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Ariz. teachers join national rally to raise minimum wages

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By Madison Alder, Special to AFN

While across the nation people turned in their taxes on April 15, another nation-wide event took place that could help minimum wage workers make Tax Day a lot easier next year.

Teachers and minimum-wage workers flocked to the Arizona State University Tempe campus to rally in a national campaign called "Fight for \$15."

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Marchers took to the streets in Tempe to rally for a rise in the minimum wage. [Madison Alder/Special to AFN]

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"Fight for \$15" is a national campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. The movement began in 2012 after fast food workers went on strike in New York. The "Fight for \$15" website boasts victories in two states — one in Seattle and one in San Francisco — that raised their minimum wages.

Among the protesters at the Tempe campus were teachers and professors from schools in the Valley, many of which were ASU faculty.

Though the movement typically is associated with fast food workers and other workers in low paying positions in large corporations, teachers marched to show that they too are affected by low wages.

"The main goal is to bring awareness to this national day of action and the worker rights movement," said Tomas Robles, executive

director of Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), who partnered with Faculty First, an organization supported by Service Employees International Union (SEIU). "What we've done for today, is incorporate many different workers from many different industries who are paid — many times — unlivable wages."

The rally took place in 130 cities and 30 countries on April 15, he said.

"Many times (teachers) wages are about average to the minimum wage and so you have professors with PhD's and master's degrees living off of welfare, food-stamps, Medicaid or the state government insurance, AHCCCS," Robles said.

Faculty First had a presence at two Arizona rallies on April 15; the other taking place at the University of Arizona Tucson. Some of the teachers involved in the Tucson rally were also in support at the Tempe rally.

"I can't even afford a two-bedroom apartment for me and my daughter," said Stephanie Downie, an English professor at ASU. "This 'New American University' is being run like it's a business."

Downie has been working at ASU for nine years and teaches 10 classes in one school year, which is full time as ASU. She said president of the university, Michael Crow, is to blame for the shift to a corporate model that distances itself from employees.

"I disagree with the policy of turning ASU in to a Wal-Mart-like corporation where faculty is reduced to service providers for miserable salaries and impossible working conditions," said ASU English professor Lupco Spasovski. "The 'New American University' seems to be moving toward minimizing the tenured faculty and full-time faculty, and trying to get as many adjuncts as possible."

Spasovski has been teaching for 25 years, the last 18 of which were spent at ASU. He says he doesn't blame Crow, but does think the 'New American University' has flaws that need to be addressed.

The rally began on the Hayden Lawn, where both teachers and minimum wage workers from a variety of other occupations met. The teachers lead the march to the Fulton Center, where Crow's office is located, with other minimum wage workers following behind in support.

"I believe in the idea of equal pay for equal work not just for teachers but for low-level workers as well," said Jodie Kay, an adjunct faculty member at Mesa Community College. Kay believes that all low-level workers deserve a fair minimum wage.

She said she would like to see universities recognizing the value of teachers because everything they do is for the students.

"I hope this voice is going to be heard," said Spasovski. "And I hope there will be others to join us."

• *Madison Alder is a sophomore at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.*

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