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A Brief Interlude:

Talking About Compensation

So it's a question of student value. And not moral value, but it's value for the dollar. How much, how much value is there in the education, and how much do they pay for it, and do we increase value by increasing salaries of low-paid employees?

-exempt staff member

I worked with a woman who's now retired, but when she complained about her rate of pay, which was really quite low compared with the rest of the city, her boss took her outside and said, "Yes, but where else can you see [a local natural feature] every day from your office?" And she said, "Well that doesn't feed the family, you know, that's just a stupid thing to say."

-non-exempt staff member

The idea of a living wage raises a whole constellation of questions about the nature of fairness in compensation. One part of the allure of the market as a standard for wage-setting is that it presents a relatively clear algorithm for working out what wages should be—which is not to deny that setting market wage rates is a complicated task of data analysis, but only to say that after the first, large moral decision to base one's wages on the market at all, the process is generally unencumbered by a need for judgments of abstract moral principle. It becomes a technical problem of working out the most accurate facts. By contrast, attempting to set a wage based on ethical principles demands a whole series of judgments grounded in stances on the nature of justice, of responsibility, and of compensation itself.

One might distinguish between two categories of issues about fairness in wages—on the one hand the fairness of absolute wages, which is to say, how much one's pay is worth in the context of the overall system of monetary value, and on the other hand the

fairness of comparative wages, which is to say, how different jobs or different employees in the same job are paid relative to one another. In theory, the concept of a living wage—which is that any full-time job should be paid at least enough for a worker to be able to meet basic needs for themselves and their families without needing to work an additional job—only speaks to the issue of absolute wages, promoting the idea of a minimum for all while remaining neutral on the question of relating one job to another. Proposing this kind of philosophical principle as a basis for compensation, however, almost inevitably precipitates a broader conversation, drawing in both absolute and comparative principles, about what, in a moral sense, a wage really means. For instance, does a wage represent how much the institution values a person's labor? And if so, how could that figure be set?

The market, of course, is one kind of guiding principle for establishing an absolute standard for compensation. Some kind of assessment of basic needs—couched perhaps in the terminology of living wage or of self-sufficiency wage—is another. Of course, one can conceive of other bases for establishing absolute wage standards—a percentage of the institution's total budget, perhaps, or any of a number of methods for estimating the value of people's work to an institution. The living wage idea, however, has particular contemporary political currency.

The underlying principle of a living wage, as articulated above, is deceptively simple, but even campaigners who share that goal may not agree about the underlying reasons for the principle. Perhaps the central ideological question about a living wage is what, in fact, is its relationship to need. Because it is defined in terms of meeting people's basic needs, the living wage can easily be interpreted to be all about striving to

meet the particular needs of individual employees. The immediate question becomes, what do you do about the fact that different people—in different family circumstances, for instance—have different quantifiable amounts of need? It would be too costly to pay everyone the highest figure that anyone needs, and illegal to pay people differentially according to their family sizes. One research participant suggested to me that the most efficient solution is to meet families' needs through additional benefits, since benefits, unlike wages, can be differentially available to different people based on their needs.¹

This kind of need-centered understanding of a living wage, however, sets up a dynamic of the wage as a humanitarian project rather than a fairness project—and in some ways this becomes a limiting discourse. It promotes the subjection of staff members' personal budgets to a closer scrutiny than the college would ever exert to examine, for example, the personal spending of faculty members. Further, a focus on needs may be read as patronizing, in the sense that it implies that the college, out of charity, is paying people more than they deserve for their work. Wages are traditionally read to more directly compensate for the value of one's work rather than for some assessment of basic needs. What does it mean to set the wages of particular groups of people according to a whole different kind of standard than the wages of all other groups? Furthermore, beginning to use a standard of need to compensate all of the employees in an institution might have quite different ideological implications than making this switch only for the lowest-paid categories of employees, while continuing to pay others based on the market's assessment of the worth of their labor. Is the living wage project visionary and radical, a pioneering effort in a larger socialist project of gradually separating the

¹ This idea also came up in the deliberations of Swarthmore's Ad Hoc Committee on a Living Wage, and indeed an expansion of the benefits available to workers with dependent children became a major part of

distribution of wealth from the sale of one's labor in the figurative marketplace? Or is it paternalistic and piecemeal, a charitable handout to those for whom the market wage generates hardship, but one that poses no fundamental challenge to the idea that market wages accurately reflect the value of people's work?

