

YOUNG PEOPLE & DECENT WAGES

By Malkia Amala Cyril, Director, Youth Media Council

What does living wage law have to do with youth and youth policy? Plenty, especially in the way of opportunities, threats and media strategies.

Opportunities: Youth are Vulnerable Workers & Strong Advocates for Justice

Since the 1980's, and even more so in the three years since 9/11, the U.S. economy has produced the highest levels of economic inequality, insecurity, and overall poverty among the world's 16 most "advanced" capitalist economies. Within that context, youth and young workers have been tremendously impacted and marginalized into a vulnerable and easily exploitable labor sector. Young workers make up more than 60 percent of the service sector.

As a population of vulnerable workers, youth are impacted by any legislation that attempts to raise or protect the minimum wage.

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school classes, college students, and youth religious organizations have initiated or joined fights to demand a living wage.

The self-interest is clear: our parents are workers and their salary puts food on the table and clothes on our backs; youth service providers are the ones who care for us, and when they are underpaid, we suffer; we too are underpaid workers with families and without benefits.

Threats: Age/Race as a Wedge Issue

Age has also been used repeatedly as a wedge issue in campaigns for economic and racial justice. For example, the building of youth jails in suburban white communities relies on stereotypes of violent youth. This builds a base of support for increased construction of youth jails while simultaneously dangling the carrot of new jobs over the mouths of hungry rural and suburban whites. Stereotypes about youth of color as dangerous are a powerful motive force and require strategic responses by communities fighting for justice.

Youth workers are often not covered by living wage ordinances. Under the City of Somerville, Massachusetts' Living Wage Ordinance (Ordinance No. 1999-1), any person or entity who has entered into a contract with the City of Somerville is required to pay its employees who are involved in providing services to the City of Somerville no less than a "living wage." The living wage currently is \$8.35 per hour. The only employees not covered by the Living Wage Ordinance are individuals in a Youth Program.

"Youth Program" as defined in the ordinance, "means any city, state or federally-funded program which employs youth, as defined by city, state or federal guidelines, during the summer, or as part of a school-to-work program, or in any other related seasonal or part-time program." There are additionally training wages, which are

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wages paid below the minimum wage that enable employers to fill seasonal and summer jobs with youth workers paid less than the minimum wage, displacing many adult workers. The result is that, like workfare workers, age is used as a method of filling city jobs with workers paid less than minimum wage. Whether it's a living wage campaign or a

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broader economic justice fight, young people can contribute and are impacted.

Additionally, the foundation of living wage ordinances is that public monies should be used for the public good, and that all private businesses that do not comply with living wage standards

as defined by the local policy should not be subsidized by city funds. This is often attacked with dirty tricks such as the idea that use of public funds in this way would "hurt" youth by eliminating jobs for youth service providers if their employers do not abide by living wage standards.

As vulnerable workers, impacted family members, scapegoats, and wedge weapons, youth are an important feature of the political landscape of any fight for living wage. Therefore, the media work conducted to support that fight must treat youth and young workers as the political actors and strong advocates for justice they are.

Media Strategies for Success

In the media advocacy component of any living wage campaign, it is important to examine all of the political factors as both potential threats and opportunities. Youth are both of these to a living wage campaign. Below are some media strategies to support the successful building of living wage campaigns that ultimately provide economic justice for all, including youth and young workers.

● **Goal setting:** You may be trying to win a new living wage ordinance for your city, fighting to protect a pre-existing living wage ordinance, or trying to extend the benefits of a pre-existing ordinance to a broader community. The following strategies should be used based on your political goals at the moment.

● **Reframing living wage:** One of the economic concepts that typifies opposition to living wage ordinances is that workers are paid low wages because they are unskilled. Many workers that benefit from living wage ordinances, especially

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SOME FACTS ABOUT YOUNG WORKERS:

Provided by the Young Workers Project of San Francisco

- The unemployment rate for youth ages 20-25 years old, both nationally and in San Francisco, is almost twice the rate for people over 25 years old.[i]
- In San Francisco County, unemployment for African-American youth is almost 3 times as high as for white youth (35.7% vs. 13.7%) and the rate is close to double for Latino youth as for white youth (17.9% vs. 13.7%).[ii]
- Young workers are more likely to be laid off than older workers.
- In September and October of 2001, workers ages 16-24 suffered 95% of all job losses. Young people in this age group are six times as likely as older workers to be unemployed. [iii]
- Young workers are more likely to be hired as temp workers: 53% of all temp workers are under the age of 35. Temporary jobs on average pay lower wages, while youth temp workers are more likely to suffer periods of unemployment and be poor than are permanent workers. [iii]
- Community Colleges are among the hardest hit, with a proposed increase in student fees from \$11 to \$24 per unit. This is a 120% fee increase, the largest percentage fee increase ever in the history of California.
- Community college students are more likely to be employed and work for more hours per week than four-year college students. In 1994, 90% of community college students reported working while being enrolled in college over the last five years. [iv]
- 40% of working community college students reported that work limited their class choice at college, and 37% reported that work had a negative effect on their academic performance. [v]

[i] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing*

[ii] Bureau of Labor Statistics

[iii] Jorgensen, Helene. 1999. *When Good Jobs go Bad: Young Adults and Temporary Work in the New Economy*. Washington D.C.: The 2030 Center.

