience.

Kligerman explained, “It was super useful ‘cause we’d be able to say, here’s X proposal. Play that out for me. You try to renegotiate your contract. What’s going to happen to your nanny job then? ... That sounds nice, but let’s play that out, what that looks like in real life.” In talking through potential scenarios with the benefit of workers’ experiences, the group identified the most practical ideas and changed course as needed in the drafting process.

Tested ideas from brainstorming sessions formed the basis of the POWER Act. A summary of the final legislation is provided in the Appendix.

NDWA-PA Members and Staff Grew the Multi-Sector, Multi-Racial, Multilingual Coalition

As NDWA-PA members and staff explored the policy problems and potential solutions, they reached out to workers and organizers in other sectors to build a broader coalition. They wanted the campaign to be a fight that other groups could really buy into. As Kligerman noted, “Through the DWBOR fight and the realities of state pre-emption, we had already won everything we could for domestic workers in Philly. Therefore, the campaign had to be about all workers—not ‘just’ domestic workers.”

After exploring where there were shared problems across sectors, NDWA-PA members and staff built a multi-sector coalition of Black, Latinx, and immigrant low-paid, predominantly women workers who led the campaign for the POWER Act. The worker-led organizations central to the fight included El Comité de Trabajadorxs de Restaurante, an organization of immigrant women restaurant workers, and the Philly Black Worker Project, which organizes Black workers including formerly incarcerated people working at staffing agencies. The Philadelphia Council of the AFL-CIO was also a core partner in the campaign.

Uniting a diverse group of workers was part of NDWA-PA’s strategy from the beginning. As Kligerman said, “Having multiracial, multilingual, multi-gender workers coming together, that’s how we win.”³¹ Kligerman described the POWER Act coalition of workers: “The workers involved were almost all women. All Black and Latinx—Black across the diaspora, both African-American and Caribbean. We have some West African members... Very women-forward leadership. And majority immigrant. That’s who fought and won this. Poor and working-class people.”

Brittany Alston, Founder and Executive Director of the Philly Black Worker Project, discussed the power of solidarity between marginalized workers whose employers exploit racism and fear, particularly for workers who are undocumented or formerly incarcerated:

There is just so much inherent racism that lives in these policies that are intentionally sparking fear to disempower people from standing up and fighting back. It is hard to move people through fear, period. But it is harder to move people through fear when you are taking away their ability to be free... A lot of our members are formerly incarcerated. The way they [employers] weaponize incarceration, the way they weaponize documentation, are very, very, very similar. They are often used by employers to take advantage of people. Then you don't feel powerful in being able to stand up for your rights because I will threaten to send you back to jail. I will threaten to deport you... That to me is where the importance and the power of the work comes in, to be able to create a container for people to organize...³²

The POWER Act coalition extended far beyond worker organizations, including Community Legal Services of Philadelphia and over 20 community-based organizations. Supporters included the Alliance for a Just Philadelphia, 215 People's Alliance, One PA, Asian Americans United, Juntos, VietLead, Jobs with Justice, and others. National organizations such as SEIU also supported the POWER Act.



III. PASSING THE LEGISLATION

Workers Lobbied and Rallied at City Hall

NDWA-PA members and workers from other organizations, as well as NDWA-PA staff, lobbied hard for two years to win City Council members' support for the POWER Act. Kligerman shared, "We organized incredibly hard. We were in the city council weekly for two years. There's open council sessions that we would go to every Thursday morning. We did tons of lobbying and actions in City Hall. Domestic workers specifically were so present in the fight."

Councilmember Brooks reflected on the workers' role in winning the POWER Act:

They showed up! They showed up at City Hall, at press conferences, at organizing workshops, strategy sessions, rallies, and actions. They shared their stories. They led with their lived experience. They created the momentum and the expectation that this legislation was necessary. They built relationships with my colleagues [on City Council] and with other worker-led community-based organizations so that we could actually have the support that we needed to move this legislation forward.

The coalition of workers—motivated by lived experience—showed up regularly, strategically, in person in matching t-shirts, with great determination, coordination, and energy. Councilmember Brooks shared, "Every time they filled the chambers or filled the halls, you could feel their commitment, dedication, and passion." They met with council members, shared their stories, gave public comments during council sessions, brought large signs, and published op-eds. Councilmember Brooks added, "Even though they're not a union, when they showed up it was union-like, which is powerful. Ready, coordinated. It wasn't a haphazard group of people showing up at Council. They had a plan. They were strategic. Everyone was well-informed and ready to implement." They "raised the bar" in terms of face-to-face engagement, particularly after the COVID pandemic, going beyond anything Councilmember Brooks had seen in years.

