

# The Nation.

## Living-Wage Victory in LA

*The Nation* - February 5 2007

By Peter Dreier

Last September 28, more than 2,000 people marched down Century Boulevard near Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), and more than 300 people, including two LA City Council members and other elected officials, clergy, union leaders and students, were arrested as part of a well-orchestrated civil disobedience sit-in--to protest the mistreatment of low-wage hotel workers by thirteen hotels in the airport area.

The grassroots campaign culminated four months later, on January 31, when the LA City Council voted to extend the city's living-wage law to the 3,500 employees at the LAX hotels. Their pay will bump up to \$10.64 an hour on July 1, and they'll get ten days of paid vacation, a significant improvement for most of the workers, primarily immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

Organizers believe that the new law is the first of its kind to target a specific industry and a specific geographic area.

The City Council initially approved the living-wage extension in November, over the objections of the business community and a Los Angeles Times editorial. But then the LA Chamber of Commerce and the hotel industry collected enough signatures to put the measure on the May ballot, pledging to raise more than \$5 million for a media campaign to persuade voters to rescind the law. The hotel workers' union (UNITE HERE), the LA County Federation of Labor and the LA Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE)--the key backers of the law--were prepared to defend the law with a grassroots campaign of their own, which they expected would cost \$1.5 million.

Political observers were gearing up for a bitter and costly battle between the business community and the living wage's union and community advocates. But after a poll sponsored in January by Working Californians revealed that 74 percent of likely LA voters supported the living-wage law, the business groups began having second thoughts. Antonio Villaraigosa, LA's pro-labor mayor and a former union organizer himself, offered to try to broker an agreement to avoid a divisive ballot fight and to save the city the \$3 million it would cost to run the election.

After several weeks of on-again/off-again talks, the two sides reached an agreement the day before the deadline that would have required the city to put the measure on the May ballot.

The settlement preserved all the key components of the living-wage law that the City Council had passed in November, but it responded to key concerns by opponents. It added several required steps before the city could extend the law to additional industries or geographic areas. These included additional public hearings and study by three economists to examine the impact of a wider living-wage law.

The City Council also agreed to explore investing city funds to improve the commercial area around the airport, which currently has few restaurants, movie theaters or other amenities

that would encourage tourists at airport hotels to stay in the area longer and spend more money. City officials also talked about creating a small conference center near the airport, although no promises were made. These additional wrinkles allowed the business leaders to save face in what most agreed would otherwise have been a losing effort to rescind the popular living-wage law.

The agreement also exempts hotels that sign collective bargaining agreements with their workers. The LAX hotels have resisted employees' efforts to unionize.

The strong City Council support for the law was due in large part to what LAANE organizer Vivian Rothstein called the members' "personal engagement" with the plight of the hotel workers. Council members Ed Reyes and Jose Huizar, who were arrested in the September civil disobedience, "put their bodies on the line," Rothstein said.

In addition, at the request of UNITE HERE, more than half of the fifteen City Council members visited hotel workers at their jobs and homes. Many were horrified by the workers' living and working conditions but also moved by their resolve to win improvements from their employers. Councilmember Janice Hahn, the living-wage law's chief sponsor, experienced an altercation with a hotel security guard when she insisted on talking with a hotel manager, an incident that strengthened her commitment to the workers' cause.

The LA victory comes at a time of considerable political momentum for lifting low-wage workers out of poverty. Last November voters in six states approved ballot measures to raise their states' minimum wage above the federal level; twenty-nine states now have such laws. In the past decade, more than 100 cities have passed local living-wage laws targeted to firms that get municipal subsidies. Three cities--San Francisco, Albuquerque and Santa Fe--have passed citywide minimum-wage laws. Democrats in Congress are now pushing to raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.25; it has been stuck at \$5.15 since 1997.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070219/dreier>