Harvard students campaign for a living wage, 1998-2002

Student Living Wage Movement (late 1990s - mid 2000s)

September 1998 to February 2002

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Cambridge, MA
Location Description: Harvard University Campus

Goals:
To create a living wage of $10 or more for all Harvard employees.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 012. Skywriting and earthwriting
- 014. Mock awards
- 016. Picketing
- 032. Taunting officials
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 001. Public speeches
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 015. Group lobbying
• 016. Picketing
• 031. “Haunting” officials
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 037. Singing
• 050. Teach-ins
• 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 4th segment:

• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 015. Group lobbying
• 016. Picketing
• 035. Humorous skits and pranks

Methods in 5th segment:

• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 015. Group lobbying
• 016. Picketing
• 021. Delivering symbolic objects
• 034. Vigils
• 038. Marches
• 162. Sit-in
• 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 6th segment:

• 015. Group lobbying
• 038. Marches
• 171. Nonviolent interjection

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 090. Revenue refusal

Notes on Methods:
In the third segment, non-violent occupation is used to represent the "sleep-in" that took place at Harvard. Non-violent occupation in the third segment also represents the 6-hour occupation taking place in April 2000 when the LWC distributed information about poverty on campus to admitted students, as they are described as "occupying the building" for six hours.

In the fourth segment, Banners, Posters, and Displayed Communications is used to represent the display erected in the Harvard Science Center.

In the fifth segment, Declarations by Organizations and Institutions is used to represent the endorsement of the US Senate and House of Reps, as they publicly declared their support. Nonviolent Occupation is used to represent the second sleep-in outside
of the Harvard Administration building

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
Group characterization:

- Harvard Workers
- Harvard students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Progressive Students Labor Movement (PSLM) created the LWC (Living Wage Campaign)
Partners:
Harvard workers' unions
External allies:
Alumni
Involvement of social elites:
Cambridge City Council, US Senate and House of Representatives

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Alumni
- Cambridge City Council

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:

- US Senate and House of Representatives

Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 7 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
In the fall of 1998, Harvard students began a Living Wage Campaign that would last for almost four years. The Campaign was headed by the Progressive Student Labor Movement (PSLM) and aimed to help all Harvard employees receive a “living wage”. The demands of the LWC were that each Harvard employee (janitors, security guards, cafeteria workers, etc.) receive a wage of $10 per hour or more. Most workers were receiving the minimum wage at the time, which was around $6.50. In 1998 Cambridge, MA, this was not enough to get by individually, let alone to support a family. Harvard students believed the administration was treating the workers unfairly, and so they designed the Living Wage Campaign (LWC) to combat the University’s neglect of its workers.

The LWC began by interviewing workers and unions in the fall of 1998, as well as distributing information across campus to students and faculty alike about the low wages workers were receiving. After several months of compiling data, taking interviews, and distributing pamphlets and papers, in February of 1999 the LWC sent a letter to then Harvard President Neil Rudenstine, requesting that he meet with the PSLM leaders to discuss the creation of a living wage policy at Harvard. The President did not respond, but rather directed the Secretary of Labor Relations to send a letter to the LWC explaining that Harvard’s wages were deemed as fair. This was the Campaign’s first attempt at negotiating, and it failed miserably. However, the students refused to give up.

Fueled by anger at the President’s unsatisfying response to their letter, in March of 1999 ten LWC campaigners walked onstage while the Dean of the college was delivering the Junior Parents’ Weekend Welcoming Address. They proceeded to cut him off and instead give a five-minute speech about low wage labor at Harvard, to which the audience applauded quite loudly. The students promptly left the stage, and the Dean cancelled the rest of the event. As loud as this form of action was, the President continued to ignore the students, prompting them to take further action. The LWC decided to organize a Rally For Justice along with several other student groups, and managed to attract around 400 people to the rally. Following the rally, The Cambridge City Council stepped in and urged the University to adopt a living wage. The President finally gave some form of response, and announced he would appoint an ad hoc committee of faculty only to review the living wage. However, for the LWC Students, this simply was not good enough.

In April of 1999, the action continued with more rallies (at least one was held each month following the beginning of the campaign all the way until the finish), as well as a demonstration with the Harvard U Security, Parking, and Museum Guards
Union to demand a new contract which would include a living wage. Rudenstine ignored these demonstrations per usual, so the students decided to take further action. During a meeting for admitted students, before Rudenstine could begin his speech, several LWC members introduced his remarks by presenting him with an award for “Worst Employer In Boston” (again, to the crowd’s applause). Rudenstine was flustered, but continued his speech.

