

ESPs Deserve A Living Wage

Local Activism Centered On Pocketbook Issues Is Re-Emerging, Especially For ESPs

The following report was prepared by NEA's Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy (CB&MA) staff to provide members with background on living wage campaigns and NEA's involvement with these efforts.

DEFINING 'LIVING WAGE'

The term "living wage" describes efforts by workers to increase their compensation to a level above the poverty line. Generally, a living wage means sufficient wages to pay for basic necessities in a given community. A living wage campaign is a grassroots effort by employees to win wages that are sufficient to pay for rent, food, utilities, taxes, health care, transportation, and childcare.

The guiding principle of a living wage campaign is that people who work a full-time job should not have to live below the poverty line. These campaigns hold particular promise for many of OEA/NEA's Education Support Professionals (ESPs). Living wage campaigns involve tactics and strategies that can benefit OEA/NEA and its members by providing higher earnings, by increasing membership through both new organizing and internal organizing, by creating a membership more responsive to action, and by mobilizing the membership in support of legislative agendas that benefit ESP members.

BACKGROUND

The term "living wage" was coined by the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and a coalition of religious leaders from Baltimore, Maryland who successfully launched a campaign in the early 1990's for a local ordinance requiring that city service contractors pay living wages. With strong community support, the first-ever living wage ordinance was passed by the city of Baltimore in 1994.

Since then there have been 103 similar ordinances throughout the country. When this report was written on March 10, 2003, there were 74 living wage campaigns underway. Syndicated columnist Robert Kuttner writing in the monthly magazine, *The American Prospect*, in 1997 described living wage as "the most interesting (and underreported) grassroots enterprise since the civil rights movement.. Signaling a resurgence of local activism around pocketbook issues."

In today's economic climate and among ESP members, the most compelling argument for a living wage for public sector workers is the notion that a communities' tax revenues, which are used to pay the wages of public school employees, should not create nor perpetuate poverty. When employers in the public sector (states, school boards, municipalities, townships, and the federal government) pay wages to working families at a level that results in these employees being eligible for public assistance the employer is not paying a living wage.

"Living wage" is not a concept that is owned by any single organization. The "living wage" concept has been utilized by student groups, political parties, neighborhood associations, women right's groups, and workers rights groups. Living wage campaigns can be organized by anyone who wishes to advance the interest of working people. There is no set structure to a living wage campaign. There are, however, many successful experiences and these can be replicated in different regions of the country.

A living wage campaign can be successful in states with and without public employee bargaining statutes. In non-statute states, living wage campaigns culminate with an ordinance issued by the school board or local jurisdiction outlining new wage rates. An example of this type of ordinance is a living wage resolution passed in 2001 by the board of education in Richmond, Virginia. In statute states, living wage tactics become part of a collective bargaining approach (e.g., a contract campaign) that culminates in the successful ratification of a contract: Ithaca, New York, 2001 which was led by Education Support Professionals-Ithaca; and Baldwinsville, New York, 2002 which was led by the Baldwinsville Education Support Professionals Association.

THREE ELEMENTS OF A LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGN:

1. Determination Of The Amount Of A Living Wage

The amount determined to be a living wage varies from one region to the next throughout the United States. Living wage is generally thought of as sufficient earnings to cover basic expenditures, including rent, food, taxes, health care, transportation, childcare, and utilities. Because the cost of these items varies from city to city, it is impossible to calculate one specific living wage for the entire country. Research organizations, including the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), conduct research nationwide on the costs of the basic necessities listed above and make these results accessible to the public on their Web sites.

The basis for a living wage can also be gathered from information from local universities or non-profit organizations that work on economic policy issues within a local community. In Ithaca, New York, NEA's local affiliate used a local credit union, Alternatives Federal Credit Union, to conduct research on what constituted a living wage and to help publicize these findings. The credit union was known locally, and its members provided substantial community support for the living wage campaign.

2. Organizing Members

A living wage campaign requires extensive membership involvement, which is a significant challenge. Many members have part-time jobs or family obligations that leave them with little or no time to get involved in union activities. Throughout the country working people are rising to the challenge and attaining livable wages for their families.

Living wage campaigns begin by identifying the "respected" workers in each building, worksite, shift, and department. Local association leaders survey the membership and identify "respected" workers. Members are visited at home and asked to get involved in the process of negotiating a new agreement or policy. These individuals become the core committee/cadre of the effort and convey information to co-workers and solicit feedback from them as well. These individuals will participate in bargaining and will eventually present the contract/policy for ratification by the membership.

