



# The Workers' Edge

Voice of the Tompkins County Workers' Center

## Navigating Toward a Living Wage for All: Working Group Tackling the Barriers

By Ian Greer

If you are like most people who live in Tompkins County, you struggle to keep up with the rising cost of living. New York is one of 18 states that increased the minimum wage in 2018, to \$10.40 upstate. But in our area this is insufficient, since we have a higher cost of living than the rest of upstate. This is why we are considering local minimum wage legislation, following the lead of Seattle, Minneapolis, and several cities in California.

Now a group has formed of local community activists, trade unionists, social service agencies, elected officials, employers, and myself as a researcher, to assess whether this is feasible. I am impressed to see such a diverse group working together to find a solution. After

years of conducting academic research internationally, I'm very pleased to do research that fills a real need in the place where I live.

An initial look at the regional economic data would suggest that our area is a perfect place to introduce living wage legislation. The problem of low wages is in a way worse here than in other parts of the state. We have higher levels of income inequality than anywhere else in upstate New York, and this inequality is not only class-based: the low-wage workforce is disproportionately female, Hispanic, and African-American. On the other hand, we have less to worry about from a minimum wage increase, since our local economy is relatively robust. It has had a much stronger

record of job creation than the rest of upstate and it is largely driven by the kinds of jobs and businesses that cannot easily move to lower-cost locations elsewhere, in particular higher education.

Nevertheless, local people have serious concerns:

- How would nonprofit social service agencies find the money to pay for wage increases, when so many prices are set by government funders?
- How could small businesses adapt if their current business models depend on low wages?
- How would workers making just above the liv-

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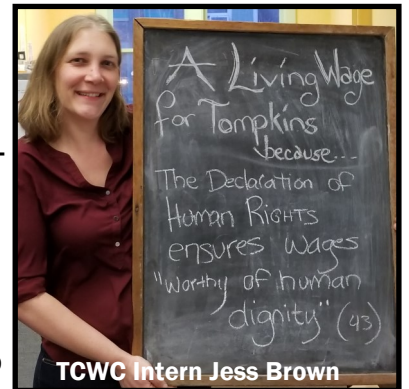
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## From the Intern Desk: Building Power, Making Connections

I am deeply privileged to have the opportunity to work with the Tompkins County Workers' Center (TCWC) for my first Masters of Social Work (MSW) internship placement through University of Buffalo School of Social Work. The internship has been dynamic and hands-on, with tons of Workers Rights Hotline calls to answer which lead directly through micro, mezzo and macro levels of so-

cial work. I have responded to calls for stolen wages and discrimination at work, calls of people seeks to work together in concerted action to make changes to their work environment and the opportunity to work toward the Tompkins County Living Wage campaign. I have learned a ton about labor standards!

One of the ways I have been able to practice and apply the skills of as-



TCWC Intern Jess Brown

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# Worker Gets Justice Through Hotline Call

The following is from an interview with a worker about their experience calling and getting help from the Workers Rights Hotline.

## What happened to you at work?

I was a hard worker at Mia Restaurant. As all humans do from time to time, I made a small mistake one day while serving and Lex, the restaurant owner, took my tips to cover the mistake.

## What did you do?

I did some research and then called the Workers' Center about the legality of this action, and they confirmed that it is wage theft in New York State. The following Monday when I came to work I told the bosses I needed my tips back.

They told me that many restaurants regularly make servers pay for the mistakes they make with their own tip money. I was fired that day, out of retaliation, for asking Lex to return my stolen wages.

## So you were fired in retaliation?

Yes, it took a couple of months but through support of the Workers Center staff I filed a complaint with the New York State Department of Labor and Mia agreed to pay a settlement. I received a check for \$3,000.

I am overjoyed to be receiving this settlement. It shows that the new New York State Department of Labor's Anti-Retaliation Unit is doing its job. I stood up for myself, and the state actually took my case seriously. The reason I want this case public is that I

am concerned with the way restaurant workers are treated in this city. I know my case is not isolated.

## What would you say to other workers who have had tips stolen or been treated unfairly?

Don't feel isolated. Don't feel like it isn't a big deal. Don't let them get away with it.

## What is your message to the rest of us?

I want people who go out to eat in Ithaca to start thinking about the owners they support with their money. Get to know some of the servers better and ask about their experience. Let's all work together to hold restaurants to a higher standard. Workers deserve respect, because we are the basis of this whole economy.



**Workers Rights Hotline  
607-269-0409**

"Don't feel isolated. Don't feel like it isn't a big deal. And don't let them get away with it."

