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# Groups Press Vanderbilt to Raise Workers' Wages



Josh Anderson for The New York Times

Mary Hampton is a housekeeper at Vanderbilt University.

**By THEO EMERY**

NASHVILLE, Nov. 29 — When Mary Hampton landed a housekeeping job at [Vanderbilt University](#) in 2004, she looked forward to the boost that the steady, full-time work and benefits would give her and her two young daughters.

Instead, she says she now makes \$7.92 an hour and brings home less than she did in factory and warehouse jobs. She moved to a shelter for the homeless about seven months ago when her daughters' father stopped paying child support.

The fragile economic state of some of Vanderbilt's union employees like Ms. Hampton and the contrast with university spending elsewhere, like the \$6 million renovation of the chancellor's 20,000-square-foot house, has become a point of contention between the administration and a loose coalition of labor, students and community members.

A “living wage” campaign, which is picking up steam alongside contract negotiations between Ms. Hampton’s union and the university, is hardly unusual. There are more than 35 campus-based living-wage campaigns in progress nationwide, according to the Living Wage Action Coalition in Washington.

What makes Vanderbilt’s situation unusual is that Vanderbilt’s chancellor, E. Gordon Gee, is one of the highest-paid university executives in the nation, giving the union and its supporters added leverage in their bid for higher pay, said Paul F. Clark, a professor of labor studies and employment relations at [Penn State](#).

“It gives them a significant opportunity to generate community support, to get attention to embarrass the university,” Professor Clark said. “I would be surprised if they didn’t take advantage of that.”

The coalition calculates that a living wage for unskilled workers in the area would be \$10.18 an hour.

A spokesman for Vanderbilt, Michael J. Schoenfeld, said it paid market wages, as well as generous benefits.

“Vanderbilt is committed to and does pay market-competitive wages for all of our job positions,” Mr. Schoenfeld said. “In addition, the university offers what we believe is the most comprehensive package of benefits to all employees, regardless of their job classification.”

In the past six years, Mr. Gee has labored to burnish Vanderbilt’s reputation and reshape the university into a prestigious research institution of national stature.

By many measures, Vanderbilt has succeeded, attracting top scholars, new research money and students from a wider geographic swath. Mr. Gee has been handsomely compensated, almost \$1.2 million a year, according to recently released figures on executive pay at universities, making him the third highest paid university president in the nation.

But as Vanderbilt focused on the national horizon, students and some community members have accused the university of underpaying its lowest-wage employees.

The university is renegotiating its contract with the Laborers’ International Union of North America, the sole union on campus. It represents about 600 groundskeepers, dining hall workers, janitors and other employees. The contract expired in mid-November.

The union commissioned a study comparing Vanderbilt’s wages with local, state, and national wages from the Federal [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). The study found that higher-paid positions like painters, electricians and mechanics earned wages comparable to average wages nationally.

But about half the employees in lower-paid positions earned less than average and, in some cases, far less. For example, many assistant gardeners at Vanderbilt earned \$7.79 an hour, almost \$3 less than the average wage nationally, the study found.

“Vanderbilt, to strive for the role model that it should be, has to accept their responsibility as an employer as well,” Glenn Farner, the union’s regional business manager, said. “Saying they can’t afford it is just not true.”

The chief human resources officer for the university, Kevin Myatt, said the union data was not accurate, because it did not take into account seasonal turnover, which keeps wages clustered at the lower end of the university pay scale.

Until recently, the campaign by the student group, Living Income for Vanderbilt Employees, has generally been cordial and orderly, with students making their views known with rallies and informational workshops. But this month, students barged into trustees’ meeting demanding a comparative wage analysis, garnering a meeting with Mr. Gee in the process.

Tim Bowles, a senior who was among the students who interrupted the board meeting and later met with Mr. Gee, said the students felt the administration was not taking the wage issue seriously.

“This is the culmination of four years of frustration and evasiveness and elusiveness on the part of the administration,” Mr. Bowles said.

The campaign for Vanderbilt workers occurs at an awkward time for the university. Mr. Gee has had to respond to what some board members saw as runaway spending. He has said spending on the chancellor’s house, for example, was necessary, but he nonetheless agreed to tighter scrutiny of future spending.

Cliff Buntin, 44, who has worked as a Vanderbilt housekeeper for five years, said some of that money should be spent on employees.

“How can you be a leader if you let workers live in poverty?” Mr. Buntin said.

Mr. Schoenfeld said it was simplistic to argue that university spending could be shifted to pay higher wages.

“Any large, complex university, any large institution, any large company,” he said, “is going to have to make an almost infinite number of decisions about how to expend resources and what is consistent with the mission.”