

Winning a living wage: the legacy of living wage campaigns

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Abstract

Living wage campaigns, led by community organisations and trade unions, aim to raise the wages and working conditions of some of the most vulnerable workers in society. But are they, ultimately successful in doing this? Drawing on the first major impact study of living wages campaigns in the UK, recent research into employment practices in the cleaning sector and primary research undertaken with cleaning workers at the University of East London, we assess the legacy of living wage campaigns and what this entails for the organisations that lead them.

There is perhaps no more high profile campaign at the present relating to low paid workers in the UK than the living wage campaign. Since its launch by a broad based community organisation in 2001 it is estimated that the campaign has secured in excess of 200 million pounds in additional wages to some of the most insecure and poorly paid workers in society.ⁱ This has led to higher tax receipts and savings in in-work benefits. A report published by the Institute of Public Policy Research and the Resolution Foundation estimated that the net savings to the treasury from the introduction of the living wage across the UK would be the region of 3.6 billion (Lawton & Pennycook, 2013). Campaigns have been led by community organisations, trade unions, student unions and political parties and ‘wins’ have been secured across the economy in banking and financial services, healthcare, cleaning, hospitality and catering, and latterly retail. Unusually for a campaign of this kind it enjoys cross party

support. Its success is all the more remarkable given long terms trends towards outsourcing in the managerial and organisational practice and given the onset in 2008 of the deepest global recession in recent history. A number of commentators have looked to account for this success in terms of new organisational models adopted by trade unions and community organisations (Wills 2008, Holgate 2009, Hearn and Bergos 2011). In particular, commentators have highlighted the success of the latter in mobilising communities and non-typical actors in these campaigns.

However, while there is a growing body of research on living wage campaigns and a significant amount of research on the economic benefits of a living wage, there is comparatively little research to date on the longer term impact of these campaigns, especially from the point of view of workers that receive the living wage. Are there lasting benefits for workers who receive a living wage or are these benefits offset by contractors and clients through increased workloads and reduced hours? Such questions cannot be entirely separated from questions about the benefits accruing to clients and contractors, end-users and the community at large. A common finding, for example, is that workers receiving a living wage often report feeling more recognised for the work that they do (Wills 2009). Similarly clients and contractors often report an increase in productivity as a consequence of factors like increased staff retention and more contented workforce (Wills & Linneker 2012). While such questions are not separate, the distinction between a workforce struggling to manage increased workloads as a result of squeezed profit margins and a more productive because more contented workforce should be relatively clear.

In this chapter we draw on research undertaken in the US and the UK and our own primary research to evaluate the impact of introducing the living wage. By impact we understand the range of benefits and detriments accruing to workers, clients, contractors, end-users and the community in general as a result of the introduction of the living wage. In doing this we

leave to one side the question of whether the raising of the wage floor has a positive or detrimental effect on the economy as a whole and whether the way the living wage is calculated favours some forms of family over others.ⁱⁱ This is not because such questions are unimportant in our view. It simply reflects our focus on the possible negative impact of the introduction of the living wage, specifically in the form of heightened job insecurity as a consequence of a reduction in contracted hours and increased workloads. If, as our study suggests, the introduction of the living wage can lead to greater insecurity, then this is important for supporters and campaigners to know. In the conclusion we discuss some possible responses to this and call for more research on the impact of introducing the living wage. We begin by providing an overview of the campaign for the living wage at the University of East London (UEL) from which the cohort of cleaning workers that we interviewed is drawn. We then look at existing research on the impact of introducing the living wage as well current research. We then go on to present and analyse our data before drawing and contextualising, in the context of other research, our findings.

Finally it should be pointed out at the outset that we were both active in the campaign as organisers and supporters. We write therefore as academics who were heavily involved in the campaign and we address issues of bias and the relation between this research and the campaign in the methods section.

The living wage campaign at UEL

UEL was one of a number of Universities in London that introduced the living wage from 2007 to the present day. It was the first post 92' University to sign up to the living wage in 2010. The campaign was led by The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), the founding chapter of Citizens UK, and the local branches of Unison and Universities and

Colleges Union (UCU) and it focussed primarily on outsourced cleaning workers at the university. The campaign took place against the backdrop of the outsourcing of security staff in December 2010 and catering staff in June 2012. These workers were also covered by the living wage.