## WANT TO PLANT YOUR OWN VEGGIES, SAVE MONEY, EAT HEALTHY FOOD?

The Ithaca Community Gardens have plots available this year. The cost is \$50 for a full plot and \$35 for a half plot. Financial aid is available when needed to lower the cost to \$15. You can put your name on the list for new gardeners now. To reserve a plot either go to [IthacaCommunityGardens.org](http://IthacaCommunityGardens.org) or write to Project Growing Hope PO Box 606 Ithaca NY 14851. Be sure to include your name, postal mailing address and phone number. We are located near the Washington Park neighborhood, off route 13 near the farmers market. We provide water, tools, and compost. There are also always some seed and plant donations.



If you want more information about this contact Judith Barker at [judith.barker2@gmail.com](mailto:judith.barker2@gmail.com)

**A retraction: In our Winter 2017 edition of The Workers Edge we said that Ellen David Freeman was a former organizer with the American Federation of Teachers. In fact she worked with National Education Association. Sorry, Ellen!**

# Gimme Union Contract

By Pete Meyers

**G**imme! Coffee baristas recently voted unanimously to ratify their first union contract with Gimme! Management, the culmination of seven months of negotiations. The union covers baristas at Gimme! Coffee locations in Ithaca on State and Cayuga streets, at Gates Hall on the Cornell Campus, and in Trumansburg.



Says Gimme! Coffee Barista Samantha Mason: "Having a contract that protects me and my co-workers is only one of the benefits to having a union. For me, the most integral part of this has been to see how far my co-workers and I have come in building solidarity, in rebalancing power and having the courage to take action and create a better workplace. It's important to me that all workers understand that they can change their workplace."

The goal of this partnership is to organize hospitality workers across Tompkins County into a union to raise living standards and improve working conditions. The Workers' Center is committed to ensuring through community support that Tompkins County workers have the right to organize a union free of employer interference and intimidation.

A few highlights of the contract are:

- A union "just cause" clause that protects workers from unfair discipline or discharge;
- A union grievance and arbitration procedure to resolve any workplace problems;
- Wage increases;
- Establishment of a paid sick day program;
- Monthly joint labor/management meetings.

Kevin Cuddeback, Owner and CEO of Gimme! Coffee said: "I'm a proponent of people coming together to build a better world, and I look forward to working with the union toward the advancement of the company mission."

Gary Bonadonna, Jr., Manager of the upstate NY union, Workers United stated: "I would like to salute the Gimme! Coffee baristas for the dedication and hard work they put in to organize their union and negotiate an initial union contract. They are an inspirational group. If as a society we truly want to address the issue of economic inequality, then the Gimme! workers offer part of the solution which is to organize more unions. Too often workers in this country who want to organize a union to make improvements on their job have to walk through a minefield of threats and intimidation by their employer. I want to recognize Gimme! Coffee management for not going down that road. My hope is that other employers in Tompkins County will follow this more ethical path."

Restaurant workers interested in organizing a union should contact the TCWC at 607-269-0409.

# Updates from the Immigrant Rights Coalition

By Patricia Rodriguez

The Tompkins County Immigrant Rights Coalition (TCIRC) has been busy the past few months. Our Rapid Response (RR) Network was activated in January, and we followed up on arrests of local community members. The RR organizes a broad network of community volunteers, many of whom are immigrants themselves, who will try to get to locations where immigration arrests are happening to witness and document the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Border Patrol officials in our communities. Though our purpose is not to interfere with officials, we hope to help ensure that immigrant rights are respected.



Several RR members have been hard at work to help local workers who were detained, and are doing follow up post-detention too. One of these community members is Somkiat Wandee, who was arrested by I.C.E. (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) on Jan. 9th in Ithaca, NY, on the charge of overstaying his visa. He was released on bond (\$7,500) on Feb. 6 from the Batavia Federal Detention Center. Upon his release, Somkiat stated, "I was so lost when I got into the detention center; I didn't know what to do. Now I am rejoiced to be released, with the support I have received. I'm grateful for the support of TCIRC. I feel warm now to know that there is a group of people caring for immigrants like me."

Though it takes time and commitment, this support work offers a good chance to build trust between the diverse communities in the county. TCIRC is planning to do work-place trainings and would welcome input from immigrant workers about what they would want included, and whether they would like us to do a training at their workplace.