Workers' lobbying and actions proved extremely effective. When Councilmember Brooks officially introduced the bill in February 2025, a veto-proof majority of Councilmembers had already cosponsored the bill. In May 2025, the act passed unanimously (16-0)³³ with support from the 14 Democrats and 2 Working Families Party members on the City Council.^{34, 35}



Domestic Workers' Sharing of Lived Experience Connected Councilmembers to the Issue

Domestic workers' sharing of their lived experience tapped into Council members' lived experience and personal connections, linking them personally to the issue and moving them to act. Numerous elected leaders in Philadelphia, including Mayor Cherrille Parker³⁶ and various councilmembers, were raised by domestic workers or have family members who were domestic workers. For example, on the Committee on Law and Government alone, Chair Katherine Gilmore Richardson's mother and grandmother were domestic workers³⁷ and Vice Chair Kendra Brooks' grandmother and great-grandmother were domestic workers.³⁸ By sharing their experiences, workers implicitly invited Council members to consider their own personal connections to the issue—whether as domestic workers or people and families that needed paid care.

As Kligerman explained, “Domestic work is such personal work. Really, everybody in Philadelphia has a relationship to it... A lot of lawmakers were raised by domestic workers or have family members who were domestic workers. So being really face-to-face with workers that remind them [lawmakers] of their family members was really effective.”

Councilmember Brooks shared how her colleagues' family experiences with domestic work bolstered their support for the POWER Act:

I do think it led to us getting as many votes as possible, because I'm pretty sure folks [council members] had heard these stories before. Like, they heard stories from their grandparents, aunts, or someone about the experience, the lived experience they had working in people's homes—or remembering grandmom's not around because she had to care for someone else's children on holidays. And how that impacted them. So I think that was a huge part of many of my colleagues really taking part in this.

Upon signing the legislation, Mayor Parker stated, “I proudly signed the POWER Act... This is personal. My grandmother was a Domestic Worker. I saw her struggle and her perseverance—and today, we honor that legacy.”³⁹

Workers’ Leadership with Lived Experience Overcame Business Opposition

Workers’ leadership with lived experience was essential in shaping the narrative in the face of business opposition. As Councilmember Brooks explained:

We had opposition from organizations that represented the bosses and the restaurant and hospitality industry. They said the law was too much of a burden on them. But we always shifted the attention and the narrative back to the workers—what was the burden on them, the workers and their families? What were these workers, who were mostly Black and brown women, expected to tolerate? ... Every time we faced those obstacles, we brought workers in to share their stories and help shift the narrative back to their real experiences—that’s why this legislation was necessary.

Workers’ expertise and lived experience proved crucial in the April 2025 committee hearing on the POWER Act. Councilmember Brooks shared:

In the hearing, the pushback that we were able to give was like, this is not made up. This is documented real things that are happening here. Being in the room with the bosses and allowing them to kind of go back and forth. ‘You can’t dispute what I know. You can’t dispute what I’ve lived.’ For the workers to have the opportunity to do that, and the employers to have the opportunity to hear the passion, the pain, and the disappointment, helped us to be able to move this forward and craft a piece of legislation that everyone could live with.

As NDWA Pennsylvania Chapter Member Lilia stated, “We have our own stories, our own experiences, and it is very important that they hear from our own voices. We don’t need someone to speak for us. We are real, and we must be heard, because we are the ones who live through the bad experiences.”⁴⁰

Councilmember Brooks’ own lived experience as a former nanny was also indispensable to holding firm in the face of business opposition. Kligerman explained:

Having policymakers with lived experience was absolutely critical in terms of us maintaining the strength of the policy as business interests started to very actively lobby against us. Actually having her [Councilmember Brooks] understand how the degree of what they’re [business interests] pushing for is undermining the fundamental nature of what we’re going for was really critical.

