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THE U.S. LIVING WAGE MOVEMENT

Building Coalitions from the Local Level
in a Global Economy

Stephanie Luce

In the last decade, U.S. unions have sought out opportunities to build coalitions with potential allies. In part, this is a defensive measure: faced with declining density and power, unions must search for partners to help them rebuild and be "good community citizens" in order to strengthen their reputation among potential members. It is also a proactive measure: numerous union leaders today come out of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and realize the need to incorporate broad demands into labor's agenda. Finally, some unionists pursue the strategy because they simply believe "it's the right thing to do."

In this chapter I examine one possible avenue for building labor-community coalitions: the living wage movement. The modern U.S. living wage movement began in 1994 with a campaign in Baltimore to raise wages for city residents making the minimum wage. The result was an ordinance that required employers holding service contracts with the city to pay their workers a wage close to the federal poverty line for a full-time worker with children. Since 1994, activists have engaged in living wage campaigns around the country, typically building coalitions of labor, community, and faith-based groups to pass local ordinances directed at city or county governments. I discuss the types of coalitions built through the movement and examine their successes and failures in terms of their capacity to build city-based networks and to revitalize union organizing.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LIVING WAGE MOVEMENT

The United States established a federal minimum wage as part of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which sets a minimum hourly rate of pay for covered employers. The minimum wage is not indexed to inflation, so it must be raised by Congress on a regular basis to keep up with the cost of living. Congress failed to do this in the 1970s and 1980s, and by the early 1990s the real value of the mini-

imum wage had fallen far below its historic levels—and well below the amount necessary for a worker with a family to meet the federal poverty line.

In addition, public sector workers, who had fought and won the right to unionize in many places, also saw an attack on their wages in the form of privatization, or contracting out. Local governments, faced with reduced federal aid and declining populations and tax bases, looked to balance their budgets by contracting out government services. This effort was spurred in the 1980s by an ideological move toward downsizing government and the expansion of free markets (Scler 2001). The result was that many unionized public sector jobs were lost, and low-wage positions without benefits developed in their place.

In response to these trends, the incidence of workers living in poverty grew, and community and labor organizations looked for solutions. At the same time, labor and community groups were feeling under attack more generally and looked for avenues for local campaigns that would unite them with allies and offer the opportunity for winnable reforms.

The living wage movement was one solution to these issues. Framed primarily as local campaigns, they allowed unions, community, and faith-based groups to work together in coalition to raise wages for some workers. These coalitions have looked for any form of leverage they could find to raise the wages of workers, most of whom had been unable to raise their own wages through collective or legislative action. Initially, the leverage was found through getting cities and counties to pass ordinances attaching living wage requirements to service contracts. This was later expanded to cover firms receiving economic development assistance from cities, firms operating concessions on city-owned property, and direct city or county employees.

As they waged more and more campaigns, activists became more successful at winning. Scholars such as Nissen (2000), Merrifield (2000), and Tilly (2003) argue that at some point the campaigns came together into a social movement. It appears that they contain the three components that social movements scholar Charles Tilly (2004) argues must be present. First, the living wage movement is an ongoing effort that makes public demands on authorities—primarily city and county legislators, but others as well. Second, the campaigns employ a range of tactics, such as lobbying, rallies, marches, petitions, direct action, and the creation of new coalitions. Finally, the participants present their issue as worthy and their campaigns as a unified demand representing large numbers of committed people. The campaigns rely on existing organizations and networks, but they also pull in new activists.

These activists began working together across cities, coordinating their work directly with one another at times and learning from each other. Activists expanded the movement in several directions. First, campaigns went beyond sim-

ply mandating wages. Many ordinances now index the living wage to inflation, provide health benefits, and may include benefits such as paid days off. Some include community hiring halls and language that gives some preference to union employers.

