

# Oregon senator helps scuttle wage bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Oregon U.S. Senator Gordon Smith helped sink a bill in the U.S. Senate Jan. 24 that would have raised the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 per hour in three steps in slightly over two years.

A majority of senators — 54 — voted to raise the minimum wage without any attachments, but opponents threatened to filibuster the bill. It takes 60 votes to end debate (invoke cloture).

“With their amendments and delays, Republican senators tied up a minimum wage increase in more knots than you can find in a scouting handbook,” wrote national AFL-CIO blogger Mike Hall. “For 10 years when they controlled the agenda, Republican leaders used all their power to block a raise in the minimum wage. Now, after the new Democratic-controlled House passed — with bipartisan support — a simple \$2.10-an-hour increase, out-of-power Republican Senate leaders are running a guerrilla war of delay with filibusters and amendments to deny minimum wage workers a raise. They even tried to repeal the federal minimum wage altogether on Jan. 24.”

Smith told the Oregonian newspaper that he voted against the minimum wage bill because it didn't include an education tax provision that he wanted attached.

“I've learned in 10 years around this place that if you want something to move, you better hook it onto any train that's moving,” Smith said on the Senate floor Jan. 24. “This is moving. And yes, I want to vote to raise the minimum wage. But I also want to put on it such things that actually help folks that we're trying to help.”

U.S. senators — who make \$165,200 a year — almost annually vote to give themselves a pay raise without including any attachments. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), a leading Senate proponent of a “clean” minimum wage bill, said Republicans have 70 more amendments to attach to the bill.

There were indications senators would attach \$8 billion worth of new tax breaks for small business, approved in mid-January by the Democratic-run Senate Finance Committee, as a price to get the 60 votes needed to shut off debate and pass the bill. But attaching the tax breaks would kick the bill back to the House, causing more delay.

And attaching the tax breaks angered both Change to Win Chair Anna Burger and AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

“The fight for a ‘clean’ (minimum wage) bill is over, but the fight to give America a raise is not,” Burger said. “The minimum wage increase is not dead — it is simply open now to am-

endments. We will continue to work hard to prevent any amendments from being added to the bill that would hurt workers.”

Sweeney says, in the past 10 years, the Republican-controlled Congress showered corporations with \$276 billion in tax breaks, plus another \$36 billion aimed exclusively at small businesses.

“It's just plain wrong to ask these working families to wait even longer to receive a minimum wage increase while many of our nation's leaders shower big business with additional tax perks,” Sweeney said.

President Bush has signaled that he would sign a bill providing for a wage increase with related tax breaks.

In a statement on its Web site, the Oregon AFL-CIO said, “Senator Smith is the only one of Oregon's congressional delegates who is out of sync with Oregon voters on this minimum wage bill. We salute the others — including Sen. Ron Wyden, and Representatives Earl Blumenauer, Peter DeFazio, Darlene Hooley, David Wu, and even Smith's Republican colleague Rep. Greg Walden — who supported this long-overdue raise.”

The federal minimum wage has no impact on Oregonians, as they have twice voted in favor of raising the minimum wage at the state level. Oregon has the second highest minimum wage in the nation at \$7.80 an hour.

## NLRB to hear case on use of employer e-mail

EUGENE, Ore. (PAI) — Can unions use company e-mail to communicate with workers? The National Labor Relations Board will take on this question in a case this spring.

The case involves The Newspaper Guild's Local 37194, which represents 150 staffers at the Eugene, Ore., Register-Guard. The paper is challenging the union's rights, across the board, to use e-mail in communicating with its 150 members there. The bargaining unit consists of reporters, photographers, copy editors, secretaries, clerks, advertising department employees, and district managers in the circula-

tion department.

The paper's management says its policy bans using its e-mail “to solicit or proselytize for commercial ventures, religious or political causes, outside organizations or other non-job-related solicitations.” The paper says the ban covers the union. The Guild, an affiliate of the Communications Workers of America, says it doesn't.

Among the issues the board will tackle is whether union members can use the e-mail system to discuss “union or other concerted, protected matters” — such as wages, hours and working conditions — defined by labor law.

If so, what restrictions may an employer place on the e-mails and if not, can the paper permit non-job-related e-mails but not those related to the union? Another question before the Board is whether e-mail access is a mandatory subject for bargaining, just like wages and hours.

A hearing is scheduled for March 27.

The union filed an unfair labor practice charge against the newspaper while negotiating a successor contract in 2000 after the union's president was reprimanded in writing for corresponding union business with employees on their work computers via e-mail.



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