Workers Led Efforts to Grow the Coalition and Pass the POWER Act

Key events in the worker-led process of building support and passing the POWER Act included:

- **June 2023:** Domestic workers kicked off the POWER Act campaign with a rally against retaliation in Rittenhouse Square, one of Philadelphia’s wealthiest neighborhoods and the site of many domestic worker labor violations.^{41, 42, 43}
- **November 2023:** NDWA-PA joined with a variety of worker and community organizations to organize the Philly Workers Fight Back Summit. NDWA-PA members and staff got summit participants on board with the POWER Act campaign.⁴⁴ Councilmembers also joined the summit.
- **January 2024:** On the first day of the new term, 45 workers from NDWA-PA and other organizations spoke one-on-one with City Council members, asking them to sign a pledge to fight for workers’ rights in 2024.^{45, 46}
- **September 2024:** Workers, labor leaders, and 11 City Councilmembers gathered at City Hall to demand robust labor law enforcement through increased funding for OWP and passage of the POWER Act, which was intended to be introduced before the end of the year.⁴⁷
- **February 2025:** Councilmember and Minority Leader Kendra Brooks introduced the POWER Act. Workers from NDWA-PA, El Comité de Trabajadorxs del Restaurante, and the Philly Black Worker Project testified in support. Thirteen of the 17 Council members—a veto-proof majority—cosponsored the bill.⁴⁸
- **March 2025:** Councilmember Brooks hosted a briefing in City Hall to provide information for Councilmembers and staff about the POWER Act. Workers, employers, labor leaders, and legal experts explained how the legislation works.⁴⁹
- **April 2025:** The Committee on Law and Government considered the POWER Act. Workers and organizers from NDWA-PA, Philly Black Worker Project, and El Comité de Trabajadorxs de Restaurante testified in support of the bill—as did leaders from local unions, community organizations, and small businesses. The committee approved amendments and unanimously passed the bill out of committee.⁵⁰
- **May 2025:** After testimony from members of NDWA-PA, El Comité de Trabajadorxs de Restaurantes, and Philly Black Worker Project, the City Council unanimously passed the bill.
- **May 2025:** NDWA-PA members and other workers from the coalition showed up in force as Mayor Cherrille Parker signed the POWER Act.^{51, 52}

IV. IMPLEMENTING THE LEGISLATION

The POWER Act Coalition's current challenge is implementing the law. NDWA-PA is working with OWP, labor groups, legal service providers, and unions on implementation. Kligerman discussed the major difficulties: "We're very deep in implementation right now. It's a 44-page law. It's extremely sweeping and ambitious... The campaign was, start to finish, I think 3 years. Now we have to implement... That is still a ton of work... We're working on the 18-month plan on implementation."

Implementation Strategy is Based on Workers' Assessment of Impact

NDWA-PA's implementation strategy is based on workers' assessment of impact. Kligerman explained:

Our philosophy is that we had workers look at—what did we win? Let's rank what we won. What is going to take the longest to implement, but we need to move on? What is going to have the biggest immediate impact? And based on workers' experiences of what they think is going to be the most impactful, that is what we're pushing for, what workers are pushing for on the policy table.

Trainings with the Office of Worker Protection Feature Worker Leadership

An early implementation priority for NDWA-PA was a series of training sessions with the OWP and NDWA-PA members, in partnership with The Workplace Justice Lab at Rutgers University. The trainings included:

- **OWP Investigation Process:** First, OWP trained workers on their investigation process, and workers provided feedback.
- **Protecting Immigrant Workers:** NDWA-PA trained OWP on protecting immigrant workers through the POWER Act and beyond—partly to protect immigrant workers filing complaints under the POWER Act. As Kligerman shared, "Right now it's really challenging because of folks' immigration status and everything going on, it's really difficult to have people filing those complaints. That's where the idea of immigrant workers training the staff of OWP on how to do it came from."

Member-Led Rittenhouse Campaign to Advance Implementation and Strengthen Worker Power

Part of NDWA-PA's POWER Act implementation strategy is a new, member-led density campaign to organize domestic workers in the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood. This area is one of Philadelphia's wealthiest. The campaign aims to organize workers to collectively demand a family-sustaining wage and benefit floor for all domestic workers in the neighborhood. Another campaign goal is to find strategic cases to enforce the POWER Act.