The movement also expanded the types of employers covered by the laws. In addition to service contractors, subsidy recipients, subcontractors, and direct city or county employees, the ordinances now also cover universities, school boards, transportation boards, and ports. In recent years, we have seen campaigns designed to raise the minimum wage for all employees in a particular locality. The New Orleans minimum wage passed in 2002 was overturned by the Louisiana Supreme Court, but subsequent ordinances passed in Santa Fe, San Francisco, and Madison.¹

Living wage advocates have also been connected to statewide minimum wage campaigns. In states such as Massachusetts, Vermont, California, Oregon, Illinois, and Washington, efforts to increase the state minimum were tied in with living wage language and activists. In November 2004, voters in Florida and Nevada passed statewide minimum wage laws by a large margin. Both set the minimum wage at one dollar above the federal level, and the Florida law also indexes the wage rate to inflation.²

The living wage itself varies from city to city. Initially, campaigns set out to win a living wage that was set to the poverty level for a family of four, assuming a full-time worker. Activists recognized that this does not "solve poverty," as many workers do not work full time, and the poverty level itself is still quite low. Still, it is an improvement over the minimum wage. For example, in 2004 the federal minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour, and the living wage as defined by the poverty level for a family of four was \$9.28. After the movement achieved some success, campaigns tried to win higher wages—such as 110 or 120 percent of the poverty line. In 2004, the average wage won in traditional living wage campaigns was \$10.89—or 117 percent of the poverty line.³

1. Not all cities have the right to pass their own minimum wage laws. Louisiana is a "home rule" state that does allow cities this right. New Orleans living wage activists collected the necessary fifty thousand signatures to put the minimum wage proposal on the city ballot in 1996. However, the hotel and restaurant lobby went to the state and got the legislature to outlaw cities from passing wage laws. The law allowed the state to override home rule in this case because a city wage law would do "undue economic harm to the state." Activists challenged this law, and the courts ruled that the measure had to be allowed on the ballot. The measure passed with strong support, and opponents immediately challenged it. The first ruling was in favor of the living wage, but the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld the state law, nullifying the city ordinance.

2. Other states will have minimum wage referendums on the ballot in coming years.

3. In addition to the minimum wage, the United States also has "prevailing wage" laws. These primarily apply to the construction industry and require the federal government (and some state and

After the first ten years of the movement, more than 120 living wage ordinances were on the books. A handful of these have been overturned or repealed (which will be discussed later), but most still stand. Living wage ordinances can be found throughout the country—in large cities and small cities with Democratic and Republican leaders; traditional “progressive cities” such as San Francisco and Madison, as well as more conservative or mainstream ones such as Lincoln and Cincinnati. However, Isaac Martin (2004) finds that the cities with ordinances tend to be concentrated outside the South in urban centers, or at least in large metropolitan areas in liberal cities with dense organization levels “including labor unions, congregation-based organizations, and low-income community organizations.” Because the ordinances are more likely to be found in large cities, this suggests the cities with ordinances are those with a greater percentage of people of color.

For the most part, the living wage movement has been targeted at the municipal level. First, the constituency groups that are involved in most of the campaigns are rooted there. Most community organizations and churches have a local focus; the municipal level is where the base of these groups exists. These groups are used to mobilizing at the local level and have the infrastructure to do so. This is less true of unions: union locals may be used to mobilizing at the firm level and internationals at the national level. But the growth of the living wage movement coincided to some degree with the rebirth of the central labor councils, making for a natural partnership.

The second reason for the local focus was that the campaigns had a greater chance of winning. State and federal campaigns take a lot of money, which these campaigns did not have. It is also much easier to use people power at the local level—getting members to meet with elected city representatives, for example. Finally, the local focus allowed groups to build the kinds of coalitions they wanted to create.

BUILDING COALITIONS

Living wage campaigns and ordinances differ greatly from city to city, making it difficult to characterize the movement or the impact of the laws. Despite the variation, one thing most campaigns have in common is that they are run by labor-community coalitions. In many cases, these coalitions bring together groups that have never worked together before or that have not developed strong relation-

city governments) to pay the prevailing wage (usually defined as the union wage) for any publicly funded construction work.

ships. The living wage concept is popular with a wide spectrum of organizations—indeed, with the general population—so it makes a natural issue around which to build alliances. The most common coalition partners include labor councils or unions that represent low-wage workers such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE, which was formed by the merger of UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) and HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union); national community organizing groups with local chapters, such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN); faith-based groups, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF); and labor-community collaborations, such as Jobs with Justice (Jwj). In any one campaign, a host of other organizations, ranging from environmentalists to civil rights organizations, might sign on. In many cities, new relations have developed between labor, faith-based, community, and student groups. Some coalitions form to pass the ordinance only, but many have gone on to work on other projects together.⁴

Not all the coalitions include labor. Some campaigns are led primarily by community organizations, and some include labor unions only as endorsers rather than as full participants. A few campaigns are run primarily by community organizations such as ACORN. In some cases, the ordinances are pushed through primarily by elected city officials. The Hayward, California, a living wage ordinance was passed primarily by local Democratic Party activists.

