

LIVING WAGE

Continued from page 1

throughout the United States, including many in the Diocese of Rochester. More than 100 communities across the nation have passed living-wage ordinances.

Supporters of the living-wage movement claim that such ordinances improve the overall quality of life for workers by giving them a sense of security and incomes sufficient to meet their minimum needs. In turn, businesses benefit by reducing worker turnover. Opponents of the living wage argue that the movement destroys job opportunities for low-skilled and unskilled workers and hampers business growth.

In Elmira, the proposed law would have required any business that contracts for city services or receives economic benefits of \$25,000 from the city to pay its employees at least \$9 an hour with health benefits, or \$10.50 an hour without them. In a statement, the Chemung County Chamber of Commerce called the living-wage proposal "well-intentioned but damaging," noting its belief that the ordinance would hurt efforts to lure businesses to the area.

OLD CAUSE

Although living-wage campaigns are relatively recent developments, the idea of a living wage has roots that go back to 19th century Catholic social-justice teaching, according to the 1998 book *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* by Marv Mich, director of social policy and research for Catholic Family Center in Rochester.

Mich also co-chairs the Rochester Labor-Religion Coalition, an umbrella group of religious and labor orga-

nizations. The coalition is affiliated with the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, which is co-chaired by Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany. Over the past few years, both the Rochester and New York coalitions have been supporting living-wage campaigns, including the successful 2001 campaign in Rochester.

Mich's book notes that Pope Leo XIII, in his famed 1891 labor-rights encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, defined a living wage as one that enables a worker to be "housed, clothed and secure, to live a life without hardship."

"While later documents would take up this question in more detail, the basic right is established in this encyclical: the wage is seen as the only way the worker can preserve his or her life, which is a 'duty common to all individuals,'" Mich wrote.

Yet opponents of the living-wage movement argue that this "basic right" can create many unintended wrongs, depending on how it is applied to the economy. For instance, the Rochester Business Alliance argued during the city's living-wage debate that such ordinances create a "minimum wage" in specific areas of the nation, rather than across the country, thus driving businesses to communities where they can pay workers less.

Additionally, the alliance argued that the living-wage movement drives up taxes; decreases incentives for investing in new technology by shifting a company's resources to meet payroll costs; and actually reduces job opportunities for low-skilled workers since companies affected by living-wage laws focus on hiring highly skilled workers whom they would pay higher wages anyway.

Many of those arguments don't hold water with Catholic social-justice



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Caroline Groves visits Elmira's Samaritan Center June 17 to find clothes for her 5-year-old and soon-to-be-born grandchildren. Groves has a hard time supporting her grandchild and two daughters because she cannot get full-time hours at her job.

tice and labor advocates, according to Kathy Dubel, justice and peace director for Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, and Cindy Hale, coordinator of the Southern Tier Labor-Religion Coalition, which is affiliated with the state coalition.

Hale acknowledged that the living-wage proposal that failed in Elmira may need some fine-tuning. For example, she said, the proposed law could be amended to allow some leeway to start-up businesses that need a few years of operation before they start paying living wages. Dubel and Hale noted that when businesses don't pay adequate wages to workers, churches and other charities pick up the tab.

Soup kitchens, food pantries and second-hand clothing centers operated by churches are filled with the working poor, they said. They cited,

for example, the Samaritan Center, operated by Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, which provides assistance to many families headed by breadwinners, not just to families on public assistance. According to Samaritan Center officials, the agency fulfilled 20,000 requests for food alone last year, and its clientele has increased by 17 percent since January 2002.

"People are working and still (need) help with rent or prescriptions or a bag of groceries," Dubel said. "Why are people who are working hard still poor?"

PUBLIC EXPENSE

Rochester City Council Member Brian F. Curran remembers finding himself at odds with the thinking of some of the city's business representatives as the city council debated its living-wage proposal.

In particular, Curran said representatives from one industry argued that they would have to raise wages in order to attract workers who would only be willing to work for city contractors because such firms would be required to pay their workers more than they would otherwise pay.

"I didn't see that as a problem — I see that as a goal that addresses the primary problem, which is poverty," the councilman said.

Curran, who grew up attending Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Brighton, was a primary sponsor of Rochester's living-wage legislation. The city is expected to issue a report on the ordinance's impact later this summer, he said, adding that he believes it's the duty of municipalities to enact living-wage ordinances.

"It would be wrong for people employed ... for the public to not make enough to make a living," he said.



All Diocese

MEETINGS

FRI, AUG. 8 — **Fr. Richard Seaton** deadline: Aug. Worldwide Marriage counter; Notre Dame House, 5151 Foster Canandaigua; 8 p.m. Sun.; \$50 registration plus donation to cover Ed & Pam Knauf 53180; www.wmme-w

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

SAT, AUG. 9 — **Fr. Richard Seaton** outdoor chapel, Our the Martyrs Shriresville; 10 a.m.; 1 p.m.; followed by spiritual talks; offering; 518/581-175

WED, SEP. 3 **WEDDING** Jubilee Marriage couples marriage 40, 50 or more years; Matthew H. Clark brant; St. John of Rochester, 8 Wickford Fairport; 2 p.m.; to invitation send name dress to Sylvia M. 1150 Buffalo Rd., Rochester, NY 14624; 800/388-71295, 585/328-3210, [e-mail: smancuso@d](mailto:smancuso@d)

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FUNDRAISERS

SAT, AUG. 16 — **St. Mary's Church** Franklin St., Southside mira; 1-10 p.m.; chick becue, 2 p.m. until \$6.50 full dinner, \$5 card, \$5 one-half chick ly; food, games, 607/734-6254.

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

SUN, AUG. 10 — **St. Mary's Church** Sick; Ss. Peter & Church, Market & High Elmira; 2 p.m.; 607/734-

Monroe Cour

EDUCATION

TUE, AUG. 12 — **St. Mary's Church** introductory for caregivers of older. Mercy Center with training, 327 Warrington Brighton; 5:30-6:30

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