We have recently formed Working Groups to work on several fronts, including community outreach about the EMERGENCY HOTLINE

(only to report I.C.E./Border Patrol presence) @ 607-358-5119 as well as information that can help immigrants prepare well for possible arrests, and demystify what the process may entail; coalition building for rapid mobilizing and for court hearing support. We also have a group that is working on media production such as op-eds, educating the community about policies, and personal stories that enable a better understanding of the fundamental causes of migration.

We have a new website created by Daniel Hawkins, a volunteer in the RR Network. Thank you much Daniel! Look there for updates on upcoming events, trainings and working group meetings regularly on the website.

Website: [www.tcimmigrants.com](http://www.tcimmigrants.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/tcimmigrants](http://www.facebook.com/tcimmigrants)

Twitter: #tcimmigrants (used for emergency updates, so please 'follow')

Email: [tcimmigrants@gmail.com](mailto:tcimmigrants@gmail.com) (for information and questions)



**EMERGENCY HOTLINE**  
(only to report I.C.E./Border  
Patrol presence)  
@ 607-358-5119

# National Living Wage Network Website Launch

In February, 2018, the national Living Wage Network launched its new online hub which can be found at [www.livingwagenetwork.org](http://www.livingwagenetwork.org) Network coalition partners are organizations that run Certified Living Wage Employer programs in communities around the United States, with support from United for a Fair Economy.

The new site highlights network members' work to promote Living Wage pay standards and makes it easier for organizers in other communities to receive support getting their efforts off the ground. In addition to downloads of the Living Wage Certification Toolkit created by Interfaith Worker Justice, Just Economics, and the Tompkins County Workers' Center, organizers can use the site to join the network to share innovations and strategies with other network partners.

People can also use the site to take the online Living Wage consumer pledge to support an economy that works for all and to support businesses and organizations that don't just pay all their workers fairly, but are committed to the principle that everyone else deserves fair pay too. Through network partner links, people can find more than 2,500 businesses that are Certified Living Wage Employers of tens of thousands of workers.

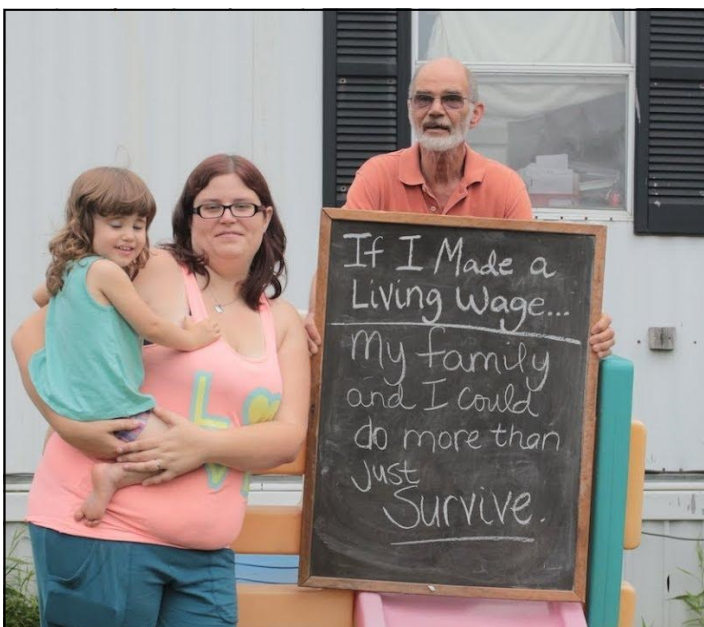
The Tompkins County Workers' Center created the United States' first Certified Living Wage Employer program in 2006. In the years since, organizations such as those in the Living Wage Network have adopted, adapted, and expanded TCWC's model to suit their communities and build regional movements for workers' dignity. As a co-founder of the Living Wage Network, it has benefited from the shared enthusiasm and savvy of the group and looks forward to the network's future as it builds worker-business coalitions throughout the country.



Any business, non-profit, or government in Tompkins County, NY that pays all its workers at least the Living Wage identified by Alternatives Federal Credit Union's biennial Living Wage Study, and endorses the idea that no one should earn less than a living wage, can receive certification from TCWC. See the list of current Certified Living Wage Employers at the end of this issue of The Workers' Edge.

