

# Minimum wage key to Bush's education pledge

By Lane Kirkland

President Bush now has a golden opportunity to fulfill his campaign pledge to be the "education president," and do so without breaking his other promise to hold the line on taxes.

## Commentary

He can accomplish this feat by signing into law the compromise minimum wage increase recently adopted by Congress.

In addition to easing the plight of America's working poor, who haven't had a raise since 1981, a minimum wage increase from \$3.35 to \$4.55 an hour would go a long way toward helping millions of teenagers and young adults pay their way through college.

The cutbacks in student financial aid programs during the Reagan years have enhanced the significance of student employment to the point where work is now one of America's foremost tuition-assistance programs. Consequently, the minimum wage legislation is one of the most important education bills that will come before the President in this or any year.

Oddly enough, the fact that many of those who earn the minimum wage are teenagers is

one of the primary arguments used by the opponents of the increase. These young workers, they say, couldn't possibly have any need for the extra income.

Anyone familiar with the cost of a college education these days knows that isn't true. Over the past decade, tuition, fees, and room and board expenses at private colleges and universities have nearly doubled. Similar costs for higher education at public four-year institutions have increased more than 70 percent. Yet the minimum wage has remained the same.

While it is a fact that some students come from families who are wealthy enough to pay all of their college expenses, the skyrocketing costs associated with higher education are leaving an ever-decreasing number of undergraduates with this option.

According to the United States Student Association, about 40 percent of full-time college students are employed, while 90 percent of part-time students hold jobs. The U.S. Department of Education reports that one out of every five undergraduate students receives no help from either financial aid programs or their parents; that is, they rely solely on their own resources to attend college.

Aside from increasing its financial support of educational programs, no activity of government could help these students more than raising the minimum wage.

Apparently, President Bush doesn't see it that way. By threatening to veto the minimum wage bill unless the increase is reduced by 30 cents, he fails to make the connection between the minimum wage and educational opportunity.

Moreover, the President is insisting that any increase in the minimum wage include a provision for a so-called six-month "training wage," under which any worker starting a new job could be paid at a sub-minimum rate of \$3.35 an hour. Under this system, students working their way through college would be entitled to earn the higher minimum wage only after they stayed at one job for a half-year. Those who work intermittently, or who switch jobs several times, could end up earning nothing more than the sub-minimum wage throughout their school years.

In an era of limited government resources, it would seem that raising the minimum wage might be President Bush's best available option for the time being if he truly wants to take that important first step toward fulfilling his pledge to be the "education president." The

lesson of experience, however, tells us that campaign promises often amount to less than zero after election day is over. Let's hope the President lives up to this one by changing his mind

and signing the minimum wage bill.

Lane Kirkland is President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations.

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My letters and commentaries having suffered grievously at the editorial hand of Emerald Editor-elect Thomas Prowell, consultation with Prowell's patron saint, the Apostle Thomas, offered compensation.

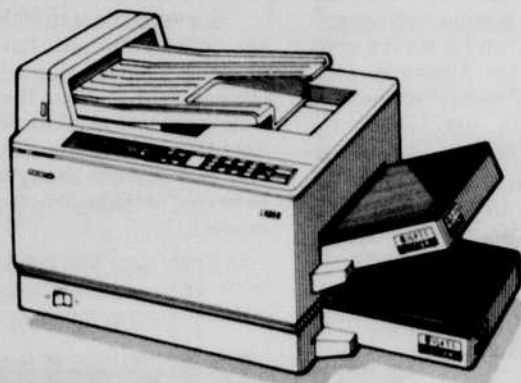
Parents with mischievous children will be relieved to consider they might have suffered the plight of Mary and Joseph, parents of Jesus Christ, who at age five, according to the Gospel of Thomas (Chapter II) gave indication of his divine powers and prerogatives:

"One day when it had rained, He went out of the house where His mother was, and was playing on the ground where waters were flowing down. And when He had made pools, the waters were coming down, and the pools were filled with water. Then saith He, I will that ye become clear and good waters. And straightway they became so. But a certain child of Annas the scribe passing by, and carrying a stick of willow, upset the pools with the stick and the waters were poured out. And Jesus turned and said to him, 'Wicked and lawless one, what harm did the pools do thee that thou didst empty them? Thou shalt not go thy way, and thou shalt dry up like the stick which thou holdest.' And as he was going, after a little, he fell down and gave up the ghost. And when the young children that were playing with Him saw, they marvelled and went and told the father of him that was dead. And he ran and found the young child dead, and went and complained to Joseph."

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