UEL is a diverse university with high percentages of black and minority ethnic students and staff. Sixty eight percent of the student intake in 2012-13 described themselves as black or Asian or mixed ethnicity. Yet as a group the cleaning workers were conspicuous, drawn mainly from Spanish speaking South America and Portuguese speaking Africa and with very limited levels of English.

The living wage campaign was broad based. It involved a number of groups and constituencies including unions, academics, students, administrators, the chaplaincy and neighbouring institutions such as schools and churches as affiliates of TELCO. Organizers and activists began by conducting one to one meetings with individual cleaning workers. After a couple of meetings to determine a strategy a letter was sent to the University's Vice-Chancellor, requesting a meeting to discuss the living wage. The campaign strategy was insistent rather than oppositional. While not averse to reverting to action when denied recognition, the primary purpose of the campaign was to get a meeting with senior managers and build relationships with them. What was particularly noteworthy was the way that branch representatives and community organisers worked closely together in contrast to the often strained relations between trade unions and citizens organisations at a higher level.ⁱⁱⁱ

After the announcement that UEL would sign up to the living wage in 2010 it began to be introduced as contracts came up for re-tendering in 2011. Cleaning workers received the living wage in August 2011 when a new company with a strong ethical track record took over the contract. We then wrote a report one year after the implementation. The initial aim of this

report was to highlight and celebrate the living wage at UEL. While we were aware, anecdotally, that there were a number of issues with the new contractor, the findings were unexpected. This report was sent to senior managers at the university and eventually formed the basis of a meeting between Unison representatives and members of the campaign team, facilities managers and the contractor. A number of issues that the report highlighted were addressed and while some issues remain, regular meetings take place between union representatives and the contractor. In 2013 the university became an accredited living wage employer and students and staff launched a campaign to introduce the living wage at London City Airport, following requests from cleaning staff for assistance.

The Living Wage: impact and problems

The London living wage campaign was launched in 2001 by Citizens UK, a broad based coalition of community groups, schools, faith based groups and trade unions. The campaign followed similar initiatives in the USA. The living wage campaign is intended as a response to in-work poverty; it is above the National Minimum Wage and is updated and announced annually in November. While the National Minimum Wage is set by the government's Low Pay Commission and represents "what the market will bear" (Wills, 2009, p.38), the Living Wage expresses the costs of living: housing, transport costs and childcare, as well as a basic basket of goods. The London Living Wage is set by the Greater London Authority.

There is a significant body of literature focusing on the evaluation of the impact of the living wage. However, most of this research has been undertaken in the USA. Research in the USA points to small to moderate effects on municipal budgets, increasing less than the rate of inflation in Baltimore and allowing the bidding for municipal contracts to remain competitive or even improving their competitiveness. Moreover, studies show living wages affect mostly

adult workers and their families and most studies have found no evidence of diminished employment. Finally, evaluations of the living wage in the US point to raised productivity and a reduction of staff turnover benefitting employers (Thompson and Chapman, 2006).

In the UK, a recent study commissioned by Trust for London has focused on the costs and benefits of the London Living Wage using a mixed methodology that included case studies, interviews and survey, as well as statistical data analysis. This research has confirmed what anecdotal evidence had previously suggested: that wage premium was being managed down by employers and clients in different ways. In some cases, the living wage implementation led to very little increase in overall contract costs and in one case costs went down. In this case the client decided to reduce workers' hours and the frequency of some jobs. The research revealed that the introduction of the living wage meant increased costs 'that were less than might be expected in relation to the headline changes in wages' (Wills and Linneker, 2012, p.18). The research also suggests that the move to the living wage 'precipitated an examination of costs and renewed efforts to keep the costs down' (Wills and Linneker, 2012, p.18). In most cases the initiative to introduce the living wage came from the client or the employer, rather than the contractor. The living wage usually became a mandatory criterion in the procurement process, while decisions about differentials were left to the tendering firms. The research concludes that 'costs associated with the living wage have to be considered in light of the power relations between the clients and their contractors, and in regard to the way in which the clients chose to manage their service.' (Wills and Linneker, 2012, p.20). Moreover, the introduction of the living wage was associated with increased staff retention, improved attitude among workers and the ability to attract better staff to do the job, as well as reputational improvement (Wills and Linneker, 2012, pp. 21-22).

