

The Union of Embroiderers



Madeira, an autonomous region of Portugal, has traditionally been a centre of fine embroidery on household linen and garments, sold to tourists or exported. In the mid 1970s the Union of Embroiderers, under new female leadership, decided to recruit homeworkers who were numerous in the trade.

They set about reaching homeworkers by holding meetings in the schools and on the streets. They mailed people, went round door to door, made contacts through the local church. The then President of the Union of Embroiderers, Guida Vieira, said *'We listened to their grievances and demands and formulated them into demands of the union, so that we could unite and fight together.'* Both she and Union Vice President Maria Garanito had done embroidery themselves and respected the homeworkers' unrecognised skill.

Between 1976 and 1980 2000 women were recruited. The first important victory was winning social security in 1979. The law was changed so that embroiderers could get retirement pension and sickness benefit. They went on to win legal protection as workers, the right to a Christmas bonus and an annual price increase for embroidery workers in 1980.

As news spread of these achievements more women joined the union. In 1987 they won a campaign so that employers, not homeworkers, would pay for the thread used in the work. They also won the right to a family allowance. In 1997 they won the right to unemployment benefit and in 1999 they won a long campaign for the right for women to retire early with a pension.

But problems are ongoing. Homework embroidery still means long hours and low pay. As women grow older they suffer from bad eyesight. Employers continue to cheat the women claiming work is not well done. They frequently owe back pay and the union has to take them to court. The industry is in crisis. Younger women are seeking other forms of work, even if this means migrating to mainland Portugal or elsewhere.

Since 1996 the Union has also been working with another groups with a traditional skill who are suffering from global competition - wicker workers. The wicker workers are producing in independent family-based units and they sell their own goods. While the men see themselves as independent craft workers, the women, who are assumed to be 'helpers', feel they are homeworkers. But both are working within a domestic unit together for the livelihood of their family.

'Organising homeworkers was not easy, and it still isn't easy. On the other hand, it is rewarding work for the union and for my personal fulfilment as a woman, a trade unionist and a worker. Understanding all the different experiences of homeworkers, and the specific characteristics of each, is important for building a solidarity network and exchange of information. It is absolutely urgent, absolutely crucial that the world wakes up and starts to defend the rights of homeworkers.' - Guida Vieira