

Will the minimum wage movement come to Oregon?

Back in May, Oregon business lobbyists must have felt sheltered from the storm. Three hours north, a surging minimum wage movement had Seattle business groups so far on the defensive that business leaders themselves were pushing a \$3.18 an hour increase in order to prevent a \$5.68 an hour increase. [They lost.] But in Oregon, the business lobby had planted a fire break back in 2003 — legislation, passed by the then-Republican Legislature and signed by then-Governor John Kitzhaber, that barred Oregon cities from passing a

higher minimum wage than the state.

So in the May primary, when Concordia College economics instructor Nicholas Caleb tried to replicate the example of Seattle's Kshama Sawant, it failed to ignite. Sawant in November had beaten a long-term Seattle City Council incumbent by campaigning strongly for a \$15-an-hour city minimum wage. But when Caleb called for the same in his insurgent campaign for Portland City Council, incumbent Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman replied that the City is barred by state

law from passing such an ordinance, though he pledged try to get that law changed next year.

Three months later, there's no sign yet of a plan to end the pre-emption when the Oregon Legislature meets next year. But that doesn't mean that the minimum wage movement sweeping the country is going to skip Oregon. In fact, forces are gathering to push a "reset" of Oregon's minimum wage.

On Aug. 8, representatives of six of the state's most politically active unions and three nonprofit groups met with state Sen. Diane Rosenbaum and Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian at the Oregon AFL-CIO headquarters in Portland. The meeting was to talk strategy about passing an increase to the minimum wage in the Oregon Legislature in 2015. Rosenbaum was chief petitioner on the 2002 ballot measure that raised Oregon's minimum to \$6.90 and indexed it to inflation thereafter. Today it's \$9.10 an hour. But given the political opening provided by a burgeoning national movement, and the president calling for \$10.10, supporters of an increase think Oregon's minimum wage could be much higher.

"We're convinced now is the time it needs to happen," said Oregon AFL-CIO Legislative Director Elana Guiney. "Every union I've talked to in Oregon is interested in raising the minimum wage." Guiney said some unions are getting behind an ongoing campaign to raise the minimum wage in Portland, while others are interested in legislative action to raise it statewide.

Guiney said supporters are going to try to come up with a figure they can realistically find support for: More than \$10.10, though less than the \$15 figure being championed elsewhere.

One possible reference point would be the federal poverty level for a family of four, which currently works out to \$11.47 an hour for a full-time year-round worker. That's why Oregon Labor Commissioner Avakian proposed adjusting Oregon's minimum wage to \$11.50 in a July 15 guest column in the Portland homeless newspaper Street Roots. Avakian said such a raise would benefit 450,000 Oregonians, and would generate more than \$188 million per

year in new purchasing power to stimulate the economy.

Whatever the target, Guiney said the minimum wage supporters at the Aug. 8 meeting were steadfastly not interested in watering down the raise with concessions or irksome complexity, like different timetables for different-sized businesses, or a lower minimum wage for tipped workers.

"The minimum wage is never going to be a living wage," Guiney said, "but we do want to make sure it's enough that families are able to put food on the table."

— DON MCINTOSH

Judge orders Kellogg's to take locked-out Bakers back to work

MEMPHIS (PAI) — A federal judge in Memphis, Tenn., has ordered Kellogg's to take back the 226 union workers it locked out from its cereal plant there over nine months ago.

The workers, members of Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 252G, returned to work Aug. 11.

U.S. District Judge Samuel Mays ruled on July 31 that the company was using "creative semantics" to force changes in the workers' collective bargaining agreement. He ordered Kellogg's to re-establish its old employment conditions, and he ordered the firm to resume bargaining.

He called ending the lockout "just and proper."

Kellogg's lockout of the mostly mi-

nority workforce, which began Oct. 22, 2013, became a cause for the union and for civil rights groups nationwide. That's because profitable Kellogg's demanded the workers take deep pay cuts, pay more for their health insurance, and allow the firm to outsource their jobs. When they refused, it locked them out.

Mays called the lockout "unlawfully coercive" and said it "discriminates against the employees for their participation in protected collective bargaining activity."

Union President David Durkee said "the federal judge agreed entirely and unequivocally with the union and the National Labor Relations Board. Judge Mays rejected each and every argument Kellogg has made since this dispute began."

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