

TOWARD A VISION OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE:

STATE OF THE LIVING WAGE STRUGGLE

By Jen Kern, Living Wage Resource Center,
Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now! (ACORN)

No one could have predicted, on a cold Baltimore day in December 1994, that the seeds of a national grassroots movement were being sown. To this day, that movement is flourishing.

Back on that day in Baltimore a powerful labor-community coalition brought to fruition its campaign for a local living wage law after a protracted battle. The victory set in motion what columnist Robert Kuttner, writing in 1997, called “the most exciting (and underreported) grassroots enterprise to emerge since the civil rights movement.”

More than 100 ordinances—and thousands of media hits later—the living wage movement not only arguably merits this flattering comparison, but has also shed its “underreported” past.

As of this writing, there are at least 75 ongoing campaigns in cities such as Sacramento, Indianapolis, Knoxville and Atlanta. The fight for fair wages has spilled over into local school boards and state legislatures and exploded onto college campuses, with dozens of current campaigns at colleges and universities in every region of the country.

On the Media’s Radar Screen

The impressive efforts of community groups, labor unions, religious leaders, civil rights advocates and others to force the issue of the working poor onto the agendas of city councils, county commissions and into ballot boxes across the country have not gone unnoticed. Articles in *Business Week*, *Time*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and TV spots on CNN, Fox News, ABC and Oprah (to name a few) testify both to the mainstream appeal of the living wage issue and the hard work of living wage organizers everywhere.

So why—after almost a decade—is the living wage movement still newsworthy? And how do we see to it that it stays that way?

Simply put, living wage campaigns seek to pass enforceable laws requiring private businesses that benefit from public money to pay their workers a living wage. A living wage is typically defined as at least enough to bring a family of four to the federal poverty line, currently \$8.85 an hour (though campaigns have won wages as high as \$13 an hour). Commonly, the ordinances cover public employees and employees of firms who hold large city or county service contracts or benefit from public tax dollars in the form of tax abatements or other economic development subsidies.

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Our message has been straightforward: **People who work should not live in poverty, and limited public dollars should not subsidize poverty-wage work.** Public dollars should be leveraged for the public good—reserved for those private sector employers who demonstrate a commitment to providing decent, family-supporting jobs in our local communities.

“The phrase [living wage] is seeping into the political vernacular and changing the dynamics of political discussion.”

Sometimes the most succinct articulation of an effort’s success comes from its detractors. As campaigns spring up everywhere and advocates take the living wage message into the media, consider the above quote by John Doyle of the anti-living wage Employment Policies Institute.

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Toward a Vision of Economic Justice, cont.

The Message Evolves, the Movement Expands

Over the years, however, the living wage phrase and message have been adapted to a range of campaigns around improving labor standards, workers' right-to-organize and corporate accountability. As such, the living wage concept now usefully frames efforts to raise city or state minimum wages above the shameful federal level of \$5.15 just as well as campaigns to demand that public money not be used for union-busting or that subsidized companies return public money if they fail to meet established standards.

The living wage message is universal and compelling precisely because it is rooted in the increasingly grim economic reality faced by low income workers and their

families: the failure of the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation; massive cuts in welfare and unsupported work requirements pressuring wages downward; and the slow economy resulting in devastating federal and state cuts to crucial social service. Add to that the growth of low-wage service sector jobs; the weakening of labor unions through active union busting;

rampant no-strings-attached corporate welfare that depletes tax dollars while keeping workers poor; the widening gap between rich and the poor; and a depressing new focus on the Business of War, which threatens to further constrain already shamefully limited resources and snuff out any political will to put people first.

Because living wage campaigns have arisen in this larger context—and to the extent they are directed by organizers who understand this big picture—the operating framework and media message for the movement actually addresses a broad range of fundamental issues around work, fairness and democratic accountability. The movement's proven ability to deliver real economic benefits to workers who need it most is only a part of its potential power and importance.

