

Time for Conscience at Stanford

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It seems that political activity comes to Stanford about once a year. It's almost a year to the day since the general population of this sleepy, apathetic, liberal campus awoke and refused to permit Bush on campus. Since then the campus has settled back into comfortable slumber. It's about time.

In the latest culmination of a long and sordid history of labour relations on campus, students and workers have been on hunger strike for almost a week. The immaculate university campus is, in a sense, is a battleground, complete with encampments, demands, and pressures, and the forces are potentially tumultuous — they make a sharp and clear call to conscience to every student and worker on campus. The situation, indeed, beggars the belief of any who are minimally socially concerned. Students and workers have taken the fight to the university administration; they have staged a hunger strike over the issue of a living wage.

Who could deny a living wage? Who can argue against it? Those who work ought to earn enough to live decently, to afford groceries, education, housing and utilities, and spare a little discretionary income afterwards. What is the alternative? The alternative is to accept working poverty — that one can do an honest day's work, a hard day's work, and not have enough to live at the end of it. Give us liberty, equality and fraternity; give us solidarity, freedom, democracy and diversity; but first give us bread — and if there is no bread, then let the high rhetoric be revealed for the empty shell of hypocrisy that it is. A wage that does not pay the cost of living is no wage that a minimally decent society permits. A worker ought to be able to pay the bills, pay the rent, make ends meet — ought to be able to live above the poverty line. This is the most minimal demand: far short of anything like democracy; anything like self-management; anything like truly equitable wages; anything like true and substantive equality; anything like arrangements to achieve the fulfilment of human potentials. But still, in the twenty-first century, on an elite university campus, swimming in thousands of millions of dollars of endowment, within a blessed paradise of palm trees and exquisitely manicured gardens and obscene wealth, inside a tolerant and liberal-minded bubble — still the demand must be made. And still the demand is not accepted. Still it must be fought for, at the cost of great pain and suffering.

It would take too long to recount the history in full detail. In one sense the battle was won years ago: as a result of student pressure, the university adopted a code of conduct in 2003; as a result of student pressure, the university adopted a living wage policy. Appropriate rhetoric exists on paper — paper with the official letterhead of the esteemed institution. But the university stonewalled; and universities, like all large bureaucracies, know how to stonewall. Suppose you are a university and you want not to do anything: what do you do? Why, of course, you form a committee! Forming the committee will take a few months; and then distinguished and honourable members must be found and appointed, which will take a little longer! They must schedule their meetings, they must decide upon an agenda, they must decide on ground rules, they must discuss, think, and research! This will take years! And then they must write their report; which will be long and full of obfuscatory detail. But first there must be drafts! There must be revisions! And all of this requires meetings, requires scheduling, requires more agendas and more appointments and more time of busy honourable people! Properly executed, the process can be so drawn out that it is effectively interminable. Properly executed, the process can outlast any individual in opposition. Properly executed, we will be lulled to sleep by the churning of the institutional machine. Properly executed, the bureaucracy will suffocate us to political death.

And it has done so; how else could it be that the essential gain was won *four years ago* and has not yet been implemented? Since then the university administration has agreed in principle with the idea of a living wage and treating all workers with dignity; and it has lulled opposition into such quietude that it has not yet, in the four ensuing years, been finally pushed over the line into reality. Since then the administration has put in place a so-called 'living wage policy' — except that it is riddled with exceptions and restrictions, so that it applies to virtually nobody. Nay more: it may well apply to *exactly* nobody. As far as I am aware, the administration has never presented an example of any worker covered by the policy. And they have got away with it, so far. Their position has not been held by force of argument; in fact the argument is conceded. Their position is pure hypocrisy: a rhetorical commitment to basic decency accompanied by a flat refusal to put any modicum of the rhetoric into practice. It is pure intransigence, buttressed by the full might of the bureaucratic apparatus, in all its stupefying and stultifying grey glory.

