Swarthmore students and staff campaign for a living wage, 2000-2004

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

Time period notes: The campaign was suspended each summer in accordance with students' presence on campus.

February 2001 to December 2004

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

Goals:
Students, staff and allies fought to enact a comprehensive living wage on campus and make the College's decision-making processes more democratic and transparent.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 021. Delivering symbolic objects
• 166. Mill-in

Methods in 4th segment:

• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 031. Performances of plays and music
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 025. Displays of portraits
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 178. Guerrilla theatre

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice

Group characterization:
• College staff and students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:  
Swarthmore Living Wage & Democracy Campaign

Partners:  
Sympathetic faculty and administration

External allies:  
Local Quakers, Women's Association for Women's Alternatives, Radical African Dissent and other radical student groups, more mainstream student groups, alumni, Harvard and other university Living Wage campaigns, student organizers at Haverford College

Involvement of social elites:  
Best-selling author and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich issued a statement of support for Swarthmore’s Living Wage campaign

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• local Quakers
  • politically active students
  • staff

Groups in 2nd Segment:

• Some faculty
  • less politically active students

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Majority of faculty

Groups in 4th Segment:

• Alumni

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

• President Al Bloom
  • Swarthmore administration

Segment Length: Approximately 6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college just outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had long been respected as an institution with a strong commitment to social justice. While the College had pioneered such practices as co-education and comprehensive financial aid, by 2000 many College staff—including those in the environmental and dining services departments—were paid just above poverty levels for Delaware County, where the College and the majority of its workers reside. In the fall of 2000, a group of students began to talk with staff about the College’s employment practices. Among the chief concerns voiced by workers were low wages, lack of respect, and a lack of representation in the College’s decision-making processes. To address these issues, staff and students formed the Swarthmore Living Wage and Democracy Campaign.

The group began working with Women’s Association for Women’s Alternatives (WAWA), based in nearby Holmes, Pennsylvania. WAWA conducted market-based surveys of self-sufficiency, measuring the real cost of necessities such as food and childcare with wages, as well as comparing differences in self-sufficiency across pay scales and against outside economic factors. One study, for example, found that, over a given period, growth in the College’s endowment failed to correlate to growth in the lowest staff pay scales.

In February 2001, following 5 months of coordination between staff, students, and WAWA, SLW&DC presented Swarthmore president Al Bloom and the College Senior Staff with a proposal outlining inconsistencies between the College’s practices and stated values, staff experience with wages, contemporary economic conditions, lack of transparency, and the potential benefits to the College of implementing a living wage and transparent, democratic decision-making process.

In addition to pointing out existing issues, the report also stated the campaign’s goals clearly to the administration, within the categories of either wages or decision-making structures and transparency. The proposal also made four recommendations of the administration: that an edited version of the proposal be implemented within the 2002-2003 Fiscal Year, that the planning for the policy transition be completed by the end of the 2001-2002 academic year, that an Ad Hoc Committee with equal numbers of staff, students, administration, and faculty be formed to oversee the transition, and that all discussions and decisions regarding the transition be fully transparent to the entire College community.

Throughout the winter of 2001, SLW&DC held a number of educational events around issues brought up in the proposal, including panels in which staff discussed their experience as College employees, as well as publishing Op-Eds and articles in the school’s weekly newspaper, The Phoenix. On February 23rd, the group held a Kickoff Party for staff, students and allies, to officially began the campaign.

The Swarthmore Friends Meeting sent a letter of support for the SLW&DC, notable because of the Campaign’s early and
continued emphasis on the College’s disavowal of its stated Quaker values.

In March, SLW&DC members circulated a petition of support for a living wage and democratic decision making process that was signed by 1,135 staff, students, faculty and community members; the entire student population was less than 1,400. Campaigners submitted the petition to president Bloom in a delegation. The next month, they made another delivery in the form of a revision to the proposal presented in February, as promised by campaigners at the time of the first proposal’s delivery.

May 2001 saw the Harvard Living Wage group stage a sit-in that gained national attention, providing inspiration and energy to Swarthmore’s campaign and others throughout the country. Furthermore, Harvard’s campaign was being partially organized by a Swarthmore alumnus who would also hold educational talks and film screenings at various times throughout Swarthmore’s campaign for members of the College community.

Educational events continued throughout the fall of 2001, with speakers and more articles in school publications. Also in the fall, SLW&DC published a salary schedule that explained how staff wages were determined, information previously unavailable to the staff it affected. On November 19th, the Staff Compensation Review Committee (CRC) recommended that the administration raise the College’s minimum wage from $6.66 to $9 an hour and improve employee health benefits. On the 30th, Campaign members distributed questionnaires to workers, asking what their primary concerns were with their employer; the top results were, in order, wages, benefits and job security. The next spring, students at the College launched a satirical publication, entitled The Swonion (a reference to the nationally-distributed satirical newspaper The Onion), which focused specifically on the SLW&DC, poking fun at and pointing out the College’s lack of response to concerns raised by staff, students and allies.

