

Everyone deserves a 'Living Wage'

Recently, some publicity was given to a decision by the hotel chain Hilton UK to review its contracts with firms that supply its room cleaners. The employment practices of these firms, including the low wages they pay, were highlighted by West London Citizens (WLC), an alliance of active citizens and community organisations that campaigns on a range of issues including the Living Wage.

Hilton did not go easily to that decision – WLC and its members, including low waged workers, persuaded them. In one action this year, at the Hilton Metropole in Edgware, London, they took a three pronged approach: they managed to put leaflets in bedrooms letting guests know about the low wages paid to room cleaners; they had well dressed activists 'infiltrate' an event at the hotel where they talked to guests about employment conditions, and they had a demonstration outside.

WLC is part of the wider London Citizens network – a coalition that The Food Commission has been doing some research for recently, specifically to support a project considering the impact of low waged employment on workers'

health, nutrition and living conditions. Interviews have been done with hospital domestics and hotel cleaners, some on the minimum wage and others with wages at or just above the London Living Wage of £7.20 an hour.

The research is not yet finished, but what we have found, so far, are people who work in physically demanding jobs, for long hours, at very low wages for years on end without respite. As one hospital domestic noted, "This is forever for me." They do jobs that are essential to keep London running and yet get very little appreciation for this.

Single people told us they feed themselves on around £20 a week and juggle this with high costs for housing and transportation. One cleaner told us, "I cook a lot of soups – vegetable, barley – they taste good and are cheap." Others mentioned that they call on family in a pinch and go without meals to save. At one of the meetings we had, no one would eat the cake and biscuits put out as a snack, as one person said, "I can't usually afford those things, so I don't like to get in the habit of eating them."

The research has provided some evidence of how the move from a minimum wage to the Living Wage enables people to make improvements in their diets, purchasing a wider range of fresh food, for example, and in their lives – the two things are not divisible. The people we have spoken to are on low wages – but they still need to socialise, have the odd cake and let go of some of the stress that always counting the pennies brings to life.

It is also about pride, as hospital domestic assistant Martin Grant noted, "Another staff member called me a two bob cleaner and as a union rep I will take action. I am proud of the job we do, no one degrades me or puts me down. We work so hard and the hospital couldn't manage without us. Managers take big bucks but it has taken us a long time to get the wages we deserve."



Three of over 1,000 people who came to a recent West London Citizens assembly to campaign on the Living Wage. Photo by ChrisJepson.com

How big is a bowl of cereal?

In one sense it doesn't matter how large a standard bowl of cereal is because we each of us select our own serving and eat what we want. But, when it comes to nutrition labelling the question of a standard size becomes much more important, because we need to compare products to choose the healthier item.

The food industry has decided it cannot abide the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) traffic light scheme for comparing products, based on a common standard of a 100 gram (g) portion.

Instead, it has come up with 'GDA' labelling schemes, where it tells you how much of an average person's guideline daily amount of each nutrient is contained in a portion. Not only is there a problem with the 'average person' (none of us is

average) but there is an even greater problem with portions. Put simply, the industry cannot agree what a portion should be (see boxes below).

Most tellingly, the portions suggested by manufacturers are nearly always less than people actually consume! The FSA recently reported results from a survey showing that actual amounts of breakfast cereals eaten were far adrift from the companies' standard servings.

	Company portion	Actual serving
Corn Flakes	30g	55g
Coco-Pops	30g	70g
Cheerios	30g	50g
Muesli	50g	125g

And as a footnote to this whole soggy saga, the people in the survey said that what they really wanted was information per 100g of dry cereal, so that they could quickly see as they walked down the cereal aisle which product was the healthiest. Quite.

■ Tim Lobstein, with research by Lindsay Rodrigues



Three similar packs of cereal, with three different GDA labels, making comparison almost impossible. All of these cereals are high sugar and medium salt and would merit clear 'red' and 'amber' light signals under the FSA's traffic light labelling scheme.

A 30g serving contains

Calories	Sugars	Fat	Saturates	Salt
113	10.5g	1.1g	0.5g	0.2g
6%	12%	2%	2%	4%

of a 5-10 year old's Guideline Daily Amount

Nestlé Nesquik cereal gives the GDA for a 5-10 year old child based on a 30g serving

Each 30g serving contains

Calories	Sugars	Fat	Saturates	Salt
122	10g	2.5g	0.9g	0.3g
6%	11%	3%	5%	5%

of an adult's guideline daily amount

Kellogg's Coco Rocks gives the GDA for an adult based on a 30g serving

A 45g serving contains

Calories	Sugars	Fat	Saturates	Salt
161	13.2g	0.9g	0.3g	0.3g
9%	16%	1%	2%	8%

of a 5-10 year old's Guideline Daily Amount

Nestlé Coco Shreddies gives the GDA for a 5-10 year old child based on a 45g serving