

# Carrots not sticks: Living wage helps youth

By Christine Trujillo

**C**ongratulations to Santa Fe for its historic compromise to expand the Living Wage to cover all workers, not just those with 25 or more employees. I could write this letter as President of the New Mexico Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO — the umbrella organization for most of New Mexico unions. Or I could write it as the President of the American Federation of Teachers New Mexico, representing educational employees in New Mexico.

But, I prefer instead to write this as the classroom teacher that I was for many years. I do that because I am concerned about the suggestion of some Santa Fe city councilors that they are looking at an exemption for youth, or at least those who have dropped out of school.

The Living Wage compromise, worked out by business groups and unions, religious and civil rights organizations in Santa Fe is a model of cooperation for the country. That is fitting, because the Santa Fe Living Wage itself became an inspiration for similar action in Albuquerque, Gallup and Bernalillo County. Then Santa Fe's actions triggered a substantial increase in the minimum wage in the entire state.

Communities all over the country are looking at Santa Fe. The compromise has built trust and enabled the community to move forward toward solving other workplace problems. For example, the Santa Fe Alliance, an organization of 600 small, local businesses and the Santa Fe Living Wage Network are working on a program promoting internships and pre-apprenticeship opportunities leading to better jobs and careers in Santa Fe for young people, including those at-risk.

The Santa Fe City Council should honor the community effort involved in this compromise by adopting it. That would encourage more of the same type of cooperation.

Yet some councilors are looking at chang-

ing the agreement by exempting young people, or least dropouts.

This idea has a history. Before passage of the Living Wage, many predicted that youth employment would drop off dramatically, because, they reasoned, if a business had to pay more, young people would just not be "worth" more money and would be laid off. Those predictions have not come true.

In fact, according to a recent University of New Mexico study, since the Living Wage went into effect "youth employment has continued to increase in all age (groups)." At a study session of the city's Finance Committee, the author of the UNM study, in response to a question by Councilor Rebecca Wurzbarger, confirmed that the "youth population has not been hurt, and it seems that there has been some expansion of job opportunities."

Some people also claim that the Living Wage is responsible for an increase in the dropout rate in the Santa Fe Public Schools. It is difficult to get good data on dropout rates. However, the data we have do not confirm this proposition. In fact, the existing data contradicts it. The UNM study quotes the latest information from the New Mexico Public Education Department, "The data for the school year following the implementation of the (initial) \$8.50 minimum shows a significant decrease in the dropout rate over the previous two years. The reported dropout rate for the 2005-2006 school year in Santa Fe was 5.7 percent, down from 10.5 percent the previous year and 10 percent in 2003-2004."

A recent study by the Santa Fe Public Schools showed that the dropout rate went from 10 percent in 2004-2005, before the Living Wage, to 6.4 percent in 2005-2006 at Capital High School after the Living Wage went into effect. At Santa Fe High it went from 7.91 percent to 5.5 percent. Another recent study by the Public Schools showed that only four dropouts out of almost

100 who were personally interviewed dropped out of school for "work."

The Public Education Department Web site has additional data showing that the graduation rate for 2004-2005 (based on those who enter the senior class and those who leave) was 81 percent before the Living Wage and the rate increased to 85.2 percent after the Living Wage was in effect.

No data is available for the 2006-2007 school year.

The PED is currently participating in a Data Quality Campaign on dropout rates that will give us very good information on what factors affect students dropping out of school. The PED will track students for all four years of high school to get a more meaningful dropout rate. New Mexico is now on the second year of collecting this data. Certainly, it would be useful to have this data before penalizing young people on the assumption that the Living Wage is increasing the dropout rate.

As to the suggestion of exempting dropouts from the Living Wage, quite simply, this would be an unjust and punitive approach. As a teacher, I learned a long time ago that many young people are often forced by family problems to take a job. We should applaud the fact that the Living Wage would make it easier for them to supplement family income, so that they may be able to stay in school or return to school. Let's take a positive approach — "a carrot" — and work to make school interesting, challenging and worthwhile for young people to stay and invest in their future. Let's not punish them with "the stick" of condemnation to sub-minimum wages. I know what I am talking about: I was a high school dropout for the very same reasons.

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