3. Organizing The Community

Living wage campaigns also require that members of the community, outside the union or local association, become involved. To build a strong foundation and a strong union, the first place to focus is with the organizations to which OEA members belong. Therefore, community support is often first pursued through churches, temples, and synagogues where members worship. Those congregations are asked to involve other congregations in the effort. Other support groups such as: AFL-CIO unions, student groups, parent groups, civic groups, political parties, workers' rights groups, typically are also involved. Communities have responded enthusiastically in support of living wage issues throughout the nation.

NEA LIVING WAGE SUCCESSES

NEA has only recently started to promote living wage campaigns. Already, several important victories illustrate the power of living wage campaigns to raise wages and activate members. All of the NEA affiliates that have engaged in living wage campaigns have won significant wage increases as a result of their efforts. Some of the most notable are:

- Ithaca, New York - ESP members won a 50 percent wage increase over three years, no increase in healthcare contributions and no reduction in benefits.
- Baldwinsville, New York - members won a 49 percent increase over three years with no increase in health care contributions and no reduction in benefits.
- Montpelier, Vermont - members won a 6 percent wage increase with a 25 percent reduction in health insurance co-pays and no reduction in benefits.
- Scituate, Rhode Island - members won a 45 percent increase over four years.

Bargaining units that have utilized these tactics have also seen a large increase in their membership. The cadre/committee of respected workers who were the voice of the membership during the campaign are also the people who approach the non-members and ask them to join the union. Invariably, non-members feel hard pressed to say no to the co-workers whose opinion they respect and who have just won substantial wage increases for them.

Most importantly, workers join the union because they feel the pride of the total membership, and they want to be members of a union that is relevant to them. Although New York has an agency fee, all 221 paraprofessionals in Baldwinsville are union members, and all 225 paraprofessionals in Ithaca are union members. The use of these tactics and strategies by other unions in right-to-work states has maintained membership levels above 90%.

Membership also becomes more responsive to action as a result of living wage campaigns. In Baldwinsville, New York, two candidates for the Board of Education in the most recent election were relatives of ESPs who engaged in the living wage campaign. The local affiliate decided that negotiating a great contract was not good enough, so they attempted to elect Board of Education candidates who understood their issues.

One of the candidates who won, David Lum, is the son of an ESP member and was 18 years old at the time of his election in 2002. Elected to a full 3-year term, he is the youngest school board member ever in Onondaga County, NY.

NEA Collective Bargaining And Member Advocacy's Activities In Support Of New Business Item 2002-17

Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy is working closely with staff from ESP Quality, External Partnerships and Advocacy, and State Affiliate Relations to promote living wage campaigns. We are developing strategies to aide affiliates participating in living wage campaigns on behalf of ESP members and other low waged workers. This could include providing information on methods for advocating for living wage policies and contract provisions, training sessions on tools and techniques for effective advocacy, and resources for NEA affiliates engaging in living wage campaigns to assisting with grants during the campaign.

Specifically, NEA staff is engaged in the following activities:

- Presenting on living wage campaigns and providing training to affiliates requesting information on living wage and how to conduct a winning campaign.
- Building a network of NEA staff and membership who have experience on living wage campaign tactics and who are willing to lend their knowledge and expertise to other locals by assisting with training and providing personal testimony.
- Developing a training program on living wage campaigns for the UniServ Professional Development training.
- Preparing written materials (print and web-based) to inform leaders and staff about Living Wage Campaigns, including contract campaigns.
- Working with the Communications Integration Team to create a short training video on living wage and contract campaigns to use in training programs and to share with the regional offices and interested leadership
- Providing technical assistance and grants to local affiliates, through state affiliates, to sponsor living wage campaigns.

It's All About ESPs Telling Their Own Stories

To win a living wage for education support professionals (ESPs), you've got to "win the hearts and minds" of the community they serve. That's common-sense advice from NEA state and local affiliates -- and other labor organizations -- that have pursued and won pay increases that better reflect the value of ESP work. Here, from the trenches, are some valuable communications tips for any living wage campaigner.

1. First And Foremost: Elect Good School Board Members.

Says Bernie Mulligan, a veteran communicator with the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT): "If you're not involved in the election of school board members in your community, you're limiting your opportunity to communicate with them in an effective way about a living wage. Superintendents sometimes control information and access to board members -- and constantly shape their perceptions."

2. Develop A Communications Plan.

Consider the living wage campaign's overall goal. Identify the decision makers you need to influence, and spot the people whose support will be needed to achieve a living wage. Who can help you reach those people, and who will try to stop you? How will you allocate resources to a communications campaign? How will you persuade potential allies to join the campaign and how will you neutralize adversaries?

3. Develop Your Salary Message.

Members, potential allies, and the public need to understand the living wage issue. Develop a theme and message that explains it simply (such as "It's All About Fairness"), and then publicize it, repeat it, and disseminate it widely -- being direct and positive.

