

# THE CATALYST

(kat'ə-list) n., an agent that provokes change

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BUCKNELL CAUCUS FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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## **Bucknell Takes Baby Step Toward a Living Wage: Dining Services Workers Get Raise**

Several staff members informed us that Bucknell has declared a new minimum wage of \$6.75 for all its dining service employees, and it has increased by 25 cents the hourly wages of dining services workers already making this minimum wage. Using administrative data from last year, we estimate this raise will bring about 100 dining service workers up to the \$6.75 level. We are, indeed, pleased to know that food service workers are making more money. However, this level remains more than \$2.00 less than what we estimate to be a "living wage" for our area, and then only if subsidized benefits were included. A living wage of \$6.75 is an annual wage of \$14,040, still far below a reasonable poverty level for families of any size. Related to this matter, we reported earlier that Bucknell and Wood had agreed to allow dining service casual workers to become Wood employees on January 1 and thus become eligible to participate in Wood's benefit program. We have been told that about 30 such casual workers made that choice, and we will provide more information in later issues as we receive it.

## **FAIR LABOR PRACTICES AT BUCKNELL FOR EVERYONE: A CALL TO ACTION**

In solidarity with other colleges and universities across the nation, and in group action endorsed by the AAUP and other organizations, the Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice, with this issue of its newsletter, is calling for a "FAIR LABOR CAMPAIGN" at Bucknell. We direct this call to everyone on campus, but especially to President Stef Rogers because both he and Bucknell trustees have indicated that decisions pertinent to such a campaign should come from his office. The Fair Labor Campaign, whose rationale is described below, represents a logical extension of the "living wage" idea we have raised in previous issues of *The Catalyst*. It is modeled on similar actions now underway at a number of colleges and universities, among them such outstanding institutions as Wesleyan University and Earlham College (places that might reasonably be considered among Bucknell's "frame of reference" schools), and involves both short-term and long-term goals.

Like those at many universities, Bucknell's *Mission Statement* calls for "engaging in practices that exemplify compassion, civility, and a sense of justice," and we believe that fair working conditions for everyone are a moral imperative for our institution. Establishing job practices that deny employees dignified work and/or enough money to support families and raise children is, simply, uncompassionate, uncivil, and unjust. A further dimension of the Campaign follows the good lead of PULSE, and, in accordance with the "Fair Labor Practices Code of Conduct" nationwide, seeks to eliminate the sale at Bucknell of all products made in foreign sweatshops.

Most immediately, within Bucknell's own "border," over two hundred staff members do not make a living wage, and many others feel (more about this below and in previous issues) that they are treated and rewarded as second-class citizens here. Yet the most casual glance at how the university operates will demonstrate that the work of the staff is the foundation upon which all else rests. Instruction cannot occur, nor can scholarship, nor can any sort of learning, nor can Bucknell's continual marketing of itself, without a virtual army – there are over 600 of them -- of support staff people typing, copying, mailing, filing, record keeping, cleaning, building, maintaining, feeding, and on and on. Bucknell's resources give it ample opportunity to correct these injustices and make real its commitment to compassion, civility, and justice. Our Fair Labor Campaign attempts to push Bucknell to provide everyone dignified work at a decent wage, with reasonable opportunities for advancement.

## Key Elements of the Fair Labor Campaign

The establishment of fair wages and working conditions at Bucknell will take time. The idea is new and the mechanisms of any large institution move slowly -- especially when change is in the air and privilege is being threatened. Nevertheless, the end of every road demands the first few steps. We propose the following ones:

**The adoption during the current calendar year of a minimum “living wage” of \$9 an hour, with access to subsidized benefits, for all Bucknell employees, and for all employees who work for Bucknell sub-contractors.** Please look at the **BCEJ INDEX** on page four for possible ways to finance this living wage – which we hasten to point out again would cost less than 1/3 of one percent of Bucknell’s current annual expenditures.

**The immediate addition of three support staff persons, elected by their own members, to serve regularly on the University Committee on Planning and Budget (UCPB).** Recent action by the UCPB attests well to this need. The Committee recommended to the president that next year faculty salaries be increased by 6 ½% and those of staff members by only 4 ½%. Since the membership of the UCPB is confined to faculty members, students, and top administrators, including the VP for Administration and Finance (VPAF), no support staff members were included in the final decision that led to their lower rate increase. Input about compensation for support staff is made by the VPAF and the Director of Personnel. However, these two are the principal bosses of non-supervisory staff *and* they are charged with keeping down total personnel costs. This means that they are unlikely to know or understand the true needs of support staff concerning fair employment practices. As recently as 1996, UCPB recommendations, ones typically followed by the president and the trustees, always called for *across the board and identical* rate increases for faculty and staff. The “de-coupling” of these two rates -- aimed at improving the compensation of faculty members compared to that at competing institutions -- is a telling indication that fair labor practices for all at Bucknell are increasingly less likely to emerge from the current budgetary process.

**The creation – by the president’s initiative during this semester -- of a University Fair Labor Committee, made up of four support staff members, three students, and two faculty members, all chosen by their respective constituencies.** This Committee would be charged with drawing up a list of recommendations about how Bucknell could best construct and maintain Fair Labor practices permanently, and thereafter would regularly meet to hear complaints concerning the infringement of workers rights on campus. The Committee would make its initial recommendations to the entire campus as soon as it is feasible to do so.

## Rationales for the Fair Labor Campaign

**Why “Living” Wages Rather than the Legal Minimum Wage?** Because the current minimum wage of \$5.15 is far below a poverty level wage, as institutions across the nation are now emphasizing.

**Why “Fair Labor” Rather Than Just a “Living Wage”?** In the three months since we published the first issue of the “new” *Catalyst*, BCEJ members have received considerable feedback in personal conversations and through the mails from Bucknell staff workers in every kind of work (see anonymous examples on pages 5 and 6). This feedback made us aware of wage and job conditions at odds with the university’s goals presented in the *Mission Statement*. The most prominent complaints we received focus on the following matters:

**The Job Freeze.** As we described in a previous issue, in 1996, expecting a small but gradual decline in student enrollments, Bucknell trustees adopted a five-year plan that, in effect, froze the number of staff positions on campus. We also reported how increasing, rather than declining, student enrollments and a brisk economy led to a shortfall of seventeen positions in dining services. Beyond that problem, the entire structure of staff jobs across campus became less flexible, and some staff supervisors told us that when they requested new slots from the administration, they were effectively told that to get them they would need to fire people already on the job. Many, many conversations with staff persons have convinced us that this inflexibility is a cause of considerable dissatisfaction among staff members.

**The Burden of Added, Uncompensated Work.** Staff employees at every level also told us of resentment among many who see their own workloads increasing. Custodians, for example, are often being assigned more spaces to clean, along with additional duties, and some secretaries are being asked to provide staff support to more and more professors without commensurate increases in definition of level of employment or wages and benefits.

**The Growing Inequality in Compensation.** Most staff members are quite aware that their wages are growing much more slowly than those of faculty members, and that they make a pittance compared to the salaries of top administrators. As we explained above, an additional concern about this income gap is the university's decision to de-couple rate increases for faculty members from those of everyone else.

In sum, then, the major rationales for a Fair Labor campaign at Bucknell are that (1) our institution should not pay its employees less than "living wages," and (2) something is fundamentally wrong when a considerable number of staff members do not feel they are being treated with dignity or fairly, and that their needs as workers and "family members" are not given the same attention as those of other people in the Bucknell "family." There are good reasons for these feelings on the part of staff persons, and we have tried to point out some of them here.

### **GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS: WANT TO JOIN THE FAIR LABOR CAMPAIGN?**

**The politics of a campaign like this benefit from the support of other campus organizations of any and all kinds. The living wage campaign at Wesleyan, for example, received official endorsement from many campus groups, and a number of our readers here asked how they or their organizations might help. Let us know if you as an individual or your organization would be interested in endorsing the Campaign at Bucknell. Soon, we will begin more formally to collect and to publish such endorsements.**

### **CHECK OUT THE NEW BCEJ WEBSITE!**

We now have a web site that contains all the issues of our newsletter, information about BCEJ, and soon we will be adding links to other living wage and fair labor campaigns around the country. Access to the site is at: [www.orgs.bucknell.edu/catalyst](http://www.orgs.bucknell.edu/catalyst)

### **LIVING WAGE AT WESLEYAN – ONE MODEL**

*Below is a story on the Living Wage campaign as it was undertaken, and won, at Wesleyan University. We will continue to print accounts of similar campaigns at other schools.*

An important new trend has developed at some of the most highly esteemed colleges and universities in the country -- students, faculty, and staff are beginning to fight for fair labor practices for all employees. College students have begun to connect their concerns with international sweatshop labor to 21<sup>st</sup>-century versions of unfair labor and pay for workers in institutions of higher education. Although the struggle seems daunting, groups at many schools resembling Bucknell -- with comparable financial endowments, student bodies, and histories -- have succeeded in forcing their institutions to comply with living wage structures. Surprisingly, at those institutions that now offer all their employees a living wage and benefits package, student tuition has not increased, nor has the overall quality of instruction, campus infrastructure, or reputation of the institution deteriorated. In fact, the prestige of the complying universities has actually increased as they join the ranks of an elite group of private institutions that embrace fair employment practices.

To achieve this seemingly distant goal of living wages and benefits, students have organized protests of all types. In its "Justice for Janitors" campaign, Wesleyan students occupied the admissions office for 33 hours. In similar campaigns, Fairfield University students staged a hunger strike for four days, Trinity College students conducted a noisy rally on parents' day, and Johns Hopkins students conducted a 17-day sit-in. All of these student groups demanded a living wage, benefits, wage adjustments to the increasing cost of living, and justice for all ranks of the university staff.

Wesleyan's victory provides a good model for Bucknell because Wesleyan has a comparable student population, faculty, and facilities, and is also located in a small town, Middletown, Connecticut. Interestingly, Wesleyan's administration at first tried to blame low wages for its janitorial staff on a company called Initial, a subcontractor that dealt directly with the union that represented the janitors. However, students at Wesleyan insisted that the

university itself assume ultimate responsibility for the wages of workers there, whether those wages were filtered through the system of a subcontractor or not. Their 33-hour sit-in forced Wesleyan's administration to agree to pay the difference between a \$10.20 "living wage" and the \$8.25 wage that had been agreed upon by the subcontractor. Wesleyan President Doug Bennet also signed a statement saying that ALL contracted campus workers would retain their jobs, wages, and benefits if the university were to switch contractors. In addition, all full time employees were given benefits, and part-time employees were given the opportunity to buy into benefits for an affordable fraction of their wages.

Had universities across the country declared their mission to be similar to that of business corporations, out to earn the maximum dollars for the benefit of stockholders alone, ongoing unfair labor practices might be expected. However, by adopting fair labor standards in accordance with widely-stated understandings of the moral imperatives of universities, a growing number of schools, such as Wesleyan, are achieving better results from their staff, along with the important benefit of finally mirroring the just practices of employment and education that they claim to aspire to in their mission statements.

## BCEJ INDEX

### THE FIRST STEP IN A FAIR LABOR CAMPAIGN: A LIVING WAGE AT BUCKNELL NOW

In our earlier issues, using research on a living wage done last year by Bucknell students, we have estimated that it would cost about \$500,000 annually to provide a \$9 living wage, with benefits, for all current Bucknell employees. Because the adoption of a living wage is the first step in our Fair Labor Campaign, we want to extend our discussion of how it might be financed.

*The point we want to make most emphatically is this: Bucknell chooses not to pay all its staff members a living wage, rather than having such incivility forced upon it by market or other forces. It's a matter of priorities. Here are a few – and only a few – examples of Bucknell's financial situation that lead us to that conclusion.*

- **Bucknell's Total Annual Operating Expenditures are about \$150,000,000. A living wage costing \$500,000 would thus amount to the very small fraction of less than 1/3 of 1% of that total budget.**
- **Luxury and Waste:** This past year, as we have pointed out, Bucknell spent \$260,000 to refurbish the president's house. That expenditure – a bit gaudy on its own -- would have allowed Bucknell to increase wages of at least 100 workers up to the living wage level this year, and makes us wonder where else Bucknell spends money for extravagances. Wasted food? Wasted energy from inefficient heating/cooling systems? Wasted money on pomp, circumstance? Could we have somewhat less concern for the look of the campus and somewhat more for the care of all employees?
- **Bucknell has recently CHOSEN to spend \$35,000,000, at least, on a new sports complex. A living wage for ten years could be funded from this source if only Bucknellians could CHOOSE to squeeze by on a \$30,000,000 dollar complex, rather than the one planned. We urge the Development Office to ask donors to consider stipulating that a small percentage of their donated funds be earmarked for maintaining a decent minimum wage structure. Surely some alumni and other donors would be willing to see a part of their donations used to avoid a distribution system at Bucknell of caviar to some and scraps to others.**

In short, Bucknell is, to put it quite mildly, a rich place. Its new buildings sparkle in the same sunshine that reflects always on a fleet of expensive vehicles that jam every parking lot. The most casual glance at our campus must often provoke in the first-time visitor something akin to the idea that "This is one rich school!" And, so it is, in so many ways, except for the poverty it chooses for many of its workers.

*Can Bucknell afford a living wage? Next time you get a chance, take a close look at the campus and answer that question for yourself.*

**A Mother First  
by Renee Brody\***

I can't stand to stand all day.  
You people can't see the value of what I do.  
I do what I do for absolutely nothing.

The job you see me at every day  
pays the house, pays the car, pays the bills,  
pays for the children. I need a full-time job.

The job is a job with benefits  
so I don't go on welfare  
and that's pretty much the bottom line.

When I take off sick, it goes against my record.  
I give up me to go to work to be here for my kid  
when he gets sick.

I'm a mother first and I work  
to support my son. I work so hard  
so we can have a nice house.

My kid asked once why we don't live in low-income  
housing. He said we gotta do it  
because I don't make much.

He reached in and grabbed a hold of my heart with his fingernails.

\*This poem was written by student Renee Brody in collaboration with a Bucknell employee as part of a creative writing class assignment. Both the poet and the worker have given us permission to use the poem here.

**WANT TO CONTACT US? If you would like to submit information to us about job practices at Bucknell (we rigorously protect anonymity), or if you would like to join the BCEJ, please contact one of us by email, or through campus mail at Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice, Box C-3925.**

*The Catalyst* Editorial Collective for this issue: Ariane Allen, Kristen Erickson, Janet Jones, Dawn Lonsinger, Julie Luu, Marcy MacMillan, Mike McCaffrey, Julie McLaughlin, Alex Monticello, Saundra Morris, Karl Patten, Bekka Payack, Jennifer Perrine, R. J. Prushnok, Megan Rancier, Jeff Rogan, Charles Sackrey, Geoff Schneider, Andrew Smith, Doug Sturm, Paul Susman, Carol Wayne White

## **RESPONSES FROM OUR READERS**

*Below and on the next page we have included a sample of responses from our readers that we received either by email or in our mailbox. The enthusiasm of these letters indicates to us widespread support for the cause of economic justice at Bucknell, and encourages us in the Campaign. Because of space, we could not print all of the responses and we have eliminated names and portions of some of the comments in order to protect anonymity.*

My response is this: Bucknell should be embarrassed! I always knew that I am not making a living wage here, and have to work two other jobs and rely on child support to make ends meet, and still come up short at the end of every month. Yet I had no idea that the dining service workers are in worse shape still, or that there is unbridled spending on superfluous goods and services. Stef and Athena, and the Board of Trustees, should live in my house for a few weeks, share a bedroom with one of their children, as I do, because that's as many rooms as I can afford, and then tell me what needs to be done in their place to make it livable. I guarantee that it would be a shorter list. Use my name, use my words, use whatever you need that I can provide to further the cause of fair wages and benefits for all Bucknell employees.

This is phenomenal, I really admire the effort you're putting forth here. I wish I had such passion myself.

Thank you for sending this out and please pass along my appreciation to the editorial collective. I was appalled when I learned, soon after coming to campus, the inequities of salaries among staff, faculty and administrators. At the last campus I worked . . . they had a union which helped in this aspect. The newsletter quotes Stef as saying if this is a concern of people at Bucknell, he will listen . . . Please let us know of ways we can most effectively voice our concern to Stef in your next issue.

What you have described is to me is an amazing and unjust situation, and I feel that a petition to President Rogers regarding the matter is in order. Perhaps you in the BCEJ should consider an online survey of some kind in light of this information.

Although the information presented in *The Catalyst* did not surprise me (it is something that I indeed suspected), I am very much appalled by the practices of our university. As a student . . . I would like to ask you how I could be of help to the Catalyst or in persuading Rogers and the trustees. Any information that you could relay to me would be useful, and I thank *The Catalyst* for enlightening me.

I applaud the work you are doing and will be more than happy to send you a donation to help you keep up your good work; you truly have the employee's best interest at heart . . . Again, thank you for all that you are trying to do for us as it is appreciated by a great many of us but most likely admitted to you by few.

Wonderful work. Just read this issue. I've done things like this in the past, so I have some idea just how hard it is to get all those details, get them right, and get them written up that well. I'm very impressed. I particularly like the "where can you get the money" material. I assume you also considered (a) all the money that goes into entertaining the trustees in NYC and other places and (b) those end of the budget year surpluses.

In addition to the ideas you have presented to raise money to give a living wage to all employees, I would submit that all staff be given the opportunity to voluntarily give 1 to 2 % of their income. . . IN ADDITION to the suggestions you have made. Thank you for all of your time and efforts to bring this information to the forefront.

. . . point out schools, preferably rival schools or schools we wish to emulate, that THEIR policies allow for a living wage, fair treatment, etc. . . . Also, if you are looking to raise support from students . . . [try] the Greek system . . . Best of luck and let me know if I can help.

I applaud your efforts to help us all get our priorities straight around here. Higher education certainly has its quirks -- which have the unfortunate effect of leaving behind those who keep our institution running at the most fundamental level. Is there an established living wage fund at Bucknell? If there is, I would consider contributing.

I am thoroughly enjoying reading about the steps being taken and the potential for some progress to be made, and I support your efforts 100 percent. . . One suggestion -- even the opportunity to "buy into" BU's health insurance plan might be a viable option for some of us. . . I don't know what that cost would be but it just might be a little cheaper than our having to find our own plans and pay in excess of \$200/month for coverage. Just a thought . . . Keep up the good work.

I fully support you! It was very enlightening to read all about the Bucknell strategy and the Family stories most revealing . . . Merry Christmas and a great catalyzing year ahead!

I want all you committee members to know I appreciated . . . your support and effort you all are trying to achieve. You've made good strong points to the administration, hopefully something good will eventually come from all of this. Keep up your determination.

Was there any thought given to a general fund that any individual could contribute a percentage of their salary to support a "living wage" fund for those who are not making enough to live on? It may be an interesting way to challenge those who make important financial decisions.

I applaud the work you are doing with *The Catalyst*. You've really exposed some appalling conditions/situations of which I was only partially aware. Thanks and have a happy holiday.

We received one e-mail agreeing with us that "It is not right that the board of trustees runs basically everything without any checks on them . . . the origins of the many problems with this university can be traced back to this set up," but disagreeing with the idea of the living wage, pointing out problems with dining services (to which we responded by email).