However, most campaigns do include labor unions in some capacity, and labor has participated in almost all the successful campaigns (Martin 2004). These involve two basic types. First are the unions or central labor councils that participate in living wage coalitions to build new alliances or strengthen ties with community allies. For these unions, the coalition building is the primary goal of the campaign. The second group consists of unions that become involved in living wage campaigns to advance specific goals, such as organizing workers or winning raises for workers they already represent. This involves cases where unions are in the coalitions from the start, as well as cases where the unions come on board after the laws are passed—when they see opportunities to use enforcement campaigns to their benefit.

Not all campaigns include workers who would be covered by the ordinances. Sometimes the movement is an extension of previous organizing efforts, such as the unsuccessful unionization drives at the hotels in Santa Monica, California, or an outgrowth of low-wage workers self-organizing around their own demands about what constitutes a living wage, as in Providence, Rhode Island. On the other hand, many campaigns have little or no contact with the affected workers and are

4. For more on this, see Luce 2004.

run instead by what Harvard economist Richard Freeman refers to as nonworker organizations, or NWOs (Freeman 2005). Freeman notes that the presence of NWOs has grown as the official labor movement has weakened. He argues that these organizations can "fight for other folks' wages" on behalf of vulnerable workers "who cannot improve their situation by themselves" (Freeman 2005, 17). However, NWOs differ from other worker organizations in that they are not controlled by the workers. Instead of workers electing their own leaders, NWOs choose what workers they want to fight on behalf of. Sometimes this gives workers little or no voice in fighting for their own demands. At other times, it can be a successful partnership that creates a space for workers to form their own organizations or creates alliances between NWOs and existing workers' organizations.

Building Labor-Community Alliances

The chance to build new alliances is perhaps the most important reason some labor unions have been involved in living wage campaigns. This has been especially important for central labor councils trying to increase their visibility in their communities. In some cities, central labor councils have initiated the campaigns, such as in San Jose, Tucson, and Madison. In others, they came on board as major participants, such as in Atlanta and Los Angeles.

As Southern Arizona Labor Council president Ian Robertson explained his role in the 1997–1999 living wage campaign in Tucson: "I'm tired of being called a labor boss, and that we're only interested in collecting dues. Here was an opportunity for labor to be a community partner" (Luce 2002). In Cleveland, labor council president John Ryan notes that even if the living wage ordinance didn't result in immediate organizing gains for labor, the campaign was important in itself for its ability to help some families move out of poverty.⁵

Beyond central labor councils, local union members and leaders have also found living wage campaigns a useful way to build alliances. Coalition building is important in its own right, but it also creates the foundation for broader social movements with a workers' rights agenda. A Sonoma County, California, living wage coalition includes unions—SEIU, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and the Carpenters—political groups (the Green Party), and groups such as the Sonoma County Council on Aging, Sonoma County Peace and Justice Center, and Women in Action. According to Marty Bennett, a lead organizer in the effort, labor unions lost a close vote on a project labor agreement (an agreement between the city and stakeholders to build a new development un-

der certain conditions favorable to workers) in a city council meeting in 2000. That woke them up to the fact that they needed to work in coalition to pass labor's political agenda. Steve Benjamin of the IBEW notes, "Any time you can establish new relationships like this, it's a good thing" (Luce 2002).

