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The Significance of the Living Wage for US Workers in the Early Twenty-First Century

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Abstract This article provides an introduction to the importance of the living wage for low-wage workers in the United States. Described as a wage based on an estimation of the official poverty threshold for a family of four, the living wage, as an alternative to the minimum wage, is based on the notion that people working at full-time jobs, and their families, should not have to live in poverty. After discussing the emergence and growth of living wage campaigns in the United States, this essay discusses the coverage and provisions of living wage statutes, the economic effects of living wage ordinances as well as additional benefits provided to workers and unions from living wage statute implementation. The article concludes that due to the current economic conditions in the United States, the struggle to attain a living wage will become increasingly relevant in the coming years.

Keywords Living wage · Low-wage workers · Economic effects · Minimum wage

Wage inequality has been rapidly increasing in the United States over the last 40 years. From 1973 to 2007, for example, the average income of the top one-hundredth of the top 1 % climbed in excess of $30 million or a startling 758 %. The bottom 90 % of the wage distribution was much less fortunate. This group's average income over these 34 years rose only $286 or under 1 %. This means that their average yearly increase amounted to a measly $8.41 (Johnston 2009). In addition to this widening wage inequality, during the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, which was made substantially worse by the Financial Crisis of 2008, 40 % of the jobs that vanished were in high-wage industries, characterized as positions that compensated employees, on average, from $19.05 to $31.40 per hour (National Employment Law Project 2011, p. 1). Over the last 3 years, jobs have slowly been returning to the U.S. economy after the hemorrhaging of hundreds of thousands of jobs throughout the latter part of 2008 and the first few months of 2009. Many of these newly-created positions, however, are found in low-wage

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industries (ranging in pay on average from $9.03 to $12.91 per hour) which comprise 49 % of recent job growth (National Employment Law Project 2011, p. 1). And with the current unemployment rate of 7.9 % (February 2013), it is still difficult to land any job, much less one that pays well.

One major problem is that many of these recently-created jobs do not pay enough to cover their employees' living expenses. Based on a Wider Opportunities for Women report from 2011, single workers need at least $30,000 a year to meet the required cost of living. With regards to single parents who have two children and for two-income households, the yearly salaries needed to meet necessary expenditures, including childcare, rises to $58,000 and $68,000, respectively (Wider Opportunities for Women 2011, p. 5). Given that the U.S. minimum wage is currently at $7.25 per hour, working 40 h per week for the entire year grosses $15,080 annually which is far below the amount that even single workers require for the basic necessities.

Combining these employment and wage statistics with the fact that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2011 approximately 48 % of Americans were classified as poor or low income (Seales 2011), it is little wonder that so many people are experiencing a high level of insecurity in a land of accelerating economic inequality. Since the minimum wage, as has been demonstrated, is far from adequate in serving as a wage floor, a modest alternative, the living wage, can play this role for many US workers early in the twenty-first century's second decade.

Defined as a wage based on a calculation of the official poverty threshold for a family of four, the living wage is centered on the concept that people who work full-time jobs, and their families, should not be forced to live in poverty. Although the struggle for a living wage has its historical roots in the fight for the establishment of minimum wage laws in the early decades of the 20th century, the first success of the present-day living wage movement dates to 1994 with its implementation in Baltimore (Levin-Waldman 2005, pp. 3–4).

Economic changes in the latter part of the twentieth century have contributed to the growth of living wage movements and the passage of corresponding statutes within the last 20 years. Over the last several decades, federal and state minimum wages have failed to match increases in the cost of living, resulting in these poorly paid workers falling well below the poverty line. Additionally, beginning in the 1990s, many public services once provided by municipal governments have been privatized and outsourced. This has resulted in the transfer of thousands of government jobs to private-sector contractors who are able to pay their employees considerably less because they are neither bound by civil service rules nor union contracts (Pollin et al. 2008, p. 16; Levin-Waldman 2005, p. 4).