The impact of the living wage from the workers' perspective was researched via a survey of 416 workers in living wage and non-living wage work places. The researchers found a statistically significant association between the living wage and psychological health, after adjusting for socio-economic factors. They also found that 54% of workers reported experiencing benefits from the living wage in relation to their work. This was based on questions about whether they were working harder, feeling happier, more respected, more valued; having more pride in their job and being more likely to stay in the job). At one particular site, workers complained about the association of the living wage with cuts in number of contractual hours, reductions in overtime and bonus payments. Financial benefits were reported by 38% of survey respondents and family benefits by 32%. The research also found that respondents who earned the living wage claimed less than those not earning the living wage and that the move to the living wage is associated with slight household income improvement, assuming that those who are entitled claim benefits; if workers are not willing or able to claim benefits, the move to the living wage has more significant positive impact to the disposable income of households. A surprisingly high percentage of worker survey respondents (35%) reported experiencing no benefits from the move to the living wage. (Wills and Linneker, 2012, pp.22-34).

A recent report on employment practices in the UK cleaning sector commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found similar evidence of benefits to workers, contractors and clients from paying the living wage (EHRC, 2014: 39). The report interviewed ninety three cleaning workers across the UK and developed six in-depth case studies examining the procurement process for outsourced cleaning services. These case studies were drawn from six different sectors and three of the organisations had introduced the living wage, enabling researchers to compare conditions and practices in living wage and non-living wage organisations. Clear benefits to workers found by the report included higher

rates of pay thereby obviating the need for a second job and greater visibility and respect in the workplace (ECHR, 2014: 19). Benefits to clients and contractors included a reduced staff turnover (ECHR, 2014: 69,70) in some cases to as little as 1% (ECHR 2014: 15); improved service (ECHR, 2014:72); and higher productivity rates (ECHR, 2014:15).

However the report also found evidence of staff levels being reduced and workloads being increased to offset the cost of paying the living wage. According to one worker interviewed the workforce was halved when the living wage was introduced and the remaining workers were left to do the work previously done by two staff (ECHR, 2014: 36). Despite these negative findings the report was highly positive about the impact of the living wage campaign on the cleaning sector as a whole and encouraged more firms to include it in their procurement policy.

We now turn to the research undertaken with cleaning workers at UEL following the implementation of the living wage in August 2011.

Methods

Our research proceeded in two stages. During a first stage, a small-scale questionnaire was distributed among cleaning staff and supervisors prior to the implementation of the living wage. We received 39 responses, which corresponds to a 43% response rate. The questionnaire covered experience of migration, reasons for migration, experience of campaigns and union and faith-group membership. The questionnaire was followed by eight semi-structured interviews in which the same issues were explored in greater depth. Interviews took place either in the work place or in the participant's home and lasted on average forty five minutes. They were conducted in the participant's first language (Portuguese or Spanish) and subsequently translated.

In a second stage, a questionnaire was distributed a year after the implementation of the living wage, focusing on pay and working conditions, workloads, overtime and hours, payments, grievances, etc. There were 41 responses to this which corresponds to a 46% response rate. The same themes were further explored in seven semi-structured interviews with cleaning staff and a focus group.

The method chosen to analyse the qualitative data set was thematic analysis. We found this to be a flexible method of analysis that enabled us to account for the data in a suitably rich and detailed manner. Themes were identified and analysed by the researchers and patterns across the data set were sought. Interview data was coded using NVivo software.

