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

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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
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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)
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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
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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
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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
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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
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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
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Future Directions

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