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‘Lyndy McIntyre, Power to Win: The Living Wage Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand’

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Lyndy McIntyre, *Power to Win: The Living Wage Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Otago University Press, 2024), 274pp. Paperback. NZ\$45. ISBN 978-1-9900-4875-3.

This book on the Living Wage Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand (LWMANZ) is a good introduction to the movement which the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU Te Kauae Kaimahi) leader, Helen Kelly, launched in May 2012. It brought together in coalition over 50 groups keen to find a way to raise the wages of the poorest paid workers. The LWMANZ is part of a wider transnational living wage movement. National Secretary of the NZ Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), John Ryall, and his wife, Muriel Tunoho were inspired by meeting Deborah Littman of the United Kingdom (UK)'s service union UNISON, the largest union of workers in public services in the UK when they visited in 2006. They learnt of the Living Wage campaign which had started there in 2001 with wide community organisation support to combat 'poverty pay', that is below-subsistence income. Developing out of Chicagoan Saul Alinsky's community organising strategy which emphasised collaboration between diverse community groups, and the wider organising model in unionism that started to grow momentum during the 1990s, the movement never aimed to have a mandated Living Wage. Instead, it aimed to build power in the community voluntarily to win wage justice for low-paid workers. Ryall and Tunoho saw the common cause with the situation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their motivation was the obvious and growing wealth injustice: service workers like cleaners were working for poverty wages, at the same time the CEOs and managers were earning exorbitant incomes. The gap between top earners and average workers had increased since the late twentieth century extraordinarily in Aotearoa New Zealand. The wealthiest 10 per cent of households own nearly half of the country's total net wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent own less than 7 per cent.¹ This divergence widened significantly after the enactment of the *Employment Contracts Act* 1991 and the dismantling of the century-old arbitration system. The LWMANZ commissioned Charles Waldegrave and Peter King from the independent and publicly-funded research institute, the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit, which had been measuring child poverty, to pivot to develop an empirically based living wage formula for a family of four.² Having appointed SRWU campaign director, Annie Newman, in February, launched the campaign in May and empowered with a dynamic formula of calculating the Living Wage by December 2012, the movement was 'up and running'. The J.R. McKenzie Trust funded community organizer training for the LWM from 2013. The next year it funded community organisers and a residential leadership trainer to build broad-based community power. Community delegations began to be organised to spread the message.

Lyndy McIntyre, involved in SRWU's Living Wage Campaign, became a community organiser working employed by the LWMANZ from 2015 to 2020 to work with unions, community and faith groups. Having voted in principle to implement a living wage, and after phasing it in, the Wellington City Council became the first accredited city council to pay all its directly employed workers a living wage in September 2018. The newly-elected Labour government agreed to pay Parliament's

¹ Stats NZ, Household Economic Survey data: 'Household net worth statistics: Year ended 2024', corrected in late September 2025. Using earlier data Max Rashbrooke analysed the trends, 'New Zealand's astounding wealth gap challenges our 'fair go' identity', *Guardian* (31 August 2020).

² Peter King and Charles Waldegrave, 'Report of an investigation into defining a living wage for New Zealand' (Family Centre Social Policy, December 2012).

inhouse cleaners a living wage in December 2017 (these workers won a pay rise of 30 per cent) and then expanded its commitment to a living wage for all public service contractors—including cleaners, caterers, and security guards—with effect from 1 December 2021. In 2025 there were 342 businesses and government agencies accredited as Living Wage employers covering an estimated 55,000 workers. Currently there is push back amid economic difficulties, high interest rates, and inflation. Having fought the good fight, McIntyre has done the movement a further service by writing this compelling account of the ‘power to win’. She takes a personal, participant observer perspective, telling the history in the words of those she worked beside and who participated in the campaign. McIntyre embodies her history in life histories of those involved. The movement was a ‘storytelling’ one which she enhanced by conducting ‘40 interviews’ for her book specifically.

It is hard to ‘critique’ McIntyre’s account. It is a campaign story and necessarily has a presentist perspective. It does not delve into the complex philosophical and legal origins or current dilemmas facing the living wage objective. The concept of families with working members being able to afford the necessities of life has a long history in Australasia. In the famous Australian Harvester Judgment (*Ex parte H.V. McKay*) in 1907, Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration Justice Henry Bournes Higgins decreed that wages needed to meet ‘the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilised community’. He recognised that work should provide dignity not just subsistence. He ruled that if an employer’s business model could not sustain paying a living wage, then that business should not continue operating. An Australian Royal Commission in 1920 determined that the economy could not sustain the living wage for every worker that it had calculated. Some were paid it, nevertheless. The New Zealand Court of Arbitration piggy-backed on the Australian decision. A living wage was not universally implemented in either country. It is sometimes assumed, perhaps romantically, that the arbitration system of Aotearoa New Zealand which lasted from 1894 to the 1980s was itself inclusive. However, domestic servants and agricultural workers were not included until the first Labour Government and the 1930s. Women were not paid equal pay even in principle (overlooking the practice) before 1972 and pay equity eludes many still. Young people were paid less than adults. And so on. A stream of analyses of living wages shows many challenges for the living wage campaign: excess growth in high incomes needs to be controlled, wage relativities and the problem of changing consumption norms need to be addressed and the ‘obsession with money/material rewards’ needs to be reduced, and so on. As John Buchanan, Ian Watson, and Gabrielle Meagher conclude ‘living wage campaigns – although impressive – still have a long way to go’.³

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³ John Buchanan, Ian Watson, and Gabrielle Meagher, ‘The living wage in Australia. History, recent developments, and current challenges’, in Deborah M. Figart (ed.), *Living Wage Movements. History, recent developments, and current challenges* (Routledge, 2004), 123-137.