Living wage campaigns force elected officials and candidates for public office to move beyond rhetoric and declare their position on a concrete progressive program. They challenge the reverence for the (supposedly) free market and the privileging of an abstract corporate bottom line over the real life baseline below which no family

should be allowed to fall. The campaigns heighten public awareness of the difference between corporate welfare and real economic development. They promote public scrutiny of practices like privatization and the “temping out” of public work. They promote the idea that any economic decision affecting an entire community should advance the well-being of the community, and that, in a true democracy, such decisions must be subject to public review.

A Tremendous Organizing Opportunity for a Progressive Agenda

Most significantly, these campaigns provide opportunities for organized labor, low-income community groups, faith-based and advocacy organizations to forge and institutionalize alliances that allow future collaborative action as part of a sustainable long-term fight for economic justice.

Like other base-building organizations, the Association of Community Organizations For Reform Now! (ACORN) continues to view living wage campaigns as useful tools around which to organize our low- and moderate-income membership. Toward that end, we will fight alongside our allies to consolidate and expand the victories we have won while broadening the scope of demands that are marshaled and delivered under the living wage banner—such as real health benefits, paid vacation, worker retention, local hiring, corporate disclosure and language that fosters union organizing.

As we move ahead into our second decade of living wage organizing we must not lose sight of our ambitious goal of economic justice. If we as organizers keep our eyes on the prize—and integrate that vision into our media message—this movement should remain newsworthy for many years to come. ■

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Living Wage Wins (and a Few Repeals)

Prepared by Jen Kern, Living Wage Resource Center,
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Listed below, from most recent to earliest passed, are places that have enacted living wage laws.

Total = 101
(cities and counties only)
June, 2003

2003

- Ingham County, MI
- Arlington, VA
- Prince George's County, MD (June)
- Santa Fe, NM (February)
—*minimum wage*
- West Palm Beach County, FL (February)

2002

- Bellingham, WA
- Louisville, KY
- Cincinnati, OH (November)
- Westchester County, NY (November)
- Taylor, MI (November)
- New York City, NY (November)
- Broward County, FL (October)
- Watsonville, CA (September)
- Fairfax, CA (August)
- Southfield, MI (July)
- Oxnard, CA (July)
- Montgomery County, MD (June)
- Port of Oakland, CA (March)
- Santa Fe, NM (February)
- New Orleans, LA (Feb)
—*minimum wage; overturned by Louisiana Supreme Court, 9/02*
- Hazel Park, MI (February);
repealed 6/02 in reaction to state threat to cut revenue sharing to LW cities
- Marin County, CA (January)
- Pima County, AZ (January)

2001

- Salem, OR
- Santa Cruz County, CA (December)
- Bozeman, MT (December)
- New Britain, CT (December)

- Cumberland County, NJ (December)
- Camden, NJ (December)
- Burlington, VT (November)
- Charlottesville, VA (November)
- Richmond, CA (October)
- Washtenaw County, MI (October)
- Hempstead, Long Island, NY (Oct); *repealed before implementation 12/01*
- Monroe County, MI (October)
repealed 3/03
- Ashland, OR (September)
- Oyster Bay, NY (August)
- Gloucester County, NJ (August)
- Suffolk County, NY (July)
- Pittsburgh, PA (May)
Implementation on hold as of 3/02
- Santa Monica, CA (July);
repealed before implementation 11/02
- Ventura County, CA (May)
- Miami Beach, FL (April)
- Pittsfield Township, MI (April)
- Eastpointe, MI (March)
- Missoula, MT (March)
- Ann Arbor, MI (March)
- Ferndale, MI (February)

2001

- Rochester, NY (January)
- Meriden, CT (November)
- Santa Cruz, CA (October)
- Berkeley, CA & Marina (October)
- Eau Claire County, WI (Sept)
- San Francisco, CA (August)
- St. Louis, MO (August);
overturned by lawsuit; 7/01; amended and reinstated by Board of Aldermen 7/02
- Cleveland, OH (June)
- Alexandria, VA (June)
- Toledo, OH (June)
- Omaha, NE (April);
repealed: 9/01