This power has conceded nothing without a demand; and in the face of extreme obduracy, years of protests, petitions, demonstrations and other actions have still failed to yield a result. So, several students decided last week to escalate the matter and intensify the pressure — to sharpen the demand. They decided to go on a hunger strike until the administration removed the restrictions on its living wage policy — that is, until the living wage policy was worth the name. That is an act of courage; an act of extreme physical sacrifice; an inspiring act that represents the breaking of the last straw. It is the last stand of conscience after the tragic disappointments of protracted struggle; it is the digging in of the heels of the informed, concerned citizen who has suffered too many shocks to the conscience and resolves to draw their line in the sand. This

final injustice will not pass — no further, they say!

The hunger strike began with three students fasting on Thursday, 12 April, and it continues as of today, Wednesday 18 April. There was a rally and march to the office of the university president, where demands were delivered; maybe 50-100 people were present. Of course the president was not in his office; one of his assistants came out and started to explain how setting up an appointment would be difficult.

It melts the heart. Here are students so fed up and angry that they resolve to starve themselves for as long as it takes to achieve a goal — a goal that is, in the final analysis, minimal. Here are dozens of students foregoing their studies and their work — indeed, all else in their lives — for a cause that is only indirectly their own. Imagine the pent-up rage! Imagine the clenched fists and the trembling lips of those who have suffered such shocks to their conscience! Imagine the resolve; imagine the courage; imagine the independent-mindedness! Imagine the thought process; imagine the intense critical thought that leads one to conclude that they must take such an action.

So what did they do? Did they blast Hennessy's assistant with righteous anger? Did they chant over the top of him, drowning out the voice of the morally bankrupt establishment? Did they hurl abuse?

No, they did not — it is indeed the meek that shall inherit the earth. They listen politely. Some of the workers present in support appear to have a little more working-class scepticism; but the students listen to him, engage him in conversation. He fobs them off; says he might possibly be able to get an appointment on Monday, by which time they will be wasting away. He displays horrendous, callous indifference to them, their courage, their values and their commitment. And what do they do in return? They thank him. They tell him politely that they'll be back. They turn the other cheek. And they continue with their fast.

The fasters established an encampment in the middle of campus, and lived there. The three fasters grew to twelve; there are now undergraduate students, graduate students, and workers who refuse to eat so long as this injustice prevails. Over the weekend was the university's community day, and they rallied and railed and put their case to the local community. The university's officials tried to prohibit them from handing out fliers, which is apparently a 'disruption'. The encampment moved to the main quad, immediately outside the president's office. From there the fasters were eventually evicted by the police, returning to their original location in White Plaza.

The fasters grew weak, their metabolic systems slowed, and they ceased even to feel the pangs of hunger. The pangs of conscience, however, grew stronger; in addition to the growth of the hunger striking party itself, the ranks of supporters swelled. More and more students are becoming informed about the issue. All the progressive student organisations on campus leant their support — those groups concerned with people of colour, Latino issues, black issues, native American issues, Asian issues, south Asian issues, Palestinian rights, Darfur, immigration, underprivileged education, and many others. But the pangs of conscience failed to strike the university administration; it was not until the Monday that the

president agreed to meet a delegation from the hunger strikers. Whatever the president might think of the strategy, and however great his obligations to those who work for his administration, he also has a basic obligation to observe the health of students — this includes not ignoring those who starve themselves in outrage at his policies.

And so, on Monday afternoon a rally was called; the hunger strikers and their supporters, students and workers, maybe about 200, marched to the negotiation room. They gathered outside and chanted and yelled; they made known they were there. The delegation of six was allowed in; the door was locked behind them.

Once the negotiators were inside, the crowd outside kept up the pressure, creating noise, attempting to create a political atmosphere where the administration was forced to act. Of course the implementation would not be difficult if the administration wanted to do so — they have mountains of reports, minutes of committee meetings, costings and estimates. The problem is not the detail or the implementation; the problem is the political will. The task at hand is to drag the administration into action; to rescue it from its own hypocrisy; to entice it out of its untenable position; to shake it out of its inflexibility and intransigence.

