



The Workers' Edge

The Voice of the Tompkins County Workers' Center

Spring 2011



Major Living Wage Victory for the Community Union at Ithaca College!

Multinational Sodexo Agrees to Pay Living Wage

by Pete Meyers

The Tompkins County Workers' Center is pleased to announce the success of the student/community living wage campaign at Ithaca College, benefiting over 120 food service workers. Beginning in September the workers will be paid at least the Tompkins County Living Wage, currently \$11.67 per hour.

The IC dining workers previously paid above the Living Wage will see a commensurate increase as well.

Some Sodexo workers had been making as little as \$8.19 an hour, so the increase will total over 35 percent!

The Workers' Center com-

mends the Ithaca College administration for its responsiveness to the student demands and community concern. But we mostly applaud the determined Ithaca College student group, the Labor Initiative Promoting Solidarity (LIPS), which began raising the issue of a Living Wage for all workers at Ithaca College in the fall of 2010. These students helped mobilize student and faculty support and built a powerful case that the Ithaca College administration could not ignore.

TCWC Intern, Kiera Lewis, founder of LIPS, said, "This is a huge victory, but it is just a first step. We hope that workers will



LIPS students chant at the Rally for Something We Can Win, April 1.

continue to trust and support initiatives and speak up because

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Got Living Wage?

by Carl Feuer

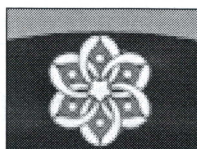
his past year, food service workers employed by Sodexo at Ithaca College won a living wage (with a lot of help for IC students, faculty, TCWC and community members). Five years ago it was workers at GreenStar grocery. Ten years ago it was teacher aides and teacher assistants employed with the Ithaca City School District.

Will you be next to win a living wage?

If you want to begin to organize with TCWC and community supporters to win a

living wage at your place of employment, a good place to start is the Tompkins County Living Wage.

Every two years Alternatives Federal Credit Union studies the cost of living in Tompkins County and figures out how much a worker needs to earn to support themselves. Given rental costs in our area, food costs, transportation, healthcare, telephone, recreation, taxes and



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tcworkerscenter.org

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Member Spotlight:

James Douglas

I first got involved at the Workers' Center after working at a now defunct northside BBQ restaurant. Several of us had been working for over a month without getting paid, and when it got to be too much, we came as a group to the Workers Center. From there, the Workers' Center helped to try and recover our wages.

I was quite inspired by the off-the-books style of the Workers' Center. A lot of problems that people are dealing with are unconventional, and so it sometimes requires unconventional solutions to actually solve the problem. Basically, I came because I needed help, and I stayed because of the ability to help others.

I feel most committed to the Community Union Organizers. It's a really unique group that is trying to create larger change by empowering individuals to be more active members of the community. Personally, it gives me the confidence to be someone that people can come to if they need advice or simply want to talk about something at work. I believe the CUO's have a lot of potential to develop leaders within the community, and then be of real service to people who are having issues with their jobs.

I've had a few different jobs over the years. I was a part-time library clerk for

5 years during high school and my freshmen year of college. Since then I've worked in a few more libraries, several restaurants, and have had several stints doing cold-call telephone surveys. Currently, I'm a paralegal with Neighborhood Legal Services, which is a job that has really been able to combine challenging work and a new perspective on what kinds of problems people are facing in their day to day lives.

I was born and raised in Ithaca, and spent three years completing a degree in humanities at Binghamton University. I love the outdoors, especially playing soccer, biking, and canoeing. I'm currently involved in an ambitious amateur gardening project. Lots of fun, but lots of work.

Thanks, James, for your leadership and dedication to our work!



James



Workers' Center intern Laura St. John

A full-time intern at the Tompkins County Workers' Center this summer, Laura St. John has held matters of social justice near and dear to her heart throughout her life.

Raised a Quaker in the D.C. Metropolitan area, her beliefs on equality, simplicity and the inherent goodness of all have led to her political activism. A junior with a concentration in sociology and studies in economics, politics and environmental science at Ithaca

College, Laura is also an organizer of the Labor Initiative Promoting Solidarity, the community-based, student-led group on campus that advocates for relationship building to create and influence change. (See our front page story for the exciting LIPS/TCWC victory at IC.)



