

# Keep the Promise of a Living Wage in Buffalo

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By Scott Schell

Imagine the following: After Congress passes laws to clean up corporate boardrooms and the accounting industry, the Justice Department and SEC claim they lack the resources to monitor compliance. Congress responds by stripping the enforcement provisions from the law, concluding that the job of bringing lawsuits against corporations and accountants should be left to private individuals.

How would the American public react? It's a fair bet that few Senators or Congressmen would long hold onto their jobs.

Yet an almost identical situation is now playing itself out in Buffalo. For two years a law has been on the books mandating that companies with sizeable city contracts – in excess of \$50,000 – pay their workers at least \$9.08 an hour (a dollar less if health coverage is provided). But few if any workers – many of whom work two or three low paying jobs and still cannot afford adequate food or shelter – have yet to see the benefit of this living wage law.

With officials citing a lack of resources, the city has for two years declined to monitor (much less enforce) compliance with the new law. Implementation of a living wage, meant to help hardworking families make ends meet, has never gotten off the ground. Earlier this month, adding insult to injury, the Common Council simply eliminated the key

enforcement and notification provisions needed to make the living wage a reality.

Mayor Masiello's answer to outraged community activists is that individual workers will do the job abdicated by local government. The recent modification of the law authorizes individuals to haul their employers into courts, where they can demand compliance with the living wage law. To make this a viable solution, the Mayor needs to explain how low-income workers will succeed at an enforcement task that allegedly was beyond the reach of City Hall. In fact, few employees are even aware of the living wage provisions. In resisting a lawsuit urging the city to implement the law, the city has refused to disclose information that could help employees learn whether they are covered.

At bottom this is a matter of public trust. Passing a living wage law, promising low-income workers a slightly brighter future, and then gutting the law, first through inaction and then through outright repeal of key provisions, reveals a disturbing disregard for the citizens of Buffalo by their elected officials.

The timing for this display of City Hall arrogance could not be worse. In this era of Enron and Worldcom, troubles in the Catholic church and doubts about the competence of the FBI and CIA, people are hungrier than ever for public servants that earn their trust. The surest way for elected officials to destroy credibility is to treat legislation as a masquerade, where feel good laws are enacted supposedly to raise up the most vulnerable members of the community, and then left to wither on the vine.

A living wage for hardworking Buffalo families is a just and worthy goal. So too is the preservation of the public's trust in government. Thankfully, it's not too late to make things right.

The Common Council should move to restore the law. Concerns about the cost of monitoring and enforcement raised by the Mayor's office, while understandable, are unfounded in this case. Like all cities, Buffalo has a duty to keep track of its contracts and its contractors' legal obligations. Officials already on the city payroll can absorb this task for the living wage law.

If the city still insists on having no hand in monitoring, there are other options to explore: One we've seen work in Boston and elsewhere around the country is for a citizens' advisory committee to take on the task.

In the end, Buffalo's elected officials should keep their promise. The people of Buffalo deserve nothing less.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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