

# A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society

Lawrence B. Glickman



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The fight for a "living wage" has a long and revealing history as documented here by Lawrence B. Glickman. The labor movement's response to wages shows how American workers negotiated the transition from artisan to consumer, opening up new political possibilities for organized workers and creating contradictions that continue to haunt the labor movement today.

Nineteenth-century workers hoped to become self-employed artisans, rather than permanent "wage slaves." After the Civil War, however, unions redefined working-class identity in consumerist terms, and demanded a wage that would reward workers commensurate with their needs as consumers. This consumerist turn in labor ideology also led workers to struggle for shorter hours and union labels.

First articulated in the 1870s, the demand for a living wage was voiced increasingly by labor leaders and reformers at the turn of the century. Glickman explores the racial, ethnic, and gender implications, as white male workers defined themselves in contrast to African Americans, women, Asians, and recent European immigrants. He shows how a historical perspective on the concept of a living wage can inform our understanding of current controversies.

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