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Idealism in the ivy: VU living wage fight

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By Janell Ross

In the 14 years Carolyn Lawless has worked for Vanderbilt University -- Nashville's largest private employer -- very little in her work life has remained the same.

Lawless was once a dorm housekeeper. Now, she is a team leader who oversees cleaning staff in three buildings. And Lawless' pay has, in her words "slowly crawled," from \$4.25 per hour to \$9.52 per hour. But one thing has been consistent.

"It's real hard to get by," she said, "month after month, year after year, I'm struggling."

For what may be the first time in at least a decade, lots of Americans are paying attention.

The nation is moving toward what may be a gradual adjustment of the minimum wage. The federal political machine has shifted into a gear where both President Bush and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke have recently described the vast and growing gulf between executive and ordinary worker pay as a troubling economic trend. And on some of America's college and university campuses, the debate about wages and work has intensified.

Since the late 1990s, coalitions of workers, students, faculty and, in some cases, community groups have pushed about 30 institutions to offer workers a "living wage."

But at Vanderbilt this year, the rhetoric and protest associated with the movement have been so amplified that the local campaign wound up on the pages of The New York Times.

Last semester, a group stormed a university board meeting. And two weeks ago, a speakers at an on-campus rally invoked past struggles for civil and worker rights.

Organizers behind the local movement say a university with a mission that calls for scholarly research and service to "the community and society at large," a \$3 billion endowment and the funds to pay Vanderbilt University Chancellor Gordon Gee \$1.3 million per year should also pay each of its workers a "living wage."

University workers should be able to live without government help or the aid of a second job, the movement's backers say. And as a university where so many Nashville area residents (about 20,000) work, they add, Vanderbilt needs to raise its campus wage floor for the good of the community.

For its part, Vanderbilt borrows the language of industry to rebuff calls for a living wage. It argues that the university pays its workers "competitive market wages".

Vanderbilt also offers such a generous benefits package that there are more applicants than open jobs and employee turnover remains low, said Michael Schoenfeld, vice chancellor for public affairs at Vanderbilt. Plus, for many workers with two jobs, their work at Vanderbilt is the sideline that fills in the family financial gap, he said.

The university is a nonprofit institution that provides the community with services such as some \$200 million per year in free health care. But, Vanderbilt must maintain a balanced budget

and the vast majority of its legendary endowment is legally off limits, administrators say.

Still, the debate around the living wage and work on America's college campuses is bigger and even more complex than workers and college administrators will readily admit.

Issue erupts nationwide

While students, workers, administrators and activists at Vanderbilt debate the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees, the same discussion -- featuring many of the same terms and ideas -- is taking place across the country.

In the last 10 years, colleges and universities stretching from Florida to Massachusetts, North Carolina to California have faced loud calls for "living wages."

At Harvard, students began lobbying for a living wage for campus workers in 1999. By 2004, when student calls had escalated to a 21-day sit-in and national media coverage, Harvard administrators made some wage increases and substantial increases in the number of campus workers with health-care coverage.

At Georgetown last fall, students and workers brought the struggle for wage increases to an end when they staged a nine-day hunger strike. Living wage campaigns have also brought about some wage changes at universities such as Notre Dame, the University of Florida and Duke. At other campuses, such as Emory, Louisiana State University and the University of Virginia, there has been little to no change.

But Ben Crawford, a Duke University student engaged in what he calls "progressive causes," said people should resist the temptation to categorize campaigns in simple terms like victory and defeat.

At Duke, the university raised the wage floor for campus workers to \$10 per hour in 2005. A community organization was in the process of gathering information about wages at the university. With nearly 29,500 employees, Duke is the area's largest employer.

The group had already convinced the city, county and school district to pay all of its workers and contractors a living wage.

A few weeks after the group made its interest in Duke clear, the university announced the wage increase.

The change cost the university about \$1 million, Duke administrators said.

But, the change also applied only to university workers and directly affected about 300 people, Crawford said. (The university said the change applied to 600 workers.) The hundreds of contract workers who cook at the university restaurants or process university and hospital linens -- some of the lowest paid workers -- were not included.

Now, the \$10 university employee wage floor created two years ago has slipped below the area's current living wage figure. And, there's something else.

"I think it would be fair to say," said Crawford, "that what the university did only affected a small number of workers but really took a lot of the energy, the oxygen out of the movement to help hundreds of others (contract workers)."

The real world

Vanderbilt, administrators say, has joined the list of schools with an active living-wage campaign precisely because it is a prestigious university able to attract a variety of students.

Sheldon Steinbach, the longtime vice president and chief counsel of the American Council on Education, retired in 2006. He led the advocacy organization and council's 1,600 member institutions for about 35 years. The living wage movement blossomed during his tenure.

Steinbach suspects that students -- often relatively affluent -- get to college and are for the first time confronted with the real world.

"I think that for the first time," Steinbach said, "many young men and women really come to grips with poverty that is not Southeast Asian or something in Darfur. Right here, there are individuals working but barely squeezing through."

But the call for living wages, Steinbach and some economists have said, is not the solution. Living wages would probably benefit some low-wage workers in the short term. In the long term, universities will cut jobs or have the option of hiring more "qualified" workers willing to work for higher wages, Steinbach said.