4. Collect Your Best Arguments For A Living Wage.

Some examples:

- **ESPs play a vital role in children's lives, especially in their health and safety.** We need qualified, caring people in every job in every school.
- **ESPs are the first people parents and children see in the morning, and the last they see in the evening.** People form many of their impressions of the school and school district from the image of teachers and ESPs working together.
- **When workers are paid a living wage, taxpayers no longer subsidize low-wage employers.** Every school employee should have the right to spend time at home with his or her own kids, without working two or three extra jobs to survive.
- **Teachers can't function their very best if ESPs aren't there to help them.** Without ESPs, teachers would have less time to do what they do well in the classroom.
- **Better pay attracts quality staff and stems turnover.** A living wage and low turnover is all about maintaining "institutional memory" in the workplace. Human resource experts estimate that the cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new employees is between 10 percent and 50 percent of a salary for a position.
- **The local economy will benefit through higher ESP spending power.** "A \$40,000 minimum salary for all teachers and a living wage as starting pay for education support professionals would mean economic prosperity for communities," says NEA Research staffer Michael Kahn. "Why? Because education is highly labor-intensive. A dollar invested in education creates more jobs, direct and indirect, than any other sector of the economy."

5. Gear Up ESPs To Tell Their Own Stories.

Bus driver John Boggs, a leader of the Kentucky Education Association's (KEA) Eastern Kentucky Living Wage Campaign, thinks that the biggest factor behind the campaign's momentum is communications by ESPs themselves, "who let people know what's going on" with low pay.

Organizers should pick the brains of ESPs about their work and life experiences, adds NYSUT's Bernie Mulligan. "That's the raw material for a campaign message, and we need ESP spokespeople for a campaign," he points out. "It's really a question of figuring out how to humanize and personalize the theme of fairness."

6. Take The Living Wage Message Public.

Veteran campaigners stress the need to identify public education supporters in the community and work with state affiliate communications staff on strategies to move the living wage message to them -- through meetings or the media. Some useful advice from the Virginia Education Association and other organizations that tackle living wage issues:

- **Plan any meeting, whether you are going alone or as a group.** Research your audience. Decide who will lead the meeting, and what each person will contribute to the discussion. Plan to focus on one issue only: the living wage.
- **Tell the living wage story in a personal way that brings the low-wage issue to life.** Speak about personal hardships due to low pay. Bring photographs to illustrate your perspective. Give specific examples as often as possible. Don't speculate, exaggerate, fudge, or invent -- just tell it as you see it. Engage your audience in dialogue.
- **Appeal to your audience's sense of fairness and justice.** There's widespread public opposition to paying less than a living wage, and a tremendous amount of respect for what ESPs do in schools. Work to get elected officials to agree, in principle, that low ESP salaries are unfair. As soon as possible after your visit, jot down notes that record what was said, the tone, and what questions were asked at the meeting.
- **Deal intelligently with the media.** Compile a list of media outlets in the community. Develop relationships with news directors, editors, education reporters, and talk show producers. Reach out to the media early and foster direct relationships with reporters likely to be assigned to the ESP wage story; use the time to educate them on the issues. Keep pitching story ideas, new or creative angles on ESP work and economic struggles.
- **Introduce journalists to struggling, underpaid ESPs.** Train selected members to handle contact with the media and have them speak at rallies, community meetings, and other events. The Vermont Living Wage Coalition does public awareness training for members, preparing them to approach school boards, the press, and the community.
- **Create your own news through rallies, demonstrations, public forums, community events, and news conferences.** Train members how to put together a media package, how to write press releases, and how to follow up after the release to ensure coverage.
- **Make liberal use of free media,** including letters to the editor, cable TV, talk radio, and community petitioning -- door to door, if necessary.
- **Collaborate with teachers to generate positive publicity** about teaching and learning, student achievement, safety, and efficient operations in the schools -- and the vital role that ESPs play in making it happen.
- **Create a video, PowerPoint, or blog on the work or financial plight of ESPs.** In a PowerPoint made by a Pennsylvania ESP local, each bargaining team member talked about her job and how it had changed over the years. The local affiliate effectively corrected an outdated school board impression that poorly paid ESPs were nothing more than menial "paid volunteers."
- **Find parents and community members to help you tell your story.** "When Mrs. Jones or Mr. Kelly tells a heartwarming story about ways ESPs help their kids, school board members who ignore us listen; they see those parents as 'real' people," says Bernie Mulligan. "It's really effective when people in the school community start to talk about you -- then a campaign comes alive!"

--Dave Winans, NEA Collective Bargaining & Member Advocacy, November 2006