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Students go on hunger strike over employee wages at University of Virginia

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NCR Today

Eighteen students and their supporters at the University of Virginia, my alma mater, are on day six of a hunger strike calling for a living wage for the university's lowest-paid workers.

Members of Living Wage at UVA campaign are demanding the university pay their employees at least \$13an hour, provide job security, "safe, just and humane working conditions" and create a Living Wage Oversight Board.

In a letter to friends and supporters, hunger striker Hunter Link gives background on the campaign and explains why he is participating. Link, who is Catholic, says Catholic social teaching and Dorothy Day inspired his decision to join the hunger strike. Interestingly, University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan is also a Catholic and has written in favor of a living wage.

Here is an excerpt from Link's report:

The hunger strike decision did not come lightly nor easily. After years of engaging the administration in more conventional ways, including two meetings with the President herself, we became convinced that we needed different tactics. Read the our official announcement here. We are part of a 14-year long effort to secure justice for our community. We have the support of Charlottesville City Council, churches, and many other local community groups. Employees have also been voicing their support, though many are scared of retaliation. We've collected some anonymous testimonies from U.Va. employees, and a new one is posted everyday on our blog. Read one here.

We are asking that this institution becomes one that prioritizes human needs. A "living wage" essentially is a wage that allows families to support themselves, based on the cost of living in an area. The fact of the matter is that hundreds if not thousands of U.Va. employees do not make enough money to live in Charlottesville. A recent survey showed that over 20% of Charlottesville families were below the poverty line. U.Va. is the largest employer in the City and has more than enough money to make a dent in local poverty levels. Employees are forced to work second or third jobs, go on government assistance, or make choices between healthcare and food. At a rally today, a local doctor who works mainly with low-income populations in town said that "*many of the people he sees do not have health insurance, and many of these work for subcontractors at U.Va.*" He supports us because he has seen the damage that below-living wages have caused. All of this while U.Va. employs most of the highest-paid Virginia State employees, with salaries reaching above \$600,000/year.

We are asking that the University pay at least \$13.00/hr, including benefits, indexed to inflation (our full demands are online). Currently, U.Va. contracts labor services with private companies that can pay as little as \$7.50/hr with no benefits. Direct U.Va. employees make more, about \$10.65/hr with decent benefits, but that still puts them far beneath a living wage. If you want to learn more about what a living wage is, how it is calculated, etc. read our research document entitled "Keeping Our Promises." It contains all the information that you need to know.

We will soon be in the season of Lent, which as many of you know, is a season of fasting and penance. The connection between fasting and struggling for justice is as old as Christianity itself. St. Luke describes Jesus being "*led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry*" (Lk 4:1-2). Then, immediately after this trial in the desert, Jesus returns to Nazareth and describes His mission "*to proclaim good news to the poor./He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners/and recovery of sight for the blind,/to set the oppressed free,/to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Lk. 4:18-19). By quoting Isaiah and referencing the Jubilee as the manifesto of his earthly mission, Jesus unambiguously calls Christians to work for justice in the world. We pray that our own fast also awakens hearts to this call.

I am inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, which clearly calls for a living wage and the prioritization of human needs in business. I draw upon the history of working for justice that is part and parcel with the Catholic faith. I draw courage from the writings of Dorothy Day and others. I draw strength knowing that you my friends and family are praying for me. I feel blessed to have this opportunity to apply the teachings of the Church and of Christ to my life.

In the end, I decided to hunger strike because I believe that our institutions, especially ones of education, should be geared towards human needs and centered on the compassion of Christ. Jesus treated people's needs as holy, and we should do the same.

For more on the students' strike, including the university's response, click here.

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