Reflecting on the U.S. Living Wage Movement:
Opportunities for organizing outside of the Wagner Act?

Stephanie Luce
University of Massachusetts-Amherst
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U.S. Living Wage Movement

- Modern movement began in 1994
- Decreasing real value of the federal minimum wage
- Initially targeted at municipalities
- Attached higher wage standards to public service contracts, economic development subsidies
- Also health benefits, indexing, paid days off, worker protections & more
Growth of the movement

- Spread to new jurisdictions, including concessionaires on city land, direct city employees, & college campuses
- Citywide living wage campaigns
- State and federal minimum wage
- “Big box” ordinances, Community Benefits Agreements, Retail development
- Today, over 150 ordinances have passed
- Wages range from 100-130% of federal poverty line (most around $10/hour)
Dimensions of the Movement

- Living Wage as economic policy
- Living Wage as political tool
- Living Wage as a social movement
- Living Wage as union organizing tool
Living Wages as Social Movement

- Coalition building
- Unions, community groups, faith-based, students, some small businesses, and more
- Can help create new and lasting organizations that have workers’ rights as their core
- After passing LW ordinance, some coalitions moved to other campaigns
Living Wages & unions

- Most unions support, but not all
- Some success in using campaigns to start new organizing drives
- Some allow already organized workers to get a raise
- Some ordinances contain union-friendly language
- Few cases: fight privatization
Organizing outside the Wagner Act?

- Public sector jobs
- Formerly public sector/outsourced jobs
- Raise the bar to discourage outsourcing
- Changing the nature of jobs with vulnerable workforce (immigrant workers, low-wage, high turnover)
- Building community support for higher pay and better jobs
Challenges

- Scale (number of workers)
- Doesn’t solve poverty
- Opposition is persistent
- Can be “lowest common denominator” politics
- Enforcement is weak overall (with some exceptions)
- Limits of city governments/legal restrictions
- Power of workers once organized? You still need a union
Future Directions

- Minimum wage campaigns (state and federal level, indexing)
- Enforcement campaigns
- College campuses
- Community Benefits Agreements
- Big Box/Economic Development
- International