

Washington State's Living Wage Movement:

Fighting for Economic Justice in a Post-September 11th Economy

By Holly Prueett

September 11th Job Losses...

- *80,000 New York workers lost their jobs between September 11th and December 31, 2001; 60% made an average of \$23,000 (NYC citywide average salary is \$58,000)*
- *The Milken Institute projects 1.6 million jobs will be lost in 2002 due to September 11th*

When hijacked planes wreaked havoc on September 11th, the nation's consciousness was finally forced to reckon with the plight of at least one category of low-wage workers: airport security personnel. In some quarters they were demonized as incompetent — despite the fact that the box cutters used on those planes were not considered contraband.

But on editorial pages and talk radio across the nation, people voiced their concern for the low wages, poor working conditions, and inadequate training that are a daily fact of life for airport security workers, many of whom work more than one job to meet the needs of their families.

“The reality of an \$8.00/hour security screener with no benefits and two kids is now common news,” says Michael Ramos, lead organizer for the Washington Living Wage Movement.

Recognition that the situation had to change fueled a political firestorm. If the workforce were federalized, that might mean unionized jobs: living wage jobs. Congress took the low road and federalized the airline security force while explicitly denying them many of the benefits of being a federal employee. Moreover, they established a process to re-privatize the workforce in three years. Airport security staff who manage to keep their jobs will be expected to consider themselves lucky to earn any wages at all, however low.

Workers Hit by Perfect Storm

The Washington Living Wage Movement and allied organizers across the country are striving to chart a course for economic justice through the perfect storm of the “War of Terrorism,” the recession, and the Bush-Cheney administration.

Low wage workers took perhaps the biggest hit of any group in America on September 11th. Dominant media images feature stockbrokers who commuted into the city, whole firms of them wiped out; entire squadrons of firefighters and rescue workers, our new working class heroes. Largely lost in the rubble of the news reel coverage were the people behind the scenes: the sales clerks, cooks, custodians, cabdrivers.

“No one wants to hear our stories,” Asmat M. Ali,

a former captain at Windows on the World, told the *New York Times*. “About a busboy or the dishwasher making \$250 a week and raising three kids in an apartment in the Bronx or Brooklyn. But 80% of the people who worked in the World Trade Center fell in that category.”

Undocumented immigrant workers were especially invisible. Their families here and in their countries of origin were left with no information, no breadwinner, and little hope of benefiting from the outpouring of donations to mainstream relief efforts.

The thunderous collapse of the Twin Towers reverberated through the low-wage sector across the country. Ten thousand workers were immediately laid off from Washington National Airport; many were never called back. Close to half of the employees represented by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union (HERE) in Washington, D.C. lost their jobs. In every tourism-dependent market from Las Vegas to Orlando, low-wage workers turned into no-wage workers overnight.

As the economic slow-down that was already underway continues to absorb the full impact of September 11th, the scope of the recession is spreading from the most vulnerable low-wage sector, into solid family wage jobs. Ford Motor Company announced the elimination of 35,000 jobs. The aerospace industry in western Washington state alone is expected to lay off 30,000 workers. Altogether, almost 900,000 jobs were lost between September 11th and December 31, 2001. The Milken Institute reports that the attacks on September 11th will cost U.S. cities more than 1.6 million more jobs in 2002.

But America has a safety net for people out of work, right? Not even close, according to Tom Snyder of HERE. The majority of hospitality industry workers do not qualify for unemployment. In fact, only 40% of U.S. workers do. Even the minority of laid off workers in the best of shape — those receiving unemployment who had employer health insurance — quickly run into trouble. The average cost of maintaining a family's health insurance under COBRA, \$592 per month, consumes three-quarters of the average \$795 unemployment check.

The hardship created for workers across the country spells tough times, too, for the organizations that support them. While unwavering in its commitment to organizing, HERE's Synder reports, "In Las Vegas, with 8,000 members laid off, we've got our hands full with food give-aways and counseling."

Verlene Wilder, organizer with the King County Central Labor Council and a leader in the Washington Living Wage Movement, confirms, "We're finding we have to work more on supporting families that are losing their jobs. The living wage package has to include them too."