In Boston, the main anchors of the 1997 living wage campaign were ACORN and the Greater Boston Central Labor Council. According to Monica Halias, a living wage advocate and lawyer with Greater Boston Legal Services, the campaign brought together ACORN and the labor council in a way that other issues had not. The alliance may not seem a natural one, as ACORN's base is primarily African American residents, while the labor council has stronger ties in the white working class in a historically segregated city. Yet the organizations were able to institutionalize their relationship by requiring the city to establish a Living Wage Advisory Committee, with seats for both, to monitor and enforce the law. According to Halias, the committee "really cemented their relationship, and there have been so many positive spin-offs out of that" (Luce 2004, 204). These spin-offs include the successful effort to raise the state minimum wage in 1998, pass a statewide and Boston earned-income tax credit, and introduce a state corporate accountability law. When Boston Justice for Janitors went on strike in 2002, ACORN president Maude Hurd and labor council leader Tony Romano were arrested together in an act of civil disobedience supporting the janitors.

In Los Angeles, the 1996–97 living wage campaign helped build not only a labor-community coalition but a citywide movement. Living wage advocates as well as opponents and journalists point to the living wage campaign as a catalyst for this movement, which has brought a slew of victories: community benefits agreements for major economic development projects in the city, the election of labor-backed candidates for city governance, winning the largest pay raises in many years for city employees, and growth in union power. City council member Joel Wachs, who had been in office for twenty-seven years, noted in 1998 that "the city employee unions are stronger than I've ever seen them with respect to influence over the City Council. Most council members will not buck the unions. There are more council members today who will vote 100 percent for what the unions want."⁶

Living Wages and New Organizing

The link between union organizing and the living wage is complex. Although some living wage opponents claim that unionization efforts are the main motive

5. John Ryan, interview with the author, May 19, 2004.

6. Patrick McGreevey, "Unions Gaining Power in L.A.," *Daily News*, September 7, 1998, N1.

behind the movement, not all union leaders are convinced that living wage campaigns can lead to new organizing. Some believe the campaigns hurt organizing efforts: If workers can get higher wages through legislation, why would they fight for a union? Anecdotally, union leaders from a variety of unions and regions have made this claim, including those from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the building trades, UNITE HERE, and others. In general, however, these opponents are in the minority, and most union leaders are supportive of the living wage concept.

According to Ken Jacobs, former head organizer for the San Francisco living wage campaign, living wage campaigns can either help or harm unions. Unions that have been strategic about involvement in campaigns have seen positive results. Where unions are neutral toward or skeptical of the campaigns and stay out of them, living wage ordinances can be a detriment to new organizing (Luce 2004).

There are several ways in which unions can use living wage campaigns or ordinances to assist new organizing. First, the campaigns can simply be a way to meet new workers and let them know about the power of a union. If a union is an active participant in the campaign, they can help workers to see that winning a living wage might be the first step in a longer campaign for more rights. In Burlington, Vermont, the Living Wage Coalition helped pass an ordinance raising wages for direct city employees. The workers got a \$2.25 per hour pay increase and went on to successfully seek representation with AFSCME.

Second, unions can build language into the ordinances that give them advantages in organizing. Taft-Hartley prevents cities or states from requiring firms to honor card check and/or neutrality agreements outright (Sahu 2001). Instead, unions have been able to win weaker language in ordinances that gives some advantages to unions, such as "labor peace" provisions that allow cities to deny contracts or subsidies to firms with a poor labor relations history; gives preference in handing out economic development monies to businesses that "engage in responsible labor relations"; and prohibits the use of public money for antiunion activities. This kind of language can be found in about a quarter of the ordinances passed.

Over a third of ordinances passed also contain language that explicitly prohibits employers from disciplining or firing workers who exercise their rights under the living wage law. This can aid union organizing efforts because workers who speak out about their right to join a union will be protected from job loss if they are also speaking about their right to receive a living wage.

In the first ten years of the movement, there have been a handful of cases in which unions have been able to use this direct ordinance language to organize

workers. In Santa Cruz, the living wage ordinance requires covered employers to remain neutral in union campaigns. When a known antiunion employer wanted to get a city contract to drive city buses and vans, they granted a card check agreement to the United Transportation Union Local 23. The union then organized and won a contract for the 150 workers. In the same city, SEIU Local 415 won a card check agreement with the city to cover its 550 nonunion temporary workers.

