

Trying to Make a Decent Living

While some janitors struggle to get by, others are climbing into the middle class. Behind the new battle over low-wage workers

By JEREMY CAPLAN

IT'S 9 P.M., AND CRAIG JONES has just finished dumping 400 trash cans' worth of garbage into the Cincinnati Textile Building's basement compactor. The weighty refuse he carries each night hardly fazes Jones after five years on the job, but the grime he has to scrub off dirty waste-baskets still gets to him a little.

"Wiping spit is a tough thing to get used to," he says. Jones, 27, earns \$6.50 an hour without benefits, vacation time or sick days. His employer, Professional Maintenance, a cleaning contractor, usually schedules him for just four hours a night, five nights a week, so Jones' biweekly paycheck amounts to about \$260, before taxes. The monthly rent for his spartan ground-level apartment in a once-industrial part of town is \$215, so there's little left after phone and utility bills and food. He hasn't bought a new piece of clothing in years.

Less than 300 miles away, Robyn Gray is in the midst of cleaning 48 kitchenettes, dusting 90 conference rooms and scrubbing 40 glass doors at One Mellon Center, a financial building in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although her work is equally grueling, Gray, 44, is paid well, compared with Cincinnati, Ohio, janitors like Jones. For working a 9:30 P.M.-to-6 A.M., 40-hour-a-week schedule, she earns \$12.52 an hour and gets health insurance, three weeks' vacation and three personal days a year. Her \$26,000 annual salary has helped Gray and her husband—who

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works for a company that erects cell-phone towers—buy their own home, send their two daughters to college and even go on the occasional family vacation. In May, they took their first trip to Honolulu, Hawaii.

The major difference between Gray and Jones, say advocates for low-wage workers, is that she lives in a city where janitors are unionized and have collectively negotiated what they call a *living wage*—that is, salaries

considerably above the minimum wage. The living-wage movement may have got a new burst of energy when the Change to Win Federation, made up of seven labor unions that split from the AFL-CIO last year to focus more directly on the lives of low-wage Americans, officially launched its first national initiative on April 24. Dubbed Make Work Pay!, the campaign aims to convince the public in 35 U.S. cities that all Americans who work hard deserve to earn a wage they can live on.

The new campaign's supporters include former North Carolina Senator and likely presidential contender John Edwards. "The perception exists that [a living wage] is not a politically popular subject, and that people in general aren't interested in it," Edwards says. "But my feelings now on the subject are stronger than they've ever been. You can't live on \$6, \$7 or \$8 an hour and have anything to fall back on. Instead of getting ahead, which most families want to focus on, they're focused on survival."

The model Edwards and others want to replicate is the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors campaign,

which over the past 20 years has helped to raise wages for workers in 27 cities, including Boston, Houston and Pittsburgh. SEIU organized Justice for Janitors Day, with public protests in cities around the country. One of the key battlegrounds of the new offensive is Cincinnati, which gained 8,400 service jobs in 2004 alone. SEIU's primary strategy is to show how higher wages and job benefits have improved not only the finances of workers like Gray but also the lives of their families and the economic and social welfare of the cities in which they live.

Pittsburgh is its Exhibit A. Once hailed as America's Iron City, Pittsburgh has gone from a manufacturing stronghold to a service-dominated economy, a shift that is evident in its abundance of converted mills. The first Justice for Janitors initiative began there in 1985. The campaign sparked an 18-month standoff in which employers locked out unionized workers and brought in replacements willing to work for lower wages. The janitors eventually triumphed, and in the years since they have bargained their way to health-care coverage, personal days and vacation time.

The city appears to have benefited too. In Pittsburgh neighborhoods with high concentrations of janitors and other service workers, high school graduation rates and home ownership rates have risen steadily over the past two decades, according to Census data. Among janitors surveyed by SEIU, the rate of home ownership had grown to

57% by 2005, an increase of nearly 20% since 1990. Meanwhile, the number of families below the poverty line has fallen. Over the past three years, the median household income in the city has grown nearly 3%, from \$39,643 to \$40,699, adjusted for inflation. And annual janitorial-job turnover, as high as 300% in Cincinnati, is just one-tenth that rate in Pittsburgh. As a result, contractors' costs for recruitment and training are significantly lower.

Cincinnati shares many attributes with Pittsburgh. Both are Rust Belt cities with midsize populations—314,000 for Cincinnati and 322,000 for Pittsburgh—and workforces similar in size and composition. But they diverge in their treatment of janitors and other low-wage service workers, and living-wage advocates say the results are telling. In Cincinnati neighborhoods like Over-the-Rhine and the West End, where Jones lives, poor wages coupled with high rates of drug use, street violence and truancy have created a cycle of interdependent problems. More than half the adult black males in the two neighborhoods are without full-time work. In the West End alone, 76.5% of the children under 5 are living in poverty, and per capita income is \$9,759 a year.

It is 10 P.M., and Craig Jones is back home after another four-hour janitorial shift. He microwaves a Stouffer's dinner and grabs a Coke from his cabinet, which is mainly stocked with canned corn and some pumpkin filling that Jones got from a food

pantry around Thanksgiving. He has been looking for a better-paying job during his off-hours but hasn't found one, so he is pinning his hopes on the Justice for Janitors campaign. "I'm not looking for a handout," he says. "But I feel like I'm stuck." ■

Questions

1. What is the difference between the salaries and benefits that Craig Jones and Robyn Gray receive for doing the same job? Why is there a difference?
2. What is the primary goal of the living-wage movement?