Kligerman described how the neighborhood density strategy will help find strategic cases to enforce the POWER Act:

Some of the strongest provisions within the legislation kick in when there are three or more violations. That's really difficult when you work in a worksite of one. So we're very focused on that condensed area to find these 'frequent flyer' bad employers who are violating our laws... in order to identify those workers and file those claims.⁵³

This new campaign builds on the foundation of worker leadership and power developed via the POWER Act campaign. Kligerman explained:

The power and leadership built through the POWER Act is now translating into the Rittenhouse density organizing. We have a bunch of members who were active in the POWER Act and who work in the Rittenhouse neighborhood and are working with us right now. We're on the survey outreach and base-building phase of this and strategizing with them... It's very member-led, and all of it—the knowledge, skills, relationships, organizing ability, commitment, sense of self, and sense of the group, all of that comes from our ongoing and connected work together.

The Rittenhouse campaign applies NDWA-PA's lessons learned from the DWBOR about the need for a major implementation campaign that shifts power dynamics. Kligerman emphasized:

If people think that they can just win a law, and then it's gonna work, they're wrong... It [implementation] needs as intense of a strategy to win as a legislative campaign would need.

She stressed that successful implementation requires not just outreach and education, but also continued organizing:

The goal is to change a really, really intractable problem. Printing a million flyers... is not going to overcome the power dynamic and exploitation—particularly now with so many threats to immigration, and the economy how it is... A broad educational, know your rights awareness campaign does very little to shift the power imbalances to the degree required. It's real organizing around the wins and making sure that they're enforced in every single household and every single work site.



WORKERS' LEADERSHIP IN THE POWER ACT CAMPAIGN DROVE RESULTS

This section describes the results and impact of workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign.

Workers Developed an Effective Policy That Changed Power Dynamics

Workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign was critical to developing a policy designed to change power dynamics. The law creates new worker protections, expands resources for workers, and limits employers' power. It also increases both OWP's power to hold employers accountable and public power to hold OWP accountable. For example, the POWER Act does the following (see a summary of the law in the Appendix):

- Creates new retaliation protections for workers—and shifts the burden of proof from the worker to the employer after an employee stands up for their rights
- Provides damages directly to workers to compensate for harm from employer violations of their rights
- Authorizes the creation of a Worker Justice Fund to compensate workers who face retaliation
- Creates a publicly-available Bad Actors Database for abusive employers
- Provides OWP the power to: suspend licenses and procurement contracts for bad employers; investigate the whole workplace for violations when they learn of one complaint; initiate proactive investigations of abusive employers; subpoena records; etc.

Workers Won Passage of the Policy

Workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign was essential to passing the policy in the face of powerful, well-funded business opposition. Kligerman explained:

I know we wouldn't have won if domestic workers were not so powerfully—not just telling their stories, which is important, but were in every single policy meeting and were going toe-to-toe with policymakers. 'Cause when Amazon and the Chamber of Commerce and the Restaurant and Lodging Association and the hotel industry were swinging really hard at us, to have workers who had built those relationships... Specific to Philadelphia, there's a lot of lawmakers who have family backgrounds rooted in domestic work... They [workers] were able to much more effectively move the lawmakers than I would have. If it's me, Nicole, versus an Amazon lobbyist, I'm going to lose. But if you have a room of over a hundred domestic workers that look like the lawmakers' grandmothers and are reminding them of them—we won because of that.

The Coalition Is Invested in Meaningful Implementation

The strong worker-led coalition for the POWER Act has resulted in different kinds of workers and organizations being invested in and fighting for its meaningful implementation. Kligerman said, "Having more different kinds of workers and organizations be invested in non-union labor protections in Philly—understanding that cycle, having done the first go-around—now we have so many more people who are really invested in that success."

The Campaign Bolstered Workers' Knowledge of Rights and Sense of Power and Community

Workers' leadership in the POWER Act campaign bolstered their personal sense of agency and power, their knowledge of their rights, and their sense of community. Lilia explained:

I feel empowered because we were listened to, and we won... I feel more empowered and able to keep helping other people. I've learned my rights, and now I share them with other people. We have rights regardless of immigration status. I hear from people saying, 'This is happening in my workplace,' and now I'm able to say, 'We have rights, we have to speak out.'

Kligerman noted that working together on the campaign also developed workers' feeling of community: "Organizing is really important community-building, both within domestic workers' membership and also across the different worker sectors."