- San Fernando, CA (April)
- Denver, CO (February)
- Warren, MI (January)

1999

- Corvallis, OR (November)
- Hartford, CT (September)
- Tucson, AZ (September)
- Buffalo, NY (August)
- Los Angeles County, CA (June)
- Ypsilanti, MI (June)
- Ypsilanti Township, MI (June)
- Somerville, MA (May)
- Miami-Dade County, FL
- Cambridge, MA (May)
- Hayward, CA
- Madison, WI (March)
- Dane County, WI (March)
- Hudson County, NJ (January)

1998

- San Jose, CA (November)
- Detroit, MI (November)
- Multnomah County, OR (October)
- Boston, MA (September);
expanded Oct. 2001
- Pasadena, CA (September)
- Cook County, IL (September)
- Chicago, IL (July)
- San Antonio, TX (July)
- Portland, OR (amended 1998)
- Oakland, CA (March)
- Durham, NC (January)

1997

- West Hollywood, CA (October)
- Duluth, MN (July)
- Milwaukee County, WI (May)
- New Haven, CT (April)
- Los Angeles, CA (March)
- Minneapolis, MN (March)
- St. Paul, MN (January)

1996

- New York City, NY (September)
- Jersey City, NJ (June)

1995

- Milwaukee, WI (November)
- Santa Clara County, CA

1994

- Baltimore, MD (December)

1991

- Gary, IN*

1988

- Des Moines, IA* (amended 1996)

SCHOOL BOARDS

- Milwaukee Public Schools (January, 1996)
- Richmond, VA School Board (March, 2001)

UNIVERSITIES

- Wesleyan University (April, 2000)
- Stanford University (2002)
- Harvard University (February, 2002)

Campaigns are currently underway in more than 75 additional cities, counties, and universities such as New York City, Little Rock, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Sacramento, Richmond, VA, Manhattan, KS, Knoxville, TN, University of Pittsburgh, Swarthmore College, Valdosta State University.

* Although there are examples of cities requiring labor standards in exchange for public investment going back decades, Baltimore is widely regarded to be the first living wage victory in what we have come to refer to as "the living wage movement."

IN LIVING COLOR:

LIVING WAGE, RACE & THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

By Steve Williams, Executive Director, People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER)

In most communities, the majority of low-wage workers who see raises after the passage of a living wage bill are people of color. This stands to reason given the strong interrelation between race and low-wage employment in the United States.

As we know, the living wage movement is sweeping the nation. In an effort to try to reduce poverty, strong coalitions of workers and community members have come together to pass living wage bills that require all employers who receive any form of subsidy from the local government to pay their workers a living wage. More than one hundred communities have passed their own living wage bills since the passage of the first one in Baltimore in 1994.

Just as it has since the nation's founding—from the murder of Native Americans to the enslavement and disenfranchisement of African-Americans to the internment of Japanese-Americans to the hyper-exploitation of Latinos to the incarceration of Arab and Middle Eastern people today—racism plays a defining role in shaping the economic reality of people in the United States.

Lessons for the Conscious Organizer

Many of the organizers and workers who have built the living wage movement are deeply committed to building a movement that sees the end of racial, gender and economic injustice. We see that our principle tasks are to: **(1)** build the capacity of low-wage workers, particularly low-wage workers of color, to lead campaigns designed to meet their needs; and **(2)** raise the consciousness of low-wage workers to better understand the root causes of poverty and inequality. Living wage campaigns offer us opportunities, if seized upon, to accomplish so much more than just passing a law that raises the wages of some workers.

Many conscious organizers hope our work building local coalitions to pass a living wage bill would also help move us closer to building a broad-based movement for racial and economic justice. But despite all of our successes and our best intentions, conscious organizers can still do more to take full advantage of the potential of living wage campaigns to expose and undermine racism and poverty.