In addition to the dramatic decline in the purchasing power of low-wage workers over the last 40 years, the movement has resonated with citizens and public officials due to a corresponding quickening in wage and income inequality in the United States. For example, although average US labor productivity expanded by approximately 80 % from 1968 to 2001, the minimum wage failed to keep pace with such rapid growth. The minimum wage's real value peaked in 1968 when it was $1.65 per hour (or $8.39 in constant 2001 dollars or $10.74 in constant 2012 dollars). At the 1968 level, the minimum wage approximated the accepted poverty threshold for a four-person family. However, by 2001, its purchasing power had plummeted some 37 % when it was $5.15 per hour. At this wage level, a full-time worker employed for 52 weeks a year earned $10,712 annually, some 12.2 % below the 2001 national poverty level for a family of two (one adult and one child). However, many researchers argue that the officially determined poverty rates are established at a rate of 25 to 50 % too low (Pollin 2005, p. 4).

The Growth of Living Wage Campaigns in the United States

The emergence of the living wage movement in Baltimore occurred after pastors, in a group called Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development who operated food pantries, noticed that an increasing number of their patrons were employed yet still poor. Although unemployment had fallen and city officials claimed that local economic development projects would lift people out of poverty, the number of working poor continued to multiply leading the local clergy to seek an answer. As members of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), these pastors launched a vigorous campaign with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), a public sector union, in pressuring the mayor to arrive at a resolution (Luce 2002, pp. 402–3).

In response, the city administration proclaimed that while it was unable to force all employers to raise their wages, it stated that the city's prevailing wage law, which required city construction and service contractors to pay higher wages, could be expanded to include any company holding a service contract with the city. Ultimately, this action increased the hourly pay of workers earning the federal minimum wage of $4.35 in 1994 over a four-year period up to $7.70, a rate equal to supporting a family of four at the federal poverty threshold. While the number of employees benefiting from this provision was small (approximately 1,500), it served as a catalyst for extending the living wage movement to other cities and counties (Luce 2002, pp. 402–3).

Although rudimentary minimum compensation levels had been implemented in Des Moines (Iowa) and Gary (Indiana) for employees working on economic development projects in 1988 and 1991, respectively, the significance of the victory in Baltimore was that the fight for a living wage had progressed from mere legislative campaigns to one that encompassed grassroots organizations. What distinguished the achievements in Baltimore from those of the two smaller Midwestern cities was the recognition that the minimum wage was inadequate for alleviating poverty. Furthermore, the expression "living wage" became part of the national vocabulary, inspiring similar campaigns by activists in cities throughout the country (Luce 2002, p. 403).

While living wage campaigns in other cities were initiated by the IAF and AFSCME, other political actors, such as religious organizations, community groups, labor organizations, and student groups became involved including the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Direct Action and Resource Training Center, the Service Employees International Union, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, a handful of central labor councils and the New Party. During 1996, living wage regulations were adopted in New York City, Santa Clara County (California), Milwaukee, Jersey City with more launched in other areas. In 1997, Los Angeles approved a more comprehensive ordinance, providing much more extensive coverage, which included benefits, than previously adopted living wage statutes. One decade after Baltimore's success, 130 living wage ordinances had been implemented throughout the country including in large cities such as Denver, Minneapolis and St. Paul (Luce 2002, p. 403, 2005, p. 424, 2004, pp. 35–36, pp. 219–222; Freeman 2005, p. 20).

Additionally, living wage campaigns have cropped up at colleges and universities throughout the United States where students have initiated such campaigns on the behalf of campus workers. The most notable of these which gained widespread media attention occurred at Harvard University where after 2 years of fruitless efforts, students engaged in a successful 21-day sit-in demanding that the university pay all direct and subcontracted Harvard employees a minimum living wage of $10.25 per hour along with benefits. After a negotiated settlement with the Harvard administration terminated the sit-in, hearings conducted and reports issued in the following months resulted in the students obtaining some of their demands including increased wages and a reduction in outsourcing. Another victorious student action took place at Wesleyan University in 2000 where after a 33-hour sit-in, the university granted campus workers a Code of Conduct which included living wages, benefits and the promise of neutrality should workers attempt to unionize. Other major campus living wage campaigns have been organized at Johns Hopkins, Brown and the University of Virginia (Luce 2002, p. 404).

