

INTERN LABOR RIGHTS

August 10, 2013

To the Readers and Editors of The Nation,

We would like to congratulate and praise the spring 2013 intern cohort at The Nation for bringing to the public's attention the important work being done not only in the pages of the magazine, but in the running of it as well. By publicly holding The Nation Institute, the not-for-profit body that funds the magazine's operations, accountable to the same standard of scrutiny the magazine holds low-wage employers such as Walmart, they are furthering the development of a much-needed dialogue about the present and future of our economic relationships with one another.

The Nation Institute has now not only made good on a goal it set for itself last year — raising sufficient funds to put its fall 2013 intern staff on payroll, dignifying the valuable contribution intern labor makes to its enterprise — but its director, Taya Kitman, has also declared that:

"We see this as the beginning, not the end, of this conversation. We hope that in the future we will be able to raise additional money, allowing us to pay our interns more. The campaign and pay increase reflect a serious commitment to our interns in a deeply challenging environment for fundraising, particularly in the area of journalism."

It is a testament to the values of The Nation Institute that it is conducting this dialogue publicly. When a labor-exploiting employer such as Walmart endeavors to use the opportunity of this openness to mock an outspoken critic, we have to wonder if Walmart realizes it is wading into an argument about low-wage work that it cannot win. Discussion about intern labor pay must include discussion of society's mandated minimum wage, but as should be clear to any casual observer today — whether considering Walmart's efforts to stymie a living wage requirement in Washington, DC, or in observing Fast Food Forward and similar fast-food industry worker initiatives nationwide — discussion of minimum wages is a discussion of their inadequacy.

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The low-wage work crisis knows no industry boundaries. Following the financial system collapse we have since witnessed a jobless "recovery" in which almost all of the recovered economic wealth continues to flow to the top, average worker pay remains stagnant, and the bottom of the income scale continues in decline. That the wealthiest society in the history of civilization cannot structure its economic relations more equitably remains a disgrace, one which the nation's largest private sector employer, Walmart, is helping to perpetuate.

Into this system of dysfunctional economic relations we also find journalism — and not-for-profit journalism in particular — at a crossroads. As the essential Fourth Estate struggles to find new footing in the digital era, it is unfortunate to observe that The Nation Institute has to rely on the generosity of donors simply to provide a modicum of income to all its staff. And now, with enough funds to pay minimum wages secured, the question looms of where to find sufficient funds to provide a living wage. While society recognizes the value of organizations that are not structured around profit-making, it has not seen its way to ensure that the labor necessary to make such organizations operate effectively is remunerated properly.

We can do better than this. We thank not only the spring 2013 Nation intern cohort for bringing this issue to light, but also The Nation Institute for engaging this overdue but necessary dialogue publicly. With such continued determination we are confident that solutions can be found, and we look forward to witnessing and supporting what the next cohort of Nation Institute interns do as the baton is passed to them.

Intern Labor Rights

ABOUT INTERN LABOR RIGHTS

Intern Labor Rights aims to raise awareness to the exploitation of unpaid laborers. We have experienced firsthand the detrimental effects of a practice whereby workers contribute to their employers' success but receive no wages in compensation. In this era of historic inequality, class divide, skyrocketing student debt and persistent unemployment — all of which are compounded by the widespread acceptance of unpaid internships — we call to an end of the exploitative practice of unpaid internships: Pay Your Interns.