Applauding the Board’s approval to raise the staff base wage from $6.99 to $9, on April 4th, 2002 the SLW&DC held a “Keep On Movin’ Forward” rally in solidarity with National Student Labor Action Day. The rally encouraged and pressured the College’s administration to continue improving its staff compensation policies, including implementing a living wage of $13 per hour. Rally events included spoken word poetry, labor-friendly song, speeches by faculty and alumni past and present, and cheers by the Swarthmore Radical Cheerleaders. By this point, notably, 27 colleges and 75 communities across the nations were waging living wage campaigns concurrently with Swarthmore’s.

On April 24th, the Campaign cosponsored an event on race, gender and the living wage with another student group, Radical African Dissent, or RAD. The following day, all four student representatives of the Student Advisory Group to the Staff Compensation Review Steering Committee resigned, publicly citing opposition to the committee’s practices and their own lack of inclusion in the decision making process.

On May 3rd, students involved with SLW&DC asked the Board of Managers’ to consider the edited proposal in their Fall 2002 meeting agenda. Participating students interrupted a Board dinner for three minutes, presenting each of the Managers with ornate chocolate mints attached to notes in support of the Campaign from staff, students and faculty. On May 15th, SLW&DC met with president Bloom to discuss a research committee for a living wage at Swarthmore. Following a straw poll among faculty of support for SLW&DC, Bloom approved the creation of the Committee on the Living Wage.

At May’s graduation ceremony, attended by a number of students and alumni, graduating seniors involved and allied with SLW&DC presented president Bloom with bread and roses, traditional symbols of labor solidarity, upon shaking his hand when receiving their diplomas. Banners were also hung around the campus during graduation week clearly connecting the action to the Living Wage Campaign.

During the fall semester, the Campaign continued to educate the campus through a series of events and pamphlets. A number of Campaign members and the Swarthmore Radical Cheerleaders were also involved in supporting an eventually unsuccessful union drive at fellow Tri-College Consortium member Haverford College. The following spring, SLW&DC protested cuts to the existing benefits bank, a surplus in the hourly wage allowing staff to purchase health and dental care. As a result of pressure on the administration, the College’s director of Human Resources announced that it would be “unwise” to cut the benefits bank as once planned.
In September of 2003, Campaign members sent a letter to each member of the Board of Managers that included a packet of information about the living wage. In October, partially in response to the previous May’s action, the Board met privately to discuss the proposal, evoking transparency concerns among SLW&DC and its allies. During this time, also, a number of alumni came to the side of the Campaign, writing letters of support to the administration and in alumni publications.

From February 23rd-28th of 2004, SLW&DC organized a week of action. The series of events, featuring broad participation from staff, students, and faculty, featured concerts, a tea time with administration in addition to speakers involved in the labor movement. The week culminated in a Rally for a Living Wage with large banners, songs, marching, and a giant puppet pageant that recreated the College’s Quaker ancestry, as well as the workers who could not be present to show their support. At an April panel featuring at least one dining services worker, a professor asked a staff member if she and her colleagues “really cared about a living wage.” In response, the same staff member organized an anonymous survey that found all 50 of the dining services staff respondents to be in support of the Living Wage Campaign.

The next fall, president Bloom released to the College community the proposal he intended to present to the Board of Managers, including benefits for employees’ children. Upon discovering Pennsylvania’s Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), however, which provides health benefits to children whose parents cannot afford it, he instead proposed that employee health benefits extend only to spouses. The Campaign and faculty publicly rejected the proposal, with faculty proposing an alternative proposal of their own in which the College would provide benefits to employees’ children who do not qualify for CHIP. The “Specter of Economic Injustice,” a grim-reaper garbed student, began to appear around Halloween of 2004 at various points around campus, from Saturday night parties to Tuesday afternoons between classes.

In December, president Bloom presented the proposal—including a $10.38 minimum wage and $0.88 benefits bank—to the Board of Managers’ meeting. A “Building New Foundations Toward A Living Wage” rally was held just outside the meeting, featuring songs, dances, cheers and speeches by Campaign members, alumni and administration. During the rally, after four years of organization on the part of students and staff, it was announced that the Board of Manager’s had approved a Living Wage Document for Swarthmore College.

Research Notes

Influences:

Swarthmore students were influenced by Harvard University's Living Wage sit-in as well as other concurrent campaigns (1). Following their victory, Swarthmore students’ campaign served and continues to serve as an inspiration for other living wage campaigns on college campuses throughout the U.S. (2)

Sources:


