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THE NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED SATURDAY, JULY 20, 1991

Lawyers Who Deserved More Money

By Daniel L. Greenberg

Y CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Yesterday's settlement of the bitter 16-week strike by the legal services lawyers and other workers was a big victory for the advocates who represent New York's poorest citizens. In part, the wage gains were made possible by a recent state law creating new financing. But despite this triumph in the fight for a decent wage, legal services workers deserve support from the private sector, notably from big law firms. Legal services lawyers and paralegals provide free assistance for the poor in housing, welfare, family and other civil matters for the poor. This advocacy often means a large difference between living on the streets or in an affordable apartment. Legal services lawyers prevent the electricity and heat from being turned off in

apartments of the elderly.

We all benefit from this service. In addition to the simple fairness of both sides being represented in lawsuits, the minimal cost of providing a lawyer at a critical juncture can save hundreds of thousands of dollars that would eventually go to welfare hotels, shelters and foster homes.

Law students face a choice of entering public service or pursuing a lucrative career in private practice. Less than 5 percent choose the public sector. And in this small group, legal services lawyers for the poor are paid less, for example, than attorneys who represent criminal defendants through the Legal Aid Society.

Nearly 25 years ago, when the Ford Foundation financed a prototype law office for New York City's poor, legal services lawyers were paid \$6,500 a year. The going rate at large corporate New York firms was \$7,500. Legal services presented an opportunity to do meaningful work, with negligible financial sacrifice. The experiment was so successful that Federal financing followed nationwide.

Faced with the competition, salaries at Wall Street firms doubled in 1968 and continued to grow. The start-

ing pay at the big firms is now \$83,000 a year. Even under the new wage settlement, the starting salary for legal services lawyers will be about \$33,000 — an 18 percent increase — plus a small bonus. And after a decade, when attorneys at big firms have become partners, the gap is off the charts. No legal services staff attorney, even one with 25 years' experience, earns what a first-year associate in a big firm makes.

Many law students who wish to go into legal services have huge loans to repay. Some law schools have begun to help with repayments of those who choose the public route. Nonetheless, more than half of the legal services attorneys leave within three years.

Since legal services lawyers played such an important role in raising the salaries in the private sector in the late 1960's, the corporate lawyers should reciprocate. Many law firms do provide legal support for the poor. Skadden, Arps, for example, has allocated \$10 million over five years for law graduates to work in legal services and other public interest offices. But no firms directly subsidize the pay of legal services workers. These workers should be "adopted" by

large firms, which, if they don't, the salary of one first-year associate could make a big difference.

The new contract for modest increases in salaries of legal services employees was made possible by a new state law requiring banks to count for the interest that accrues on the money that attorneys deposit in escrow for their clients for only a few days. These small transactions add up to millions of dollars. This money has been earmarked for legal services for the poor. Increasing the appropriate use of this money.

Editors' Note

A photographic essay on this page on July 6 included a crucifix in a staged photo that reflected against the imposition of private morality on other citizens. The image offended many readers (see Letters).

The Times offers contributors on the Op-Ed page wide latitude in expressing their opinions. Even so, carrying out this policy, the editors regret giving the impression of insensitivity, and any offense.

Legal Service Workers Settle 15-Week Strike in New York

A strike by New York City's legal services workers, who represent the city's poorest people in Housing Court and in their battles with bureaucracy, was settled early yesterday, ending a dispute that had grown increasingly bitter as it stretched past 15 weeks.

The agency's 100 lawyers will receive raises of 18 percent in the first year and 6.5 percent in the second year, said Scott Sommer, the union's strike coordinator. Its paralegals and clerical workers will receive 12 percent in the first year and 5 percent in the second year. Salaries in the public-interest law field have traditionally been low.

"I'm thrilled that it's over," said Dale S. Johnson, the executive director of Legal Services for New York, the private nonprofit agency that represents about 35,000 families a year.

Mr. Sommer said: "It's clearly a victory. They tried to split the union and it didn't happen."