

The Justice League: a History of the Student Labor Action Movement by Michael Gould-Wartofsky

In 1997, the big men on campus were raking in millions of dollars. But over a thousand people who worked on campus were living in poverty, struggling to subsist on \$7 or 8 an hour after Harvard had cut their wages and “outsourced” their jobs year after year. Meanwhile, revelations had emerged that Harvard apparel was being made in overseas sweatshops, by women and children toiling for pennies under inhuman conditions.

That year, two groups of students decided to do something about it.

One was Harvard Students Against Sweatshops, part of a nationwide movement called United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). For six years, HSAS activists would lead an uphill campaign to ensure that clothes bearing the Harvard logo would no longer be made under sweatshop conditions. In 2003, they would win, with an agreement from the university to join a human rights monitoring group called the Workers Rights Consortium.

The other was the Harvard Living Wage Campaign, which launched what would become one of the most celebrated student labor campaigns in the country. These students were fighting to bring a “living wage” to Harvard, one that would allow people who work in this community to live and raise their families here. When the Cambridge City Council declared a living wage of \$10 an hour in 1999, students demanded that Harvard live up to that basic standard.

The Campaign soon united with HSAS to form Progressive Student Labor Movement (PSLM). They built strong relationships with campus workers and community groups. They educated the student body with posters, facts, stories, and “guerrilla theater.” And they used a diversity of tactics to get the Harvard administration to implement a living wage and take a stand against sweatshops. It would not be easy.

PSLM held over a dozen big community protests, won the support of hundreds of faculty and alumni, staged a “teach-in” for prefrish in the admissions office and one for administrators in Massachusetts Hall, organized a “Workers First!” concert for Harvard’s Arts First festival, and even chartered an airplane to fly over commencement pulling a living wage banner.

When the administration and the Harvard Corporation still wouldn’t budge, and worse, outsourced even more workers from above to below the living wage, PSLM knew it was time to up the ante. In April 2001, fifty students staged a sit-in in Mass. Hall in protest of Harvard’s poverty wages and the administration’s intransigence.

The sit-in would go on for three weeks – the longest such action ever seen on a college campus. Daily pickets, rallies, and a “tent city” in the Yard attracted up to 2000 people and the attention of national media. After three weeks, students finally left Mass. Hall with an agreement from the university to create an independent committee to investigate

labor practices, put a moratorium on outsourcing of jobs, and renegotiate a better contract with campus unions.

Over the next year, janitors and dining hall workers would see their wages rise to a level above what was then the Cambridge living wage. Other victories came soon after, like the adoption of a “parity policy” to equalize pay and benefits for outsourced workers. But to this day, the university still refuses to implement a lasting living wage standard.

Student Labor Action Movement

Over the next few years, students would graduate, awareness of workers’ rights would fade, and activists would turn their attention to other concerns after September 11th. But injustice would not go away so easily. Workers kept up the fight for their rights, but they were losing ground. As soon as students had their backs turned, Harvard busted the union of security guards, outsourced more jobs, and in spite of record revenue, laid off hundreds of workers from 2003-4.

It was up to a new generation of Harvard students to revive the movement for justice.

Enter Student Labor Action Movement (SLAM) in the fall of last year. The janitors’ contract with Harvard was expiring, and the university was ready to take a hard line to try to keep the janitors where they were: with wages still \$7 below the “state self-sufficiency standard,” poor health and vacation benefits, and few full-time jobs. What’s more, Harvard’s security guards, who had seen their union crushed, were struggling to organize a new one.

Hundreds of students joined SLAM in stepping up to support the janitors. SLAM held speakouts and community lunches with the janitors, a “Workers’ Week” to educate the student body, a “trick or treat” visit with the children of janitors to President Summers’ house, and the two biggest protests seen in years, with students and janitors blocking traffic on Mass. Avenue.

In November, janitors won a \$5 raise over the next six years, along with enforcement of the “parity” standard, better overtime pay, and increased sick time, disability, and vacation benefits. But workers were still not getting the full-time jobs the university had promised, and the struggle to support Harvard’s janitors continues this year.

In February 2006, SLAM launched the Right to Organize Campaign, meant to defend the human rights of workers to form unions and freely associate with each other.

The campaign calls on Harvard to institute a campus labor code of conduct, to implement “card-check neutrality” as a democratic process to allow workers to organize without fear, and to cut contracts with companies in flagrant violation of these rights. Companies like AlliedBarton Security, which has harassed and retaliated against Harvard guards for trying to organize, and Coca-Cola, which has been found responsible for the murders of union activists in Colombia.

In April, SLAM also joined in the nationwide movement for immigrant rights. Together with members of Fuerza Latina, SLAM called for a student walkout on May 1 to demand legalization for immigrants and to protest H.R. 4437, a law that was set to criminalize millions of undocumented immigrants and anyone who helps them. Over 600 students walked out of classes that day and joined hundreds of others in Harvard Yard for a spirited rally and march.

SLAM launched its final drive of the year in support of the dining hall workers, whose contract was expiring in June. They'd lost the summer jobs they once had at Harvard, they were working in dangerous conditions, and their wages and benefits were in danger. So SLAM members fanned out to every dining hall, collecting Dining Service "comment cards" with messages of support from students. In a few weeks, over 1,300 comment cards were gathered.

Dining hall workers went on to win their best contract yet, with wages rising \$4 over the next five years, their first paid recess, better disability benefits, and special protection for immigrant workers. But like the janitors' campaign, the struggle continues to win justice and respect for these workers. And as of this year, the Harvard guards are still fighting for the union rights that were taken away from them. SLAM plans to support them every step of the way.