## Important Questions Raised in Social Media Post

by Jon Frankel, longtime TCWC Member



The TCWC recently did a video post both on its website as well as Facebook page that can be found here: [bit.ly/blodgettsw](http://bit.ly/blodgettsw). The posting is about The Blodgetts, a family living in Dryden struggling to survive on low wages. I was struck by the anger of many of the responses in the comment stream. [See comments on Facebook at [bit.ly/blodgettfb](http://bit.ly/blodgettfb)] The video makes clear that the family are not looking for a hand-out, just a wage that permits them to pay their bills and feed themselves. While many viewers responded with empathy, and many with contempt, the issue itself, a living wage, got lost in a mess of moral judgment and folk economic theory. What underlies this response is anxiety, and a couple of damaging American myths. **How does a post making a case that a living wage would lift working people out of poverty become an argument about rugged individualism?**



# Support our 109 Certified Living Wage Businesses with over 2945 workers!

Advocacy Center

Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County

Alternatives Federal Credit Union

Autumn Leaves Used Books

Ancient Wisdom Productions

Avital's Apiaries

Blue Spruce Painting and Decorating

Boyce Thompson Institute

Brightworks Computer Consulting

Buffalo Street Books

Brotherton Construction

Cancer Resource Center of Finger Lakes

Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga

Center for Transformative Action

Child Development Council

Cinemapolis

City of Ithaca

Colonial Veterinary Hospital

Community Dispute Resolution Center

Community Foundation of Tompkins County

Community Nursery School

Community Science Institute

Cornell Child Care Center

Court St. Chiropractic of Ithaca

Downtown Ithaca Alliance

Family and Children's Service of Ithaca

Fairman Builders, Inc.

Finger Lakes Naturals

Finger Lakes ReUse

First Baptist Church of Ithaca

First Congregational Church of

Ithaca, United Church of Christ

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Friendship Donations Network, Inc.

Foodnet Meals on Wheels

The History Center of Tompkins County

Holmberg Galbraith, LLP

Home Green Home

Hospicare and Palliative Care

Human Services Coalition of

Tompkins County

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local #241

International Food Network, Inc.

Ironwood Builders of Ithaca

Ithaca Carshare

Ithaca Cayuga Optical Service

Ithaca Health Alliance

Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services

Ithaca Oral Surgery and Implants

Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency

IthacaMed

Ithaca Teachers Association

Jewel Box

Jillian's Drawers

Julia e Dean Inc/The Clay School

Loaves and Fishes

McBooks Press

Miller Mayer Law Firm

Multicultural Resource Center

New Roots Charter School

Northeast Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine

Nutritional Wellness Center

OAR – Opportunities, Alternatives and Resources

One World Market

Ongweoweh Corporation

Park Foundation

Planned Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes

Q2 Solutions

Red Feet Wine Market and Spirit Provisions

Renovus Energy, Inc.

Schlather, Stumbar, Parks and Salk

Sciencenter Discovery Museum

Segal and Sorensen

Shade Tree Auto, Inc.

Shaw & Murphy Law Firm

Silk Oak/Ithacamade

Singlebrook Technology, Inc.

Snug Planet LLC

Sparks Electric

St. Catherine of Sienna Church

St. John's Episcopal Church

St. Luke Lutheran Church

St. Paul's United Methodist Church and Nursery School

Stone Quarry House

Strawbridge and Jahn Builders

Sunbeam Candles

Sunny Brook Builders

Sunny Days of Ithaca

Sustainable Tompkins

Sweet Land Farm CSA

Taitem Engineering

Temple Beth El

The Frame Shop

The Strebel Planning Group

Tiny Timber LLC

Tompkins County

Tompkins County Public Library

Tompkins County Recycling, LLC

Town of Caroline

Town of Danby

Town of Enfield

Town of Ithaca

TRC Energy Services (Ithaca)

Trumansburg Community Nursery School

United Auto Workers Local 2300

Upscale Remodeling Corporation

Village of Cayuga Heights

Viridius Property

The Watershed

Weaver Wind Energy

Youth Farm Project

## Intern, cont.

Assessing power dynamics and advocating is with my support of the Beechtree Family Council at Beechtree Nursing Home. I became aware of the concern when a family member came to the Workers' Center to get advice about organizing for better living conditions for residents. The families had identified the number one concern being that the needs of residents were not being met due to chronic understaffing at Beechtree. Call bells go unanswered, for example, when there are only two Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) on a floor of forty residents. I have also been directly affected by this problem as my own parents had stayed at Beechtree and had similar problems.

Through this work I have been given the opportunity to research the needed ratios of nursing staff for resident well-being as well as sit weekly with family members and residents to monitor and respond to concerns. And of course it all comes back to wages and working conditions for the CNA staff, who do not make a living wage and report working conditions that make it difficult for them to commit to the job long term. It feels as though no matter what direction you begin, you can dig into the Workers Center mission to, "**support, advocate for, and seek to empower each other to create a more just community and world.**"

## Working Group, cont.

ing wage respond to new hires raised up to the same wage level?

