

Myths and Facts about a Living Wage at the University of Memphis

Myth #1: Workers at the University of Memphis just received a pay raise. They need to be happy to have a job and stop complaining.

Fact: U of M custodian Thelma Jean Rimmer sums it up this way: “sure, it’s good to have a job, but you need a paying job!” Workers did receive a long over-due pay raise in July, and many workers with 2 or more years at the university received a \$1,000 bonus at the end of October. But these victories only came about after workers themselves began to organize with students, faith leaders and other community allies for dignity and respect at work.

What’s more, unlike the UT System which raised base pay to \$8.50 in addition to giving a \$1,000 across the board raise, the University of Memphis and the Tennessee Board of Regents did not change base pay. That means for some new U of M employees, base pay is still set at the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.

Myth #2: If workers were paid a living wage, students would be forced to pay even more in tuition.

Fact: A study conducted at the University of Tennessee Knoxville found that from the 1970s until 2000, the real wages paid to many campus jobs dropped significantly (wages adjusted for inflation over time, one’s “buying power”). During this same time frame, the state made cuts in education spending and increased tuition. The same policy makers cut worker pay and increased student tuition.

Both these problems share a common solution: real public investment in public education. And given the current state of affairs, many students feel even more passionate about the living wage knowing that their tuition is paying workers to living in poverty.

Myth #3: The living wage figure of \$11.62 per hour doesn’t include health insurance and other benefits that are a part of the overall pay of workers.

Fact: The living wage study which was updated in summer of 2010 included calculations for the living wage in Memphis based on whether a worker was receiving employer provided benefits. In fact, the benefits package offered at that time by the University of Memphis was one of the metrics used by the study itself.

Myth #4: Administrators wish that they could pay a living wage, but with the state budget situation it is not possible.

Fact: We cannot speak to the personal desires and intentions of individual administrators, but we do not think that the whole of the problem lies with them. That said, it costs President Raines nothing to publicly state her commitment to move all University of Memphis employees to a living wage. In fact, this summer’s \$750 raise and future flat dollar pay increases are a tested method to reduce the number of employees earning poverty level salaries.

Myth #5: If workers are paid higher wages the University will have to outsource jobs.

Fact: This is a lie perpetuated by many of the outsourcing companies. In fact numerous academic research studies have shown that the public does not gain significant savings by privatizing essential work in the public section. In fact, quite often privatization costs the public far more than what the companies’ savings claims through overage charges, decreased quality, added inefficiencies, and graft.

At UTK custodial services was outsourced in the classroom and office buildings in the 1990s, and the university has spent the past several years working to bring this work back in-house because of poor quality, theft and complaints.

Myth #6: If workers don’t like their pay, they should get another job.

Fact: The University of Memphis is a major employer in the area, and its pay scale influences many other jobs. What is more, we pride ourselves for being moral community leaders (as with our slogan of “Dreamers. Thinkers. Doers.”). The University should be the moral compass in our city.

Likewise, workers at the University of Memphis do not want to work somewhere else. We value our jobs and the work we do. But workers here will continue to demand that we be treated with respect and paid a living wage. After all, it’s our human right under Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights “to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.”



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