Our positionality as campaign activists has influenced our approach to the research which can be seen as a piece of community-engaged research (Handley et al 2010). In addition it can also be seen as a piece of action-research (Wills 2014). A partnership between the community and the researchers was built and strengthened throughout the research process. The community partners collaborated in discreet steps of the research such as participant recruitment and data collection. Findings were disseminated to the community prior to write-up and submission of the completed article. Also - and in a very direct sense – the research was action-orientated. It was undertaken in the context of a campaign to ensure that the benefits of the living wage were secured. Our findings were published in a report that was sent to senior managers at the university that was then used as the basis of a negotiation between the living wage campaign team at UEL – comprising TELCO, Unison and representatives from other trade unions on the campus – and the client and the contractor. This accounts for the fact that, unlike the Wills and Linneker study (2012), only cleaning workers participated in this research and not clients, contractors or end-users. A fuller assessment of the costs and benefits of the introduction of the living wage at UEL would require broader participation but also a greater elapse of time to allow for the new contract to

bed down. We are currently engaged in writing this evaluation. In this study however the research is undertaken expressly to bring about change: to give voice to the interests of a marginalised community and ensure that ownership of the campaign translates into lasting control over their work and its impact on their lives.

Data analysis & findings

A year after the implementation of the living wage, it was clear that some progress had been made. Questionnaire data showed that while in 2011 a majority (62%) of cleaning staff respondents had received incorrect pay, the figure dropped to 44% in 2012. Late payments also seemed to happen much less frequently: they were reported by 62% of respondents in 2011, but only by 12% in 2012.

Another noticeable change was in the number of respondents who stated being a member of a trade union: from 46% in 2011 to 51% in 2012. Furthermore, 44% of those who stated being a trade union member also knew who their branch representative was, demonstrating some engagement with the union branch.

One year on - Summary table	
experienced increased workload	56%
experienced problems taking leave	58%
have a contract	90%
have always been paid on time	88%
have always received correct pay	56%
are no better off as a result of the living wage	61%
Have trade union membership	51%
Know their TU representative	44%

n = 41

Benefits from the introduction of a living wage

While just 24% of our respondents said they were better off and just 20% said that their life had changed as a result of receiving the living wage we did nonetheless find evidence in the interviews that the pay rise had made a difference. One cleaning worker that we interviewed responded as follows to the question as to whether he was better off:

Yes I am. Well, it's astonishing because in other places they pay £6 or £6.30 at most. Not even £7. So it's great that here they pay £8.30. That had a very positive impact because you can really see the difference between this company and other companies. Lots of people want to work here because we earn £2.30 more than most others. So it was a big change. It made a big difference. [Paulo]^{iv}

Another described the benefits of the introduction of the living wage as twofold:

First, the rise itself. I know I have two more pounds than I had before. With those two pounds I can buy things I couldn't afford before and I can save up and then buy something for which I wasn't able to save up before. And there's a second thing – we are not alone; we have support. If we have a problem the union helps us and they stand firmly by us. I was very happy with that and I think we should have done it before. I believe all cleaning workplaces should be unionised, because without the union our voice can't be heard - our cries are muted. [Laura]

Others interviewed stated that they used the additional money to save or purchase additional items for their house that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to afford.

There was evidence that cleaning workers thought that the new contract was better managed with 88% of respondents saying they were paid on time. This contrasts with the previous contractor which frequently didn't pay its staff on time and often underpaid them. The

majority of those surveyed 42% believed that a problem arising at work was taken seriously by their line manager. Cleaning staff also appreciated fortnightly payments with one former supervisors characterising the benefits as follows:

It's good because it gets easier for one to manage one's money. With one payment you pay the rent, with the following payment you pay something else... I think it's good. [Carmen]

However there was also evidence of frustration on the part of cleaning staff that for a variety of reasons they weren't able to perform to their best abilities in their job. The following comment was typical of the frustration felt by many:

... If they would treat the cleaners well, this would work very well. We could even do twice as much work, without being degraded. We work better if we're more relaxed and less... they don't have to humiliate us. I don't get it. If they ask us to do something, we do it. There is no need to degrade, mistreat, shout... It's a very sad situation.[Jose]

'Evening things out'

However, our research unveiled a range of problems including workers working without contracts, problems experienced booking leave; instances of bullying and victimisation of staff that had taken an active role in the campaign. Such problems are not unusual, particularly in the aftermath of a campaign and can generally be addressed by building capacity in the trade union branch. What concerned us more was the increase in workloads reported and in some cases the reduction in the length of contracts from 52 weeks to 39, and 29 weeks. Regarding workloads and time allocation, 72% of survey respondents said they did

not have sufficient time to complete their work; 56% said that their work had actually increased under the new contractor as contrasted with 34% who said it had not.