Laura

To Laura, the existence of the working poor is an outrage. "If you have a job, regardless of what it is, you should be able to provide for yourself and your family. Point blank. The money is there: it just needs some serious redistribution."

In a city she claims to be the first place she can truly identify with, a summer with the Workers' Center comes with much anticipation and excitement.

Presenting The Wage Theft Prevention Act and the Restaurant Owner's Manual

by Linda Holzbaur

Labor laws regarding food service workers are some of the most confusing and befuddling laws on the books – and that speaks volumes! Laws in general are written with lawyers, not the average Joe, in mind. Even the most conscientious restaurant owners and managers can be perplexed when trying to understand labor law.

In order to help the food service workers who come to us and to explain, in simple language, the basic laws for managers, the Workers' Center has been working on the *Tompkins County Restaurant Owner's Manual* for a long time. We are proud to say that finally, after many rocks in our road, the booklet has been printed and will soon be distributed by the Tompkins County Health Department.

One of the 'big rocks' in the path meant editing and corrections for us, at a point when we thought that our writing and editing was over. But that same rock was great news for people who have been cheated out of their paychecks: **The Wage Theft Prevention Act** was signed by Governor Paterson last December. It became law on April 9, 2011.

The Wage Theft Prevention Act increases penalties for wage theft and record keeping viola-



tions and adds a criminal penalty for failing to pay minimum wage. It provides the Department of Labor with the power to investigate and prosecute. It protects workers from retaliation when they ask for past due wages.

Employers are also required to expand their record keeping and pay notices. This means that employers must provide all employees with the following information: rate of pay, the regular payday, overtime rate of pay if applicable, basis of wage payment (e.g., hourly/weekly/etc), intent to claim tip or meal allowances, the employer's name, main address and phone number and any 'doing business as' titles. All new employees must

receive this notice upon hiring; existing employees must receive it yearly by February 1.

What is Wage Theft? Failure to pay minimum wage, failure to pay overtime, requiring off-the-clock work, stealing of tips, misclassification and plain old not issuing pay at all are examples of wage theft. It's shocking for many people to learn that these offenses occur in 2011 but they do, too frequently. And right here at home in Tompkins County.

Our new manual explains laws specific to the Hospitality Industry but includes information about the new Act. We know that a majority of our local employers want to do the right thing but haven't had the resources to know the latest law.

This project would not have been possible without the help of County Legislator Nate Shinagawa who secured funding for printing from Audrey Edelman Real Estate. Many thanks to them for bringing our dream to reality. We also thank the Tompkins County Health Department for their willingness to distribute the booklet. We hope this is the beginning of a new partnership between workers, businesses and government.

If you are a food service worker and you'd like a copy, please call or email us.

The Sustainability movement isn't just about the environment. No matter how much you clean up the rivers and the air, if the people are hungry or sick and have no healthcare, or their neighborhood is shabby and unwelcoming, their quality of life will still be lacking. Sustainability is about the big picture: the environment, economics and community life. We have to consider all of these factors when we create lasting change.

Recently, the Workers' Center participated in a community forum sponsored by Sustainable Tompkins after the screening of *The Economics of Happiness*. Representatives from many other Tompkins County community organizations were on the forum panel, all sharing how they are contributing to our sustainable culture. The focus of our work may be different but together, we will achieve that sustainable future.

Victory at IC

we did change things. This is what the Labor Initiative is for: bringing different constituencies together for sustainable initiatives."

The Workers' Center worked closely with the students and mobilized community support to help build a community coalition that brought substantial pressure on the College. This coalition included religious leaders, government officials, IC faculty, student organizations, labor unions and many others.

"We are extremely proud that IC has made the decision to pay a living wage to all its employees," stated Herb Engman, Town of Ithaca Supervisor. "As a certified Living Wage Employer ourselves, The Town is overjoyed that Ithaca College has joined the ranks of those of us who wish to set high standards for all our workers."

