

the jfrej schmata pesach 2007

a campaign update from jews for racial & economic justice

social justice shabbat

On February 9th, I had the opportunity to join members of Park Slope Jewish Center, Kolot Chayeinu, Domestic Workers United, JFREJ, and others for an evening of Shabbat *davening* (prayers), education, and open discussion. We came to the issue of domestic workers' justice from a variety of perspectives: as employers, as employees, as people raised by domestic workers, and others who came with genuine curiosity or concern. A large number of the participants were employers of domestic workers. Though the February wind blew outside, our numbers were high and the warmth of the community shone through.

The issues we discussed were more than "close to home"—they were from the very center of "home." Participants at my table's discussion brought honest conversation usually reserved for their private spaces into this communal one and grappled with the complicated challenges of employment. People found that the words of Amanda Aaron, a member of both Kolot and JFREJ's Employer for Justice who spoke at the event about being an employer, resonated with them. They also related their own stories of domestic workers who cared for elderly parents; others recounted the love and sense of responsibility they felt towards their charges; still others remembered affectionately the nanny who raised them. It was remarkable to take part in such an exchange, not because we resolved everything but because members of the community found that others shared their emotions and anxieties around domestic work and employment. And it was with this sharing that we began to confront issues that are much larger than each individual, and can only effectively be tackled by us all working together for change on the local and policy levels. The public and the private are not easily separated, we learn time and time again. When it comes to domestic workers' justice, this lesson could not be more true.

— Vered Meir, active member of the Shalom Bayit working group

roti and hamantaschen

Costumed and glittered swarms carrying plates of fish balls and hamantaschen in one hand and pomegranate martinis in the other filled the social hall at the Workmen's Circle until early morning at this year's Purim spiel on March 3rd. An annual collaboration between JFREJ and the Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring, this year's spiel focused on JFREJ's Shalom Bayit Campaign, bringing to light current issues for domestic workers in New York as well as the growing partnership between JFREJ and Domestic Workers United (DWU). Several members of DWU were key in the making and performing of the spiel. A three-act play titled "Roti and Hamantaschen: The Palace Workers Revolt!" told the traditional story of Esther through the voices of some of the less frequently celebrated characters—eunuchs, maids, cooks, and gardeners—who were necessary for the palace to function with the sort of grandeur expected of Ahasuerus. Opening with a procession, the cast sang an original song written by DWU members that emulated a traditional carnival melody:

So be prepared to fight / for what we know is right /

Stand up and unite / so we can fight, fight, fight!

Mindful of the Bill of Rights that DWU and JFREJ will be moving in Albany this spring, the spiel led the audience through some of the more frustrating elements of the bureaucratic process, using puppets, props, and outrageous costumes designed with help from Great Small Works. Romashka, The Rude Mechanical Orchestra, and DJ Rekha provided musical interludes between acts and after the show.

— Michelle Kay, performer and member of JFREJ's Purim Planning Committee

one-to-ones and general membership strategy session lead to jfrej embarking on a new housing campaign

We met at the Bruckner Bar and Grill, in the South Bronx. Within a few minutes of that first conversation with Marian, a longtime yet lapsed JFREJ supporter, she and I discovered all kinds of overlaps. We live and work in the same neighborhoods in the Bronx, have done activism with some of the same people, and have the same farmer for our Community Supported Agriculture schemes. By the end of the conversation, which was one of a series that I had as part of the one-to-one campaign, Marian and I had found out each other's stories—what we care about, and why—exchanged phone numbers, made a Shabbos plan together, and she committed to help choose the next JFREJ campaign. Stories uncovered through these conversations then got combined into a collective "story" to be developed into an action plan—a campaign around an issue that members care about, one that will have a concrete effect on the community.

Our action plan began at the General Membership Strategy Session in early February. First, we presented our findings from over 200 conversations with JFREJers (current or potential members), 6 living room gatherings, and 30 meetings with ally organizations. Among the concerns that emerged from all of these conversations, affordable housing/gentrification, labor, and public education were consistent themes. We brought these ideas, in the form of three campaign proposals developed in consultation with our ally organizations, to the strategy session. There, members discussed, debated, and ultimately chose to focus on affordable housing and gentrification for the new campaign. Stay tuned for a description of the new campaign in our upcoming newsletter. And call the JFREJ office to get involved!

— Elizabeth Wilson, member of JFREJ's core team to chose a new campaign, and Co-Facilitator of February's Strategy Session

support this effort by making a contribution to jfrej!