

Living Wage

Aotearoa New Zealand



THE LIVING WAGE MOVEMENT

GETTING INVOLVED – LIVING WAGE MOVEMENT AOTEAROA NZ

All over the world communities are uniting to address poverty and inequality through living wage campaigns. The Living Wage Movement Aotearoa New Zealand (the Movement) was formed in 2012 to generate a conversation about working poverty in Aotearoa and it has been extraordinarily successful in its short history.

The Movement was established in May 2012. Since then, 60 businesses have become accredited as Living Wage Employers and more than 70 Member Groups from union, faith and community organisations are part of the campaign to achieving a Living Wage for New Zealanders as one step in reducing inequality and poverty in Aotearoa.

The Movement has successfully ensured the words “living wage” have entered the lexicon of New Zealand culture as the new standard for decent wages and as a political demand in elections for public office. The Living Wage has in a very real way impacted on the debate about the Minimum Wage and, arguably, the level at which it is set.

We operate on four key principles:

1. Non-party political
2. Built locally through local relationships and local issues
3. Independent of government in policy, funding and association
4. Comprised of three streams in our structures and decision-making: faith-based; community-based secular groups, and Unions

WORKERS ARE AT THE HEART OF THE MOVEMENT

Many of those involved in the Movement are paid less than a Living Wage and are articulate and dedicated campaigners. Low paid workers are involved through their churches, unions and community organisations because it is these organisations that join as Member Groups of The Movement.

The strength of the Movement is its broad base. Through churches, community groups and unions a diverse group of people have joined together in the recognition that we all have a vested interest (or common concern) in the creation of thriving communities where each member can participate as active member in society.

An example is the representative from Changemakers Refugee Forum, Ibrahim Omer-Salin, who is on our national Governance Committee and the Living Wage Wellington Local Board.

Prior to the October 2016 local government elections, People’s Assemblies were held in locations including West Auckland, Central Auckland, Wellington, Hutt Valley, Porirua and Christchurch. At each of those events, the speakers included people earning less than the Living Wage. For example, at the People’s Assembly at St-Matthew-in-the-City, one of the speakers was a woman who works as a cleaner at Auckland Council. She cleans the Mayor’s Office and other offices from 5.30pm until 3.30am five days a week and is paid \$15.60 an hour. Her husband is also on a low income, and both of them are acutely aware of the wider context of poverty in New Zealand.

She spoke of her aspirations for her children, and explained how difficult it was to give them a good education when the family simply did not have money to pay for extra-curricular activities at school.

THE MOVEMENT AND THE GOVERNMENT

One of the benefits of the way the Movement is organised is that it is a community initiative independent of, and not reliant on, government action or funding. There has been no New Zealand Government in recent decades willing to take a comprehensive approach to abolishing poverty. No New Zealand Government in recent years has raised benefits or increased wages to liveable levels, nor have they created an employment relations system capable of delivering decent wages through workplace bargaining or arbitration.

While lobbying governments is one tactic for addressing poverty, it will have limited effectiveness as long as New Zealand governments cling to neo-liberal philosophies. However, as a Movement we are able to make real progress in improving family incomes by advocating for a Living Wage, as this is not dependent on any government action. While governments have sat on their hands and refused to address poverty in a meaningful way, the Movement is dealing directly with employers to raise family incomes.

The Movement's strategy of acting directly in communities to achieve change is proving to be an effective approach. A broad-based organising model of uniting the diverse groups of civil society to influence powerful decision-makers has reaped dividends in local government elections across the country with six councils having majority support for a Living Wage at the end of 2016.

Malia Lagi