Coverage and Provisions of Living Wage Ordinances

Living wage statutes usually assume one of two types. The first and most elementary kind is the contractor-only ordinances which cover companies that possess contracts with municipal governments to deliver services which might include anything from janitorial work to human services. The second form of living wage ordinance applies to private businesses that receive any kind of financial support from the city government. Such organizations would cover those that are provided with economic development incentives, tax reductions, or those that conduct their affairs on property owned by the municipality. Typically, cities will adopt only one version of a living wage law, usually the contractor-only type, although there are some cases where municipalities have implemented a statute that includes both kinds (Lester 2011, p. 39).

Even though several large cities and counties have implemented living wage statutes, only a relatively small number of workers are actually covered under the two types of ordinances described above. The reason for this is that usually these two kinds of statutes only apply to one or more of the following groups of employees – (1) businesses that have contracts with the city or county; (2) employees of companies collecting economic development grants; (3) subcontractors of the above two groups; (4) employees of businesses having city leases and (5) direct government employees working for the city or county. Furthermore, a majority of living wage ordinances contain three or more exemptions such as part-time or seasonal employees, students participating in job training programs or those serving as interns, disabled individuals partaking in special employment programs, and construction workers (because of prevailing wage law protection). These typical exceptions further limit the number of employees covered by these ordinances (Luce 2004, p. 45).

Besides cities and counties, living wage campaigns have targeted universities (as discussed above), school boards and even states through the launching of statewide minimum wage campaigns. In addition, living wage statutes cover workers employed by a transportation board (San Diego), a road commission (Washtenaw County, Michigan), a hospital (San Antonio), a library (Little Rock) and the Port of Oakland (California) (Luce 2004, p. 44).

Research has demonstrated that living wage laws are more likely to be passed because of the specific political, rather than economic, conditions that exist in geographic areas throughout the country. These circumstances include the presence of more liberal voters, a local chapter of ACORN and higher union density rates. It appears that when ACORN allied with other community organizations and labor unions in promoting a living wage ordinance, the chances were substantially increased that such a statute passed (Martin 2001).

Although living wage laws are far from monolithic in their provisions, a majority specify not only the paying of a specific minimum wage but also mandate that employers must supply either health care coverage or a higher base wage. These two options exist because according to the Employee Retirement and Income Security Act of 1974, cities cannot be required to provide employees with health insurance so a higher wage can be offered as an alternative. Many statutes also automatically raise wages with increases in inflation. Other employment protections found in at least some living wage ordinances include either paid or unpaid days off, the use of community-run halls for hiring new employees and the requirement that employees be retained if contracts change hands (Luce 2002, pp. 404–5).

A number of living wage statutes also outline employee rights for covered workers. Some prevent employers from disciplining or terminating workers who make inquiries concerning living wage provisions or who file charges against employers alleging non-compliance. Other ordinances preclude employers from utilizing public funds to break unions. Finally, cities are permitted to refuse to subsidize or to offer contracts to companies that commit labor law violations (Luce 2002, p. 405).

Methods for the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of living wage statutes are as varied as the specific provisions of the ordinances themselves. The implementation of living wage ordinances may include specifying a particular department or office to administer the procedure, developing rules for the statute after passage, examining contracts and subsidy agreements to decide the employers that are included, educating municipal and county personnel concerning the statute's requirements, writing and distributing literature to inform employers and employees about the living wage, and guaranteeing that living wage language appears in applications for new contracts or subsidy agreements (Luce 2004, p. 50).

Effective monitoring is an essential component for the successful implementation of a living wage ordinance. An ideal situation would entail city and county personnel responding to inquiries and examining charges of noncompliance by a worker (or those of a third party if permitted by the ordinance), gathering and investigating employer payroll data, traveling to workplaces to confirm that employers have displayed the required poster concerning the statute and that the employees are being provided with the correct remuneration (Luce 2004, p. 51).