When we interviewed cleaning staff many reported that work had become more insecure with cleaning staff being sent home when there wasn't enough work. We explored this further in interviews and the following is typical of the responses that we got:

Before (with the previous contractor) the work was normal but now with [the new contractor] one has to do the work of two or three people...One has to clean more rooms, more corridors, you do some work in a certain floor, then you have to go to another floor and do other things....So it's a lot more work, a lot more.

In response to the question whether there was enough time to complete the work, an interviewee said:

No, I don't have enough time. There never is enough time. If you put a little bit more into your work, if you want to do it well... you have to be very fast because there is no time. It's two hours. For example, we have two hours to do all of the toilets in the Ground Floor.....So it's fifteen toilets that I have to do in two hours. And if I am to do it well... and I like doing it well because I always said that I do my work well. But often I go past my hours. I never finish at the same time. Sometimes I finish at 8.30 and if one day I do it a little more in-depth I finish at 9am.[Manuela]

Another described working with a colleague:

Just recently I was working with a lady called Paula.....and that lady, she seems crazy. She runs and runs and runs in despair. She picks up the bags and the rubbish... I asked her: 'Paulita, what's the matter with you? Are you OK?'

'Why, sonny, why do you ask that?'

'Because you're running and running...'

'I have to run otherwise they say I don't do enough'[Jose]

Moreover, 61% survey respondents said they were no better off as a result of receiving the living wage. [15% were either neutral or did not respond]. In the interviews we expected the reduction of in-work benefits to be the central reason for this. While we found some evidence or a reduction of tax credits in some households as a consequence of increased wages, a number of interviewees said they were happier to be paid more and receive less in-work benefits. However, the main reason lay elsewhere: with increased workloads and the reduction of contracts from 52 weeks to 39 weeks and 29 weeks. While workers were receiving the living wage - over two pounds an hour more than their previous hourly rate - their annual wage was considerably less. This in turn led to increased pressure on workloads as staff remaining carried the work of those not working and increased job insecurity. One cleaning worker that we interviewed described this as a process of 'evening things out'. While the hourly rate increases the overall contract is reduced and the workload is increased. Another interviewee summed the problem up as follows:

The problem is that there is no stability. For example, when the lectures are over there is less work and so they lay off some people, so one ends up having to do double the work. The work of that worker, if they lay her off, then you have to do it yourself. But if you have to do it on top of your own, I think they should pay us double. And they pay us the same. So you do double the work and they pay you the same amount. I don't think that's right. If you do double the work, they should give you more hours.[Manuela]

Another commented on the insecurity of work with the new contractor;

For example, here in East Building there were permanent cleaners from 6am to 8am and some of them stopped doing that. That's the case of Paula (...); they cut her morning hours. So they told her they were going to give her more hours in halls but some days they don't call her! Some days they call her, some days they don't!

[Alfredo]

In response to the question whether the living wage campaign had been worth it one interviewee responded as follows:

Well... No, I don't. They do pay more, but with so much work one hardly notices it. It's like... they just demand more work and that's how they compensate for it. They pay more but now we have to do more work – a lot more actually. I'm having to clean an office, clean a glass panel, put the paper, get the rubbish, to clean the lamps... things I didn't have to do before. So that's it... they increased the workload.

