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OPINION

A Social Contract for Workers at the Bottom

The justification for a dignified minimum wage

BY BENJAMIN TODD JEALOUS

This summer, minimum wage workers in California abandoned their posts at fast food restaurants and retail stores for spots on the picket line. They joined workers in cities across the country to demand an increase in the minimum wage.

Their efforts paid off last month when California Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill to raise the state minimum wage over the next three years to \$10 an hour.

For the first time in years, widespread minimum wage reform is a real possibility, and we need to keep the pressure on. The current federal minimum wage is inadequate, outdated, and out of touch with the modern cost of living. In this country, a full-time job should be enough to keep a family above the poverty line and off of welfare.

Imagine a mother working a

steady, full time, year round job at the federal minimum wage - \$7.25 an hour. Her annual salary will amount to just \$15,080. That puts her below the poverty line for a family of two, and well below the poverty line for a family of four. To make matters



worse, her paltry salary depreciates in value each year, since the federal minimum wage is not tied to inflation.

At this rate, she could put in 45, 50 or even 60 hour weeks in an effort to keep her family off

not the unemployed. These are not the underemployed. These are the over employed and underpaid.

It is a travesty that millions of Americans work full time but still struggle to support their families. They are making a decision to be hard-working employees and responsible parents, but their employers are also making a decision - to pay them poverty wages.

Raising the minimum wage is imperative, and the potential cost to businesses and consumers is less than you might think. According to a recent study by DEMOS, raising

There are several opportunities to make this a reality.

In November, New Jersey voters will decide whether to raise the state minimum wage to \$8.25 and tie it to the cost of living. President Obama recently suggested increasing the federal minimum wage to \$9. Even below the Mason-Dixon Line, two Maryland counties are considering bills to raise their minimum wage to \$11.25. (Oregon's minimum wage is \$8.95 and will rise to \$9.10 in January

with an automatic cost of living adjustment.)

It is time for a new social contract for people at the bottom of the economic ladder. We need to stand up with workers in California and other states and demand a dignified minimum wage on the federal level and in our communities. We can no longer afford not to.

Benjamin Todd Jealous is the president and chief executive officer of the national NAACP.

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welfare, but she would still qualify for - and most likely need - public assistance.

This is hardly a hypothetical situation. Thirty-three U.S. states and territories use the federal minimum wage, and there are over three million mothers and fathers just getting by on full-time jobs. These are

the federal minimum wage to \$12.25 (\$25,000 for a full-time, year round worker) would cost large retailers just one percent of total annual sales, and it would cost consumers just 12 to 18 cents extra per shopping trip. At the same time, this change would lift more than 700,000 people out of poverty.

Closing the Gap in Health Care

A basic human right that all God's children deserve

BY YVONNE OLIVER

When the federal government shut down for 16 days, more than 800,000 "nonessential" federal employees became unemployed. No one believed it would go that far.



After more than 41 attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), health care reform became the scapegoat for the government shutdown. Was it a mere coincidence that opening day of enrollment for the health insurance marketplace was the day the government shutdown occurred? Maybe. Maybe not. You decide.

The Patient Protection Affordable Care Act gives more than 40 million uninsured folks health insurance. Yet, 'trusted leaders' have taken a stand against the 2010 law, declaring, "We need to delay providing this benefit," because giving poor and middle class hard working people another entitlement makes them rely too much on the government.

Having an illness or a chronic

disease and not being able to get much needed care diminishes a person's quality of life and can contribute to premature death. The ACA has created a new space for how we care for each other.

Healthcare reform takes away the control insurance companies once held and holds hospitals accountable for the quality of care they deliver. Healthcare is a basic human right that all God's children deserve, but right-wing extremists continue to spin exaggerated or inaccurate analyses which only serve to create anger, anxiety, blaming, uncertainty and more despair among hard working families.

Much can be said about a people by the way we care for the most vulnerable citizens, our babies and our elders. The United States ranks 38th in healthcare systems according to the World Health Organization. In May, the Huffington Post reported that "the U.S. falls behind 68 other countries in infant mortality."

As baby boomers mature, we now have more people over the age 50 than ever in our history. An aging

population is one of the greatest challenges we face in the 21st Century. Health insurance coverage for all people should not be negotiable.

The ACA provides no annual or lifetime caps of benefits; free preventive services like mammograms, prostate exams and colonoscopies; a 50 percent reduction on prescription drugs with elimination of the donut hole by 2020; allowance for children up to age 26 to stay on parent's insurance; elimination of gender based pricing, elimination of denials based on pre-existing conditions; and additional resources for doctors to provide better care.

The Affordable Care Act saves money from a reduction in waste, fraud, abuse and Medicare costs.

It is time to let our legislators know we need them to do their constitutional duty and provide for the well-being of their public. Where healthcare is concerned, the ACA is a good start. We need our legislators to help make it work for everyone, rather than create obstructions that serve no one.

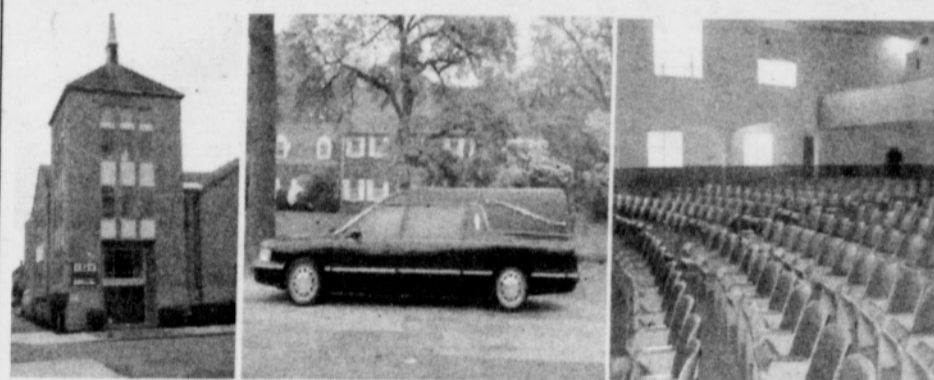
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