However, despite public embarrassment, the President still refused to acknowledge the Living Wage Campaign and its demonstrations, so the students continued to take action. In May of 1999, the Cambridge City Council passed an official Living Wage Ordinance, establishing a wage of $10 per hour for all Cambridge city employees. Harvard ignored the ordinance. Following the passage of this ordinance, 115 Harvard Faculty members publicly endorsed the living wage, announcing that they supported the LWC and its goals. As the school year came to a close and the President continued to ignore the LWC, the campaigners hired an airplane to fly above the graduation ceremonies pulling a banner reading “Harvard Needs a Living Wage”. Rudenstine, again, ignored this action, and as students returned home for the summer, several LWC members decide to remain in Cambridge to continue organizing community members for their campaign. They used grant money to do so, and through the summer managed to get around 100 alumni to pledge to refuse to give money to Harvard until the University adopted a Living Wage. The University also took a first step and admitted that it had committed “systematic abuses of the casual payroll” by keeping hundreds of their full time workers listed as “casual workers”, even though they worked over 40 hours a week and some had worked there for as many as ten years. The College promised to convert over 200 casual jobs to full time jobs by 12 October.

However, this promise was, again, not enough for the LWC and they opened the school year in full campaign mode starting in October. The LWC hosted a public demonstration in cooperation with the Harvard Janitors Union to argue for better wages and a new contract. Their demonstrations were again ignored. In November of 1999, the Campaign contacted the President directly and invited him to come to a rally to explain why he paid the wages he did. The President did not show, as expected. The Campaign fired back in December with a huge effort to canvass the entire campus with their message. Members of the LWC visited most of the administration members and serenaded them in their offices with carols about the poverty they were creating.

Following winter break, in January of 2000 members of the LWC appeared as speakers at a conference on welfare reform and related economic activism. Several small rallies were held until March 2000, when around 30 campaign members entered the offices of administrators and held a mock teach-in, designed to inform administrators about the benefits of a living wage. Following this occupation, police officers and vehicles were stationed around the building until the end of the year.

The President continued to ignore the students, and in April of 2000, the Cambridge City Council stepped in once more, urging Harvard to implement a living wage immediately. At a rally organized by the LWC, several City Councilors stepped onstage and announced that they would refuse to approve building permits for the University until the administration implemented a living wage. The LWC also sponsored a sleep-out, during which around 30 students slept outside in the rain to support their movement and the enactment of a living wage for Harvard Workers. The Campaign sent another request to meet with the President, which was again denied.

Following the President’s refusal to meet with the Campaign members, towards the end of April 2000 about thirty LWC demonstrators occupied the administration office for around six hours to distribute information about poverty on campus to hundreds of admitted students and their families during an orientation weekend.

In May of 2000, the ad hoc committee implemented by the President at the beginning of the year released its report, rejecting a wage standard for Harvard workers, instead offering a small benefits package, with which the students and workers were not satisfied. The Campaign responded with a “Workers First” concert and rally during Arts First weekend. Following the concert, the President announced he would be resigning effective on 20 June 2001.

As the school year came to a close, several students remained in Cambridge once again to continue organizing and holding several small rallies. The LWC was slow to begin action as the 2000-2001 school year began, but in December of 2000, the LWC initiated the first meeting of many among the Harvard workers unions. Nine of the eleven unions sent members, and the
representatives of each union agreed to push for a living wage in their next contract. During the talks, the unions also created a draft of a Labor Code of Conduct.

Following the union gathering, the LWC hosted a Workers Appreciation Day, during which they erected a display in the Harvard Science Center (something many student groups would do) consisting of typed interviews with Harvard Workers. As it neared time for winter break to commence, the LWC staged a holiday pageant about the President going to jail for paying “Criminally low wages”. It was called “Neil Rudenstine’s Christmas In Jail”. The LWC was still ignored by the administration.

As Spring Semester commenced, the campaigners put together hundreds of parodic Valentines for the President, and in February 2001, several members delivered “Love your workers” Valentines to the President’s house.