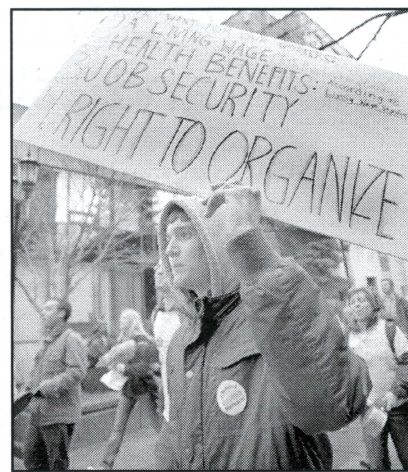
Pastor Rich Rose of the First Baptist Church of Ithaca said, "This is not only a great victory for Sodexo workers, but also a reflection of the commitment of

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the people of Tompkins County to a Living Wage. It is indicative of the power of community to affect corporate America. Obviously, Sodexo wants to have a positive image in the community and on the Ithaca College campus. And it is another example of how important the voice of community members is in influencing corporate policy."

Martha Robertson, Chair of the Tompkins County Legislature, said: "This is very welcome news! It's terrific that Ithaca College and Sodexo have found a way to do the right thing, which will benefit the whole community. I especially appreciate the hard work of Ithaca College students and the Workers Center for bringing this issue to the table and sticking with it."

"We look forward to seeing other large employers in the Ithaca area follow IC's lead in doing the right thing for their employees by agreeing to pay the Tompkins County Living Wage," said Pete Meyers, Workers' Center Coordinator.



Junior Samuel McCann and other LIPS students marched from IC to the rally. Michelle Boulé/The Ithacan

The Workers' Center works to insure that all workers are respected in the workplace, have a Living Wage, the right to organize, quality health care, housing, childcare, transportation and access to healthy food and water, as guaranteed by the Declaration of Universal Human Rights as ratified by the United Nations in 1948.

The Workers' Center sees the Ithaca College victory as one small step towards our larger vision.

Living Wage

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so on what hourly wage would be enough for a worker to maintain themselves, not need public services and even have a little bit left over for their saving account?

For 2011 the living wage in Tompkins County is \$24,271 or \$11.67/hour for someone working 40 hours/week for the full year. For full details see <http://alternatives.org/LivingWage2011Chart.html>

That figure, however, is only useful if your employer provides health insurance. Workers not provided the option of health insurance by their employer need \$26,592 or \$12.78/hour to enable them to get their own health insurance.

The Tompkins County Living Wage technically

only applies to what a single person needs to sustain themselves. If you have a family, the picture changes significantly. According to the Economic Policy Institute the living wage (what they call a "Basic Family Budget") for an Ithaca single-parent family with one child is \$46,144 or \$22.18 hour. For full details and the option of plugging in different sized families go to

http://www.epi.org/content/budget_calculator/.

Start Organizing Now!

Since approximately one-third of working families in Tompkins County do not earn a living wage and therefore are not able to sustain themselves adequately, we have a lot of organizing to do. Organizing to win a living wage for everyone is good for workers, good for families, good for kids and good for the community. Hey, in the end it's even good for employers!

The Annual 40 Hour Fast Commemorates the Centennial of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

by Linda Holzbaur

Every year, members of the Workers Center and the Labor Religion Coalition of the Finger Lakes participate in the statewide 40 hour fast sponsored by the Labor Religion Coalition of New York State. Fasting is an important practice in most faith traditions, encouraging prayer, reflection and action. During the 40 hour fast, people pledge to go without one or more meals, honoring the sacrifices of low wage workers.

This year, the theme of the fast was the Centennial of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out just before closing time on the 8th floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, one block east of NYC's Washington Square. Within 18 minutes, 146 workers, most of them young, female immigrants, had died. The elevator crashed to the bottom floor after one load of workers reached safety, stairwell doors were locked so that workers couldn't sneak out early, fire escapes were neglected and crumbled uselessly when workers tried to flee the fire. The building had no sprinkler system; fire ladders in 1911 reached only to the 6th floor.

It took over 6 hours for the 100,000 strong memorial procession to march through pouring rain, passing over 300,000 mourners. New York City was shamed by the tragedy: many felt that they had ignored the workers' cries for justice. Most of the workers labored 60 hours a week, sewing in overcrowded, dirty rooms. In 1909 and '10, garment workers had been on strike for better conditions and fewer hours. Some of the small sweatshops granted raises and shorter workdays to their workers but not the Triangle. Public opinion changed with the horrifying tragedy.

