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Helen Lachs Ginsburg, Who Saw a Living Wage as a Right, Dies at 91 - The New York Times

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Helen Lachs Ginsburg in an undated photo. A Brooklyn College professor, she was a founding member of the National Committee for Full Employment, which was led by Coretta Scott King. Credit... via Ginsburg family

Helen Lachs Ginsburg, Who Saw a Living Wage as a Right, Dies at 91

A top authority on full employment, she said a job for all may seem unrealistic, but at one time so did the right of women to vote.



By Katharine Q. Seelye

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Helen Lachs Ginsburg, an economist and leading authority on full employment, or what has been called a job guarantee, died on Oct. 8 in a hospital in Queens. She was 91.

Her family said she had multiple health problems.

Dr. Ginsburg had retired as a professor of economics at Brooklyn College, where she specialized in labor and social welfare. She studied the public policy's ramifications of full employment in the United States as well as in Sweden, and she received several awards from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Full employment — defined as an economy in which anyone who wants a job can find one — has been part of the national conversation since the early 20th century.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was a strong proponent of full employment during the Depression. His hiring programs, including the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, provided significant relief for many workers, but their temporary nature made them insufficient to achieve the long-term benefits that he had hoped for.

“Living-wage jobs as a right may seem unrealistic,” Dr. Ginsburg wrote in a 2011 article, “but so once did the right of all children to go to school, the right of women to vote and the abolition of slavery.”

Dr. Ginsburg was a founding member of the National Committee for Full Employment, which was led by Coretta Scott King as she carried on the quest for economic justice and equality begun by her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. Ginsburg lectured around the country in the 1970s in support of the full employment legislation proposed by Augustus Hawkins, California’s first Black representative in Congress, and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, Democrat of Minnesota.

The original legislation, intended to reduce inequality and poverty, would have provided a job for everyone who wanted to work. It was a forerunner of similar proposals today, including the federal job guarantee, a \$15 minimum wage and the Green New Deal, which includes a right to living-wage work.

A watered-down version of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill was passed in 1978 and did not guarantee full employment. At that point, a

disappointed Dr. Ginsburg began her study of Sweden’s successful, sustained full employment policy.

It led to her book, “Full Employment and Public Policy: The U.S. and Sweden” (1983), which inspired progressives to examine the Swedish model and try to adopt parts of it to the United States.

She also co-wrote, with two authors, a 1994 manifesto on full employment, “Jobs for All: A Plan for the Revitalization of America.” That work led to the creation of the National Jobs for All Coalition, now called the National Jobs for All Network, which promotes the idea that everyone capable of working has a right to a job. Dr. Ginsburg was a founding member.

“Helen Ginsburg was a model of a scholar-activist whose research and writing, always informed by her engagement in the struggle for economic justice, was an inspiration and impetus to all who carry on that struggle,” Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg, chair of the National Jobs for All Network, wrote in a tribute.

Helen Lachs was born on June 25, 1929, in the Bronx. Her father, William Lachs, was a haberdasher. Her mother, Anna (Riegelhaupt) Lachs, was a homemaker.

She grew up in Bayside, Queens, and received her undergraduate degree in economics from Queens College and a doctorate in economics from The New School.

She married Nathan Ginsburg in the mid-1950s. He survives her, as does her brother, Sherman Lachs.

Katharine Q. “Kit” Seelye has been the New England bureau chief, based in Boston, since 2012. She previously worked in the Washington bureau for 12 years, has covered six presidential campaigns and was a pioneer in The Times’s online coverage of politics. @kseelye

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