Success has also come in indirect organizing victories, where the campaign has in some way spurred a new drive or assisted an existing one. For example, Tucson passed a living wage law in 1999 that applied to service contractors. The living wage raises put contracted workers' wages higher than some city workers' wages, so city workers began an organizing campaign. Communication Workers of America Local 7026 organizer Rolando Figueroa, who had been active in the living wage campaign, approached the workers and launched an organizing drive. Eventually, fifteen hundred workers won recognition and a first contract with the city. Figueroa asserts that the Communication Workers campaign might never have happened without the living wage campaign because the victory gave workers confidence to take on a union drive. Figueroa notes that "many workers are reluctant to join unions because they are afraid to make the commitment, or think the effort is futile. But seeing a living wage coalition join together to fight for and win a living wage ordinance opens their eyes to the power of collective action, and the potential power of working with other workers in a union" (Luce 2001).

Many university-based living wage campaigns are closely related to efforts to organize workers. In 2001, the University Student Labor Action Coalition at Wesleyan University in Connecticut helped janitors on campus (working for a private contractor) organize with SEIU Local 531, as the initial step toward a living wage campaign.⁷ In the spring of 2005, after three years of pressuring the administration, students at Georgetown University went on a hunger strike to win a living wage policy for campus janitors. After nine days, the administration agreed to raise workers' wages to \$15 over three years. According to senior and Georgetown Living Wage Coalition member Mike Wilson, winning a living wage was not enough:

We wanted Georgetown to commit itself and its contractors to a policy of neutrality in union campaigns, because we felt that this was important in our fighting for it with the workers at Georgetown. We wanted the workers themselves to feel empowered so that they could continue this fight after most of those working on the campaign graduate and leave. We wanted the workers to keep the power. (Democracy Now 2005)

7. For a fuller account of the Wesleyan effort, see Clawson 2003.

As a result, the university agreed to commit to union neutrality and include this requirement in all its contracts. A few weeks later, students at Washington University—St. Louis held a sit-in on their campus to demand a living wage for university employees. After nineteen days, the administration agreed to \$1 million in salary and benefit increases for campus employees and to form a committee to work on ensuring that campus workers have freedom of association.

Other successful efforts to link living wage campaigns to unionization have occurred in cities such as Berkeley and San Jose, California; Alexandria, Virginia; and Miami, Florida. Perhaps the most extensive connection between the living wage and union organizing has occurred in Los Angeles. The campaign was spearheaded by the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), a union-based social justice organization founded in the 1990s by HERE. After the ordinance was enacted, LAANE had staff monitor city meeting agendas for upcoming service contracts and economic development projects. This information was shared with unions, which then attempted to work with the bidding employers to obtain card-check/neutrality in exchange for helping the employer get the contract.

At the same time, LAANE worked with the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and area unions on an independent organizing drive at Los Angeles International Airport, which was covered by the ordinance. Some of the airport contractors hold long leases—some that were adopted right before the ordinance was passed were not due to come up for another ten years. The unions decided to pressure the employers to adopt the ordinance voluntarily. Their efforts paid off: according to Larry Frank and Kent Wong (2004), "When the living wage law was passed 30,000 out of the 50,000 airport worker were not in a union. Since this time, HERE has gone from representing roughly one out of five airport workers in its bargaining to four out of five. SEIU has moved from representing one in ten workers within their jurisdiction to representing more than half."

LAANE and its living wage coalition allies, including the faith-based Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, continued to use the momentum from the campaign and the power of the living wage rhetoric in related efforts to win community benefits agreements for economic development. As of 2005, LAANE has won six such agreements, which provide things such as living wages for workers in development projects, such as the new Academy Awards center, as well as union neutrality agreements, which have helped UNITE HERE organize workers.

Unionized Workers Win Better Contracts

Some living wage campaigns have furthered the cause of organized workers in other concrete ways. When Alexandria, Virginia, passed its living wage law in 2000, the ordinance resulted in raises for parking lot attendants at city-owned lots, represented by HERE. The union had only been able to win wages of around \$7 per hour, which was higher than the wage paid to other parking lot attendant in the area but still below a living wage. With the ordinance in place, wage jumped to \$10.21 an hour. Similarly, in Chicago, living wage advocates made sure that the ordinance covered home-health-care workers represented by SEIU Local 880. The ordinance raised those workers' wages from \$5.30 to \$7.60 an hour.

