



In Spite of Corporate Lobbyists, Vermont Residents Organize to Raise the Wage

By Jonathan Leavitt

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Montpelier, Vermont, with its two main streets, nary a McDonald's, ringed with restive hills of raw milk co-ops and back to the land communes, suffused with narratives of leading the country, is generally not the sort of town most people would imagine the Koch brothers having much sway over. Vermont legislators, as with statehouses across the country, have been overcome with a public inequality discourse fomented by images of erupting subaltern indignation from the US' poorest and most precarious introduced not one but four bills this year to raise Vermont's current \$8.73 minimum wage to either [\\$10.10](#), [\\$12](#), [\\$12.50](#) or [\\$15 per hour](#). Yet a familiar constellation of corporate lobbyists employing a playbook used from [Seattle](#) to [Washington DC](#) to [Annapolis](#): slow implementation, low as possible wage increases, carve outs of tipped workers and younger workers, and recasting large corporate front groups as the tiniest of businesses.

In the face of this, a movement of low wage Vermont residents are building power, sharing their stories and flooding the statehouse in an attempt to take back their democracy. "After testifying to a committee like you in 2007, I reached the breaking point and I filed for bankruptcy," said Heather Pipino. "Decades later, I'm still at this table testifying for the need for livable wages and paid sick days, which wasn't even considered this session. It's shameful to still be having this conversation when worker productivity has steadily increased over my lifetime, but wages are stagnant and declining. You have a duty to represent those who are scrambling to get by and have frankly given up on democracy."

Vermont social movements have so fundamentally shifted power that, ["Awareness of the need to raise the minimum wage is so prevalent that Republicans have given up on fighting it and instead are looking for ways to make the change comfortable and reasonable for business."](#) Whether the corporate lobbyists are successful limiting the final political expression into what organizers call

a "poverty wage" or whether social movements are able to lay the groundwork for a livable wage will be decided in the coming days.

Corporate Lobbyists Versus Work With Dignity

In its [current form \(H.552\)](#) in Senate Appropriations, Vermont's minimum wage would only surpass the \$10.10 mark in 2018 when it rises to \$10.50. Travon Leyshon of the Vermont AFL-CIO, describes this as, "a poverty wage." According to the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, the [2012 Vermont Livable Wage was \\$12.48 per hour](#).

Recapitulating national corporate lobbyists' talking points George Malek, President, of the Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce urged Mullin's economic development committee, "not to raise the minimum wage above the schedule already in statute. If you must do so, please keep the increase to the lowest level and phase it as slowly as possible." Shayne Spence, Outreach Coordinator for the free market think tank, [The Ethan Allen Institute](#) (which receives funding from the climate change denying, Charles Koch founded Cato Institute) cautioned the Committee about having any sort of minimum wage at all. Instead, Spence proposed carve outs from this ground floor for working class Vermont residents. "I would suggest that you go the other way," said Spence, "and provide an exemption in the minimum wage for those below 18." In a House General Committee hearing Spence detailed his concerns about gains made by raising the minimum wage would go to those who making more than the Federal poverty line of \$11,670 per year for one person; people who, in Spence's opinion, "don't really need it."

Sean Crumb, Chairman of the Vermont Campground Association, asked that the bill "not be forwarded to the floor for further debate," effectively asking the committee to kill not only any minimum wage increase, but also kill the conversation about whether to raise the wage. Jim Harrison, lobbyist for the Retail and Grocers Associations, who helped defeat paid sick days this year, asked for multiple carve outs to the current minimum wage, to not increase wages in subsequent years relative to the increasing costs of household goods (Consumer Price Index), and an expansion of the high school student exemption to 22 years old.

The National Chamber of Commerce's provocative [lobbying against climate change legislation](#) and fighting to preserve [CEO payouts for taxpayer bailed out corporations](#) have caused even monolithic entities such as Nike and Apple to turn on it. While local Chambers don't always adopt similar corporate-friendly lobbying efforts, George Malick of the Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce, channeled [a controversial full page Wall Street Journal ad](#) in his House General committee testimony. Intimating the same technology-will- replace-workers theme should something approaching a living wage be passed, Malick said, "Snow blowers can replace snow shovelers; automated voice messages can replace receptionists."

Economic Development for Whom?

Republican State Senator Kevin Mullin of Rutland, Vermont being named the powerful Chair of the Vermont Senate Economic Development committee was controversial for Peter Shumlin, who has adroitly distilled the sentiments of social movements for single payer healthcare and ending nuclear power into an electoral mandate. Mullin is the Vermont Chair of the American

Legislative Exchange Committee (ALEC), a scandal-plagued, Koch Brother-funded corporate lobby group described by Bill Moyers as "[one of the most influential and powerful \[organizations\] in American politics](#)" for its flood of over a thousand model bills tailored by corporations, for corporations and introduced in statehouses nationwide annually. A sampling of ALEC bills isn't exactly redolent of progressive Vermont values: [Stand Your Ground which George Zimmerman claimed as a legal rationale for killing black teen Trayvon Martin](#), [Republican Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's controversial economic and social programs](#) which dismantled public sector unions and limited non-white voter participation - and [SB 1070 legislation to mandate racial profiling in Arizona](#). Yet in an interview with Truthout, Mullin describes ALEC as a "moderate" group. According to Mullin, during the debate on minimum wage, he "grabbed five copies" of an ALEC study [Rich States Poor States](#) and brought them into Senate Economic Development. "This whole fear of ALEC is absurd. It's beyond me," said Mullin.