Vanderbilt's Schoenfeld echoes many of the same ideas but added that unemployment in Nashville is in the single digits. Employees who feel underpaid are free to look for jobs elsewhere.

Stewart Acuff, a national organizing director for the AFL-CIO who is from Tennessee, sees things differently. Unions and student groups such as the United States Student Association and Living Wage Action Network have supported living-wage campaigns on college and university campuses across the country.

(The international union that represents some of the Vanderbilt workers made a contribution to the local living wage campaign.)

But Acuff said student interest in the movement is organic. Students are drawn to the movement because they have watched corporate downsizing and limited wage increases affect their own families.

Like most Americans, they also believe that, "in a just world an honest day's work deserves an honest day's pay" and "hard work ought to be the key to the middle class."

Universities need the work for which they currently pay low wages. So, Acuff doubts significant job cuts will be made or that there will be applicant influx.

A living movement

At Vanderbilt, the network of students actively participating in the effort ebbs and flows.

The recent Friday night vigil, which organizers say drew more than 200 people, had what some said was a different tenor than events staged in the past.

University staff estimated the rally drew 125 to 150 people.

At the rally, human and civil rights luminaries such as Don Beisswenger and the Rev. James Thomas Bradford talked about wages and work in moral terms. Bradford described the living wage movement as this generation's struggle.

Other speakers likened the campaign for a living wage to Martin Luther King's final campaign for low-wage sanitation workers in Memphis. Others compared Gee's pay and well publicized home makeover, the number of low-wage jobs and "slow" pay increases at Vanderbilt to the operations of a feudal estate.

Some carried signs bearing images of King and the slogan "Living Wage was part of his dream."

In the crowd was Erica Williams.

Williams, a senior psychology major from Memphis, is deeply involved in the campus push for living wages. Williams said she was drawn to the movement because she comes from a family where both parents worked long hours at low-wage jobs.

She stays away from living wage arguments linked to the size of Vanderbilt's endowment or Gee's salary. Williams knows that much of the money in any endowment is legally earmarked to cover specific costs. And, she feels that Gee earns his keep with his fundraising prowess. But, she questions why Gee and the board haven't made raising a piggy bank for worker salary increases a priority.

"I know that you can work very hard, you can do essential work and still struggle," she said. "And I know that when you find yourself with limited education or income it is not so easy to give up a job to go look for something else or take the time out to go to school. ... You get trapped."

Which might describe where Carolyn Lawless in housekeeping is. This year, when she marks her 15th anniversary with Vanderbilt, she will earn about \$19,801.

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WHAT IS A LIVING WAGE?

A "living wage" is typically defined as the hourly or annual wage a worker would have to earn in order to feed, transport, house, clothe and provide health care for a family of four in a given area.

A living wage theoretically allows a wage earner and her or his family to cover their most basic needs without government support or anti-poverty programs. This means that the "living wage" in Nashville differs from the "living wage" in Charlotte or Atlanta.

Two independent but left-leaning agencies, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) and **Wider Opportunities for Women** provide living wage estimates for various locations across the United States. In a 2002 study updated in 2005, for inflation, **Wider Opportunities for Women** determined that \$10.18 per hour constitutes a living wage in Davidson County.

WHO PAYS WHAT: A REALITY CHECK

Vanderbilt's true economic footprint and the "competitiveness" of its wages are hard to peg.

Through a spokesperson, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce declined to comment on the living-wage debate and Vanderbilt's economic influence in Nashville.

In November, the agency unveiled a study showing Middle Tennessee's 20 colleges and universities have a collective \$5.5 billion economic impact on the area. Vanderbilt has itself claimed to have a \$3.7 billion economic impact and does make numerous charitable contributions to area foundations and organizations. But some economists, including Vanderbilt's John Siegfried, question the methods behind these calculations.

A look at wages offers a picture that is only slightly less complicated.

Kevin Mayatt, Vanderbilt's associate vice chancellor and chief human resources officer, declined to disclose pay ranges associated with specific campus jobs. The university also declined to offer the complete range of employee salaries or a staff (non-academic employee) pay average.

The university's wage floor is \$7.55 per hour. At this time, only 15 of Vanderbilt's 20,000 workers are paid at that rate, Myatt said.

Myatt also would not disclose how many employees earn more than \$7.55 per hour but less than \$10.18. But Megan Macaraeg, an organizer with Middle Tennessee Jobs with Justice, said several hundred employees -- mostly housekeepers and groundskeepers -- earn less than \$10.18.

Lawless' \$9.52 per hour wages do plant her \$3.04 below the median hourly wage for Nashville area first-line supervisors and managers of housekeepers and janitorial workers, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

But Lawless is just one worker in 20,000 at Vanderbilt.

Other housekeepers such as Lawless' sister Margaret Lawless earn more than a dollar over the \$7.77 area median for Nashville area housekeepers and cleaners, according to federal data.

By comparison, Tennessee's largest private employer, Wal-Mart, says the average wage of full-time store associates is \$10.18 per hour. And other major area employers such as Middle Tennessee State University, Loew's hotels and Metro government do pay housekeepers, landscapers and HVAC systems workers wages that are a dollar or two more or less than the Vanderbilt workers contacted for this story reported that they are paid.