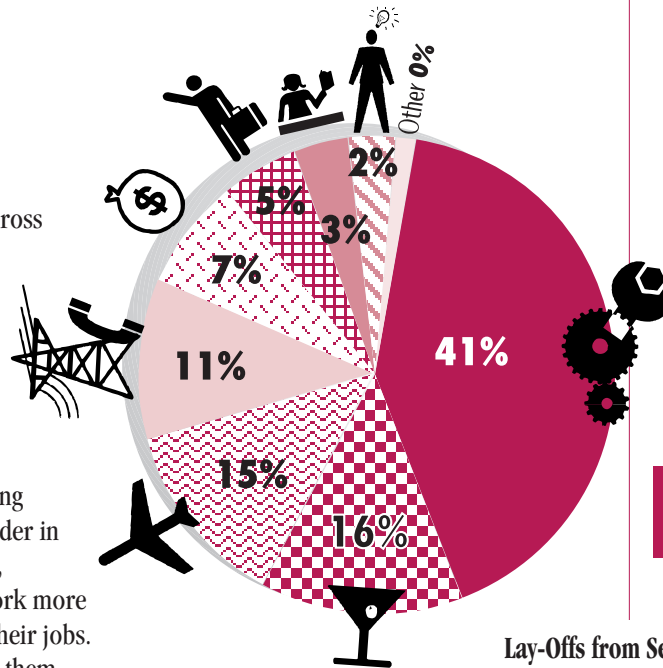
Therein lies the opportunity within the crisis. "There's more support now in the mainstream middle class as people start to feel the pinch themselves. There's a growing recognition that people in the low-wage sector have legitimate rights and needs," says Living Wage Movement's Michael Ramos.

A Vision of Economic Justice

The Living Wage Movement offers a vision of economic justice that unifies the self-interest of the majority of American workers and their families. It offers an agenda for equitable economic recovery. In Washington state — through the joint leadership of Washington Citizen Action, the Washington Association of Churches, and the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO — the Living Wage Movement presents a model for education and organizing that shows tremendous promise.

The living wage framework refers not only to the need for fair wages for all who work, but insists that health care, child care, housing, training and education are all basic necessities for families in today's economy. It asserts that all people — regardless of race, gender, religious belief, country of origin or sexual orientation — must be respected and treated with integrity through the right to living wages.

It's a message that has inspired over 600 organizations and individuals across the state of



...Combined With Economic Slowdown

Lay-Offs from September 11th through December 31, 2001

source: AFL-CIO

| | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| 41% | Manufacturing | 363,345 |
| 16% | Hospitality, Tourism, Entertainment | 139,156 |
| 15% | Transportation | 138,855 |
| 11% | Communications & Utilities | 101,526 |
| 7% | Finance, Insurance & Real Estate | 58,722 |
| 5% | Service | 46,008 |
| 3% | Retail Trade | 25,749 |
| 2% | Public Administration | 20,650 |
| 0% | Other | 4,240 |
| TOTAL | | 898,251 |

Washington to join the Living Wage Movement. Ten thousand activists are expected at a President's Day rally at the state capitol. The demands:

- A real economic stimulus package that treats unemployed workers fairly and includes health benefits;
- Closure of tax loopholes that allow corporations to benefit extraordinarily at the expense of the services the community needs;
- No cuts to the state minimum wage (which on New Year's Day became the nation's highest) — instead aim for living wages.

"We refuse to see living wages pitted against social services," says Barbara Flye, director of Washington Citizen Action. "We believe that, if you look in the right places, the pie can be made big enough."

The unity conveyed by this message reflects the coalition building, long-term relationship development, and grassroots organizing that are at the heart of this broad-based collaborative effort.

Brought together in 1998 through the Ford Foundation's *Collaboratives That Count* initia-

- 77,826 layoffs announced in first two weeks of 2002

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tive, the three founding organizations represented a substantial base: over 1,000 affiliates and 400,000 members spanning every Washington county from the State Labor Council alone. The convening organizations quickly expanded their connections to

include organizations working on a broad array of connected but specific social and economic justice issues: low-income housing, welfare, children's issues, access to health care, worker's rights and the right to organize, farmworker issues, hunger, senior issues, and accessible transportation.

"Our approach depends on fostering deeper and more strategic relationships among all these entities working for social justice," says John Boonstra, director of the Washington Association of Churches. "In order to facilitate meaningful systemic change, these relationships need to be built for the long-term and not just around a specific issue campaign."

Organizing for Local and Statewide Impact

The Living Wage Movement's two-tier structure supports organizing that has both local and statewide impact. Living Wage coalitions are developed locally in specific geographic communities. To date, there is a strong organizational presence in Vancouver, Tacoma, Seattle, and Bellingham along the I-5 corridor; and in Spokane, Yakima, and the larger Columbia basin east of the Cascades.