The living wage movement has provided support to National Education Association (NEA) organizers around the country who are trying to win higher wages for teaching assistants and other school support staff. In Vermont, the NEA built a contract campaign around the demand for a livable wage of \$9 to \$10 per hour plus health benefits. In Boston, orderlies, clerks, and technical workers represented by SEIU settled a contract in 2002 with Boston Medical Center using living wage guidelines. Under the agreement, workers would receive raises to bring their pay up to at least \$10.55, the Boston living wage at the time.⁸ Campus campaigns have also used living wage campaigns to assist in contract campaigns for already organized workers—such as at Harvard, Stanford, and Vanderbilt universities.

REVITALIZING THE LABOR MOVEMENT

These examples suggest that the living wage movement has had some success in helping revitalize labor—by helping build labor-community alliances, organizing new workers, and raising wages for already unionized workers. What can we conclude about the kinds of campaigns and coalitions built and their ability to achieve success?

First, in cases where unions have used living wage campaigns as a way to pursue new organizing or win raises for already organized workers, building a labor-community coalition has led to some victories. Unions have been creative in finding ways to craft ordinances and use them as leverage in organizing and bargaining. Coalition building can assist in these efforts by providing unions with good publicity, making contacts with new workers, and adding moral force to

8. Jennifer Heldt Powell, "Boston Medical Center Settles Contract with Workers," *Boston Herald*, October 9, 2002, 34.

unionization drives. But for this to happen the unions must be prepared to use the campaigns for organizing purposes. As Ken Jacobs notes, they must be strategic about how to use the campaigns or ordinances to launch organizing drives or assist contract campaigns. Unions cannot simply sign on to a living wage campaign and assume it will directly help them.

It is difficult to estimate the number of workers who have benefited directly or indirectly from the living wage movement. While the traditional living wage ordinances covered only a few dozen workers at most in some cities, they affected tens of thousands in cities such as New York and San Francisco. However, the statewide minimum wage campaigns that have emerged out of the living wage movement are clearly covering many more workers. For example, economists estimate that the Florida minimum wage law passed in 2004 will directly affect about three hundred thousand workers (Pollin, Brenner, and Wicks-Linn 2004). In addition, many workers have received "ripple effect" wage increases due to the living wage movement. These are workers already earning the living wage or slightly above, who also received a raise with the passage of the new law. In many cases, these indirect raises are larger than the direct raises. For example, 550,000 workers in Florida are expected to benefit from "ripple effect" raises from the 2004 law.

Second, the examples about implementation struggles suggest that living wage advocates cannot assume that passing a living wage ordinance will automatically result in higher wages for the covered workers. Diligence is needed to ensure the city enforces the law. Furthermore, some ordinances are blocked from implementation altogether or even repealed after passage. Perhaps surprisingly, I found that strong implementation is more likely in cases where living wage advocates are involved in the implementation process and where the campaign itself was relatively contentious. Although a contentious campaign doesn't guarantee strong enforcement, it can force living wage advocates to build real and deep coalitions that may be needed later to keep the ordinance on the books. Contentious campaigns can push coalitions to test themselves and learn about their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as build institutions that can be used for implementation down the road.⁹

Third, even when the campaigns have not resulted in new organizing gains or in living wage gains for large numbers of workers, the opportunity to build labor-community coalitions can be considered a victory in itself. In Los Angeles, Episcopal minister Dick Gillet noted that many in the religious community had negative images of unions and that the living wage campaign created an ideal place for dispelling some of these notions: "The living wage victory in Los Ange-

les raised the possibility that a real awakening and a willingness to rekindle the fires for a new agenda for justice might be at hand in the form of a promising new partnership of religious faiths with the diverse and progressive sectors of the community, and even with some politicians with a conscience."¹⁰ In Milwaukee, the executive director of the job training organization Esperanza Unida remarked that the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee was different from previous coalition attempts: "I've never seen so many people working together to focus on the root cause of our social problems."¹¹

Many in the labor movement now acknowledge the necessity of building coalitions with community partners. However, recognizing the need for coalitions and the ability to build them are often far apart. The challenges to building real labor-community coalitions are many. In some cities, unions have a legacy of exclusion and discrimination against African Americans, making it difficult to find enough trust to work together. In many cases, labor unions possess greater resources (including staff, infrastructure, and money) than most of their potential allies, leading to an imbalance of power within the coalitions. Labor unions feel pressure to spend dues money wisely—often on providing services to members or organizing new members, rather than on efforts with vague outcomes.

