



Lesley Francey

A living wage

New Zealanders make a habit of comparing ourselves to you Australians. We worry who has the best food, the nicest weather, the most sheep, the strongest (or weakest) economy, the most banal politicians, and of course, our never-ending debate about sports teams and athletes. I suspect much of the time Australia is unaware its little brother is comparing itself so assiduously.

One area where we often look jealously across the Tasman may surprise you - it's your minimum wage rates.

A couple of months ago the Government increased the minimum wage here in New Zealand by 25 cents to NZ\$13.75 an hour. This meagre rate means two adults working full time on the minimum wage will earn between NZ\$800-900 a week after tax. Take away an average rent for a family house, especially in a big city, healthy food, electricity, phone and other basic necessities and there is little if any breathing room for families who face any out-of-the-ordinary costs. For a single income family it is nigh on impossible.

For a tertiary education union like us you would hope that the minimum wage rate would be little more than academic (if you'll excuse the pun). However, Victoria University of Wellington employs bookshelvers in permanent jobs on exactly that rate. And other tertiary education institutions here have similarly low rates for staff and contractors.

Tired of insubstantial and incremental gains around the minimum wage, unions and community groups around New Zealand have united in a Living Wage campaign. The campaign bases itself on the successful Living Wage campaign in Britain. It sidesteps government, instead targeting major employers, such as coun-

cils and universities, to pay at least the living wage to their own employees, and to make it a condition in their contracts with companies that offer services such as cleaning and security.

The campaign has named a living wage rate of NZ\$18.40 an hour, calculated by researchers at the Anglican Church's Family Centre, as 'the income necessary to provide workers and their families with the basic necessities of life'.

About 40 per cent of New Zealand's 1.85 million employees, or around 740,000 people, earn below that rate - including beginning teachers, chefs, truck drivers, mechanics and carpenters, as well as traditionally low-paid groups such as cleaners, caregivers and checkout operators.

Charles Waldegrave, who led the Family Centre study, says the NZ\$18.40 figure is based on 'not including any luxuries at all'.

'The whole idea is you could participate in society and have enough to pay your rent and food and power,' he says.

Many tertiary education employees, such as library assistants, gardeners and cleaners, are on salaries and wages below NZ\$18.40 an hour.

For instance, tutors at Victoria University of Wellington, some of whom have masters degrees and are studying towards doctorates, have a starting pay rate of NZ\$17.54 an hour.

Many of these tutors are also studying full-time, and are no longer eligible for a student allowance. They work limited part-time hours. They need a job that pays a fair wage just to live.

There are some general staff, caretakers and security staff at Victoria University of Wellington who earn lower rates than tutors, some close to or on the minimum wage, and many are trying to support family on those pay rates.

By comparison, Victoria University of Wellington's Vice-Chancellor earns the equivalent of NZ\$250 an hour. Institution leaders like him have a key role to play turning their institutions into living wage employers.

Universities are meant to be transformative, not just for students but staff. People at universities should be making a better life for themselves and their communities. We would like to see universities and



other tertiary employers among the very first employers to sign up to the Living Wage campaign.

Some employers around New Zealand, including the Wellington City Council, have committed to being living wage employers. However, so far tertiary education employers have been quiet on the Living Wage campaign.

We would like to see them commit publicly to being living wage employers and ensure that their contractors are the same. Employers, especially big public sector employers who are in the business of giving people better employment opportunities, need to move beyond seeing the minimum wage as a baseline and focus instead on what their employees actually need in order to care for their families.

One Vice-Chancellor, Steve Maharey of Massey University, has told the media that he believed the living wage was a 'worthwhile debate' but also said that he was speaking as a former Cabinet Minister and not as an employer. As an employer he has recently contracted out dozens of low-paid cleaning jobs.

He and his colleagues need to commit, as employers, to the Living Wage campaign.



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