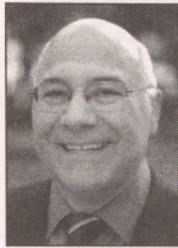


Minimum wage: A stronger economy from the ground up

BY BRAD AVAKIAN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



Brad Avakian is the Oregon Labor Commissioner. He was elected to a second term in 2012.

Around the state, a grassroots movement is calling for a higher minimum wage and a fair shot at economic opportunity.

They're right. The truth is that our wage floor is too low.

As Labor Commissioner, it's my job to ensure that Oregonians are treated fairly on the job and that we have a workforce ready to compete. I also oversee our state's minimum wage so that workers can keep pace with the rising cost of goods.

Passed by a coalition of senior, labor, and hunger security advocates in 2002, Oregon's minimum wage system directs the Labor Commissioner to adjust the minimum wage each year so that workers don't lose ground to inflation.

As a result, Oregon workers have earned steady, modest increases during the past 12 years. But now that we've had more than a decade of experience with Oregon's minimum wage system, it's a good time to step back and ask whether anyone working full time should ever have to live in poverty. I believe that the answer is no.

Last month, Israel Bayer wrote about a tipping point with growing inequality and access to housing. Raising the minimum wage alone won't solve the challenges facing our community, but it'll help. And it's a way to help working Oregonians immediately without new taxes, spending or layers of government. The minimum wage is a powerful public policy tool and we should use it.

We're in a stronger position to make smart, targeted adjustments to our wage floor because of the forward-thinking measure that Oregon enacted more than a decade ago. Because we've increased our minimum wage each year to adjust for inflation, today we have less of a gap between our current rate of \$9.10 an hour and what it would take for a family of four to live above the poverty line.

If Oregon were to keep its minimum wage

indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), but set to a more realistic level, 450,000 Oregonians could see higher paychecks and more money to make ends meet. In fact, according to the Oregon Employment Department, adjusting our minimum wage to around \$11.50 — the level for a family of four to stay above the poverty line — could generate more than \$188 million per year in new purchasing power.

That's good for individual workers and their families, but also for our economy as a whole. Virtually every dime that comes through a higher minimum wage is reinvested in the local economy when workers buy groceries, gas, clothes, school supplies and other essentials.

One of the reasons that you're hearing louder calls for a more realistic wage floor is that our economy has changed. A common misconception about the minimum wage is that these earners are mostly teenagers, just starting out and doing part-time work. Today, that's just not the case. When you talk about the minimum wage, the median worker making minimum wage is likely to be a woman in her 30s working full time supporting a family.

In fact, minimum wage earners are disproportionately female: 62 percent of all earners nationwide, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to the Economic Policy Institute, about 80 percent of all Americans who benefited from a minimum wage increase last year were 20 years old or older. In its recent report, "Pay Disparity in Oregon," the Oregon Council on Civil Rights points to a higher minimum wage as an important tool in the fight to end the pay gap between women and their male counterparts.

Of course, we know what detractors will say, because we've heard it before. This isn't our first rodeo. We just simply haven't seen the massive job losses and cost spikes predicted by those who oppose minimum wage increases.

In 2002, opponents of the minimum wage warned that our state could lose 30,000 jobs

if we increased the minimum wage. But after a decade of experience, we know that these fears are overblown. Our restaurant industry is doing well — we have 8,867 restaurants that employ 171,900 Oregonians across the state. According to the National Restaurant Association, restaurants remain "a driving force in Oregon's economy" and in coming years, the sector is predicted to grow at a faster pace than the national average.

Oregon has the opportunity to build a stronger economy for everyone by raising its minimum wage. We can address growing inequality and ensure that consumers have the purchasing power to support local business.

To get there, Oregonians must let their voices be heard. There's a strong and diverse grassroots movement out there calling for a higher minimum wage. If you believe that we should lift more Oregonians out of poverty, now is the time to get active. Let elected officials know that we all do better when employees earn a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Attend town halls, contact their offices.

There's no silver bullet when it comes to building a stronger economy and middle class. Yes, we need access to child care, paid sick days, and sustained investment in workforce training and readiness. But we should also honor the dignity of all labor, not just for the sake of individual workers, but for our economy as a whole.

Let's raise Oregon's minimum wage, boost consumer purchasing power and help lift up communities around our state.

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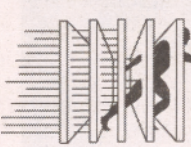
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