

...Up with the minimum wage

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by Alaska Airlines. But it wasn't enough: most of the Port commissioners continued to use their claimed lack of authority as an excuse.

So Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 775NW, backed by coalition of labor, faith and community groups, gathered 1,541 signatures, and took the proposal directly to the voters of SeaTac. It wasn't the first union-backed appeal to voters to intervene in a one-sided wage negotiation: Voters in Emeryville, Calif., passed a \$9 minimum for hotel workers in 2005, and Long Beach, Calif., voters approved \$13 an hour for hotel workers in 2012. But SeaTac's was the most audacious ask ever: \$15 for hotel and parking lot workers, plus paid sick leave, the right of part-time workers to take full-time openings, and job security when a service contract changes hands. The \$15 figure came from the rallying cry of fast food workers who had taken part in a wave of one-day strikes around the country. That movement, also with heavy behind-the-scenes backing from SEIU, spread to Seattle on May 29, 2013. On Nov. 5, 2013, the SeaTac measure passed, by 77 votes.

By then, the power of its idea had already jumped 15 miles north to Seattle,

a city with a population of 650,000. In a city-wide City Council race, a socialist candidate, Kshama Sawant, made it the centerpiece of her campaign, challenging entrenched incumbent Richard Conlin. With Sawant beating the drums for \$15, the issue spread to the highly competitive mayor's race. Vying for union endorsements, both mayoral candidates vowed to support \$15 an hour.

Exactly one month after Ed Murray won the race for mayor, minimum wage campaigners sought to hold him to his campaign pledge, with a day-long march from SeaTac to Seattle City Hall. Soon after, Murray made good on his promise, convening a work group with representatives of labor and business to work out details. The result, passed by unanimous vote June 2, raises Seattle's minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

The Seattle ordinance is no model of simplicity or speed: Businesses with more than 500 workers nationally reach \$15 in three years, four if they provide health insurance. Smaller employers reach \$15 in seven years. Tips count toward the minimum, but only temporarily. All employers would pay \$15 by 2025.

"15, three to nine years from now" is a long way from the rallying cry "15 Now." But those who'd campaigned on

the issue in Seattle celebrated its passage as a historic victory. National AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka hailed it as a "milestone in the struggle to raise wages and ensure fair pay for all workers." And it was the size of the raise, not the details, that gave heart to imitators around the country.

Business counter-attack

For the campaign that inspired the nation, it's no time to rest on laurels. Both the SeaTac ballot measure and the Seattle ordinance face business-funded counter-attacks.

Just days after the SeaTac measure passed, Alaska Airlines and the Washington Restaurant Association challenged it in state court. Ironically, the Port of Seattle changed its tune about its powers and joined the suit on the side of Alaska Airlines, arguing that only it, and not the City of SeaTac, has the legal authority to set an airport minimum wage. A judge bought that argument, and ruled the City doesn't have authority over the airport within it. Thus, SeaTac legislation went forward for an estimated 1,600 workers at a dozen businesses outside the airport, but not to the 4,800 workers within. Meanwhile, the Port gave its newly discovered authority a test run: It announced a proposal for a minimum



Minimum wage campaigners celebrate as Seattle Mayor Ed Murray signs an ordinance creating a \$15-an-hour city minimum wage. "The economic policy of the 34 years has failed," Murray declared in a prepared statement. "It has decimated the middle class, and it has created the largest income inequality gap in our history. Seattle is trying something else.... It's a step we recommend to other cities around the country."

wage for "airfield support workers" of \$11.22 an hour in January 2015, which would rise to \$13 an hour two years after that. It also promised later in the year to consider a separate minimum wage for airport concession workers. Port commissioners voted July 22 to approve the resolution.

The Washington Supreme Court heard the SeaTac ballot measure appeal Aug. 7, and is expected to make a decision by the end of the year. If it upholds the ballot measure in its entirety, airport employers will owe back pay estimated

at \$17.5 million at the end of July, a figure that's rising at \$2.5 million a month.

Meanwhile, the Seattle ordinance faces its own lawsuit, and narrowly missed having a hostile initiative on the local ballot. The International Franchise Association, represented by former Bush Administration solicitor general Paul Clement, challenged the Seattle ordinance in federal district court, arguing that the law unfairly discriminates against franchisees. And in June and July, a business front group called Forward Seattle sent paid signature gatherers out to the streets to push a November ballot initiative aimed at confusing voters into legislating a smaller increase — \$12.50 an hour, in five years, with no exceptions. But with polls showing Seattleites support the \$15 ordinance at about 70 percent, it was a hard sell. Paid petitioners lied, as documented by supporters of the city ordinance. They would say, for example, that the Seattle ordinance hadn't become official, or that their measure would expand it statewide. In the end, amid accusations of falsifying signatures, Forward Seattle's measure failed to qualify for the ballot.

The wildfire spreads

In Seattle, the battle is to defend the gains, but around the country, the movement is just getting started. In November, minimum wage increases will be on the ballot in Alaska, Illinois and South Dakota, and possibly in Arkansas and Nebraska. In Michigan, the Republican Legislature passed a law in May to raise the minimum wage to \$9.25 by 2018 — as a legal maneuver to head off a citizen initiative that sought \$10.10 by 2017. In Chicago, a proposed ordinance co-sponsored by 21 of 50 aldermen would increase the minimum to \$15 by 2018, while Mayor Rahm Emanuel is pushing a counterproposal for \$13. In November, residents of Oakland, Calif., will vote on a ballot measure that raises the minimum wage to \$12.25 and mandates paid sick days. And on July 29, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to refer to voters a November ballot measure that would raise the city's minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2018, no exceptions.

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