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Georgetown Rally Presses Pay Issue;
Students Join With Labor Officials

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The union leaders wore Teamsters jackets. The students wore toe rings.

AFL-CIO officials who are negotiating higher wages for Georgetown University support staff stood shoulder to shoulder with student activists who have spent the past week fasting in solidarity as they rallied yesterday at the college president's office.

Protesters, young and older, declared that Holy Week, which culminates Sunday with Easter, would be an appropriate time for the nation's oldest Catholic university to agree to pay "living wages" to service workers.

Labor leaders who met for about a half-hour with university officials reported that no progress had been made and called on the university to reach a decision by midnight tonight on demands made by the students' Living Wage Coalition.

The coalition began pressuring university officials three years ago to raise the minimum wage paid to contract janitors, food service workers and security guards.

"On Holy Thursday, if it's not decided, then the students will have adults next to them engaged in the hunger strike with them," said Joslyn N. Williams, president of the Metropolitan Washington Council of the AFL-CIO. "This is an important time. It's an important week. Sunday is Easter Sunday. We celebrate a significant resurrection. We are not prepared to wait beyond Resurrection Day."

The 26 students who have been fasting -- a hunger strike that coincides with Lent, the Christian season of sacrifice -- vowed to continue subsisting on liquids until their demands are met.

The students want the university, by July, to raise support workers' minimum hourly compensation, including pay and benefits, to a range of \$13.95 to \$14.93. The proposal reflects studies that were conducted by the Economic Policy Institute and Wider Opportunities for Women, District-based nonprofit organizations, and that took into account the cost of living in the District.

The university has made a counterproposal, also expressed in terms of total hourly compensation. Under its proposal, minimum compensation would increase from \$11.33 an hour to \$14 by 2007, a Georgetown spokeswoman said.

University officials would implement the first step by July 1, the beginning of the university's fiscal year.

"We would like to agree on what that step would be, and we'd like it to be resolved as soon as possible," said Julie Green Bataille, a university spokeswoman. "We'd like it to be a conversation with students, faculty and staff . . . everyone involved in making a difference in the lives of workers that we're all trying to impact."

Support for the coalition's objective comes from many quarters. Speakers at a rally before the march to the president's office included Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), who is a professor at Georgetown's law school. The university's history faculty voted to endorse the coalition's goals, said Maurice Jackson, an assistant professor of history, standing in the jampacked hallway outside the president's office. The pay issue resonated, he said.

"All of us work. All of us have children. All of us make insurance payments," Jackson said. "We understand."

Nearby stood Maria Rivas, 60, a cleaning woman who said she holds another job so she can afford the rent on her District apartment, medications for her ailing 83-year-old father and groceries. She is employed by P&R Enterprises, which has a contract with the university and pays her \$9.05 an hour, she said. Along with the other job, her total monthly take-home pay is about \$600, Rivas said through a union organizer serving as an interpreter.

"It's good that the students support us, because we're very tired," Rivas said. "We work all night long. And it's not enough."

The coalition organized after Georgetown students, on study breaks, struck up conversations with library janitors. After students visited workers at home and made sure that they wanted to organize a labor movement, the living wage campaign was born, coalition member Janessa Landeck said.

"We started by talking with workers," said Landeck, 21, a nursing student who has not participated in the fast because she is breastfeeding but volunteered to monitor the vital signs of hunger strikers camped out in tents on campus. The idea of a hunger strike grew out of frustration with university officials, she said.

"The living wages issue is a moral issue, and it's a Catholic university. And in Holy Week, people are thinking about sacrifice."

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