

## Community members rally for food service workers

**By Lauren Ober**

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For years, Donna Iverson, a para-educator at Edmunds Elementary School in Burlington, fought to earn a livable wage.

In early November, she and the about 135 other paraeducators in the Burlington School District won their fight for better wages. Monday, Iverson lent her support to the last group of school district employees still working for wages that fall short of what is described as a livable wage.

About a dozen community members joined Iverson in a candlelight vigil to rally for the rights of Burlington's 50 school food service employees, whose union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, is in negotiations with the city school district about livable wages. The small rally outside the school district's offices on Colchester Avenue coincided with International Human Rights Day, a day set aside by the United Nations to bring to light issues of human rights around the world. Supporters say earning a living wage that allows basic needs to be met is an essential human right.

At the moment in Burlington, no food service employee makes the hourly livable wage. Burlington municipal employees are guaranteed a livable wage by a city ordinance, but school employees are exempt from that rule.

During the 2005-2006 school year, 43 percent of food service workers earned \$8.59 an hour or less, and 94 percent of those employees are women, according to the Peace and Justice Center's Livable Wage Campaign. Colin Robinson, director of the Livable Wage Campaign, said this effort was as much an issue of securing appropriate wages as it was addressing serious gender inequities in the school district's pay scale.

"The vast majority of municipal employees who already make a livable wage are men," Robinson said. "In the school district, the vast majority of school employees are women."

The paraeducator livable wage agreement will see employees making \$10.20 an hour this year and will gradually increase to \$14.15 in the fourth and final year of the contract. Karl Labounty, a representative of AFSCME, said he would like the same sort of agreement finalized for the food service employees.

"We're hoping to achieve the same thing for the food service workers as we did for the paraeducators," Labounty said. "We're hoping to achieve \$14 an hour. Whether we reach that is another thing."



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Donna Iverson (left) of Winooski, a para-educator at Edmunds Elementary School, and Colin Robinson of Burlington, director of the Peace and Justice Center's Vermont Livable Wage Campaign, participate in a candlelight vigil Monday for Burlington School District food service workers. The food service workers are in negotiations with the Burlington School District about livable wages.

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It's essential that the food service workers in the school receive at least a livable wage, especially in light of the fact that they do not get any benefits, says Iverson, one of the people responsible for the paraeducator wage increase.

"They're the only city workers who have these low wages and no health care. They're really left behind," Iverson said.

As Burlington schools continue to address issues of poverty in the city, supporters of the livable wage push say this is something the school district can do that will directly effect the disparity. A number of food service employees' children qualify for federal free or reduced lunch programs, which is unacceptable, Robinson said.

"It's important the school district take the lead role here so their own employees aren't faced with the burden of not meeting their own basic needs," Robinson said.