

# **UNITE Union Minimum Wage Campaign in New Zealand: Strengthening the Working Class**

Thursday 6 August 2009, by [FRANKS Don](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2009).

One bright star above the gloom of recession in New Zealand is the Unite union's campaign for a living wage. This campaign takes the form of a Citizen's Initiated Referendum (CIR) on raising workers pay. In New Zealand, a CIR requires Parliament's clerk approving wording for a petition that would be voted on nationwide if supported by ten percent of enrolled voters - 300,000 people. Unite's petition demands that the minimum wage (currently \$12.50 an hour) be raised to \$15 immediately and then move in stages to two thirds of the average wage.

At present, 100,000 New Zealand workers are stuck on the minimum wage and rely on movement in that area to improve their lot. 450,000 are paid less than \$15 an hour. Alongside these poverty wages, profits increased 11% a year from 2000-2004 according to the New Zealand Reserve Bank.

Unite's campaign for 300,000 signatures intends to raise workers sights and activity in a time when our rulers keep talking down our expectations. Support for the campaign was sought from Unite members in a union vote. Every member of the union was visited by an organizer and given the CIR proposal. Organizers explained the campaign and distributed free post cards for members to send back. The whole process took uncountable hours and involved much discussion. A clear majority voted for the proposal. Most union members expressed enthusiasm for the project as soon as they saw it.

## **UNITE Stronger Together**

The petition campaign is seen as a good multiple organizing tool. For some workers, it's a big deal to just sign the thing. Others become an activist for the first time by taking it round, engaging with others, defending their position and developing arguments. The petition fosters debate about what constitutes a living wage, and what value should be placed on our work. The government has to mail Unite's proposal to 2 million households. Unite is placed at the centre of the ongoing debate over the economic crisis - who profited from the boom years, who caused the crisis and who should pay for its consequences.

This year's campaign follows the successful 2006 Unite-led SuperSizeMyPay initiative [[1](#)]. That was a mass struggle against youth rates and low-paid work, centered in the fast food industry. It involved many short strikes at companies like McDonald's, KFC, Starbucks, Pizza Hut and Burger King, mostly in the city of Auckland. SuperSizeMyPay pressured the Labour Government to raise the minimum wage to \$12 an hour and to abolish youth rates for most of the workforce. Unite's 2006 campaigning achievement built a movement around workers' rights among young people and students for the first time in a generation.

It is hoped that we will be able to establish broad networks of activists and supporters in workplaces throughout the country. There is space on the petition form for anyone to give their email address and phone number if they want to get campaign email newsletters.

New Zealand governments are not bound by the results of CIR. Members of Parliament ignored the 82-92% majority votes in the three previous referendums – in 1995 on the number of firefighters, and in 1999 on seat numbers in Parliament and the length of prison sentences. It's quite on the cards that well-paid politicians will balk at making any serious improvement to the wages of those who clean, cook and carry for them.

In some ways, the official result of the Unite's CIR is irrelevant. The main purpose of the campaign is to inspire and strengthen the working class, and that process is well underway. After less than three months, the campaign has raised awareness, improved union organization, extended networks, developed working class activists and created some new ones.

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Unite's \$15 an Hour Campaign for a Living Wage officially got underway at a very lively launch meeting on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June. Candidates for by-election to the national Parliament in the Auckland constituency of Mt. Albert turned up to take questions from over 200 Unite members in attendance. The workers were determined to get answers about low wages and supporting a \$15 minimum wage.

Around 90 delegates attending a training day were joined by union members from the Mt. Albert electorate to officially launch the \$15 an hour campaign and hear from the candidates just two days before voting. Unite organisers Omar Hamed and Don Franks got the crowd warmed up with some chants and songs before MC Susan Wood asked Unite National Secretary Matt McCarten to talk about the petition.

The candidates – David Shearer (Labour), Melissa Lee (National), John Boscowan (Act) and Russell Norman (Greens) gave brief presentations before the floor was opened up for member's questions.

Melissa Lee got the biggest (negative) response with her widely reported comment that she earned \$2 an hour as an MP. The audience immediately responded – they knew it was rubbish. On a salary of \$131,000 per year she would have to work 179 hours PER DAY to earn \$2 an hour.

Several members asked very pointed questions about wages and poverty – especially whether or not the candidates could live on the current minimum wage of \$12.50 an hour (they all admitted it would be either very difficult or impossible).

Matt McCarten asked them to sign an oversized version of the petition. David Shearer and Russell Norman did willingly. Melissa Lee tried to fudge it but, in the end, joined John Boscowan in refusing to endorse it.

After cameo appearances from the ALCP and Libertarian candidates, a floor vote was taken. Despite getting the biggest cheer at the beginning of the meeting, Labour's David Shearer was well beaten in the preference vote by the Greens' Russell Norman by the end. National and Act were only supported by their own campaign workers.

It was a very lively finish to the by-election campaign and a promising beginning to Unite's \$15 an Hour Campaign for a Living wage.

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## **Postscript:**

Unite has until May 2010 to gather the required signatures. The campaign is supported by the NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU). Most unions have pledged support to the petition and are appointing a staff member to be the coordinator inside their unions. The goal of petition organizers is that each union gather signatures equal to the number of their members. That alone would gather the required 300,000.

The government must call a referendum within a year of depositing of the signatures, typically by postal ballot. That deadline can be postponed for up to one year by a vote of parliament.

The Green Party and Maori Party have indicated they support the petition. Formal support has not been received from the Labour Party, but their candidate in a recent by-election (see article above) supported the petition as does the party president (who is also leader of the Engineers Union). Radical left groups like the Workers Party, Socialist Worker and Socialist Aotearoa are actively petitioning.

Meanwhile, hundreds of workers at the Sylvia Park shopping mall in Auckland have joined Unite, spurred by demands for parking and public transport for work purposes and improvements to working conditions. Over 300 workers from 70 different shops can now speak with one voice to mall managers and employers. Unite says this is the first successful mall workers union organizing campaign in the world. •

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## **P.S.**

\* From The Bullet – Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 244 –August 5, 2009.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See <http://www.unite.org.nz/?q=node/579>