



Workers Paid Poverty Wages

By David R. Jones

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For most of the past three decades, there has been a class war going on in this country. It is evident in both wages and the tax system that have benefited the wealthy at the expense of the middle and working classes. We see it again in the latest deal in Congress that would extend tax cuts with at least a quarter of the savings going to the wealthiest 1 percent of the population.

Yet another example of this systemic inequality is the pay scales for security officers and cleaners at several of the state's public utilities, including Con Ed and National Grid. Despite working at sites of multi-billion dollar companies, these workers are struggling to support their families on wages as low as \$8.00 an hour while keeping our state's key sites clean, safe, and secure. Meanwhile, executives at Con Ed raked in \$868 million in profits last year.

These workers are looking to Governor Paterson to sign a bill that would help lift their families out of poverty. The bill (A10257/S8379) closes a longstanding loophole that keeps contracted cleaners and security officers at public utilities' sites stuck in poverty. It would add service and security workers at public utilities to the list of those who must be paid the "prevailing wage" or going rate for their services.

We at the Community Service Society (CSS) know about workers living on poverty wages. A few years ago, CSS published research on the working conditions of low-wage security guards in New York City. The study was entitled "Shortchanging Security: How Poor Training, Low Pay and Lack of Job Protection for Security Guards Undermine Public Safety in New York City."

We found that the median hourly wage for guards in the New York City area was only 55 percent of the median for all workers in the metropolitan area. Few guards received benefits on the job. Most labor without a single day of paid sick leave. Given their economic situation, this meant they have no choice but to come to work sick. The result was a workforce with low morale and high turnover, a dangerous situation for those whose job it is to provide security.

Low-wage workers are bearing the brunt of the economic downturn. In CSS's latest survey of low-income New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third," we found that multiple hardships were widespread. Nearly 3 in 10 low-income New Yorkers reported falling behind in paying the rent; 27 percent had their hours, wages, or tips reduced; 24 percent could not fill a needed prescription because of the lack of money or insurance; and 23 percent lost their job in the past year.

Not surprisingly, many of these workers earning such low wages are forced to rely on public assistance programs to support their families. Adding insult to injury, Con Ed and other utilities are benefiting from being state-regulated monopolies that helped Con Ed alone bring in \$13 billion in revenue from New York ratepayers last year. The utilities are trying to scare New Yorkers into thinking that this bill could

somehow raise their rates. Even though it would cost only pennies on the dollar of the millions in profits the company made last year, they seem bent on spending their time and your money to wage a fight to keep their workers in poverty.

Low wages are a problem forcing one-third of all working New Yorkers just to get by. Two thousand public utilities workers are counting on Governor Paterson to stand up to these companies and their lobbyists. New Yorkers who are working full time should not be condemned to live in poverty.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.