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Workers Win a Living Wage Victory in Texas Solidarity America By John Funciello BC Columnist

When the Travis County, Texas, commissioners last week approved a policy that raises construction wages and wages in a few other fields from \$7.50 an hour to \$11 per hour, it was a victory for workers.

The policy is not written in stone, but it is a start, even though it is the county containing Austin, the state capital, one of the more liberal enclaves in the Lone Star State. The policy requires that contractors who come into the county asking for tax incentives pay closer to a living wage, rather than the starvation wage they have been allowed to pay.

Other cities and counties in other states have tried to pass these "living wage laws" for years, with some scattered success. This time, however, it was a win in one of the most anti-union states in the nation. And make no mistake about it, every time this living wage concept has come up, it has been tied directly to unions and the union movement by the powers of Corporate America.

Because of the relentless assault on the labor movement, in general, and the union movement, in particular, the corporations have been able to defeat the concept of a living wage law or policy in many places. There are workers who are not sure that the "living wage" concept is even valid, such is the success of decades of propaganda by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Federation of Independent Business, and others.

This one, however, cannot be denied; it is a victory for *all workers*. They can try all they want to say that this just helps "union bosses," but working men and women in Travis County are the beneficiaries of the work of thousands in securing the living wage.

Employers across the country have done their best over generations to make a distinction between workers and unions, as if unions were not made up of millions of workers. The busy Right Wing think tanks (of which there are so many in the U.S.) consistently have tried to plant in the minds of average Americans the notion that unions represent their members and corporations represent their *employees*.

The distinction is a very important one for Corporate America, which tries its best to not only portray itself as a friend of their employees, but to portray its constituency as "good corporate citizens," an oxymoron, if there ever was one. The use of the word "workers" is mostly forbidden in general usage among corporatists. In fact, there is a hate talker on AM radio who said that he is sick of hearing the word "worker." They are employees, plain and simple, according to him, and they should just be satisfied with having a job...any job, at any rate of pay.

The word "worker" conjures up the naked struggle between labor and capital that has raged from time to time in America, usually with workers on the losing end. The exception to that was a time when the union movement was on the rise, along with the nation's economy, and it was a period of a couple of decades during which the vast middle class arose. If the destructive practices of the natural resources extraction industries around the world and the rise of industrial agriculture are discounted, it was a pretty good time economically for the U.S.

Some giant corporations even thought the word "employee" was too much to bear and they began to call their workers "associates" (Walmart) and now, other companies call them "associates" or "partners." As if those words were true. They will call them anything but what they are. Workers. Maybe it is that they are afraid of that old call to join in solidarity: Workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!

Big companies have been so successful at splitting the working class and the middle class, and keeping them separated from one another, that half of those two classes think that a union would be detrimental to their economic health. The propaganda has been that good. Yet, a

significant proportion of wage-working men and women say they would join a union if they could, according to recent polls.

It would appear that not much has changed, then, from the age of the Robber Barons, when Jay Gould (U.S. financier and railroad magnate, 1836-1892) said, "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." If he were kidding at all, he was only half kidding. One of the things that has changed from that dismal time for the working class is that the military or militia are not called out as much to put down strikes (rebellions) and the notorious detective agencies are not allowed to function as the private armies of corporations. Today, private security companies have more staff than the legitimate police, but fortunately they are not allowed the leeway of those "detective" agencies of the old days.

When there are four or five applicants for every job, it's not very hard to keep wages low in America and that has been the case for more than 30 years. Not everyone on the workers' side was happy with the new living wage law in Travis County. One member of the electrical workers union in Chicago, commenting on the AFL-CIO blog's report of the new Travis policy, complained that workers apparently do not need unions any more. They simply need to go to the government and change the law or policy and get a raise.

All of the organizations that fought for the new policy deserve credit for getting workers a raise, and it is a substantial one. It would have been a benefit for all workers if they had joined together into a union to get the raise. That way, they might have received the benefits of a full union contract, including health care, a pension, paid sick leave, and a grievance procedure.

These are things that once were expected as part of a union job in the short period when the working class was looking at a bright future, but those who work under a union contract today are struggling to maintain what they have in the face of threats of plant or company closure and flight to a lower-wage country. That has been the American way of doing business for decades and workers are against the wall economically.

The situation has made the U.S. a poorer country. And, there are many obstacles to survival for the working American family. It will take a movement of *workers* to join together to gain what they are due in the economic scheme of things, whether they become part of a union, or not. The union movement will have to view its future in the light of

this changed world. An old-line trade unionist might decry the necessity of looking to the community-at-large for a rise in the pay standard, but it is time to take improvements where they occur and recognize that non-union people of all ages are coming to know that concerted action is the way to practice their democracy.

It could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

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