After the fire, the movement for occupational health and safety standards grew. The NYS legislature passed 8 new bills within a year, covering

a wide range of workplace dangers, including lack of cleanliness, rest periods, child labor, work hours and industrial injuries. In the year fol-

lowing, 25 more bills protecting workers were passed. These bills led to the creation of the modern Department of Labor and imposed harsher penalties for violations of safety codes.

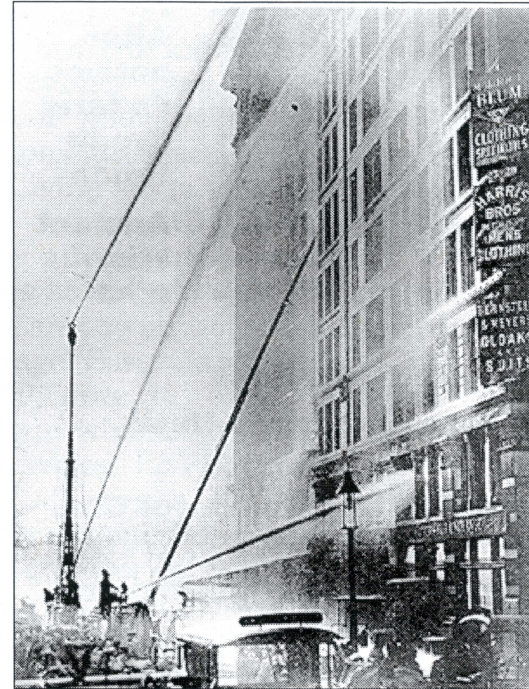
Standards for fireproof buildings and fire escapes were created and more protections were added for women and children in the labor force.

This year's theme is important, not just to remember those who died in the fire but also to remind New Yorkers that our occupational health and safety rights are endangered in 2011. Government budgets have been slashed, cutting back on safety inspectors, federal and state. We have to work hard to confront the attacks on worker health and safety. It took the deaths of 146 workers for government to honor the work of activists, fighting to protect the health and lives of workers. We can't lose those rights now!

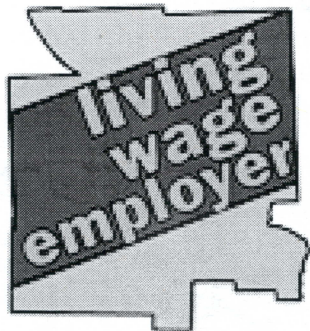
We are proud to work with our partners in keeping the workplace safe: the Occupational Health Clinical Center (OHCC) of Syracuse and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). OHCC can help diagnose and develop treatment plans for workplace injuries and illnesses. We offer OSHA trainings to help vulnerable workers learn their health and safety rights on the job. Call us for more information about these resources.

Thank you to our fasters for keeping workers health and safety in our hearts and minds.

To read more about the fire, its victims and its effects, visit <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/triangle-fire/>



Support our 71 Certified Living Wage Businesses!



Advocacy Center
Alternatives Federal Credit Union
Ancient Wisdom

Church of Ithaca, United Church of Christ
First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca
First Unitarian Society of Ithaca
GreenStar Cooperative Market
Home Green Home
Hospicare and Palliative Care
Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County
Ithaca Carshare
Ithaca Health Alliance
Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services
Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency
IthacaMed
Jeffrey Feirman Building and Renovation
Jewel Box
Jillian's Drawers
Loaves and Fishes
Money with a Mission
Morris' Men's Wear & Morris Too
Multicultural Resource Center
New Roots Charter School
Northeast Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine
OAR - Opportunities, Alternatives and Resources
Ongweoweh Corporation
PPM Homes, LLC
Renovus Energy, Inc.

