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Up with the minimum wage: A MOVEMENT ON THE RISE

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Raising the minimum wage is popular. Polls show public support for it is strong, broad, and durable. It's so popular, in fact, that elected leaders almost never directly bash it, and its hardest foes hide behind phony arguments: Big business opponents howl about potential harm to small businesses, small business opponents parade their panic about the hurt to customers and employees, and Republican politicians take cover behind rhetoric about it hurting the low-wage workers it's intended to help.

That's all camouflage. The fact is, a minimum wage increase takes money out of an employer's pocket and puts it into a worker's pocket. That's bound to irk a fair number of employers. But in an increasingly one-sided labor market, it's a hugely popular government intervention on the side of those with the least bargaining power. That's why minimum wage foes try to prevent it from coming to a vote, or work to tamp down expectations of what's politically possible so that it never comes up.

But the logjam is broken. The expectations have reignited. And the tremor that started the avalanche was last November's ballot measure in tiny SeaTac, Washington, that raised the minimum to \$15 an hour for airport workers. There'd been minimum wage

ballot measures before that, but never that high. The audacity of \$15 upped the ante. In the nine months since the SeaTac measure passed, 10 state legislatures have voted increases to the minimum wage, and minimum wage campaigns have launched in at least eight major cities, including Chicago and San Francisco, where campaigns are pushing for \$15 an hour.

The good old days

Once upon a time, it was the federal government which set the standard for minimum pay. The Fair Labor Standards Act, signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1938, set a national minimum wage of 25 cents an hour. And it was hugely popular from the start — 67 percent in favor, in a 1938 poll.

As the years went by, Congress raised the minimum over and over again, until 1968, when it reached \$1.60 an hour. That, it turns out, became its high point in buying power. If you adjusted for inflation, that would be \$10.69 today. And if you adjusted it based on increased productivity, it would be \$22 an hour today.

But after 1968, Congress failed to keep up. Though America got a few more raises, business opponents got better at gumming up the works. Since Ronald Reagan entered the White House 34 years ago, Congress has

raised the minimum wage just three times: 1989 legislation signed by President George Bush, Sr., 1996 legislation passed when Newt Gingrich was speaker of the House, and 2007 legislation signed by President George W. Bush. There's been no minimum wage increase at the federal level since it reached \$7.25 an hour in 2009.

It's not that there aren't bills in Congress. Congressman Alan Grayson (D-Florida) has H.R. 1346, "The Catching Up To 1968 Act," which would raise it to \$10.50. And George Miller (D-California) is the sponsor of H.R. 1010, "The Fair Minimum Wage Act," which would raise it to \$10.10 over two years, and adjust it annually for inflation after that.

H.R. 1010 has 196 House co-sponsors, but the House Republican leadership is preventing it from moving forward. The day it was introduced, March 6, 2013, it was sent to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, chaired by Congressman John Kline (R-Minnesota). It has moldered there ever since, without even a hearing. But Congress has a procedure for prying it loose, known as a discharge petition. (That was necessary in 1937, too.) In February and March 2014, supporters gathered 195 signatures on a discharge petition (all but six of the 201 House Democrats, but not a single Republi-

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