In March of 2001, parents began to involve themselves, and during another Junior Parents Weekend speech by the Dean, six parents silently held up signs in support of a living wage for workers at the school. The parents were asked to either leave the auditorium or risk arrest. The parents left the auditorium, and the Dean continued his speech.

During the Junior Parents’ Weekend, 20 LWC members travelled to the workplaces of corporation members in NYC. They attempted to deliver requests for meetings, distribute leaflets that called on the corporation to implement a living wage, and began to demonstrate outside of offices. Once back at the University, campaigners were greeted with the news that a new President, Larry Summers, has been chosen to replace Neil Rudenstine. The campaigners immediately pounced, and the day after the announcement over 200 students and other members of the community marched on Loeb House led by the LWC. The students interrupted a meeting with Summers and other Harvard Faculty, and demanded that Summers implement a living wage immediately upon his inauguration as President of the University.

After almost two years of demonstrations, protests, rallies, and other forms of non-violent action, the Living Wage Campaigners had made little to no progress towards their goals. They decide it was time for greater action, and on 18 April 2001, 50 students occupied Massachusetts Hall, starting a three-week sit-in in the Main Administration Building. Campaigners organized daily pickets to take place outside of the building (which sometimes attracted as many as 2000 people), and they also collected over 400 faculty signatures endorsing a living wage. The sit-in attracted the attention of national media, and the LWC received endorsements from US senators and representatives as well. During the sit-in, hundreds of campus workers also mobilized to demand justice from Harvard and support the demonstrators. Over a hundred Harvard Alumni staged a mock sit-in in NYC at the Harvard Club to support the demonstrators. Every night of the sit-in, nearly a hundred students slept in tents pitched outside of the administration building as well, to support the demonstrators. The building was canvassed with signs of support for a living wage, and supporters held a candlelight vigil on the first night of the sit-in. The LWC also occupied the administration offices during the sit-in, and began to decorate the entire building with their posters of living wage support.

The sit-in lasted three weeks, and on 8 May 2001, the University finally reached an agreement with the campaigners. The students left Massachusetts Hall with the promise of a committee formation (known as the Katz Committee) consisting of faculty, students, and workers. The committee was to present the University with recommended changes by December 2001. The University also agreed to announce a moratorium on outsourcing of jobs until the committee’s deliberations came to a close. The administration also had to renegotiate a contract with the janitors’ union in early 2002. The Dining Hall workers also settled a contract with Harvard and were able to increase the pay of almost all workers to a level above the Cambridge standard of a living wage. Undergrads who participated in the sit-in were nonetheless put on disciplinary probation.

In December of 2001, the Katz Committee released its final report, calling for immediate wage increases for workers, more affordable benefits, a fair bargaining clause, equal pay for directly hired and outsourced workers, and the ability to reassess this agreement in the future, thus allowing for the contract to be renegotiated pending inflation in the economy. Following Winter Break, over 500 students, workers, and community members marched through Cambridge to demand economic and racial justice at Harvard and to support the Katz Committee suggestions. At the end of January, President Summers announced that he would adopt many of the Katz Committee proposals; however, he did reject several of them, and the LWC began to mobilize once again.
In February of 2002, the LWC organized a Valentine’s Day March to the President’s house, and they demanded that Harvard offer better wages and benefits to its workers. The campaigners also stated that they were unsatisfied with the small number of policies the President had chosen to adopt from the Katz Committee suggestions. Following the march, Harvard students, janitors, and alumni blocked the traffic in Harvard Square to draw attention to Harvard’s refusal to negotiate. The next day, Harvard Janitors Union reached an agreement and was able to offer all directly hired Janitors at least $11.35 an hour.

In May of 2002, the University created a contract with the Guards Union and increased their wages to at least $11.35 starting in July of 2002. In June of 2002, the Dining Hall Workers Union signed a contract with Harvard as well, offering all Dining Hall workers a minimum wage of $10.85, some receiving wages even higher. The administration also agreed to release annual data about low wage campus workers and the status of their salaries. Although Harvard still has not implemented an official living wage for all of the Harvard Employees, 95% of their employees are currently receiving a living wage as a result of three years of mobilization and nonviolent action organized by the Progressive Student Labor Movement and the Living Wage Campaign.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Harvard Students were influenced by a number of living wage campaigns taking place on college campuses across the Nation (1).

The Harvard Students influenced a number of living wage campaigns taking place on college campuses across the Nation (2).

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Nikki Richards, 10/12/2012

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