The Campaign Fueled the Local Movement of Marginalized Workers, Resulting in New Campaigns

Marginalized workers' cross-sector campaign for the POWER Act strengthened their leadership and movement infrastructure, helping facilitate new campaigns. Kligerman noted that marginalized workers are building other labor campaigns off the success of the POWER Act campaign:

Part of our goal was to strengthen the whole movement infrastructure of marginalized workers—who are now putting forward some incredible, visionary fights for other kinds of workers who are extremely marginalized, and will also benefit domestic workers... It [the POWER Act campaign] provided really important leadership development opportunities and visibility for other sectors that are now having springboard campaigns—deepening and strengthening the broader movement infrastructure.

The Campaign Built and Demonstrated Working-Class Collective People Power

The POWER Act campaign built and demonstrated working-class people power. Councilmember Brooks explained:

As a community organizer, having worked on this issue in the past, I saw it as an opportunity to build the movement... This law was created and won by the people who had the most at stake, the workers themselves... Community organizers are always looking for ways to build collective power and develop new working-class leaders and show folks that they are the change that is possible—and this campaign did all of those things.



THE POWER ACT CAMPAIGN FACED MAJOR CHALLENGES

This section describes some of the challenges faced in the POWER Act campaign.

Maintaining Engagement and Momentum While Waiting for an Opportunity at City Council Proved Difficult

The City Council's consideration of the POWER Act was delayed a full year because of an intense fight over a proposed Philadelphia 76ers basketball arena in Chinatown, and it was difficult for NDWA-PA to keep engagement and momentum during this time.

Kligerman explained:

That [fight over the new arena] kind of took the whole year of the legislative calendar. So keeping the momentum was a challenge. 'What are we going to do at this retreat?' is difficult. That's where community building is so important. Really digging deep into agitation is important... We were ready to win earlier, but the political conditions weren't there.

Continued Business Opposition Intensifies Implementation Challenges

Continued business opposition to the POWER Act has intensified the major challenges of implementing this ambitious, multifaceted law. Kligerman stated, "Business interests are continuing to lobby against us...They're trying to kill it in implementation, and they have a lot more access than we do... We know it's not enough to win the law. It's like, damn, this never ends."

Anti-Immigrant Presidential Administration Makes Immigrant Workers Wary of Filing Claims

Due to the extremely anti-immigrant current presidential administration,⁵⁴ immigrant workers have been wary of filing claims to assert their rights under the POWER Act, which is necessary to test implementation. The majority of workers who fought for the law are immigrants, and many are undocumented. Kligerman shared, “People [are] wanting to come forward less and less and less. We need to have people be filing these claims, being the proof of concept in incredibly difficult circumstances.”

Explaining and Meeting the Legal Definition for Retaliation and Discrimination is Complicated

The POWER Act is complicated legislation, and it is difficult to explain and meet the legal definition for retaliation and discrimination. Kligerman noted:

Even what retaliation legally is—is quite difficult to explain... It’s still hard to explain what we won. What is legal and illegal does not necessarily always track with what is moral and felt. Something can feel retaliatory, discriminatory, and I’m sure that it is—that doesn’t necessarily reach the legal bar of what those things are... That is an ongoing challenge.



ORGANIZING OVERCAME BARRIERS TO MARGINALIZED WORKERS' PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

The marginalized workers who led the POWER Act campaign face major challenges to participating in and leading campaigns. For example, the POWER Act coalition was majority immigrant, and immigrant workers bravely spoke out despite the current U.S. political climate which is dangerous for immigrants. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for low-paid workers without paid time off to take time away from work, family, and other responsibilities to participate in a campaign, particularly during standard working hours on weekdays, when City Council business takes place.

The POWER Act campaign demonstrated that organizing—combined with workers' determination—can overcome barriers to workers' participation and leadership. Kligerman explained, "I think those are reasons why people keep fighting. People really showed up and turned out. The structural reasons are why people fight... Why is this happening? Here's how we solve it... The solution to that is winning, is organizing." Councilmember Brooks echoed the same sentiment. "This is the power of organizing. They [the workers] were dedicated and committed to each other and to the movement that they were building."

Lilia discussed overcoming schedule challenges and immigration-related fears to show up, speak up, and win:

Yes, it is a bit difficult to coordinate schedules. I'm a mom of three kids, so it's a bit of a challenge. With work, things are a little more flexible because I work for myself [cleaning houses] and can set my own hours. The desire to be there—to keep fighting—makes it all worth it... I have family members who tell me not to risk it, to not be involved because of immigration concerns. But my desire to participate and be heard motivates me to be there. Because if we don't show up and speak up, we can't win. So I show up—with fear—but I show up.