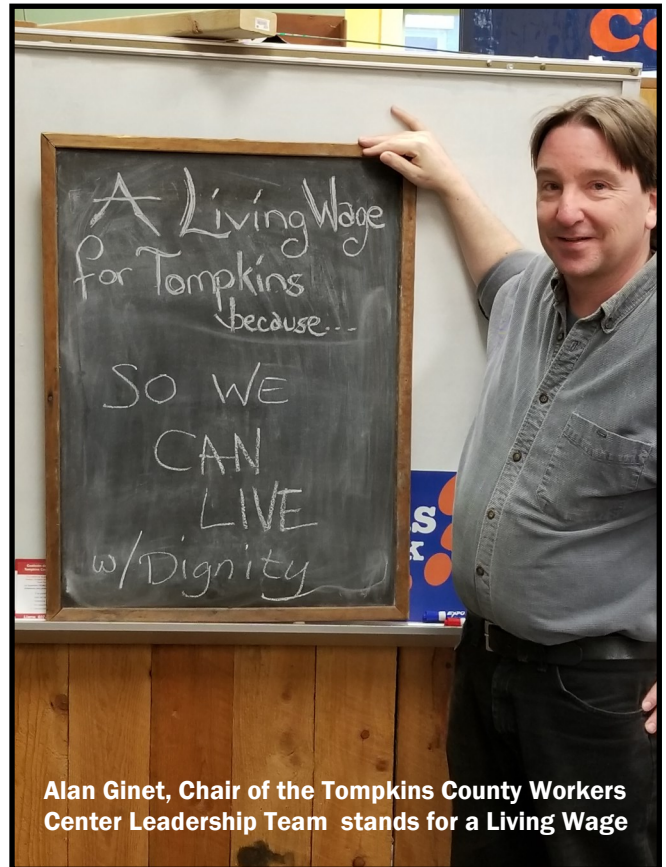
- Would increases in worker incomes be cancelled out by employers cutting jobs and hours or by 'benefits cliffs' in which they are no longer eligible for Medicaid and other benefits?
- The group has been meeting since January, with an aim of identifying concerns and using research to discuss them intelligently. Our first goal is to get a clearer view of perceived benefits and barriers to a living wage. We will be listening

to workers and employers that represent the diversity of low-wage sectors and occupations locally.

Part of the discussion will be based on past studies on living wage legislation in other cities and counties. Local minimum wage increases are a new phenomenon, and it differs from increases in state and federal minimum wages in that it involves much quicker increases. So we are following a new stream of research.

But we will also have to design and carry out our own studies. Ithaca is

*Editor's Note: Jessica Brown has been involved with the TCWC since its inception in 2003. From playing a strong role in changing the name of the Tompkins County Living Wage Coalition to the Workers' Center, to laying out the newsletter, to being a longtime Board (Leadership Team) Member, to creating our beloved logo, Brown's spirit is written all over the TCWC.*



Alan Ginet, Chair of the Tompkins County Workers Center Leadership Team stands for a Living Wage

not Seattle or Oakland, and we need to carry out our research accordingly. It will likely include a survey of employers and workers, visits to workplaces, and simulation techniques to identify benefits cliffs, and possibly other issues that come up as we begin the research.

We hope that you, the reader, will participate if approached by a researcher!

*Ian Greer is a Senior Research Associate in Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.*

See: National Employment Law Project. 2018. Raises from Coast to Coast in 2018: Workers in 18 States and 19 Cities and Counties Seeing Minimum Wage Increases on January 1, many of Them to Rates of \$12 to \$15 an hour. <http://www.nelp.org/publication/raises-from-coast-to-coast-in-2018-minimum-wage-increases/>

# Are You a Member of the Tompkins County Workers' Center?

**I want to Get Involved in the Fight for Workers Rights!**

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Individual Annual Membership  
Due= One Hour's Wage or \$10.40 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 for Rapid Response Alerts.

Signature

Name (Please Print):

Home Address

City/State/ZIP

Phone

Email

Mail to: **TC Workers Center**

**115 The Commons/ E MLK St. Ithaca, NY 14850**

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

Is a member of the  
**Tompkins County Workers' Center**

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

**I'LL BE THERE...**

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

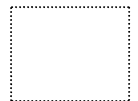
...organizing working families to take strong action to secure better economic future for all of us

...fighting for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and communities

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



**TC Workers' Center**  
115 The Commons  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
TCWorkersCenter.org



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