

# So-called 'recovery' costing all of us in services

First, let's preface what we're about to say with a commonly accepted generality: The economy is improving.

Second, consider how much more glaring that generality makes the latest study on how much taxpayers are subsidizing the miserly habits of corporations through low wages and thread-bare benefits.

This month, the University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center released its report, "The High Cost

of Low Wages in Oregon." Its findings conclude that more than 400,000 Oregonians are employed in low-wage work: "This systemic low-wage work (when salaries are set far below the costs needed to raise a family) means the demand for public services is at a record high — more than 1 million Oregonians now rely on food stamps and other assistance to feed and support their families."

As a result, taxpayers fill the gaps through government programs, such as food stamps, to the tune of \$1.7 billion each year. There is a cost to this level of economic suppression, and it is borne by every taxpayer in the state, including those needing assistance in the first place.

In summary, the economic recovery, the report concludes, "has bypassed working Oregonians."

So it's also no surprise when Work Systems, a nonprofit agency that coordinates workforce development programs to train and employ Oregonians, says that one out of three households in Multnomah and Washington counties is not making ends meet.

One out of three.

That's according to a standard of 70 household measurements for every county in Oregon. The largest increased self-sufficiency needs occurred in Multnomah County, where the rising cost of living for a young family means people who were once able to get by are now rapidly falling behind.

So in the abstract, the economy might be improving on the big stage, but go ask the family of four trying to pay rent how the economy is faring. Concrete facts reveal a different story. Ask members of the Latino and African-American communities — where 45 percent and

50 percent of workers, respectively, are employed in low-wage industries — and you'll probably hear more about erratic schedules and limited hours than the economic rebound.

Talk to a single parent trying to support his or her family, and the optimism for a better next quarter is nowhere to be found. According to the U of O report, one in three female-headed households are paid less than \$25,000 a year. That jumps to 54 percent among those women with

children under 5 years old.

Instead of enjoying this so-called economic recovery, we're paying for it.

How do we change that? We can do so by investing in our social infrastructure — such as affordable housing — and forcing those corporations on the recovery side of this economy to offset their wage suppression with a public assistance fee. And we must end wage discrimination and expand paid sick leave and child care options. We can do this.

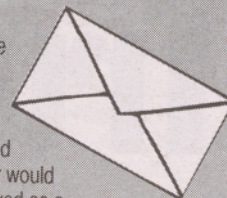
There's no one silver bullet, but ending the denial of what a true economic recovery means for all of us is a great step forward. So let's stop taking two steps back.

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## EDITORIAL

### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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## Let your voice be heard in support of \$15 an hour

Did you know that to afford a lower-end, one-bedroom apartment at 30 percent of your income in Multnomah County you would need to make about \$31,960 annually. That's about \$14.88 an hour.

Thinking of something a bit more spacious, maybe with a view? According to a recent report by KGW, you would need to make nearly \$62,000 annually to afford a one-bedroom renting for \$1,500 a month. That translates to \$31 an hour working a 40-hour week.

A person working for the current minimum wage in Oregon right now (\$9.25) would need to work about 65 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom on the edge of town. To afford a one-bedroom, \$1,500 apartment than it's a cool 130 hours a week at the current minimum wage.

Is your head spinning yet? Mine is.

During this upcoming legislative session, elected officials in Salem are proposing a \$15 minimum wage increase and requiring two weeks sick pay statewide. Hooray! Anything less would be inhumane.

The reality is, if we want poor and working people to support paying for things like a street fee that would help improve transportation in poor neighborhoods, and to support the arts for low-income children in schools, then we have to collectively turn a corner. There are far too many Oregonians having to make hard choices between paying for utilities, health care, food and rent. That's if you're lucky enough to have a choice.

Supporting government programs such as housing, the arts and transportation, to name a few, is critical to maintaining a healthy society. Who among us doesn't want a healthy government supporting a healthy society? I do.

It's no secret that the gap between the rich and poor, especially in urban environments, is at an all-time high. We could talk about the need for nearly 40,000 affordable housing units in the metro area, or the fact that some people are uncomfortable about people sleeping in our parks and on our sidewalks. It makes me uncomfortable too. We could talk about the realities of raising a child on your own, or having to work three jobs to make ends meet. In fact, we can talk about our poverty until we are blue in the face, but what we really want to talk about is simply a raise.

Raising our minimum wage to \$15 an hour will not deter the creation and success of small businesses. It will not hamper our nonprofit sector. It will not stop big businesses from making record-breaking profits this year. It's not the end of the world for the free market. It's simply giving working Oregonians a fighting chance to have access to the wages they deserve and the chance to improve their quality of life.

It was great to see Multnomah County and Home Forward increase their in-house minimum wages to \$15 an hour. Now it's time for Portland to not only support its own workers, but require that we all do the same.

There will be a rally for the \$15 minimum wage on Saturday, Jan. 24, at high noon at the Oregon State Capitol. Be there, or at the very least, let your voice be heard. Oregon wants a raise!



### DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.