Enforcement of living wage statutes involves developing appropriate procedures for dealing with situations when employers are believed to have violated living wage ordinances. If at all possible, such a process would begin with an investigation of the noncompliance charge followed by the opportunity for each party to present its position as well as the chance to appeal. Although penalties differ across statutes, if employers are found guilty, they usually consist of the city or county denying payments to the employer, suspending or ending the contract, preventing the contractor from bidding on upcoming contracts for a certain period of time such as 1 year after the first breach, 3 years upon a second, etc. and requiring violators to compensate employees with back wages owed them. The most stringent statutes also force employers to pay the municipality or county a financial penalty; in Baltimore, employers are fined $50 per employee for each day they are found in violation while in Miami-Dade County and Oakland, the fines are levied at the rate of $500 per employee per week (Luce 2004, p. 51).

Although calculating the number of low-wage workers included under living wage statutes is difficult, a conservative estimate would place the figure at between 100,000 to 250,000 as of the end of 2002. This represents a tiny percentage of the estimated 30 to 40 million people who receive poverty-level wages in this country (Luce 2002; p. 404, 2004, p. 53).

The Economic Effects of Living Wage Ordinances

Although the economic benefits provided to workers covered by these ordinances are apparent, opponents of the living wage claim that the passage of such regulations collectively harms low-wage workers and their families as a group in three ways. According to these critics, implementing a living wage will result in a decreased number of jobs for low-wage workers; alternatively, it also could lead to covered employees being replaced by workers possessing higher skills. Decreased employment opportunities for low-wage workers in cities with living wage ordinances also would result from companies fleeing to locations where they are not required to abide by these wage provisions. Finally, increased costs for municipal governments will ultimately lead to less money being devoted to ameliorating poverty as well as providing more job opportunities to low-wage workers (Pollin 2005, p. 4).

According to Freeman (2005, p. 23), most studies examining the economic effects of living wage ordinances find minimal job loss or other negative consequences in spite of the mandated increased wages. This is undoubtedly due to the relatively small number of persons covered by such laws as already mentioned. Many individual studies support Freeman's (2005) conclusion.

In a study involving data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) from January 1996 through December 2000, Neumark and Adams (2003, p. 561) discovered relatively weak disemployment effects due to wage increases from the implementation of living wage laws. They conclude, however, that the greatest disemployment effects occur among low-skilled workers. In a review article on the economic effects of living wage statutes, Adams and Neumark (2004, p. 236) arrive at two additional conclusions. While living wage ordinances increase the pay of low-wage workers, such statutes also compress the wage structure. Additionally, although living wage ordinances are related to lower employee turnover rates and improvements in employee performance, one should not necessarily assume that the implementation of such laws are costless or bring benefits that outweigh the costs.

In an updated analysis by Adams and Neumark (2005, p. 99), these two researchers confirmed their earlier findings that living wage statutes increase the wages of the lowest paid workers although they lead to some job loss among these workers. Moreover, another finding that the implementation of living wage legislation reduces urban poverty was confirmed but more strongly for the laws based on companies receiving financial assistance than for the contractor-only statutes. Finally, Adams and Neumark (2005, p. 99) present new evidence that poverty reduction may occur after living wage law enactment due to other workers receiving wage gains as a result of the passage of living wage laws.

In a study examining the growth rates of employment and unemployment before and after the enactment of living wage ordinances in 31 cities, Buss and Romeo (2006) discovered that only a minority of municipalities were negatively impacted by the implementation of these ordinances. Similarly, in a study of 19 California cities, Lester (2011, p. 252) found that the passage of living wage statutes did not negatively affect employment growth. Moreover, the enactment of such statutes also does not significantly damage the municipality's business climate through establishments leaving the city, except for restaurants.

There have been studies on the economic effects of the implementation, or the proposed implementation, of living wage laws in specific US cities. Brenner (2005, p. 73), who examined the effects of firms that complied with the law implementing a living wage in Boston, discovered that employment in these companies rose 11 % from 1998 to 2001, compared with a growth rate of 17 % for companies unaffected by the living wage's enactment. Additionally, organizations affected by the living wage decreased the percentage of their part-time workers from 34.1 % to 22.7 % of their work forces while for unaffected firms, this percentage modestly decreased from 10.7 % to 9.8 %. Moreover, 25 % of companies complying with the living wage statute assert that employee effort either increased somewhat or substantially upon the ordinance's enactment (p. 77). Finally, there was no indication that after the implementation of the living wage, companies modified their hiring standards which would signal the substitution of more-skilled labor for less-skilled labor (p. 79).

