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[The Audacity of Simplicity: Baltimore Needs Higher Wages](#)

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Posted by [Sean Dobson](#), *Executive Director, Progressive Maryland*, under [Fairness and Justice](#), [Big Visions](#)
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For many decades, Baltimore was a great engine of the American Dream – a blue-collar city, where residents without a college degree could find a good, family-supporting job.

But over the past generation, most of those mostly manufacturing jobs were replaced by lower-paying service sector jobs – with disastrous results for many Baltimoreans.

But why should janitors and home health aides and retail and child care workers get poverty-level wages? Progressive Maryland Education Fund’s recent [State of Working Maryland 2008](#) report found that 18% of all full-time workers in Maryland earn poverty-level wages. A lot of those poverty jobs are concentrated in Baltimore, which has the eighth lowest median family income of any city in the country.

One way to boost wages is to promote unions. Kudos to the Baltimore City Community Relations Commission for recently cancelling its big annual breakfast at the Sheraton Baltimore City Center Hotel. The workers, members of UNITE-HERE, have called for a boycott since the new owners refuse to sign a contract and are unilaterally imposing their own terms. The Mayor and other elected officials should show further support for the workers at the big rally at the hotel on Nov 18th at 4:30 p.m., marking one year of the boycott.

City government can enact other wage-boosting policies:

1. Living wage laws require that a company that gets a city service contract must pay workers on those contracts enough to live above the poverty line. Baltimore City was the first jurisdiction in the country to enact Living Wage, but the city’s ordinance needs to be updated to account for inflation.
2. Prevailing wage is the law at the federal level, the state level, and in hundreds of jurisdictions around the country, including Baltimore. It requires that workers on government construction projects get paid the “prevailing wage” in that area. This prevents contractors from paying poverty wages by bringing in workers from cheap (mostly southern) states and even from abroad. Prevailing wage ensures that more jobs go to local workers, who will spend their good paychecks here in the local economy. Baltimore has a prevailing wage law, but loopholes in it need to be closed.
3. Contractor accountability: In addition to wage provisions, city contracts should also be awarded with consideration of employers’ labor records.
4. Subsidy accountability: In return for taxpayer subsidies in the form of grants or tax breaks, a company should be required to provide good-paying jobs. Kudos to Mayor Dixon and to the City Council for passing last November a “labor peace” ordinance that applies to hotel development projects. The next step may well come with the new Westport redevelopment project, where conditions should be attached in return for public subsidies. There is a public forum on this in Westport on Saturday, Oct 4th, 10am-12 pm at the Lakeland Recreation Center. Call UNITE-HERE at 410-659-2191 x12 for more details.

All these policies together would boost pay for Baltimoreans and rev up the city’s once vaunted “American Dream” engine.

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