[Jose]

Another former supervisor and central activist in the campaign commented as follows:

No, I don't. Totally not.....When we started the campaign we thought it was going to be very different. We thought everything would remain the same but that we would be earning more. That's all gone. That's all totally gone. Many people have preferred to quit or to look for other jobs. Specifically jobs where they can work all year round. And people have come to understand that... how do they benefit from earning eight fifty per hour if they're going to be out of work for almost half of the year? It's better to earn less but to have security for the year for their bills, their food, their rent, and their needs.[Camilo]

What we found, then, was that many cleaning workers had been rendered more precarious and more insecure as a result of the introduction of the living wage.

Discussion

This was a sobering and humbling moment for us and others that had campaigned for the living wage at UEL. While the benefits of the campaign were not simply economic they were principally so. Was this a problem with the living wage as such or the way that it had been implemented at UEL? A comparison of our findings with those of Wills and Linneker (2012) would suggest the latter. While the concept of a living wage is not unproblematic, the UEL experience is, in our view, principally a problem of implementation and indicates the need for further attention by researchers and campaign groups. Our findings support those of Wills and Linneker (2012) that the experience of implementation can vary according to sector, the existence of a trade union, but also the diligence of facilities managers. Universities, like other public sector institutions have seen a steady loss of operational and strategic expertise in facilities management and are at a significant disadvantage when negotiating and overseeing a contract with large scale companies. Evidence from Wills and Linneker (2012) and the EHRC (2014) suggest that the best examples of implementation are where contract managers retain responsibility for this process rather than pass this on to the contractor - for example, in undertaking an audit of the total number of hours needed rather than leave this up to contractor and industry standards. While we are unable to support this argument directly due to the scope of the study, the likelihood is that something similar occurred at UEL.

What is the significance of our findings for campaign groups like community organisations and trade unions? Our findings - and the way these have been used in the campaign - suggest that, when possible campaign groups should remain involved and should not be content with

winning the living wage alone. The existence and support of trade unions and the unionisation of the cleaning staff themselves makes this more likely. Our findings would also support the call by Holgate (2009) and others^v for better and closer co-operation between community organisations and trade unions to secure the legacy of winning the living wage. While there is undoubtedly a division of labour between community organisations and trade unions it is not a hard and fast one in our view. Workplaces are communities with ample opportunities for practicing good citizenship. At the same time communities - if they are lucky today - go to work and individual members are represented by trade unions that protect their interests and the integrity of their profession. On the issue of living wage implementation, the lines of responsibility are blurred. Community organisations cannot wash their hands of organisations that implement living wage irresponsibly, walking off with the 'win' and leaving trade unions to pick up the pieces. At the same time trade unions cannot complain of encroachment onto their terrain as sustained communal relations engendered by broad based organizing, is central to ensuring that the living wage is implemented responsibly.

The Living Wage Foundation (LWF) was set up by Citizens UK in 2010 to recognise living wage employers. The bar for recognition is currently set quite low with employers receiving the living wage kite mark if they can demonstrate that all externally contracted staff are paid at least the living wage or commit to implementing the living wage within a certain timescale. Nothing prevents the poorly performing or unscrupulous organisation reducing contracts and increasing workloads to offset higher wage costs. However this is an unavoidable risk given the voluntary nature of the undertaking that relies on workers, managers (from both client and contractor) and the general community to play their part. At most the LWF can be a resource for best procurement practice at least until such times as the living wage kite mark is more broadly established. Our findings certainly demonstrate the need for such a foundation.

Conclusion

The experience of the implementation of the living wage at UEL shows that winning the living wage does not necessarily translate into improved job security. Beyond the announcement and the introduction of the living wage there is a lot more to do to ensure that the benefits of a living wage to workers are not negated by a reduction of staff, an increase in workloads and a reduction of hours. Community organisations and trade unions each have their part to play in this in ensuring and recognising the best employment and procurement practices.

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ⁱ London Living Wage Research, Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London.
<http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/livingwage/>

ⁱⁱ See for example Grover (2008) and Weldon & Targ (2003). Both argue that the way the living wage is calculated works against single parent families.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an account of union/community organisation relations see Holgate (2009 & 2013). Our experience confirms her finding that relations are often best at the grassroots level.

^{iv} All names have been changed.

^v See Symon and Crawshaw (2009).