

Fight for \$15: The Right Wage for a Working America

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once. Anywhere. We took seriously every potential critique. Is it going to increase youth or minority unemployment, or unemployment for people with low skills and less than a high school education? Is it going to disadvantage minority businesses? Is it going to cause businesses of any sort to go out of business? Is it going to make people relocate their business to a lower-wage jurisdiction across a municipal border? And we looked at every credible study we could find — not projections, not neo-classical economic modeling, but actual studies based on actual data where it had already happened. So when Santa Fe raised their minimum wage over 60 percent above the surrounding counties, they actually experienced a growth in employment. When San Francisco raised theirs above the surrounding California counties, they experienced greater growth in employment during periods of economic growth and they lost jobs more slowly during recessions. We looked at border towns like Spokane, Washington, and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho: What happened when Washington increased their wages and

Idaho didn't? Guess what happened? Businesses didn't go to Idaho. Workers came to Washington. To apply for jobs. We looked at the classic study from the early '90s between Trenton and Philadelphia, when New Jersey's wage went up and Pennsylvania's stayed the same. And then we looked at every federal minimum wage increase since 1937 when we first passed a federal minimum-wage. In 82 percent of the cases, a minimum wage increase correlated with growth in employment. In 18 percent of the cases, it correlated with no meaningful change in employment. And in 0 percent of the cases did it correlate with the loss of employment. Zero. So this is a lie perpetrated by the organized right — because they are ideologically opposed to government interfering in the private sector, and because they simply are greedy and they want more money for themselves.

I assume you're familiar with what just happened in Oregon. What do you think of Oregon's three-tiered raise that was just passed by the legislature? Listen, every jurisdiction has kind of got to figure this out for itself. I am for the most progressive policy that you

can count votes for in any jurisdiction around the country. Do I think that \$12.50 for 10 percent of Oregon workers is good policy? Not really. But in practice, by the time it gets phased in, no one's really going to be at \$12.50. Because those 10 percent of workers are going to have labor market options outside of that geography. So employers in whatever counties of the state have the \$12.50 rate are going to end up having to pay \$13.50 just to compete for workers, if they don't want them to drive into the next county and find a job for a dollar an hour more. So it was a question of what was politically possible in the legislature. And I have to respect that, because you have to count the votes. But I think in reality, by the time it's all phased in, no one is going to be earning less than \$13.50 in Oregon.

How do you think other cities and states can pull off what happened in Seattle? It's just about organizing. It's harder in some places because of state laws that preempt local decisions, like you had in Oregon. But it didn't make it impossible in Oregon; it just meant that it was a state fight and not a city

fight. This is not that hard. It's about workers going on strike, marching, demonstrating, showing up at City Hall, electing the right people. It's hard in that some of those things are hard to pull off, but it's not hard to understand. Americans want higher wages. It's actually only controversial along elites. Rank-and-file Republicans think there ought to be higher wages. Independents, Democrats, black, white, brown, born in America, immigrants, refugees ... you cannot find a demographic except for rich white men that is opposed to a higher minimum wage, and even they are relatively split on the matter.

Do you see a larger lesson for unions about winning through political means what collective-bargaining no longer seems to be able to deliver?

America's enterprise-based collective-bargaining system was a weak model to begin with. Think about what enterprise-based bargaining entails. It's one union bargaining with one company. So companies are highly incentivized to remain nonunion, or to bust the unions if they've got them, or to mini-

mize their bargaining demands because of the perception that they will be put at a competitive disadvantage on price or flexibility with their competition. And trade associations are incentivized to prevent the expansion of or reform of labor laws. What does it mean to have a right that's optional? I don't have to vote to establish the right of free speech. My neighbors and I don't have to come together all at once and agree that we want the right to petition the government for the redress of grievances. I don't have to campaign to be allowed to own a rifle. Those are rights that are guaranteed. But collective bargaining is a right that you have to opt into by a majority vote on a workplace by workplace basis. So only a minority of workers will ever benefit from it, which means by definition it will never have the political support for its own expansion. Labor law reform has failed continually for five decades. We need a better model, and one such model is something that looks like regional or sectoral bargaining mediated through state or local political institutions. That's essentially what we did in Seattle.



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