Coalition members in these communities identify their own needs and determine their own priorities within the common Living Wage framework. Farmworker and immigrant rights and working conditions are a primary focus in Northwest Washington's Skagit and Whatcom counties and throughout the Central Washington Columbia Basin surrounding Yakima. Seattle efforts center on the

loss of affordable housing and the simultaneous boom in low-wage service jobs posed by the planned development of eighteen new downtown luxury hotels. A larger King County effort is aimed at supporting the leadership of African American clergy in the Living Wage Movement.

Verlene Wilder sums up this quintessentially grassroots approach: "It's not about getting people to join our work and do our work with us, but about finding out about the work that's happening in communities, and how we can partner with that to help them be successful. We don't have to be the driver."

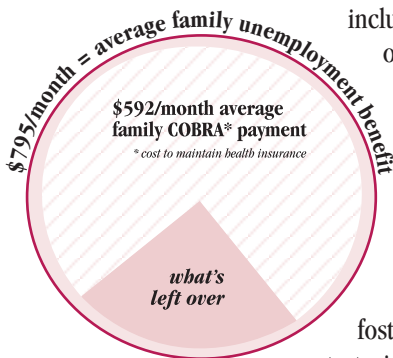
The Living Wage Movement is the vehicle that links the work of these locally-determined efforts together and amplifies their impact. Local organizing and coalition building are

supported by an intensive policy research and education arm. Boonstra notes, "Good research doesn't help our efforts if it just sits on a shelf collecting dust. By increasing the connection between policy research and our grassroots network, we will have the basis to achieve real power."

Informed by needs identified at the local level, policy development priorities include:

- fiscal and tax reform that addresses the inequities of the current public finance structure;
- corporate disclosure that exposes jobs created, wages paid, and subsidies received;
- a self-sufficiency standard that details, county by county, how much money families need to meet basic needs;
- TANF reauthorization analysis that spells out the impact on Washington state as the federal government sets (presumably reduced) spending levels for welfare programs.

In addition to providing these research, policy, and educational tools to local coalition members,



credits: Living Wage Movement



Only 40% of U.S. workers qualify for unemployment.

source: Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees Union



credit: Living Wage Movement

the Washington Living Wage Movement coordinates their involvement in statewide campaigns that reflect common concerns. Farmworker conditions, for example, are addressed not just locally in the communities where they work, but through educational outreach that builds commitment to change among allies everywhere.

In recognition of the pressures faced by the state's dwindling agriculture industry, the Fair Trade Apple Campaign seeks to gain consumer loyalty for growers who engage in equitable labor practices. "The retailer gets 68¢ of every apple dollar," according to Ramos. "The worker gets 4¢ and the grower gets 7¢. The worker and the grower are in the same boat. The solution needs to encompass them both."

There's also an agenda for action on health care; an expanding commitment to immigrant issues; and a strategy to preserve and improve airport security jobs. These statewide and local efforts reflect what the Washington Living Wage Movement calls its "three fundamental convictions:" defending the right to organize; promoting opportunities for upward mobility; and creating a just and compassionate society that leaves no one behind.

Jim Sessions, director of the national Union Community Fund, likens the current climate to the community crises weathered during his years in the South with the Highlander Center. The collapse of a coal mine or disastrous landslide or flood would inspire members of the public to step up to the plate alongside charitable institutions, community based organizations and churches. "Through the local

organizing that takes place out of necessity, the community creates changes that make it stronger, more viable, more sustainable," he says.

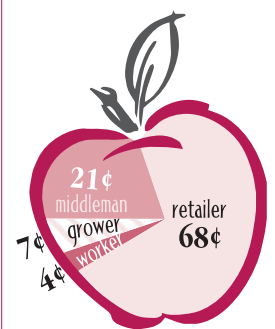
Sessions continues: "Today, across the country, unions are working ever more closely together. Allied partner organizations in the community have stepped up and made themselves known. Foundations that had been leery of working with organized labor, are now modifying that stance. People are finding new ways to work together — better institutional and community collaborations and partnerships that will strengthen organizing in the future."

The Washington Living Wage Movement is a model in the Western States region for the power and potential of effective collaboration. Forged before the current national and economic crisis, it presents both a message and a structure ideally suited to respond to these changing conditions.



Western States Center plays a support role with the Ford Foundation's Collaborations That Count initiative, which in our region focuses in Idaho (United Vision for Idaho, Idaho Community Action Network, Idaho Women's Network); Nevada (the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada); Oregon (CAUSA, Oregon Center for Public Policy, Rural Organizing Project, Oregon Action Fund); and Washington State.

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