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Rally for living wage makes its point at Swarthmore
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SWARTHMORE -- A blow was struck for the little guy Saturday as students and faculty of Swarthmore College joined representatives of progressive organizations to rally for wage increases for the lowest-paid college employees. The "Building New Foundations Toward a Living Wage" rally outside the campus’s Kohlberg Hall drew about a hundred supporters, despite chilly temperatures and wind.

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Meanwhile, college President Al Bloom was inside Kohlberg making a proposal to the institution’s board of managers to raise the minimum wage for college employees from $9 per hour to $10.38.

Harris Kornstein, an emcee at the rally and member of the Swarthmore Living Wage & Democracy Campaign, said that figure was drawn from a national self-sufficiency model and adjusted to local standards of living.

The rally kicked off with a short address by members of the SLW&DC, followed by songs, dances, and speeches from faculty and alumni spanning more than 50 years.

Recent U.S. Democratic Congressional candidate Paul Scoles also made an appearance to congratulate the campaign on its efforts and encourage students to stay active with grass-roots democracy.

"The Living Wage Campaign at Swarthmore has been working for over four years to create a policy that requires our college to pay its workers a salary high enough to pay for basic needs while working only 40 hours a week," said Julie Smith, a junior at the college who has been with the SLW&DC since she was a freshman.

"Today, with our support, the board of managers will pass a proposal that includes a wage of $10.38 tied to inflation and health care for the children and spouse of our staff’s lowest paid workers," added sophomore Alix Gould-Werth.
And she was right. About halfway through the rally, a victory celebration broke out as the board accepted Bloom’s proposal.

Freshman Sarah Roberts said the increase will likely be included in the college’s February budgeting session and implemented next spring.

"This is certainly a victory," said Chela Delgado, emcee and an alumna of Swarthmore who has been working with the campaign since its inception.

"This is the end of the living-wage campaign as we know it. The campaign is still working on issues, but this is a big victory. We can kind of take a breather now."

Kornstein said the increase was not quite a full living wage without additional funding for child care. Delgado said she expects the campaign will address that issue next.

Other plans for the future include establishing a permanent committee to monitor and reform the minimum wage as the cost of living increases, and looking into enacting an upward shift of all salaries at the college through a series of "decreasing increases" (meaning those making more money would receive smaller increases).

"No, we haven’t yet won," said Roberts. "But we have made an important stride: We have created a foundation for socioeconomic justice where none previously existed. We will continue to build on this new foundation. And today, we will claim a victory."