

Briefing Note by Julie Green

## Living Wage Gathering

Toronto, March 25, 2014

Living Wage Canada (<http://www.livingwagecanada.ca/>) convened a meeting of about 60 people to discuss how to move the living wage to the top of the social advocacy agenda in Canada.

Deborah Littman, a long-time living wage campaigner, now living in Vancouver says six things are necessary to create support for the living wage:

1. Find intersections between people who have an interest in the outcomes of better wages. For example, teachers are interested in kids, and doctors in illness.
2. Create a grassroots campaign to identify alliances that go beyond wages alone.
3. Coalitions have power through collective impact and they are difficult to create.
4. Listen to different points of view and find common ground. Ask everyone to craft the message so that it reflects common interests.
5. Look at complimentary campaigns, eg. child care.
6. Don't start with the number. Instead talk about what kind of community you want to live in, about quality of life, about how no one who is working should be below the poverty line. "Work should lift you out of poverty, not keep you there."

The audio of this talk will be available on the Vibrant Communities website in the next week or two, along with notes from the session.

**Tom Cooper** is the director of the Hamilton Round Table on Poverty Reduction. He moderated a panel of business owners who are paying a living wage. Most notably, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board became the first elected body to become a living wage employer. Cooper is now working on the City of Hamilton (8,000 employees) to become a living wage employer. Meanwhile the school board is working on a living wage procurement policy that would require anyone contracting services to them to pay a living wage to their staff.

Other key points:

- Often, only a small number of employees need to be moved up the wage scale to earn a living wage, especially where a workforce is unionized.
- Some employers are adopting living wage to distinguish themselves from their competition, especially where customers have social justice ideals (eg. credit unions).

- Living wage is likely to encourage staff to stay longer and reduce theft.
- Living wage may be paid in cash but may also be paid as better benefits.
- It's hard to connect the living wage to people who work on a "cash corner" (piece work, precarious basis). It's easier to demand the companies hiring the piece workers to pay a living wage to them (eg. moving companies)
- There is a calculator tool that can be applied locally. Living Wage for Families (BC) <http://www.livingwageforfamilies.ca/> has an online calculator. It estimates the living wage in Metro Vancouver as \$19.62.
- New Westminster BC is first municipal council to pay living wage.

**Trish Hennessey** of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives previewed a new website that provides pictures and related stories about the need for a living wage from across the country. The website is not yet live. The CCPA in BC has produced several living wage reports. Here is the latest:

[http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2013/05/CCPA-BC\\_Living\\_Wage\\_Update\\_2013.pdf](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2013/05/CCPA-BC_Living_Wage_Update_2013.pdf)

**Adam Vasey** talked about the intersection between the minimum wage and the living wage. (He was a member of the Ontario Minimum Wage Review Panel, representing NGOs.) The minimum wage is mandatory and legislated and applicable across the province. The living wage is calculated locally and covers more than the bare minimum. He said it's important to stress the benefits of the LW because most businesses are going to argue against it. The question is how to make the living wage as durable as the minimum wage, once achieved.

Getting started: Hamilton started on obtaining a living wage in 2010-11. The roundtable identified the number of people working but living in poverty. They then spent nine months calculating the living wage with the help of economist Hugh Mackenzie ([http://www.hughmackenzie.ca/hughmackenzie/Hugh\\_Mackenzie.html](http://www.hughmackenzie.ca/hughmackenzie/Hugh_Mackenzie.html)) The result was a living wage in Hamilton is \$14.95 an hour. The roundtable then spent three months validating the number with people working in poverty. It's important to allow people to challenge the number and revise it as necessary. The process makes it a better number.

Hamilton launched their living wage movement in November 2011 with City council. They have a working group that is active on this issue. Key here is building an effective coalition and creating consensus and credibility. Think of: faith community, labour, businesses, NGOs, people working in poverty, people whose task is to work on corporate social responsibility. Sign up businesses and recognize them to create a sense of momentum.

**Living Wage Week** is the first week of November. It is observed around the world. There will be some planning in the living wage community of practice about how to use this week to profile the cause.

**Why it's more effective to lobby for a living wage than a basic income:** because of the 15 per cent of the national population that lives in poverty, about five per cent would directly benefit from a living wage. A living wage would reduce the number of people who need/cost of basic income.

**Application to the north:** enlarge the No Place for Poverty Coalition to include new members who want to lobby for the living wage. Invite Tom Cooper from Hamilton to provide guidance to NPPF about the campaign he was involved in. Pick a target – city, school board – and lobby for a living wage. Lobby other businesses, especially those with a “social conscience” such as the Co-op.. Acknowledge businesses that agree to pay living wage. Encourage all to adopt living wage procurement policies that favor doing business with other living wage employers.

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