

Case Study: A Living Wage Campaign

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Laura Delgado faces a dilemma. As a community organizer for a progressive advocacy group called the Center on Policy Initiatives (CPI) in San Diego, California, Laura has spent the last two years leading a campaign to win a living wage ordinance for the city of San Diego. It has been a tough fight, but Laura believes that victory may be within sight. A pivotal city council meeting is taking place next week. Hundreds of living wage activists will pack the city council’s chambers, and community leaders, clergy members, and students will speak to encourage council members to vote for the ordinance.

Laura is convinced that a low-wage worker who would benefit from a living wage must speak as well; living wage advocates need to put a human face on the issue in order to win. Luckily, in the past few months, Laura has gotten to know Sarah Brown, an attendant for a city public restroom downtown. Sarah has a compelling story, and Laura knows that she would do a great job speaking in front of the city council. But for Sarah to take such a public position may entail some risk; Sarah’s employer could be upset, or even fire Sarah, if he finds out that she is lobbying for a living wage ordinance. Should Laura encourage Sarah to speak?

Sarah Brown is an attendant at a street-level public restroom just around the corner from the city council building. Sarah – a grandmother with a shy smile and a gracious manner - spends almost forty hours a week there, cleaning toilets, mopping floors, restocking toilet paper, and buzzing people in and out from a tiny stall squeezed in between the men’s and women’s rooms. Because she doesn’t make enough from her full time job to support her family, she works an additional 25 hours a week at a McDonald’s. Both jobs pay minimum wage and provide no benefits. Even with two jobs, it is a constant struggle for Sarah to make ends meet. “Each month,” Sarah told Laura, “I worry that I will not be able to pay my rent or feed my grandson. Sometimes he cries because there is not enough to eat.”

Laura knows that, in order for CPI to win a living wage ordinance and improve the lives of thousands of city workers, including Sarah, a worker who would benefit from a living wage must speak at the city council meeting. Half-measures, like video-taping a worker but obscuring her identity, just won’t do. But for a worker to speak in public will entail some risk. Laura knows that in union organizing campaigns, one out of four worker activists is fired, illegally, because they are trying to form a union. The stakes are equally high in this case. What should Laura do?

Questions

1. Should Laura ask Sarah to speak at the city council meeting? Whether you answer yes or no, how do you arrive at your conclusion?
2. Imagine that Laura asks Sarah to speak. Sarah responds that she wants to do so because she believes in the importance of a living wage. But she tells Laura that she is afraid of losing her job if her employer finds out that she spoke at the meeting. What should Laura tell her?
3. Imagine that Laura also needs to recruit a pastor from an affluent congregation in the suburbs to speak at the meeting. The pastor wants to do so, but is concerned that his conservative congregation will be upset about his activism; perhaps he could even lose his job. How would your answers to questions 1 and 2 change, if at all, in this case?
4. Imagine that the worker Sarah needs to ask to speak happens to be undocumented. In this case, the worker could potentially not only lose his or her job, but also be deported. How would your answers to questions 1 and 2 change, if at all, in this case?