Wrestling Jefferson’s Ghost:

The Living Wage and the Question of Working Class Citizenship, Civil War-1920s.

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Mural in the lobby of the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor

Kshama Sawant, Socialist Seattle Councilwoman

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What is Fight for $15 About?
Overview

• History of the living wage movement.
• Economic development and the development of citizenship.
• Understanding the theory of discourse and the multiple discourses of American citizenship.
• The Fight for $15 and the legacy of American racism and sexism.
The Problem of Wages & Working Class Citizenship

- The introduction of wages undermined our notion of a citizenry of small producers.

- President Lincoln, “If any continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly or singular misfortune.”

- The Civil War marked the end of both slavery and the apprentice system.
How has Citizenship Changed Over History

18th Century
Civil Citizenship
(Development of Constitutions and Individual Liberty).

19th Century
Political Citizenship
(Development of broader and broader right to the vote).

20th Century
Social Citizenship
(Development of social rights to a minimum level of welfare).

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How has Citizenship Changed Over History

What purpose does social citizenship serve?

“Citizenship is the architect of legitimate social inequality.” (T.H. Marshall 1948)
The fight for the living wage was the first battle in the development of U.S. social citizenship.
How Did the Living Wage Become the Minimum Wage?

• The American Political System.

• The labor movement rejected its producerist ideology for consumerist ideology (Glickman 1997).
  • **Producerist**: Jefferson’s Yeoman farmer, be your own boss, “full fruits” of your labor.
  • **Consumerist**: Workers as consumers are the bosses of capitalism. It is Proto-Keynesianism.

• Historical and cultural discourse constrained the labor movement.
Discourse: How Ideological Wars Are Fought

- **Framing**: Social Movements and their opponents use discourse to frame their ideology.

- **Action**: Frames diagnosis the problem, prognosis for solving the problem, and end with a call to action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

- **Multi-Vocal**: Framing is multi-vocal meaning movements, their audience, and their opponents all play a role in creating the meaning of the issue (Stienberg 1999).
# The Multiple Discourses of American Democracy

## Jeffersonian Republicanism: The Yeoman Farmer

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American Transition Political to Social Citizenship: Discourse Over the Living Wage Law

Liberal Vision Dominant

Industrialization and Wage System (Crisis)

Attempt to Subvert Dominant Discourse

Progressives Protective Democracy

Labor Consumerism

Labor Developmental Democracy

Capital Fordism

Attempt to Subvert Dominant Discourse

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Progressive Subversion Successful
Liberal Democracy and the Supreme Court

Liberal Vision Dominant

Industrialization and Wage System (Crisis)

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Labor Developmental Democracy

Progressives Protective Democracy

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Lochner v New York (1905)

"with the right of contract between the employer and employees," the supreme court declares "the general right to make a contract in relation to his business is part of the liberty of the individual protected by the Fourteenth Amendment of the Federal Constitution."
Labor Vision of Developmental Democracy

Liberal Vision Dominant

Industrialization and Wage System (Crisis)

Attempt to Subvert Dominant Discourse

Labor Developmental Democracy

Progressives Protective Democracy

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Labor and Developmental Democracy

Samuel Gompers, President American Federation of Labor (1898):
A living wage should be “sufficient to maintain an average sized family in a manner consistent with whatever the contemporary local civilization recognizes as indispensable to physical and mental health, or as required by the rational self-respect of human beings.”
Labor and Developmental Democracy

Ira Stewart, founder of the 8-hour movement, “The Second Declaration of Independence July 4, 1879”

“How many newspapers or books can he read? What time has he to visit or receive visits? To take baths? To write letters? to cultivate flowers? To walk with his family? Will he not be quite as likely to vote in opposition to his real interests as a favor?...What will he most enjoy, works of art, or rum? Will he go to a meeting on Sunday?...His home means to him his food and his bed.”
Progressive Reformers and Protective Democracy

Liberal Vision Dominant

Industrialization and Wage System (Crisis)

Attempt to Subvert Dominant Discourse

Labor Developmental Democracy

Progressives Protective Democracy

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James Boyle (1913), Pres McKinley’s Secretary, the minimum wage “the only alternative to Socialism.”

Edward Filene (1923), Businessman and Progressive Reformer, a legal minimum would be the “natural death of Bolshevik.”

John R. Commons (1912), “The old individualism that counted each person as one conceived that each one was a kind of little sovereign...The new individualism is based on the fact that individuals to a great extent, are joined together in associations...These associations, I think, are to be more and more the units of government in the future... There is both fear and hope in these organizations.”
"Living-wage"

(5) The term “living-wage” shall mean compensation for labor paid, whether by time, piece-work or otherwise, sufficient to enable the employee receiving it to maintain himself or herself under conditions consistent with his or her welfare.
Progressive Subversion Successful
Progressive Subversion Successful: But at What Cost?

Muller v Oregon (1908)

Supreme court allowed Oregon to limit hours for women because women working threatens the community by keeping women away from the home.

Pros

Opened the door to all who are “vulnerable and risk” for exploitation.

Brandeis Memo to court was the first time the court based a ruling on social statistical evidence.

Cons

It explicitly gendered the constitution.

Allowed exemptions for African Americans.
Labor Subverts the Subversion: Consumerism

Labor Consumerism

Capital Fordism

Attempt to Subvert Dominant Discourse

Progressive Subversion Successful

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Multi-vocal discourse over citizenship constrained the labor movement’s original vision.

- **George McNeill (Co-founder 8-hour League):** capitalists say workers should “produce more” but “we say make him consumer more.”
  - He switched positions calling wage workers “merchants of time.”
- **Samuel Gompers (AFL President):** “The fact that in the end the toilers must be the great body of the consumers has been given little or no consideration at all.”
Gendering the Constitution and Social Citizenship
FIGHT FOR $15 AND A UNION