Shade Tree Auto, Inc.
Significant Elements, A Program of Historic Ithaca, Inc.
Singlebrook Technology, Inc.
Snug Planet LLC
Sparks Electric
Sprague & Janowsky Accountancy
St. Catherine of Siena Church
St. John's Church
St. Luke Lutheran Church
Stone Quarry House Bed and Breakfast
Sunny Brook Builders
Sustainable Tompkins
Taitem Engineering
Taughannock Aviation Corporation
Temple Beth El
The Frame Shop
The Strebel Planning Group
Tompkins Community Action
Tompkins County
Tompkins County Public Library
Town of Ithaca
TRC Energy Services (Ithaca)
United Auto Workers Local 2300
Upscale Remodeling Corporation
Ward & Murphy (Law Firm)

Productions

ASI Renovations
Autumn Leaves Used Books
Black Box Computer Consulting
Blue Spruce Painting and Decorating
Boyce Thompson Institute
Buffalo Street Books
Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga
CFCU Community Credit Union
Colonial Veterinary Hospital
Community Dispute Resolution Center
Community Foundation of Tompkins County
Contemporary Trends, Inc.
Cornell Child Care Center
Custum Construction
Day Care & Child Development Council of Tompkins County
Downtown Ithaca Alliance
Finger Lakes ReUse
First Baptist Church of Ithaca
First Congregational

The Tompkins County Workers' Center is a Project Partner with the Center for Transformative Action

Summer Workshops offered by Members, Staff

Interested in learning something new this summer? We just might have a workshop for you!

Rich Furlong, a labor lawyer who is also an active TCWC member, is offering four workshops in labor law. You can attend the entire series or choose the sessions that work for you. They will be held on Thursdays evenings at the Workers' Center, from 6:30–8:30. Rich's firm, Lipsitz Green, will provide the pizza and wings! RSVP if possible.

On June 16 the topic will be **Organizing your workplace**. Thinking about working with your coworkers for a union or a living wage?

July 7: **An overview of labor law**. What are your rights as a worker? what is left out of labor law?

August 11: **Collective Bargaining**. How to negotiate for your rights.

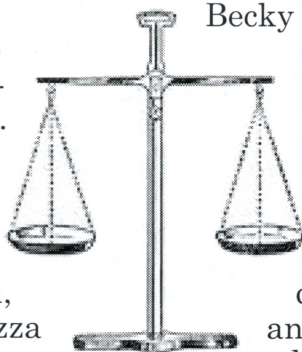
September 8: **Workers' Compensation**. Injured or made ill on the job? The Workers' Comp system can be frustrating and confusing. Learn

more about how to win your case.

Two of our Community Union Organizers, Becky Bowen and Diana Ceja, have designed a **discussion workshop on the Living Wage** which they are offering via Freeskool and the Workers' Center.

Questions discussed will include; What IS a Living Wage? Why should I care? Do I deserve it? How can a Living Wage affect our community? What does this have to do with sustainability? and How can I be part of the movement for a living wage? Sessions will be held June 11 from 1:30–3:00; July 12, 5:30–7; August 20, 10:30–12. Attend whichever session works for you. Snacks provided. RSVP if possible.

We will be offering a **Public Narrative workshop** this summer also. A Public Narrative is your unique Story of Self, Story of Us and Story of Now, a story which will persuade others to join you in your work. Developed by organizer Marshall Ganz, this workshop can change your life. (It changed Barack Obama's!) Watch for updates on the workshop soon!



I Want to Get Involved in the Fight for Workers' Rights!

\$_____ individual Annual Membership

Due=One Hour's wage or \$7.25 if not working

During the next year, **I'LL BE THERE** at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. Contact me with Rapid Response Alerts.

signature

Your name (please print)

Home street address

city

state

zip

phone(s)

email

Send to: TCWorkers' Center, 115 The Commons, Ithaca NY 14850

You'll receive a laminated card in the mail or at a meeting. Great to have you with us!

is a member of the Tompkins County Workers' Center (TCWC)

During the next year, **I'LL BE THERE** at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll all start winning.

TC Workers' Center, 115 The Commons
Ithaca 607-269-0409 www.TCWorkersCenter.org

I'll be There...

...standing up for our rights as working people to a decent standard of living

...organizing working families to take strong action to secure better economic future for all of us
...fighting for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and our communities

...supporting the right of all workers to organize and bargain collectively in the workplace.

Spring Membership Potluck

Saturday June 11 5:30-7:30

bring friends, family and a dish-to-pass!

Beverages provided.

@ the Workers' Center

115 E. MLKing St/ The Commons
2nd floor above Autumn Leaves Used Books

Need Help? Try the Workers' Rights Hotline! 607 269-0409

TC Workers' Center

115 E. ML King Street
The Commons
Ithaca NY 14850
TCWorkersCenter.org