Our experience promoting a living wage bill in San Francisco gives good example to how much more we can do. For more than two years, a broad-based coalition of trade union locals, community organizations, religious groups and service agencies was out in the community working to build support for the living wage ordinance. The members of our coalition came from all over the city, including African-American workfare workers, Latino restaurant employees and Filipino airport baggage screeners. The membership of our coalition was predominantly people of color, which was in stark contrast to our opposition.

Living wage ordinances have been tremendously beneficial for low-income communities of color. In most communities, the majority of low-wage workers who see raises after the passage of a living wage bill are people of color.

In July of 2000, after months of lobbying and back-room negotiations, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors finally passed the living wage bill. With this bill, we succeeded in passing a living wage law that raised the wages of 21,500 workers to more than \$9.00 plus health benefits. This clearly represented an important victory for low-wage workers in San Francisco.

But, our coalition could have done better in meeting the two principle tasks of the conscious organizer.

Empowering Workers of Color

Looking back, we can see missed opportunities that others beginning living wage campaigns should consider.

We could have promoted more aggressively the strategic and tactical leadership of low-wage workers of color. Even though we had done an exceptional job in building a multi-racial base of support for the living wage, there

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In Living Color, cont.

were very few people of color in leadership of the coalition. The leaders of the coalition were the leaders of the various organizations that made up the living wage coalition—who happened, in most cases, to be of European descent. Creating more opportunities for low-wage leadership puts low-wage workers of color in a better position to lead campaigns in the future.

Developing low-wage workers' leadership during the campaign strengthens the campaign and would be easy to do. For example, at least one low-wage worker from each organization could shadow their organization's representative on the coalition's steering committee. Conscious organizers could also sponsor regular leadership development and political education trainings for low-wage workers.

Framing the Opportunity

Conscious organizers within any living wage coalition should seize the opportunity to highlight the reality of how racism shapes economic disparity. Throughout the two-year campaign, the living wage coalition responded to the opposition's attacks by saying low-wage workers deserved a higher wage. The racial dynamics of a mob of white businessmen arguing against pay increases for thousands of low-wage workers, most of whom are people of color, cannot be ignored. In some spot-media situations we may not have the time to fully explain the real depth and breadth of the issue. Still, we can always be more vocal—in our background briefings and in our slogans—that living wage laws are just as much about racial justice as they are about economic justice.

For example, in addition to declaring that low-wage workers deserved a living wage, we could have opened up the frame. A message demanding that we "stop subsidizing economic racism" would have opened up more organizing opportunities and helped us make additional useful connections with ethnic and community media outlets. As conscious organizers, we should always seize opportunities to frame our campaign with an understanding of racism and help deepen low-wage workers' comprehension of the interrelation between racism and poverty.

Building Power for the Future

As a movement, the growing number of living wage campaigns is important because it offers a tool to begin reducing poverty by moving money into the pockets of some of the lowest-paid workers. Living wage campaigns also offer an opportunity for greater self-determination as working people play an even greater role exercising control over the expenditure of the community's resources. Living wage campaigns offer an incredible amount of potential in the effort to rectify the imbalance of power in our communities.

But that will not happen automatically or just because we pass our legislation. We can only shift power relations if we build strong organizations of low-wage workers with strategic and tactical leadership from people of color.

We can only build a movement for social and economic justice if we raise low-wage workers' consciousness of the root causes of problems in our communities.

There is plenty to be proud of and much more to gain from our living wage campaigns. These campaigns have helped to light a fire in the spirits of low-income communities across the United States. As conscious organizers, we must stoke that fire and help low-wage workers identify and confront the problems of structural poverty and racism in our communities and around the globe. Meanwhile, we have to be mindful of our central tasks. We have to ground our work in a vigilant anti-racist perspective and practice. Only then can we move closer to winning social and economic justice around the globe—once and for all. ■

When our living wage coalition finally brought our proposal to the local Board of Supervisors, the opponents of the living wage bill, who were overwhelmingly of European descent, insisted that nothing short of economic Armageddon would befall San Francisco if the bill was adopted.