Lawyers Who Deserved More Money

By Daniel L. Greenberg

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 citizens. In part, the wage gains were made possible by a recent state increase to $33,000 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.

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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 1988 and continued to grow. The starting pay at the big firms is now $33,000 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.

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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, will make a big difference.

The new contract for modest raises in salaries of legal services employees was made possible by a new state law requiring banks to fund the interest that accrues on the money that attorneys deposit escrow for their clients for only one day. These small transactions up to millions of dollars. This may have been earmarked for legal services for the poor. Increasing the of the legal services workers is appropriate use of this money.

Editors' Note

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

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