With the implementation of a living wage statute at the San Francisco Airport, Reich et al. (2005, p. 136) found that total costs were increased by $57.6 million per year, or .7 % of airline income. As estimated by these researchers, this lost revenue could be recovered in its entirety by charging each airline passenger an additional $1.42. Moreover, these researchers did not detect any disemployment effects with these wage increases. Furthermore, employee turnover plummeted in jobs receiving the largest wage raises such as airport screeners (80 %) and cabin cleaners (44 %). Finally, more employers noticed improvements as opposed to deterioration in employee behavior after living wage implementation including overall worker performance (35 % vs. 4 %), morale (47 % vs. 16 %), customer service (45 % vs. 3 %), less absenteeism (29 % vs. 5 %), reduction in disciplinary problems (44 % vs. 9 %) or equipment maintenance problems (29 % vs. 4 %).

In Chicago, Baiman (2006, p. 363) estimated that the enactment of a "big box living wage ordinance," which would require a $10.00 per hour minimum wage and an additional $3.00 per hour health insurance benefits, for retail stores of more than 75,000 square feet would lead to a 15.3 % increase in labor costs for such retailers. Assuming this entire increase was passed on to consumers, prices would rise approximately 2.1 %, according to Baiman's (2006) calculations.

Sander and Williams (2005, p. 31) estimated the effects of a living wage proposal in Santa Monica (California) which would have increased wages in covered firms from $6.75 to $12.25 per hour. These two researchers concluded that this mandated wage raise would lead to the loss of one-seventh of the jobs covered by the law either through layoffs or the closing of businesses. Additionally, other effects would include the dramatic falling of property values while a number of businesses would relocate to save on labor costs. Nevertheless, many businesses, particularly hotels, would still make healthy profits.

One earlier study estimated the cost of implementing Los Angeles' living wage statute which applies to firms that have contracts of $25,000 or more with the city or receive financial assistance from Los Angeles of up to $1 million. The ordinance required providing a minimum wage of $7.25 per hour, $1.25 per hour for health care coverage and 12 paid days off per year. Pollin and Luce (1998) calculate that such a plan would cost annually, on average, $68 million, which is approximately 2.1 % of Los Angeles' $3.3 billion budget. They acknowledge that this would be a sizable proportion of the budget if the city was required to absorb all of these costs on its own. However, they discovered that the average cost of this plan was merely 1.5 % of total production costs of companies covered by the ordinance.

This estimate is consistent with calculating the actual costs of putting living wage statutes into effect. Although the specifics of living wage ordinances vary as discussed above, economic analyses indicate that no matter what statistical sources and research methodologies are utilized, the average cost to most companies affected by living wage statutes is low, ranging somewhere between 1 % and 2 % of an average company's total operations. Given this figure, most firms would be easily able to absorb these modest cost increases through small boosts in both prices and productivity (Pollin 2005). Of course, if such ordinances required dramatically higher living wages, the costs to firms could be substantially higher than the above estimates.

Additional Benefits from Living Wage Statute Implementation

Besides boosting wages to the poverty level threshold and providing such things as health care coverage, there are several additional benefits from the implementation of living wage statutes. One positive outcome from the implementation of living wage ordinances is that it has made it theoretically easier for unions to organize low-wage workers because of card check or neutrality provisions, applying to contractors or those companies working on a development project, contained in living wage ordinances. Since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 precludes cities or states from compelling companies to recognize these two types of provisions, they can only be included in living wage statutes if it can be demonstrated that without such provisions, work stoppages or industrial disputes would endanger the city's financial investment. Under a card check agreement, an employer voluntarily agrees to recognize a union without a certification election provided that a majority of the employees have signed cards stating that they want to be represented by a union. With a neutrality provision, the employer agrees to abstain from certain actions used to discourage workers from organizing a union such as holding captive audience meetings where anti-union propaganda would be presented and engaging in either intimidation or harassment of union organizers (Luce 2005, p. 425).