At the meeting outside, many fine words were spoken; and though it was relatively loud at times, at others it could have been the speechmaking at a twenty-first birthday party. Many of the progressive undergraduate students know each other; many are friends. But the extra bonds mean giggles; they mean cheering friends on to the microphone; they mean listening to each other say what they passionately believe. A delegation from each of the progressive groups gave a statement of solidarity with the fasters and the negotiators; and there were a long list of groups to speak — all of their friends had to get up and give a speech! Some individuals made personal statements; some random passers-by spoke in support as well. Some were high-minded; some were inspirational; some were hilarious; some were rambling; some were awkward; some were meek in the literal sense of the term. Many had trouble operating the megaphone. But nobody swore; nobody made threats; nobody made any violent denunciations. They referred to human rights; they referred to each other's struggles; they emphasised the very basic need for minimal standards of economic justice on campus. This was an inclusive bunch of friends and colleagues and acquaintances who did something together that they believed in — that they simply regarded as the obvious thing to do.

These hunger strikers and activists are a rare breed: they combine the unbearable anger of those who are informed of the facts of their world, with the gentle empathy, charisma and humour of the sociable human being. They are meek only in the nature of their expression, compared to what they might express, and what circumstances would justify. They are not meek in action; their actions are loud and forthright. Nor are they meek in words; it is the willingness to listen to, interface with, and respectfully argue with the callous and intransigent halls of power on their own terms that marks them distinct from many activists. They will speak truth to power, knowing full well that power

knows the truth. Perhaps they should not give so much respect to such abusive authority. But in time I suspect they will convince them all.

In general, activists may be loud and disruptive, sometimes righteously so; but not these ones. The loud activist may change the world by the force of word and action; but the quiet activist will change it by persuasion, by the subtle pressures of sympathetic discussion, by sustained commitment, by inspirational example. Some may admire the bold and reckless revolutionary; but we cannot but yield to those who combine principled commitment with a pleasant and approachable demeanour. Polite but not deferential; principled but not pious; humorous but not frivolous; unable to take themselves too seriously, but deathly serious in their considered opinions and convictions; critical but not dismissive; disobedient when necessary, but not gratuitously; passionate but not preaching; high-minded but not just well-intentioned. Such a class of person has succeeded in the challenge to become a true citizen in a democracy. Such a class of person has succeeded in living as a fully human being in a world of circumstances that conspire at every turn to cut them short. Such a class of person will triumph over injustice with the magnetic pull of a positively charged good example. They will conquer the earth with inspiration; they will laugh their way into utopia — until injustice abandons its post and joins them too. They will not inherit — they will win, and they will bequeath. In time, they will establish a human civilization worth the name.

But still the university administration is intransigent; still the university administration holds out against them. No concessions have been made. The hunger strikers waste away; the administration effectively mocks their commitment with its refusal to concede to a demand to which it long ago conceded at the level of rhetoric and marketing. Support for them is strong and growing, but the outcome is far from clear. One hundred and fifty fast in solidarity with them on Tuesday; the university says it will not negotiate again until Friday, which will be day nine of the fast. That is pure callousness. That is utter intransigence. That is not the behaviour of any university that any decent person wants to be involved with. The strikers will not give up; they will not let the administration continue on its present path. The greater support, internal and external, that they can muster, the sooner the administration will be brought to its senses. Pity the administration; but with enough pressure for justice, they will be rescued from themselves in due course. Conscience will prevail; until victory, always.

You can read more about the hunger strike and labour policies at Stanford by visiting the Stanford Labor Action Coalition's website at

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/slac/>.

Mother Jones is posting updates on the hunger strike's progress at

http://www.motherjones.com/news/update/2007/04/stanford_living_wage.html.

You can support the hunger strikers by emailing President Hennessy at president@stanford.edu and urging him to adopt a real living wage; by sending encouragement or solidarity statements to the hunger strikers at stanfordlabo-raction@gmail.com; and by encouraging others to do so as well.