

The UK could have led the way on rights for domestic workers. Instead it has refused to sign a new international convention that promotes fair pay, health and safety, and labour rights

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The Coalition government today shocked campaigners and governments alike by being in a tiny minority of ILO member states to abstain in a vote to adopt an International Labour Organisation treaty on rights for domestic workers. [Oliver Pearce](#) from Christian Aid looks at what the treaty promises for the 100 million domestic workers around the world.



The British government today abstained in a vote at the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) to adopt a new convention for domestic workers. The *Decent Work for Domestic Workers* convention enshrines rights and protections for the approximately 100 million domestic workers around the world with provisions on working hours, minimum age, health and safety, terms and conditions of employment, recruitment, payment, social security and key labour rights in common with other workers.

This is an historic agreement because domestic workers have been calling for such protections for decades, and because this is the first time that the ILO has agreed standards which cover a group of informal workers. Many domestic workers are migrants, sending money home to families from their meagre wages. Too often these workers are exploited and abused, and because their work takes place in private household it is hard to regulate. As well as previously being excluded from international labour standards, domestic workers have tended to be excluded from many national labour laws. This group has found it difficult to articulate the vulnerabilities they suffer since they are often from different migrant communities and work long hours, isolated in their employers' homes.

During the negotiations for the ILO convention, the UK government made it clear that whilst it supported the principle of strengthening protections for domestic workers around the world, it would not necessarily support a Convention that it saw as being incompatible with existing UK legal provisions for domestic workers. However, it also pledged to work constructively within the ILO process and to support the consensus of the committee examining the possibility of a new convention for domestic workers.

Unfortunately for domestic workers in the UK, and also around the world, the UK government did neither. Throughout last week's tripartite negotiations between government, employer and worker representatives, the UK government supported amendments to dilute the protections the convention would afford domestic workers. Even when partners from the EU bloc agreed to the emerging consensus position of the committee on issues such as protections for the living conditions of children who may be engaged in domestic work, and for regulation of health and safety, the UK government remained [adamantly opposed to the agreed text](#).

And despite stating that it would follow the consensus of the committee, the UK government [today abstained in the ILO vote](#) on adoption of the Convention. The EU governments as a whole decided to vote for the Convention, along with all worker representatives, the vast majority of other international governments and some employers. Overall, 83 per cent of ILO members voted for the Convention, with only 3 per cent against, and 13 per cent abstaining. Of governments, only Swaziland voted against, and the UK was joined in abstaining by seven other countries (Czech Republic, El Salvador, Malaysia, Panama, Thailand, Singapore and Sudan). All worker representatives, all other governments and many employer representatives voted in favour of the Convention.

Domestic workers in the UK, those around the world and campaigners are deeply concerned by the UK government's position. It is the case that domestic workers in the UK have more rights and protections than in many countries, particularly in comparison to poorer countries. Christian Aid has been working with UK allies, including [Anti-Slavery International](#), [Kalayaan](#), [Justice 4 Domestic Workers](#), [Unite the Union](#) and the [TUC](#) to call for the UK to champion the ILO convention as a way to improve rights for domestic workers in other countries. Improvements in basic labour standards, agreed through the ILO, is an effective, sustainable and cheap way for the UK government to further its development aims, by ensuring more people can work themselves out of poverty.

Christian Aid has also been working with the local organisations in Asia and the Middle East to press governments in the region to vote for the Convention and improve their national laws in line with it. Many of them voted for the Convention, and are pledging to ratify it or to improve their laws and protections for domestic workers. Through the ILO process, governments, employers and workers have looked at how they can cooperate to ensure basic labour standards to ensure domestic workers are able to be treated as any other kind of worker, respected for their work and enabled to live with basic rights.

All campaigners have been shocked by the government's decision not to ratify the Convention. Progress has been further dented by the [review](#) announced by the government into the domestic worker visa, which is likely to curtail rights and protections for domestic workers in the UK and lead to more trafficking and abuse. By limiting visas available for domestic workers, the government risks increasing those who work in the [grey economy](#). This problem will be compounded by the severe time limit the new visa will allow migrant domestic workers to work in the UK. We should continue to press the UK government to recognise the importance of the new convention for domestic workers around the world, for it to champion the convention internationally, ratify in the UK, and ensure that domestic workers here are entitled to the same rights as other workers.