In justifying why he sees minimum wage as the wrong solution for Vermont, a state which saw the fastest growth of income inequality of all states for 15 years before 2007, Mullin cites people like investment banker, venture capitalist, Sugarbush ski resort owner and former Merrill Lynch Executive Vice President, Win Smith. With one of the highest net worths in the world, Smith told Mullin how, "if we pass the house bill, he would immediately lay off 50 people. So we're taking a more phased-in approach." This phased-in approach is one of the most often used demobilization strategies corporate lobbyists are whispering in legislators' ears.

Interestingly, unlike the former Merrill Lynch Executive Vice President, small business owners like Phil Merrick of Burlington's August First bakery support going beyond Governor Shumlin's proposed \$10.10 an hour to a livable wage. "I see it as such an obvious thing we should be doing, raising the minimum wage," said Merrick. "I think \$10.10 is still ridiculously low. It's going to cost me money, but it's the right thing to do. "

"We Can't Afford to Wait"

Audra Rondeau, lives in Franklin County and describes friends getting jobs at local gas stations at \$8.73 per hour as looking like they won a million dollars. As one of 7,500 low wage homecare workers employed by the state of Vermont, a profession notorious for the intersection of gender and poverty, Rondeau knocked on doors across the country and around the state to help score the largest labor victory in the US in 2013. Now, as the State of Vermont displays [a marked reluctance to raise Rondeau and her fellow homecare workers out of poverty](#), Rondeau found herself in Mullin's committee, pleading for action. "We can't afford to wait; people are losing their homes. I'm \$1600 behind on my mortgage. We're dying out there as it is. If we wait, more people are going to lose their homes; more families are going to be split up," she said.

"In my life as a worker, I've been an orderly in a hospital, cashier in a convenience store and a dishwasher in a restaurant," Tom Kingston told the House General Committee. "The fact that I'm a low wage worker doesn't mean I'm a bad person. The thing about raising the minimum wage is that the people who are going to benefit from this action are going to dump this money right back into the economy," said Kingston.

For three of the last four years, Keith Brunner has "been doubling up, in a bunk bed with other folks. We had ten folks living in a three bedroom apartment. It's probably not legal, but it's what a lot of people are doing."

Liz Beatty Owens has "been working in the foodservice industry" since she was 16 years old. Beatty Owens detailed to legislators how she has "to work two jobs to support myself as a college student. I can't even imagine what it's like for families. I don't think I'll have the opportunity to start a family for many many years - if ever."

Debbie Ingram of Vermont Interfaith Action described to legislators how, "People of faith, particularly clergy, feel the biggest single issue facing society today is the huge economic disparity in our country. All of our sacred scriptures in all our different traditions point to the dignity of work." Ingram detailed to Mullin's committee a Vermont full of stories like Rondeau's and Kingston's, of her clergy presiding over hungry congregations where even "the kids are working" and parents face "terrible decisions between paying for the gasoline in their cars or their gas bill or their medications or their mortgages or rent" - hungry congregations which "can't wait 2 or 3 more years."

In the absence of public policy to remedy these stories, empirical data reveals these experiences are increasingly common in the Green Mountain State. The University of New Hampshire Carsey Institute reported in 2007 that [Vermont ranked second in growth of income inequality](#) nationally. Sam Houston State University researchers found [the wealthiest 1 percent of Vermont wage earners saw their incomes almost triple between 1970 and 2005. 81 percent of wage earners can't afford the median priced Vermont home](#). In the two years between June 2008 and June 2010, the number of hungry Vermont residents on 3SquaresVT, formerly "food stamps," rose precipitously from [23,000 to 43,000 households and 51,000 to 86,000 individuals](#).

It Will, Once Again, Take a Movement to Bend the Arc of History

In the past, the movement building of The Vermont Workers' Center has successfully challenged Montpelier's logic of what's politically possible. Governor Peter Shumlin said Single Payer Health Care was politically impossible in 2009, only to try to distill the dynamism of the Workers' Center's organizing in his Gubernatorial bid of 2010. Just a year later, as Act 48 was about to be passed, a divisive amendment was inserted by Senators Brock and Sears on a Thursday which would exclude people without immigration status from the "universal" healthcare system. It would have marked the first time racial discrimination would have been enshrined into Vermont statute. Workers' Center organizers were told by governor Shumlin's staff that there was a zero percent chance of removing the amendment. That Sunday, through an incredible amount of organizing a thousand people marched on the state, demanding that universal mean everyone. On Monday, in a massive display of the constituent power of Vermont social movements, [the discriminatory amendment was removed](#).

"The [legislature's failure to raise the minimum wage to a real livable wage triggers cuts to workers benefits](#)," says Traven Leyshon of the Vermont AFL-CIO. Citing overwhelming support for raising the minimum wage to a livable wage and moving forward with Paid Sick Days

legislation, Leyshon says, "There's a real disconnect between politicians and Vermont residents. I fear this will be proof working people need our own political voice."

James Haslam, Director of the Vermont Workers' Center, detailed how Vermont's Governor gets awards for being the most "progressive" Governor in the country, and "we have a supermajority of Democrats and Progressives in both chambers, and yet somehow the agenda is still primarily set by the Chamber of Commerce and the conservative business lobby. The game is set up to maintain the status quo where the vast majority of people live with the deck stacked against them." In this context Haslam says, it will again take a movement to bend the arc of history. "We're building power to change this, and despite the odds, we will have meaningful victories this year. We hope every Vermont resident will join us to march on the State House on May 1st, as we take back our democracy and demand our human rights," said Haslam.