Although gains have been modest, two specific examples of successful union organizing drives connected to living wage campaigns include the organizing of 1,500 city workers by Communication Workers of America Local 7026 in Tucson and the obtaining of union recognition and a contract for 150 van and bus drivers by United Transportation Union Local 23 in Santa Cruz (California). Additionally, living wage campaigns have contributed to victorious unionization efforts in Berkeley and San Jose (California), Chicago and Miami-Dade County (Florida) (Luce 2004, pp. 183–185).

Other living wage ordinance provisions negotiated that have aided union organizing include disallowing public money to be spent on anti-union activities and preventing employers from terminating or disciplining workers who discuss their right to obtain a living wage. The latter clause can be beneficial during union organizing drives because workers who discuss their right to affiliate with a union cannot lose their jobs if they mention it within the context of their right to earn a living wage (Luce 2004, p. 183).

Living wage statutes also lead to an upward ripple effect meaning that when the lowest paid workers in a company receive raises, higher wage employees will obtain increases as well. Such upward pressure on wages occurs for reasons of equity and for maintaining sufficient wage differentials. Furthermore, wage increases might be given to other low-wage workers employed by the company who are in the same occupational classification as the low-wage workers covered by the living wage ordinance even though they are not working under the city contract. Finally, other employers in the same geographical area, although not affected by the ordinance, may boost wages to effectively compete for comparable employees in the labor market, an economic phenomenon also referred to as a spill-over effect. Paul Osterman's research on the living wage campaign conducted in the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas indicated that of every 100 people receiving wage raises due to the implementation of a living wage ordinance, an additional 39 benefit from increased wages due to the ripple or spill-over effects (Luce 2004, p. 191).

Although the number of positions involved has been modest, living wage ordinances have reduced, although not eliminated, the loss of city and county jobs through contracting out. While this result is far from uniform and the circumstances and dynamics vary from city to city, for example, living wage statutes appear to have slowed job erosion in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and San Jose (Luce 2004, pp. 191–2).

Furthermore, the fight for living wages has contributed to the development of labor-community coalitions which promote broad progressive political agendas, including labor rights, in cities and communities throughout the nation. Examples of concrete gains from such coalitions include playing a major role in the rejuvenation of a vibrant labor movement in Los Angeles; the creation of a Workers Rights Board as a vehicle for promoting workplace justice for nonunion workers in Tucson; and the development of an intimate relationship between the city's central labor council and ACORN in Boston (Luce 2004, pp. 200–202, 204–205).

Employers also have acknowledged concrete benefits obtained from the implementation of living wage statutes. And consistent with studies cited earlier, for example, based on a survey of contractors who are covered by a living wage law in Tucson (Arizona), 39 % claimed that there was improved employee morale, 33 % claimed that employee turnover was reduced, 22 % asserted that employee productivity increased and 11 % each stated that there was a reduction in theft and accidents after the enactment of the city's living wage ordinance (Grant and Trautner 2004, p. 75).

Finally, living wage campaigns have served as a means to raise awareness, initiate discussions and to educate the public about the negative effects of the increasing wage inequality and the persistence of low wages in the United States. Although it is difficult to measure the effects of the living wage movement on the public's consciousness concerning these issues, it has received support from some unlikely sources. For example, since 1999, a number of prominent business publications such as *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Entrepreneur* have published articles supporting the implementation of living wages. Additionally, an increasing number of employers have come out in favor of paying living wages, arguing that positive effects include increases in employee morale, and reductions in employee turnover (Luce 2004, p. 197).

Because the costs to companies and municipal governments from implementing living wage policies appear to be quite minimal combined with the redistribution of income to low-wage workers, living wage campaigns will undoubtedly proliferate well into the twenty-first century's second decade. Since it is improbable that the minimum wage in the near future approach will approach its historical peak in real value obtained some 45 years ago, living wage campaigns will most likely continue to resonate with an ever increasing number of beleaguered public officials, concerned citizens and anxious workers who fear for the loss of their jobs and middle-class lifestyles in an increasingly hyper-globalized economy.

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