ORGANIZING FACILITATED WORKERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE IMPACTING POLICY

Lived experience can be brought into policymaking efforts in various ways by various actors, including by nonprofits and the government itself. This case study demonstrates the effectiveness of a strong grassroots organization (NDWA) in ensuring that lived experience shows up in policy.

In the story of the POWER Act, despite limited resources,⁵⁵ NDWA-PA put in the time and resources that made it possible for domestic workers' lived experience to drive the policy process. NDWA-PA developed leaders, created feedback loops for sharing what was not working about the DWBOR, engaged members in policy design, and built an active base and the power to pass the law.

Kligerman emphasized that organizing and policy are not separate—she views everything as part of the campaign:

The campaign is not separate from the other things we're doing. We do leadership development, we do lots of workshops and education and membership meetings and outreach and our campaign. When we're doing outreach, we're doing outreach for the campaign. When we're doing leadership, we're using the campaign as the example... It's a losing battle to divide organizing and policy... We don't have people working on the campaign, and [other] people doing basebuilding. The campaign is what we do.

Kligerman also highlighted that the campaign is the ideal way to engage members and develop leadership:

There's no greater way [than the campaign] to do leadership development or membership—what are you building your base around other than putting people into the fight? ... Really understanding these different elements to not be at odds with each other is super critical. Our organizers meet workers in the field, and then you're recruiting them to do something—you recruit them to come to the lobby visit. That is leadership development and it is community building and it is the campaign at the same time.

CONCLUSION

In the POWER Act campaign, a coalition of domestic workers and other low-paid, marginalized workers defeated powerful business opposition to win the passage of a groundbreaking law. Workers led throughout the cycle of the campaign: identifying the policy problems, developing the policy solutions, growing the coalition, and passing and implementing the legislation. Beyond the protections they secured for 750,000 workers across Philadelphia, they strengthened their own leadership and sense of agency. They bolstered the local movement infrastructure, helping facilitate new campaigns. They showed what is possible through worker leadership, lived experience, worker power, and people power.

As Councilmember Brooks explained, “This entire movement is about building power. We’re talking about people power. We’re not talking about wealth...Everyday working people have the influence to build a movement that’s bigger than them... This is what the POWER Act is about. It’s bigger than the legislation. It’s about the shared collective movement of people to change the trajectory of our country.”

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF THE POWER ACT

WHO IS PROTECTED BY THE POWER ACT?

All Philadelphia workers, regardless of immigration status, are protected by this legislation. We estimate that over 750,000 Philadelphians who rely on the Office of Worker Protections to enforce their labor rights will benefit from this legislation.

WHAT DOES THE POWER ACT DO?

Prevents Retaliation

- Creates new retaliation protections for workers and shifts the burden of proof from the worker to the employer after an employee stands up for their rights

Immigration Certification

- Sets up clear guidelines and procedures for the Office of Worker Protections to certify applications for immigration relief. This solidifies the DoL's power to certify that the immigrant worker has suffered a violation of their labor rights, which is used in their application for U visas, T visas, or other forms of immigration relief

Compensation for Workers

- Provides damages directly to workers, to compensate for the harm they suffered from employer violations of their workplace rights
- Authorizes the creation of a Worker Justice Fund to compensate workers who face retaliation, which could be funded through the fines that go to the City based on employer violations

Creates a Bad Actors Database for Abusive Employers

- Employers are added to a publicly available Bad Actors Database: for multiple labor law violations; for failure to comply with a judgment
- Employers are removed from the database: after two years without additional violations; after complying with the judgment

Updates Sick Pay

- More accurately calculates the sick pay for tipped workers under the existing Paid Sick Leave Ordinance in order to reduce the large financial penalty for tipped workers who call out sick

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF THE POWER ACT

Provides the Office of Worker Protections with the tools they need to enforce workers' rights

- It gives the department the power to: suspend the licenses and procurement contracts for bad employers; investigate the whole workplace for violations when they learn of one complaint (“wall-to-wall” investigations); initiate proactive investigations of abusive employers; subpoena records; better enforce findings against abusive employers in court

Government Accountability and Stronger Worker Rights

- Establishes basic processes for workers when they make complaints to the Office of Worker Protections to ensure more accountability from the government, like receiving written confirmation of the receipt of complaints, periodic status updates, and a clarified appeals process
- Ensures better accountability of the Office of Worker Protections through mandated public reporting

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