[iv] National Center for Educational Statistics 1998

[v] National Center for Educational Statistics 1996

young workers, provide basic services to the city. The Youth Media Council suggests that rather than focusing on the skills or lack thereof of workers, media coverage should focus on the service these workers provide to a city they cannot afford to live in. Using this framework, living wage can be more easily connected to fights to increase the minimum wage and other youth-led economic justice fights.

● **Hooking youth issues to living wage campaigns in the news.** Mother's and Father's Day are good times to talk about the impact living wage policy can have on children and families. This is a good moment to reframe "family values" and claim the moral high-ground on this issue.

The last day of school is a good opportunity to do press work about summer jobs, and the first day of school is a good time to inject goals that impact part-time employment for youth. When new budgets are passed, particularly when they defund youth jobs, an opportunity is created to talk about the impact this has on young people.

Media Messages and Messengers

Following are some suggestions for carrying forward a youth-based message as part of your economic justice campaign.

● **Highlighting Injustice:** Demonstrate inequality and focus on exploitation. For example: Youth should not be treated as second-class workers. The proposal to create a "training wage" for youth workers discriminates against

minors. Most jobs filled by youth do not require a 60-day training period. Youth deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect as all workers.

● **Institutional Accountability:** When we use media advocacy to reframe political issues, we are generally seeking to shift public opinion from blaming the victims to holding the institutions and decision-makers in power responsible for the policies and conditions they create. Focusing attention on employers of young workers can serve to highlight gross wage inequalities.

● **Counter-messaging wedge attacks:** Engaging youth as players in the fight for a living wage provides a

new way to "focus on the family," and highlight racial injustice as youth of color and their parents make up a large percentage of those employed in city-funded, part time or temporary jobs.

● **Spokespeople:** Youth can inspire empathy as spokespersons. They help foster a sense that the goals of these campaigns are morally right, and the belief that by investing in living wage policy, cities are investing in their future. ■

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HEARING FROM YOUTH ON THE FRONT LINES

The following interview is with Nato Green, an advocate with the Young Worker's Project (YWP). YWP is a San Francisco Bay Area-based organization advocating for the rights of young workers. The interview was conducted by Malkia Cyril of the Youth Media Project.

Malkia Cyril: *Are living wage campaigns important to youth and young workers? If so, why?*

Nato Green: Yes, but it depends. Any campaign to boost wages for low-wage workers benefits youth. However, most living wage campaigns thus far haven't been major youth issues for two reasons. First, by targeting mostly businesses with contracts with city governments, living wage ordinances don't affect jobs that young workers tend to get. There are some youth in every sector, but here in San Francisco, the main benefit to young workers I would guess is not through city contractors but San Francisco Airport retail jobs. There were probably a handful of young workers who benefited from the S.F. living wage at nonprofits, security guards, construction, etc. A second reason is that many living wage ordinances have exemptions for minors, students, or trainees. So again in San Francisco, many of the City contractors or City jobs will have substandard "youth" intern or trainee jobs that may much lower wages.

I think area living wage laws and minimum wage laws will benefit youth a lot more. For example, youth working retail at Jack London Square in Oakland, a big tourist and entertainment area, benefited from the Port of Oakland living wage. Business groups apparently fought the effort by using youth to argue that youth don't need higher wages. Similarly, campus living wage laws can benefit youth in work-study, cafeteria, clerical, and other jobs.

Too often organizers of those campaigns agree to exemptions for students.

But the minimum wage is absolutely a young worker issue. Young workers are concentrated in low-wage industries—temp jobs, fast food, food and drinking establishments, department stores, video stores, movie theaters, grocery, etc., where the minimum wage level has a very direct effect on the workers. These industries are defined by their youth workforce. Fast-food for example pays minimum wage to a greater percentage of workers than any other sector.

MC: *What percentage of the economy are young workers and what conditions do they face?*

NG: We've seen some data from Bureau of Labor Statistics that workers under age 25 make up half of those earning at or below minimum wage. Remember, some of those folks are young recent immigrants.

MC: *If a group was doing media work for a living wage campaign, what information about youth and young workers should they have?*

NG: Well, in terms of organizing goals, pass a living/minimum wage without exemptions for youth, students, or trainees. Use interest in wages in general to spotlight young people in this country. Increase enforcement of wage and hour laws (i.e., overtime and meal periods) among youth. Get youth to expect more from their jobs.

Increase youth participation in the political process in an issue that directly affects them more than most.

MC: *What's the bottom line for young people and decent paying jobs?*

NG: In terms of what's at stake, it's education for youth. Raising wages for youth expands their educational opportunities. Tuition is rising much faster than wages, so students are forced to go further into debt, take longer to get through school, and work more while at school thereby compromising their education. For those youth who are doing what they're supposed to be doing—getting a job and going to school—they still can't get ahead with the jobs they can get. Things are getting worse economically for our generation. With the decline in good union jobs, higher education is the only way to get ahead but the most rapidly growing job categories are entry-level service jobs. Our communities need more access to higher paying jobs. Those who think that if they work hard and get good grades they'll get ahead are wrong.

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