



## The Fight for \$15

### The Right Wage for a Working America

David Rolf — president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 775 in Seattle — has been a leading figure in the national fight for a \$15 minimum wage. When fast food strikes erupted nationwide in 2012 and 2013 behind the slogan “\$15 and a union,” it was thanks to behind-the-scenes work and resources from SEIU. The strikes were especially successful in Seattle, where the union and many allies went on to pass a \$15 ballot measure for airport workers in SeaTac in 2013. After it became a campaign issue in Seattle as well and pro-\$15 mayor Ed Murray won office, Rolf was appointed co-chair of the task force that wrote the \$15 minimum wage ordinance, which passed in 2014. Now he’s written a book about the movement: “The Fight for Fifteen: The Right Wage for a Working America.” The *Northwest Labor Press* interviewed him by phone.

**Where did \$15 come from, and why are we hearing about \$15, and not \$10.10 an hour, or \$20 for that matter?** The real answer is: It’s a bold moral aspirational goal, along the lines of the eight-hour day. One can talk about the relative economic justifications of \$15. If you look at the high point of the spending power of a minimum-wage earner — 1968 — and you accelerated the minimum wage according to the increase in productivity since then, it would be \$21 an hour. If you accelerated it according to inflation, it would be between \$10.50 and \$11 an hour. So \$15 is a relative midpoint. But this was not cooked up in a science lab. This was workers on the ground, first in Brooklyn in November 2012, deciding that \$15 was worth going on strike over. That wasn’t any more scientific than why we have an eight-hour day instead of an 8.25- or 7.79-hour day. It was a firm round number that workers felt motivated and inspired by.

**First SeaTac then Seattle going to a \$15-an-hour minimum wage got a lot of national attention. A lot of observers who aren’t in Seattle may think that the wage is already \$15 there now. Can you tell us about the compromise and the reality?** It’s quite complex. And this is how we got consensus with a majority of the business community and a unanimous vote on city

Council. There are essentially four different rates of acceleration to \$15. For big businesses who don’t provide healthcare to their employees, it’s a three-year path - \$11, \$13, and \$15. This is the \$13 year; next January it will be \$15. Think McDonald’s or Target, Amazon, Rite Aid ... big companies with 500 or more employees nationally that don’t provide healthcare for employees. For those that do provide health care benefits — say Nordstrom, Macy’s, Safeway or QFC groceries — they have an extra year, so it’s a four-year phase-in. For small employers (under 500 employees nationally) who don’t provide healthcare, it’s a five-year phase-in. And for small employers whose employees do receive healthcare or tips that add up to the minimum wage of \$15, there is a “phase-in, phase-out” tip and health care credit. But everyone has to be at a clean \$15 seven years from the original passage, which is the year 2021. There’s a lot of complexity. It’s really the product of the mayor and the negotiators — myself and Howard Wright on the business side — feeling like we had to have not just a majority vote on the task force but a strong majority if we were not going to be subject to potential efforts to amend or repeal via ballot measure.

**What has been the impact, so far, of the incremental raises?** Workers have more money.

**Has Seattle become a ghost town with business closures?** San Francisco and Seattle, which are the two highest-wage cities in the country, have the largest number of restaurants per capita in the United States, higher than New York, higher than Washington, D.C. We have seen overall growth in the number of restaurants operating in Seattle. We have about 3 percent unemployment. There’s a waiting list to rent a construction crane in Seattle. Our biggest problem is that more people want to live here than there are housing units. So there are really fast rates of housing price inflation.

**I think that gets to my next question which is: How do you answer the argument that if you try to raise the minimum-wage significantly, it will cost jobs and actually hurt the people it’s trying to help?** It’s a lie. It’s never happened. Not



**MAKING A STAND:** About three dozen members and supporters of ATU Local 757 mobilized for a March 23 TriMet board meeting, and stood up as leaders and allies asked the board for more a respectful tone from management.

## TriMet provocation

From Page 1

allow “newly hired union employees to go to the ATU offices on District paid time for purposes of orienting them to their membership in ATU” would be unlawful under a 2013 law, Stevens wrote.

That law, ORS 243.670, says a public employer may not use public funds to assist, promote or deter union organizing. It was drafted by pro-union legislators, and was meant to stop public employers from spending public money fighting union campaigns — like University of Oregon, which spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal work to frustrate and delay a union campaign by college professors. Nothing in the bill’s legislative history suggests that it was supposed to apply to already unionized workers, or that it was supposed to ban union orientation from taking place on paid time.

“That is a real distortion of what we were trying to do,” says State Sen. Michael Dembrow, who sponsored the bill.

But in case TriMet’s legal interpretation of ORS 243.670 doesn’t hold up, Stevens’ memo also says paid-time union orientation “may violate the Oregon constitution” — because it’s an expenditure of public money for a non-public purpose.

TriMet spokesperson Mary Fetsch didn’t answer a question from the Labor Press as to whether the legal opinion came from in-house or outside attorneys. But Fetsch said by email

that TriMet’s position is that it violates Oregon law for employees to go to the union hall on paid work time for “long orientations that last hours.”

“Members certainly can go to the ATU union hall on their personal time, and the ATU may make orientation presentations to new employees of reasonable duration during TriMet’s orientation on its property,” Fetsch wrote.

In the past, TriMet trainers dropped new hires off at the Local 757 hall for a one- to two-hour paid union orientation at the end of a training shift.

At the March 23 board meeting, Oregon AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Barbara Byrd told TriMet board members that the point of Oregon’s Public Employee Collective Bargaining Act was to encourage a harmonious and cooperative relationship between government and its employees.

“Our federation is concerned by signals that TriMet management has not made a good-faith effort to maintain a productive relationship with ATU. In fact the entire labor community is concerned about poor labor-management relations at TriMet. TriMet management sets a bad precedent, and their conduct sends a bad message to other public employers.”

After union president Block addressed the board, TriMet board chair Bruce Warner said he’d be more than willing to meet with union leaders, and would work with them to set a date for a meeting.

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