I know of no integrated national conversation in the United States living wage movement about how we define the living wage in view of these kinds of ideological questions. Indeed, the loose student coalition of anti-sweatshop and living wage activists networked through United Students Against Sweatshops, Jobs with Justice's Student Labor Action Projects, and other organizations is certainly plural, often ambivalent, sometimes even evasive about its large-scale vision. In *Students Against Sweatshops*, Liza Featherstone quotes a Yale student labor activist who remarked to reporters, "We are training an entire generation to think differently about [pause] capitalism," then laughed and added, "Oops, maybe I shouldn't have said that." (34) But many of the Fair Labor activists I spoke with at Pseudonym certainly would not have characterized their project as anti-capitalist. A number said that their strategic presentation of a fair wage as a moderate project free of broader ideological implications was key to their success. Yet even if such a public stance is an effective tactic, it is risky for activists to continue to dodge at least an internal-to-the-movement conversation about the philosophical and political-economic groundings of our work, because no stance is truly neutral. The outcomes of our rhetorical and tactical choices are freighted with repercussions, not only for our specific goals, but also for how we affect the flows and power and understandings of work, community, and respect on our campuses.

the committee's recommendation and of the plan eventually adopted by the Board of Managers.

It is possible to conceive of the living wage project in a way that acknowledges the concept of meeting needs without abandoning the ideological grounding of compensating people for their work. Rather than perceiving that the institution is re-centering its wage policy around need, one can understand it to be simply recalibrating its assessment of the value of work. One explanatory narrative for this ideological turn is that the market is not a reliable tool for assessing the real value of work, since the market can be demonstrated to reflect historical biases that, for instance, systematically undervalue the work of women of color. In this ideology the need calculation becomes a benchmark, a standard distinct from the labor market against which the value of work can be read. We may not know exactly how to determine the real value of people's labor when we accept that the market is not a reliable measure, but perhaps one easy-to-agree-upon standard is that clearly anyone's full-time labor must be worth more than the minimum amount it would take to sustain oneself and one's family. This kind of narrative sidelines hyper-specific projects that seek to assess particular individuals' needs and meet them as efficiently as possible, because in this vision meeting needs is not really the point of a living wage—needs are, rather, the rough calculation by which a living wage is determined.

One exempt staff member spoke to about the ideology of compensation—specifically, the health care benefit—in a related way, drawing on the notion of how the institution values its employees' work:

Health care. You know, that it just keeps rising and rising and rising—as it does everywhere. But I think that Pseudonym always has done things differently, so even if health care increases, if they value their employees and the amount of money the employees get to bring home to their families then maybe they'd take a bigger chunk. And they do take a big chunk, they do pay

a big chunk of the benefits, but maybe they'd just pay more! I don't know!
You know, maybe they'd just decide that that is valuable.

It is possible, then, to conceive of an absolute living wage in a way that retains at its core the notion of how much the institution values its employees work. All these questions of framing are critical considerations in the work of student labor activists (and others) who plan to deploy discourses like the living wage.

In complement to various standards of absolute wage there are the factors that make up conceptions of comparative wage. Discourses of how one wage should compare to another can draw on a number of criteria; many people I spoke with at Pseudonym, for instance, invoked the relative importance or centrality of one's work to the college's educational mission; relative longevity; relative replaceability; and relative skill or competence, among others. Probably the most contentious bone in the comparative wage conversation, both at Pseudonym and at Swarthmore, has been the competition of discourses around wage compression, the issue of how the wages of employees not at the minimum are affected, or perceived to be affected, by changes in the minimum. As the bottom wage rates increase, are employees already making above the minimum entitled to some increase as well? Again, answering these questions requires drawing upon the underlying ideologies of wages, the questions of whether compensation is about meeting needs, respecting work, promoting equality, preserving hierarchy... It is worth noting, however, that two distinct kinds of wage compression are too easily elided. When faculty members in particular brought up the issue, they tended to grapple with the question of what it might mean to accompany a minimum wage increase with decompression, a strategy apparently for preserving class hierarchy in the institution. When non-exempt staff and contract workers brought up the issue of wage compression, however, they were

more likely to be referring to compression within one job classification but across degrees of longevity, with the problem being that people who had worked at the college for a long time would find themselves at the same rate of pay as people who had just started.

I should make two more brief points here. One is that union bargaining represents a third, distinct, and politically potent method—separate from the market and from the living wage idea—for establishing a standard by which wage rates can be determined. The other is that contracting out work shifts the discourse of wage comparisons in a powerfully significant way—because the industry within which contract workers are conceived of, and the context in which their wages are compared to others, is no longer the context of college wages but instead the context of other wages paid by Unnamed Contractor. This potentially exerts downward pressure on what is perceived to be a fair market wage rate.