Living wage campaigns appear to provide a way to get beyond some of these obstacles. The movement has created a way for unions to build coalitions that they had not necessarily been able to create through other means. In Cleveland, former Jobs with Justice staff person Steve Cagan says the living wage campaign "was a real movement" for two years—the coalition was grassroots, diverse, and broad, and people realized that building the movement was as important as winning the ordinance.¹²

Richard Freeman (2005, 16) cautions that living wage campaigns on their own can turn into "cul-de-sacs drawing activist energy from national reforms that could improve the well-being of low-wage workers more widely." However, most living wage activists realize that the campaigns alone will not cover many workers and that the movement must "scale up" to address poverty more fundamentally. To this end, they continue to wage campaigns at the local level, but they have expanded their efforts to statewide minimum wage campaigns and pay ongoing attention to openings at the national level to raise the federal minimum wage. In some cities, the coalitions have passed ordinances and then died off, but in other places the campaigns have built new and lasting coalitions and sparked a host of

10. Richard Gillet, interview with the author, January 29, 1998.

11. Jack Norman, "Activists Work on Economic Plan with Jobs in Mind," *Milwaukee Journal*, September 23, 1994, B1, B6.

12. Steve Cagan, interview with the author, May 20, 2004.

9. For more on this point, see Luce 2004.

successful organizing to build working-class power. For example, in July 2006 members of the Chicago living wage coalition came together to pass a Big Box Ordinance requiring large retailers in the city to pay a living wage of \$10 an hour and another \$3 an hour in benefits, indexed for inflation.

What explains the appeal of the living wage movement? In part, it rests on the basic popularity of the issue: voters have broadly supported the concept of the federal minimum wage since it was established in 1938. The idea carries a deep moral resonance and is relevant to a wide range of groups. And as expressed by *The Black Commentator* (2002), the movement fulfills a fundamental need: "Living Wage campaigns create legal, economic and political environments in which workers and entire communities can fight the power of money."

UNIONS AND THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

A Comparative Overview

Jeffrey M. Sellers

Throughout advanced industrial countries and beyond, local politics has historically provided a crucial focal point of organizing and influence for working-class movements. The comparative case studies in this book highlight how this local focus has again emerged as a major element in the opportunity structure of union politics. In this chapter I employ cross-national statistics to analyze national and local variations in the political opportunities for unions and other groups concerned with social justice within communities. Whatever the national context, the analysis shows that urban coalition building with other political and social groups plays an important role in effective union politics. Cross-national local comparisons also reveal how the opportunities and risks of urban coalition building in the United States differ from those in much of the rest of the developed world.

In the early phases of industrial unionism in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, local political regimes and coalitions governing industrial cities were as crucial to working-class politics as unions and parties at the national level (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Dogliani 1992). Under conditions of relatively stable capitalist organization, and in alliance with middle-class reformist movements as well as working-class parties, unions furnished critical support for "municipal socialist" regimes at the local level (e.g., Steinmetz 2001). These local formations provided housing and educational, recreational, and health services that often grew into components of national welfare states and helped mobilize workers in national politics. In the multithetic, more fragmented context of working-class organization in the United States, the big-city political machines of Northeastern cities brought unions parallel channels of incorporation (Cornfield 1993; Katznelson and Zolberg 1986).

In the contemporary era, high-tech manufacturing, service capitalism, economic globalization, and media-driven politics have limited the opportunities for

The author would like to thank Jeffrey Whitten and Yoel Bae for research assistance and Jeb Barnes, Dan Cornfield, Nathan Lillie, Merrill Silverstein, Janelle Wong, and two anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions.