**Uneven Engagement: Unions and the Living Wage in Ontario**

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**ABSTRACT**: There has been much activism – and much scholarly attention – devoted to the living wage in recent years. While scholars have provided valuable insight into how different organizations – including unions – have united behind living wage campaigns, there have been few detailed studies of just what labour leaders think about the living wage, especially in Canada. This is the first recent Canadian study to explore this question in depth: it is based on 20 interviews with local labour council executives from around Ontario. It reveals strong support for living wage campaigns and a belief that they should be a high priority for the labour movement. However, the extent of labour's actual engagement in these campaigns was found to be uneven. Unionists were notably open-minded when it came to strategies used by living wage campaigns, and overwhelmingly favoured taking the cause into the political realm. But union leaders often cast this cause as somewhat removed from their own bargaining, and they were split about the benefits for unions in reaching out to non-unionized workers. There was also a significant sense of pessimism in the

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answers, about the many problems faced by labour, and the prospects for serious change.

**KEYWORDS:** Living Wage; Unions; Social Movements; Poverty; Ontario

**Introduction**

In the early 21st century, campaigns for higher wages - or a living wage - have comprised one of the most significant forms of labour activism in English speaking countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. In Ontario some important living wage campaigns have emerged – and they have certainly made an impact in the past few years. For instance, the Ontario Living Wage Network counts 22 active local or regional campaigns to persuade employers to commit to paying a living wage. In addition, the *Fight for $15 and Fairness*, a grassroots campaign launched in 2015, has organized vigorously to pressure the government to raise the minimum wage to $15 dollars an hour.

Organized labour's interests in these campaigns – as with any effort to raise workers' pay rates – should be evident enough. And indeed, one does not need to look long at these campaigns' material to find unions getting involved in their efforts. A considerable number of unions (such as the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation and UNIFOR Local 444, Windsor), and Labour Councils (such as Hamilton's and Sudbury's) have been certified as Living Wage employers by voluntary campaigns (Ontario Living Wage, 2019). Moreover, the American Fight for $15 was driven largely by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which has devoted tens of millions of dollars to the campaign (Greenhouse, 2015). Ontario's Fight for $15 and Fairness boasts endorsements from almost 50 unions and labour councils, and many of its events are coordinated with labour organizations (15andfairness.org, 2017; 15andfairness.org, 2018). The Ontario Federation of Labour's *Make it Fair* campaign worked "in solidarity with the Fight for $15 and Fairness." The OFL's literature tended to cast Make it Fair (www.makeitfair.ca) as a campaign to influence the government's 2016-7 review of labour law (the Changing Workplaces Review), while the Fight for $15 and Fairness focussed on wage rates (the Fight for $15 and Fairness, however, has also addressed issues beyond wages).

But beyond these surface indicators, just how deep and strong were these connections between organized labour and living wage campaigns? How invested were unions around the province in these efforts and their successes? Do labour

leaders agree with all the strategies these campaigns have used and the policies they have advocated? Are there any signs of these organizations coalescing with labour into a larger movement with a more sweeping agenda? There have been numerous studies of how living wage campaigns emerged, how they have been structured, and how they have sought to mobilize support for higher wages, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom (Luce, 2004; Luce, Pollin, Brenner and Wicks-Lim, 2008; Devinatz, 2013; Figart, 2014; Bennett, 2014; Luce, 2017). Many of these studies have examined the role of unions in the campaigns. But few studies delve deeply into the extent of the labour movement's engagement with the living wage, and labour leaders' views on the potential benefits and downsides of these campaigns.

This lack is especially noticeable in the Canadian literature on the living wage, which in general remains at an early stage of development. To be sure, a number of scholars have examined the composition and progress of living wage campaigns in this country (Wells, 2016; Evans and Fanelli, 2016; Evans, 2017; Evans, McBride and Muirhead, 2017). Some of the main scholars of the subject, Bryan Evans and Carlo Fanelli (2016), have doubted whether campaigns against the low-wage economy have mobilized as much community and grassroots support in Canada as they have elsewhere. Evans (2017) has recently reconsidered his scepticism on this point, but the interpretive question he raises is important and it is one of many that remain far from fully answered.

This article addresses the need for in-depth explorations of labour's engagement with living wage campaigns. It is based on a series of interviews with members of Executive Committees (Presidents, Vice Presidents, Recording or Coordinating Secretaries) of Local and Regional Labour Councils around Ontario. Indeed, it is the first recent study in Canada – and one of the first anywhere – based upon detailed discussions with labour leaders about the living wage. It therefore provides vital insights into unionists' views about a key new form of activism – and about other important social, economic and political matters.

**Background and Context**

While campaigns for higher wages deploy a range of strategies, broadly speaking two models have emerged. "Voluntary" campaigns set a living wage rate based upon the local costs of goods and services, and they encourage employers to commit to paying their workers at the local rate. The rates therefore vary between cities – particularly between larger centres (Toronto's rate is $21.75) and

smaller ones (London's is $15.53). These campaigns have united into the Ontario Living Wage Network and they use what is often called the "friendly persuasion" method, which one activist in Hamilton described as being "all about the conversation." (Living Wage Hamilton, 2017) They open dialogues with local businesses and organizations and try to convince them to go through a (usually straightforward) process of getting certified as an employer that pays Living Wages. Altogether these campaigns have certified more than 200 employers across Ontario by the start of 2019, including some with large workforces such as school boards, major social service networks, and medical centres. Local living wage campaigns in Hamilton, Windsor, Niagara, and Waterloo have been the biggest contributors to this total (Ontario Living Wage, 2019).

A second model used by campaigns such as the Fight for $15 and Fairness could be termed a regulatory approach, agitating for wages to be raised through government policy. They particularly seek to raise the minimum wages that governments legislate for all workers; for decades, minimum wage rates in almost all jurisdictions in North America have fallen far behind the rising costs of living (Wells, 2016, 236). Some organizations – the Manitoba Federation of Labour for example – term this the "make the minimum wage a Living Wage" approach (mfl.ca, 2019). The Fight for $15 and Fairness has sought to mobilize workers, hold public events to rally popular support, and pressure the government to raise these rates. For instance, one of its pamphlets was entitled "We Organize, We Win!" (15andfairness.org, 2017a) Taking the lead from the Fight For $15 campaign in the United States, it spends little time calculating living wage rates in a given community; instead it sets a broad target rate - $15, as the name indicates – for a new minimum wage.

At times, there has be some cross-over regarding the approach adopted by different organizations. For instance, in 2017 Living Wage Hamilton became more engaged politically, particularly by agitating for the City of Hamilton to commit to paying a living wage for all its employees.[2] Space does not allow for a lengthy exploration of the lines of division between these campaigns, or of the terminology that they and their supporters use; these distinctions can become quite complex, especially when considering campaigns in different countries and the literature about them. However, it can be said that there is often – though not always – a noticeable divide in the outlooks of the two kinds of campaigns,

[2] This author was one of the presenters for Living Wage Hamilton when the issue was brought to City Council for discussion.

particularly regarding the value of using "friendly persuasion" to convince employers to increase wages.

At the end of May 2017, the Fight for $15 and Fairness celebrated a major success when the Kathleen Wynne's Ontario Liberal government introduced Bill 148, known as the *Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act*. Officially enacted at the end of November, the bill raised the minimum wage to $14 at the start of 2018 with a further raise to $15 at the start of 2019. These increases were part of a large set of reforms in Bill 148 (much larger than almost anyone expected), proposed after a wide-ranging re-examination of Ontario labour law called the Changing Workplaces Review (Government of Ontario Newsroom, 2017). Both Fight for $15 and Fairness and the OFL's Make it Fair campaign celebrated the enactment of Bill 148, since it not only increased the minimum wage but also made union-friendly changes to labour-relations laws and improved regulations around workplace issues such as hours, leaves, and vacations (Government of Ontario Newsroom, 2017; 15andfairness.org, 2017b). But in the June 2018 election, Wynne's Liberal government was swept out of power, and Doug Ford's new Progressive Conservative government quickly repealed almost all of Bill 148. Ford cancelled the scheduled minimum wage increase to $15, leaving the rate at $14.

**Main Findings**

The interviews reveal a high level of engagement with campaigns for higher wages, at least in a basic sense: they were discussed regularly at local councils and just over two-thirds of respondents claimed their councils were active in supporting a campaign. But the questions about activism by affiliated unions or respondents' awareness of other living wage campaigns raise doubts about the strength and intensity of local labour councils' engagement.

Respondents felt that living wage campaigns produced a range of benefits, which they felt far outweighed the drawbacks. A clear majority of local council executives interviewed also stated that the living wage should be a high priority for the labour movement, though not the first one above all others; indeed, in their discussion of priorities, respondents showed a deep awareness of the many profound challenges their movement needs to face.

Regarding strategy, the interviews revealed strong backing for *both* the voluntary and regulatory approaches to living wage campaigns. Still, local labour council executives' support for voluntary campaigns was always qualified, and support for the regulatory approach was markedly stronger. A clear consensus emerged that living wage campaigns had to involve a combination of unions and

different community organizations, especially anti-poverty organizations, with many respondents feeling that these community groups should take the lead. There was also overwhelming support for bringing the struggle for the living wage into the political realm, with the majority of respondents favouring targeting the municipal level.

As for the living wage's potential impact on unions, most respondents saw benefits in collective bargaining for at least some unions - though less than a quarter thought all unions would benefit. In fact, most answers depended on respondents' ideas about who they would be bargaining for: those who focused their answers around unions representing low wage workers tended to see major advantages, but those who focused on higher wage workers did not. A majority – but only a bare majority – of respondents believed that if it became a reality, the living wage would increase unions' appeal to unorganized workers. About 40% of respondents stated that the living wage would not help unions much in reaching out to the unorganized, and some among these sceptics felt it might hurt. But on this issue (and others they were asked about), respondents felt that the narrow interests of unions were not the paramount considerations, and that the living wage should still be pursued even if there were not immediate payoffs for them.

Space does not allow for a full and broad-ranging exploration of the implications of these findings. This article is devoted to explaining in detail the main findings of the research. However, some of the key themes that emerged through the answers will be explored further in the conclusion.

**Methodology**

The interviews were all conducted following a questionnaire that consisted of 12 questions divided into 4 sections. The first section asked about how often living wage campaigns have been discussed by their councils, how active the councils or affiliated locals were in the campaigns, and whether they were aware of campaigns going on elsewhere. The second section asked broader questions about the living wage, particularly its benefits and potential drawbacks, and just where it should be placed on organized labour's priority list. The third section asked four questions about living wage campaign strategy, particularly about the merits of the voluntary and regulatory approaches, respectively; about what organizations should lead these campaigns; and about how – and at what level – they should engage in politics. The final section explored potential impacts of the living wage on unions, particularly whether it would help their position in

collective bargaining, and whether in would make it more likely that non-union workers would want to become organized.

Executives of local labour councils were the focus of this study because these councils have often been a key centre of labour activism since the beginning of the movement (Heron, 1984). Of course, labour councils are not a perfect representation of working-class activism as a whole. Levels of participation can vary widely between regions and localities, and some unions organize their own campaigns, or focus their efforts at the provincial or national level. Moreover, some of the main force behind living wage campaigns has come from other organizations such as Workers' Action Centres. Nevertheless, labour council meetings seemed one of the likely places where important campaigns would be coordinated, supported or at least discussed. Short of a larger (and more expensive) exploration of unionists' views across the province, interviewing local council executives seemed an effective way to gauge the depth of labour's engagement.

This author's research assistants admirably embraced the dauting challenge of establishing contact with labour officials that are usually juggling many responsibilities and demands. A majority of respondents were given an e-copy of the questionnaire before they were interviewed. We were able to interview 20 members of executives, and a maximum of two executives from each council we contacted.[3] The responses provide a solid representation of Ontario's different regions: there are six respondents from southern and south-western Ontario; five from central Ontario, including the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area; five from northern and northwestern Ontario, and three from eastern Ontario. They also represent smaller and mid-size cities, as well as Ontario's larger metropolitan areas. Respondents were not asked how they identified in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or whether they were recent immigrants, or second (or more) generation born in Canada. Based on names and profiles publicly available online (we did not probe deeply into social media accounts), it appears that 12 of the respondents identified as men and 8 as women.

The interviews were conducted in two waves, the first in the summer and early fall of 2016 and the second in the winter and spring of 2017. It is important to place this timing in the context outlined above: the last interview was conducted just before the government announced the introduction of Bill 148 in 2017. This

[3] There was one exception to this rule: we received a late callback from a third leader of one council and that interview was included in the results.

author started another round of interviews in late 2017, but it became evident that the terms of the debate and the terms of the discussion had changed entirely: all of the attention now centred around Bill 148, particularly who should get credit for it and how to ensure the government saw it though into implementation. The focus of the project therefore turned to finishing the transcriptions of the interviews and data analysis.

The interviews were not heavily structured: the questions did little to guide respondents into discussing certain aspects of an issue. For instance, the questions regarding the benefits or drawbacks of the living wage did not suggest that respondents consider the impacts on certain groups of workers (such as women, recent immigrants, racialized workers), or potential resistance from certain interests (such as businesses or conservative media outlets). Similarly, the question about who is best suited to lead living wage campaigns did not suggest particular types of organizations, such as community groups, workers centres or political movements. Indeed, the goal was to learn what directions unionists would take this discussion, which aspects of the living wage were most prominent in their minds, and which were not. And the respondents certainly did engage in the discussion: the average interview length was 26 minutes. Answers to almost all the questions could be broken readily into groups. Indeed, some clear themes and lines of thought emerged as the data was reviewed.

**Current Engagement with Living Wage Campaigns**

The responses revealed that living wage campaigns have certainly been an important topic at local and regional council meetings. When asked how frequently the living wage had been discussed, 18 said frequently and only two said rarely. In addition, 14 (just over two-thirds of the 20) reported that their council was actively involved in one or more of the living wage campaigns. The questionnaire did not ask specifically about what resources councils had committed to the cause, but representatives of two councils reported that they had released some of their staff's working hours to help on a campaign.

Five respondents said that the issue had been discussed frequently but their council was not actively engaged in any campaigns. Almost all of these five explained that their councils lacked resources to launch or join the effort. One stated that "everybody knows about it" at her council but it was already involved in a number of other campaigns and "we're stretched pretty thin." The regional distribution of the councils that were actively engaged in a campaign was quite even, with the notable exception that most (though not all) of the councils from

northern and north western Ontario reported that they were overstretched and unable to get seriously involved.

The picture was less bright regarding council executives' knowledge about the extent of affiliated unions' engagement with living wage campaigns. Only one of the respondents reported that representatives of the council's member unions were regularly coming to meetings with news of activism or plans for their own campaigns. But this level of vibrancy stood out: only three other respondents reported any specific local affiliated organizations contributing to living wage campaigns. 16 respondents said that they did not know how much their affiliated unions were involved, most of them adding that this was probably because there was little or no activity to report. Overall, the interviews did not give the impression of a deep, widespread, and energetic engagement with the cause.

What about union leaders' awareness of other organizations – which could include local, regional, national, or international groups - engaged in living wage campaigns? Some respondents said they were well informed about other groups engaged on the issue; they cited a number of examples and generally gave a sense of being part of a larger movement. But they constituted a minority (7 of 20, or just over one third) of the answers received. Among the other fourteen, four respondents claimed to be somewhat aware of other organizations' efforts but mentioned only a few details. Seven more said that they had only distant knowledge of other campaigns. One of these seven, one described herself as "peripherally aware of these going on… I am supportive, but I am not actively involved in …learning about other campaigns." Two other respondents said they had little knowledge of other campaigns. Altogether, the level of engagement with a larger living wage campaign seemed uneven at best.

**Broader Questions about the Living Wage**

*Benefits of Living Wage Campaigns.* Not surprisingly, the vast majority of labour council executives interviewed (19 of 20) held very positive over-all views about living wage campaigns. Respondents identified a wide range of benefits, with the majority orienting their answer around one or two specific benefits. Significantly, none of them discussed the benefit of the living wage in isolation from other issues facing workers: they all portrayed it as connected to the effort to change the larger –mostly hostile – landscape.

Most of the answers (15 of 20) spoke about economic benefits that would accrue if the campaigns were successful and the living wage was implemented or adopted by employers. The most commonly cited economic gain was that winning

a living wage would help to raise standards of living for every worker. It thus would be a way to counter the continual attack on the quality of life for working people, and to quickly "raise the bar" (a phrase often used in these responses) for workers. In a similar vein, four respondents explained that the living wage was a social justice measure – a means of achieving broad-based fairness for workers.

But some respondents also thought that there were particular groups of workers who would benefit most. Five respondents identified the living wage as a key anti-poverty initiative that would help the working poor – some of them especially focused on the benefits for poor children. One respondent had a job working with children and explained "when we get children out of poverty by making sure that their parents have good work, then [in the] long-term kids come to school more prepared to learn and we can definitely raise the bar when it comes to student learning."

Four respondents also contended that attaining the living wage would also benefit the economy, especially in the local community. A Keynesian view of the economy emerged strongly in these responses, as they argued that increasing workers' spending power was essential to reviving or sustaining economic growth. One claimed "I've always said that people who are making …a Living Wage are folks that are going to spend the money locally. They're not going to be flying to Hawaii or to the Bahamas once or twice a year to spend that money… they're going to be spending it at local businesses."

Almost half of the respondents spoke at length the benefits for labour arising from the campaigns themselves. Education stood out among the types of benefits in this area; , the lack of public awareness about the difficulties of low-wage workers and their families to make ends meet emerged as an important theme. As one respondent explained living wage campaigns were helpful in "impressing upon people the need for a certain amount, a dollar amount, an hourly amount [that] allows somebody to at least put food at the table… [They] allow other people to see that because I just truly believe that people have no clue."

*Drawbacks of Living Wage Campaigns.* All but three council executives interviewed saw significant drawbacks to living wage campaigns, with one problem emerging above the others: resistance from employers and business interests. Indeed, a distinct lack of confidence that living wage campaigns could overcome conservative pro-market rhetoric shone through the answers. Half of the respondents described the living wage as particularly vulnerable to business's complaints that wage hikes would lead to higher prices and that small business would struggle to adapt. Several respondents worried about talk that "the small

mom and pop shop won't be able to afford it and therefore they'd actually have to lay off some their employees."

Respondents did not agree about just how vulnerable the living wage was to these complaints and, especially, why it was vulnerable to them. A couple respondents felt that business owners did have some legitimate concerns, especially about having to adjust to a quick hike in wages. One the other hand, a couple others were dismissive of employers' complaints and believed that living wage campaigns should pay them little heed. As one put it: "if you can't afford to pay the bare minimum to keep your employees above poverty… you shouldn't be in business." The rest felt that even though the complaints were "not always backed up in the actual proof" they were still effective in swaying public opinion – and according to some – even convincing some workers. One council executive from Northern Ontario lamented that she knew young people "working three jobs and they were pretty close to minimum wage and their attitude was [that if the living wage was adopted] everything's just going to cost more, it's not going to make a difference anyway, which was sad." Indeed, in many of the responses, there emerged a feeling of timidity or even resignation in the face of business opposition to the living wage.

While criticism from opponents was the most prominent potential downside to the living wage, six of the respondents focused their complaints on the thinking behind the campaigns themselves. Two focused on technical concerns about how some voluntary campaigns calculated their living wage. Remarkably, a third felt that the wage rates set by the campaign in her city were "padded" and "the calculations on a living wage need to be defendable." The other three criticized the campaigns from the opposite side of the spectrum, arguing that their goals were not ambitious enough; one said the rates set were too low, and two said more sweeping change was needed. One of the latter was the only respondent who declared that the downsides of living wage campaigns outweighed the benefits. She was also the only respondent to identify her politically as on the radical left. She felt a living wage was "too limited a policy, with too many conditions and contingencies to it."

*A Top Priority?* When asked about where the living wage should sit on labour's list of priorities, 19 of 20 council executives gave firm support to the living wage as a high priority. Just how high varied, and the reasons varied more, but two prominent themes emerged. First, respondents' awareness of the numerous crises facing Canadian unions weighed heavily on them and made it a challenge to determine how much energy they should devote to the living wage as opposed

to other causes. As one put it: "There are so many attacks on labour, it's hard to determine the priority list."

The second key theme was the value of living wage campaigns in helping unions to deliver gains for all workers, not just their own members. Even though many respondents noted this in their answers to the questions about the benefits of the living wage (discussed just above), nine of the respondents raised it again in the discussion about priorities. As with the other questions in this section, unionists sounded like supporters of social unionism in their answers. This is to say that respondents felt that labour should reject a narrow business unionist focus on collective bargaining, or servicing their own members. Instead look beyond their own union, or unionized workers in general, to become active on a wide range of social and economic issues, and form alliances with other organizations in the community (Ross, 2008; 2012). As one respondent argued, the living wage was worth supporting "even though the beneficiaries may not at this point in time be among our membership… it raises the floor for everyone and it's a social justice issue." Another explained that "labour needs to get away from the navel-gazing that has defined our movement for the past 20 years… [and] has to be recognized as a positive influence for all workers, instead of seeing as being only focussed on their own members."

Regarding just how high a priority the living wage should be, none of the respondents claimed that it should stand alone at the top of labour agenda. Five simply said, without reservations or qualifications, that the living wage should be a very high priority. A much larger group - fourteen respondents – called the living wage a high priority but were careful to emphasize that it should not take labour's attention away from other pressing issues. For instance, one called it a "good starting point …but there are some other major things that are equally as important."

Of these fourteen respondents who felt that the living wage should share labour's attention and energy, most did not get specific about which causes were of equal or greater importance. Once again, the host of urgent problems facing unions influenced their answers, and they hesitated to try ranking them all. But when respondents did identify other important priorities, the *Changing Workplaces Review* stood out; it was named by 5 respondents (2 as an equal priority, 3 as a higher one).

In their answers to questions in this section of the interviews, respondents said little about gender, race or immigration as factors. Some respondents who stated that the living wage would be a valuable anti-poverty

measure did not note how women, racialized workers and new immigrants were especially vulnerable to living below the poverty line. Gendered inequities in pay did receive some attention, too. For instance, one respondent who emphasized the educational value of living wage campaigns argued that they could raise public awareness about how "the wage gap between men and women in Canada is huge." Another named both immigration and the "gender wage gap" as two of the issues that demanded as much of labour's attention as the living wage. But these were exceptions to the general absence of discussion of either gender or race.

**Specific Questions about Living Wage Campaign Strategy**

*The Voluntary Approach.* The questions about which strategies living wage campaigns should employ yielded some of the most unexpected results of the study. Given that one of a union's most basic goals is to use bargaining and potentially strike action to force employers to grant workers better pay, it would be reasonable to expect that most labour leaders would be sceptical of the voluntary approach to living wage campaigning. Indeed, union officials would seem unlikely to believe that many employers could be moved by friendly persuasion to raise wages. However, the local council executives interviewed offered surprisingly strong support for Living Wage campaigns that take the voluntary approach. Only three dismissed the approach entirely. One attacked the idea in blunt terms ("I think it's stupid") while another reported that his council focused on getting the living wage enacted through legislation, "rather than just giving someone a pat on the back for voluntarily doing it."

But the vast majority of respondents – 17 of 20 – stated that the voluntary approach was worth supporting – although in every case that support came with qualifications: all saw limitations or insisted that a voluntary campaign would have to be supplemented with other forms of activism. The limitation that almost all of them noted, not surprisingly, was the large proportion of employers that would ignore a voluntary campaign and continue to pay low wages.

Still, they also believed that enough employers *would* join to make it worthwhile – indeed, there was a notable amount of optimism in the responses that there were many progressive employers in their communities that should be recruited into the campaign. About a quarter saw recruiting progressive employers as a key way to reduce the resistance they feared from the business lobby to the living wage. They believed that employers who got certified could themselves become active "as the volunteers to speak with their business partners …and convince them" to join as well. One went still further, showing remarkable

concern for the perspective of employers: "you don't want to ram it down the throats of an employer …you have to have buy-in and …I think if you are forcing people to do it, it can have a negative impact."

But even if they did not become active, these respondents felt that when businesses and institutions got certified by a voluntary campaign, it "makes a strong statement that it is possible" to pay living wages. As one explained – again showing a clear perspective on who could have the greatest impact on employers – it showed that the living wage "is not something that's just basically dreamt up by academics and those who are studying the subject."

Respondents also saw positive impacts of voluntary campaigns beyond how many workers would get raises. Indeed, unionists' emphasis on spin-off benefits from voluntary campaigns were another surprisingly prominent theme in the interviews. Four saw value in helping workers to reward progressive employers with their business. One suggested a two-pronged strategy of boycotting low-wage employers encouraging workers to shop at "employers who pay a Living Wage. That's a way to start this conversation and to give that credit out." These responses were in keeping with unions' long history of seeking to mobilize workers as consumers. Since the 19th century, labour leaders have used tactics, such as bargaining for union labels (that is, labels on products to show that they were union made), to allow the buying public to distinguish between progressive and regressive employers (Glickman, 1997).

Four respondents returned to the theme of education in discussing the upsides of voluntary campaigns. They returned to the need to address the public's ignorance of working people's struggles to get by. One believed that voluntary campaigns "can become part of an education process so individuals recognizing that the Living Wage …is needed to try to ensure that an individual or a family is not living in poverty."

*The Regulatory Approach.* There was definitely stronger support for the regulatory approach to living wage campaigns. Respondents were not asked to name which approach they preferred, but all the respondents showed equal or greater enthusiasm for campaigns demanding regulation or legislation to raise wages. The main reason for their preference was the limitations of the voluntary campaign noted above: since it would not be able improve wage rates for enough workers, the regulatory approach was essential.

Six respondents described the regulatory and voluntary approaches as complimentary – each addressed distinct yet important parts of the larger challenge of creating an effective movement. One argued that "you need grass-

roots buy-in and grass-roots champions to start the conversation. At the same time, you need to work at a legislative level as well. This creates change across the board." Three of these respondents again raised concerns about the perspective of employers; they felt that even if wages were raised through legislation, the voluntary campaign was still needed because "you almost have to create buy-in from the employers." While respondents' support for the voluntary approach always came with qualifications, the regulatory approach received qualified support from only seven respondents – almost two thirds (12) had no reservations at all. Among respondents that did express concerns about the regulatory approach, the nature of the perceived problems varied, but two common themes emerged.

The first was compliance: even if the government mandated higher wages, many employers might be determined to resist and underpay their workers. These answers seem to anticipate the reaction of some employers, particularly Tim Hortons, of the increase in the minimum wage to $14: they complied with the legislated raise, but then clawed back workers' benefits packages, changed policies on tips and reduced break times to counterbalance the costs (Saltzman, 2018; Mojtehhedzadeh, 2018). One council executive from southern Ontario was particularly skeptical about enforcement because "75% of workplaces were not in compliance" with the "the bare minimum requirements" set out in Ontario's Employment Standards Act. One respondent, in contrast, contended that such possible resistance was precisely why it was crucial to use the power of the law to raise wages. She drew a parallel between equitable workplace laws and "equity laws… whether it's race or whether it's sex or gender or sexuality, equity laws are put into place because it's the right thing to do, not everybody in society agrees but we do it anyway because it's right."

The second concern was another manifestation of the discouraged mood of many respondents: several worried that mounting sufficient pressure to force governments into enacting living wage legislation would require a massive amount of resources – perhaps more than the labour movement could muster. One council executive from northern Ontario explained that "there's a public perception …that you can't get anything accomplished [through these campaigns] because it's just so pro-business and pro-Chamber of Commerce …and anti-union" in her town. Another worried about the length of time such campaigns required, and "with a time issue, what happens is it might sometimes be difficult to keep volunteers and members of committees involved."

*Who Should Lead?* When asked what organizations were in the best position to lead the drive for the living wage, all respondents supported an alliance between labour and community groups. Indeed, when considering just which community groups should be involved, most wanted to focus on how broad the coalition should be rather than who should lead it. When pondering who should join, one respondent simply said "all organizations!" and laughed. When respondents did identify community organizations that could get involved, the ones most often cited were anti-poverty groups, following by institutions such as the United Way, religious groups, Workers Centres, or other interests that were already involved in supporting the living wage.

Few respondents incorporated gender, race or immigration into their answers about organizing. Some of the community groups which respondents felt should be involved in the campaign (or actually were involved in campaigns), may have represented recent immigrants, racialized workers, or women – but respondents did not note this explicitly. There was one respondent who asserted that "there are probably women's groups that should be advocating for this," while another suggested that groups representing recent immigrants should be involved. The latter respondent acknowledged the weakness of labour's connections with these organizations, and felt it was important to "go in and … explore what [their] rights really are and how to include [them], because I noticed in the meetings … around our labour council table, we aren't seeing those faces of the different groups in our community."

Eight of the respondents did not say whether unions or community groups were the best position to take charge of an alliance that would agitate for a living wage. An equal number (8) stated that community groups should take the lead. Here again many respondents sounded like social unionists, with some putting extra emphasis on the need for unions to take a back seat to organizations that represented the poorest and most marginalized in the community. One argued forcefully that unions' role should be: "supporting, helping the disenfranchised, the people without jobs or making small amounts of money at their workplace… I mean, when they speak, they'll be speaking the truth, they've lived the truth, you know what living on a non-Living Wage is like." Some of these respondents wanted community groups to take the lead even though they acknowledged that most of them had limited resources.

One reported that her council was deeply connected with community groups that should be – and were – driving the local campaign "but they've been on hiatus because they were small groups and they burned themselves out."

Another made a passionate case for unions to increase their support for community groups: "They have no budget, they have no money to get the supplies they need. They come… literally almost begging to labour council. Somehow, we have to fund them better so that they feel like they are supported, and they don't burn out… And if they had more funding from us they would …feel part of us… but [right now] we're not. They don't have enough resources." Only four respondents felt that unions were in the best position to lead living wage campaigns. One was a council executive from southern Ontario who shared the concerns noted above about the limited resources of community groups but drew a different conclusion: "[Unions] can actually make this a priority effort whereas a volunteer-based community group can only do, and it's nothing against them, but they can only do what they can, right?"

*Political Agitation in Favour of the Living Wage.* Respondents gave overwhelming support for living wage campaigns getting active in the political realm. Only two objected to the idea, both of them complaining that hostile or indifferent politicians would find a way to thwart the campaigns' efforts. Five respondents felt that campaigns should focus their energies on all three levels of politics – federal, provincial, and municipal. However, a majority (11) stated that it was best to concentrate on the municipal level – a result almost certainly influenced by the fact that the respondents were local labour council officials. Indeed, most respondents focused on the municipal level even though in Canada, the provinces control minimum wage policy – and indeed have massive power over municipal governments.

Some of these respondents felt that influencing municipal politics was "easiest," while others felt it was the best place for starting a powerful movement. One spoke eloquently about her own experience in this regard: "That's where you truly see it, when you elect municipal politicians who believe these principles, you see it almost immediately, in your town, in your communities. You see it and then you want to spread it, throughout the province and nationally and then even internationally - but I do think it needs to start on a municipal level." Most respondents said little about what tactics or rhetorical strategies living wage campaigns should use.

Respondents were not asked about specific political parties' views on the living wage, but some respondents discussed them anyway – all of them to say something negative. Two expressed scepticism that the New Democratic Party would support the living wage, one dismissing the NDP as "a loss of energy and a loss of time." Four more rejected the possibility that Kathleen Wynne's Liberal

government in Queen's Park would support the living wage. One of these asserted that: "this government we currently have has broken far too many promises to the labour movement, and well really anyone with the left-wing agenda, to be trusted with this doing this…" These are more comments that do not look prescient since Kathleen Wynne's government proposed and then passed Bill 148 (including its increase in the minimum wage) just after these interviews were completed. But, as noted above, local labour council executives were hardly alone in being surprised by extent of the Liberals' labour law reform, and their (short-lived) renewed support for progressive causes in the last few months of their government.

*The Living Wage and Unions.* The last couple of questions focused on the impact of the living wage on the labour movement. When asked whether the living wage would help unions in their collective bargaining with employers, the majority saw benefits for at least some unions. But an even stronger trend emerged: almost all of the answers depended on the respondents' sense of who they (or their unions) would be representing at the table. This is a surprise in one sense, given the answers in Section II.1; recall that in answering those questions about the general benefits of the living wage, three quarters of respondents said that it would "raise the bar" for *all* workers. But only four respondents felt that achieving the living wage would have broad and direct benefits in their own bargaining. These four respondents used the same kinds of terms that had been used in discussing the benefits for all workers; they described how the living wage would "raise the floor" and allow unions to "bargain up from the Living Wage."

However, the most common answer (from 9 respondents) was that the Living Wage would be vital only for unions representing workers in low-paying jobs. A good example was a council executive from eastern Ontario who asked himself: "Do I think it's going to benefit [for example] nurses or …teachers? I don't think it would." But he added that unions in many other sectors would see their bargaining position would be seriously strengthened: "I'm thinking hotel and restaurant folks, I'm thinking security folks, I'm thinking [folks] working in our larger grocery store chains; their hourly rate isn't sort of that high." Most of these respondents did not explain in detail just how unions representing lower paid workers might gain an advantage, beyond the "instant raise members would get. an Two claimed that unions could turn their focus towards other issues besides wages, such as health and safety. In one of the more nuanced answers, one respondent argued that the Living Wage would be especially helpful for unions that had two-tier wage scales, as it would raise the pay of the workers on the lower

tier and bring them closer to the higher-tier rates. This was also the only answer to address gender or age (none of the answers spoke to race or immigration), as the respondent added the lower tier is made up primarily of "women and younger workers doing… what they call 'unskilled work.'"

Four of the respondents felt that the Living Wage would have no meaningful impact on unions' bargaining power. All of the sceptics portrayed bargaining as a distinct process that involved a union and an employer, with issues such as the living wage far in the distance. Indeed, the social unionist sentiments expressed above faded noticeably in some of the answers about bargaining. Moreover, these sceptics assumed or stated explicitly that their unions were bargaining for workers that already had good compensation. One explained that she was a teacher and "we've had more than living wage for years. When we bargain, we don't actually bargain for people who aren't our members. That's one of the things about bargaining, right? That's why you need labour unions all banding together to represent people who they don't represent ... You're not in a union? If you're not in my union, I don't bargain for you." Perhaps surprisingly, all four of the respondents who saw no spillover benefits for unions in bargaining had stated (in their answers in the earlier sections of the interviews) that labour should make the living wage a high priority, and two were from councils that were very active in one of the campaigns.

When asked about the impact of the living wage on the attitudes of non-union workers, a majority of respondents (12 of 20) said that the living wage would help to boost unions' appeal among the unorganized. The most commonly cited reason (by 7 of the 12) was that winning the living wage would improve the public perception of unions, and this would make workers more open to joining. One respondent explained that achieving an important gain for all workers would help overcome one of the main obstacles that unions face when reaching out to the working poor, namely that "management keeps telling them that [unions] are just interested in ourselves." Another made an impassioned case that the living wage would be "something that we can point to and say - like the weekend, like the forty-hour work week, like the health and safety laws - unions have achieved this for you even though you're not a unionized employee." He added that if workers then tell workers that "if you think that's good and if you want to see more things like this, join a union, unionize your workplace, bring democracy into your workplace, strive for these things as an active worker."

Five respondents focused on the process of campaigning, rather than the policy goal, contending that the living wage created an opportunity to start

conversations with all workers about how their jobs could be improved. Others saw badly needed new momentum "that really took off" through local campaigns, which "could inspire non-union workers to join unions." On the other hand, eight respondents raised doubts that the living wage would significantly increase non-union workers' interest in organizing. Three did not think the living wage would be relevant to organizing in general. One contended that "most people don't join unions because of money" but rather over working conditions and having "a shitty boss." Three went further and predicted negative impacts for the labour movement. One drew a rather bleak picture of workers thinking to themselves, "now that I make enough" thanks to the living wage, "I don't need a union," and precarious workers remaining "a little bit reluctant to join unions" for fear that the employer may lay them off or "close down their business."

Six of the eight respondents who raised such doubts about benefits for organizing non-union members had (in answering earlier questions) called the living wage a very high priority and two were on councils that were actively involved in campaigns. In fact, one asserted that unions should not be thinking about their own self interest when agitating for the living wage. One explained that "a great concern for us to have every worker in this city, in this province being paid a fair wage and treated with respect and with dignity. Hey, I don't care if they're a union member or not; I don't need the dues that bad."

**Conclusion**

While space considerations seriously limit the scope of the interpretation of the findings and especially of their potential implications – the focus here being on explaining the results in detail – a number of key themes can certainly be identified. There was a strong base level of support among local council executives for living wage campaigns. Respondents were especially enthusiastic about the potential value of raising the wage floor for all workers and living wage campaigns' ability to engage the public in a discussion about income and poverty. The campaigns' importance in generating new energy in community mobilizing also featured prominently. These upsides to the living wage usually mattered most to respondents even if they were uncertain about its potential impact on bargaining, or labour's prospects for organizing non-union workers, or the campaigns' choice of strategic approach.

Moreover, unionists were notably open-minded about strategy, with most deeming voluntary campaigns to be worthwhile even though they thought the approach to be limited or even flawed. The main problem respondents saw

with the living wage was hostility from opponents rather than inherent problems in the idea or the voluntary campaigns. Despite the commitment to helping the most disadvantaged workers, there was also a clear sense of distance from the living wage cause. Many respondents portrayed the living wage as a social justice issue benefitting the poorest, mostly non-unionized workers. There was unanimous support for labour forging partnerships with community groups on living campaigns – almost half of respondents felt these community groups should take the lead in these campaigns, while less than a quarter felt that it should be labour.

When a large portion of respondents discussed the impacts of the living wage on bargaining or on unions' appeal to unorganized workers, they tended to conceive of unions as representing higher-waged workers rather than workers who would receive a raise from the living wage. This sense of distance was evident in the limited amount of information respondents provided on their affiliates' living wage activities, or their involvement with living wage campaigns elsewhere. Respondents were also not engaged with issues of immigration, race, and gender, as evidenced by how little attention they paid to these issues in their answers.

Another theme that develops across the responses is anxiety about the ever-mounting pressure on the labour movement and working people in general. Regaining lost ground on workers' standards of living, renewing mobilizing efforts and potentially scoring some badly- needed victories were consistently seen as among the biggest advantages of the living wage that respondents cited. But this anxiety also meant that the living wage had to compete with a wide array of other pressing issues when unionists discussed priorities. It also infused a seriously pessimistic note into many responses. For instance, even strong supporters of the living wage campaigns taking a regulatory approach expressed doubts about whether they could be successful or even sustain the effort.

Indeed, the introduction of Bill 148 right after the last of these interviews certainly would have come as a major shock, and a rare pleasant surprise, to the respondents. Given the tone of the results, Doug Ford's cancellation of the minimum wage increase to $15 – and the inability of labour and other movements to stop him – would have been perhaps less surprising. However, the minimum wage hike was very popular among Ontario voters (Angus Reid, 2017). And conservative commentators were proven entirely wrong in their dire predictions of economic doom brought by a drastic increase in the rates: in Ontario as elsewhere, after minimum wages were raised, the economy continued to grow and

the impact on employment rates has been minimal (Younglai, 2018; Hallett, 2019).

For Ontario's labour leaders, rallying to insist on the minimum wage increase to $15, or even up to the standards set by living wage movements, would be a popular cause and would achieve many of the goals respondents said they valued in these interviews: delivering meaningful and immediate gains to thousands of workers, providing opportunities to educate the public about the difficulties of the working poor just to get by, showing that unions will fight for not just their members but all workers, building stronger connections to community and anti-poverty groups that know and speak of the truth for the most marginalized workers in Ontario. If union leaders are serious about lifting the sense of gloom around their movement, this seems a good place to start.

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