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"Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now"

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Time to Raise the Minimum Wage

The Curry Report

George E. Curry

The first federal minimum wage of 25 cents an hour was established in 1938. Since then, it has been raised 22 times. It's time to increase the floor for the 23rd time, from its current $7.25 to at least $10 an hour.

According to the Center for Economic Policy Research, the value of the minimum wage peaked in 1968. If the minimum wage had been indexed to the official Consumer Price Index each year, the minimum wage today would be $10.52. The last time the minimum wage was raised was in 2007, when it was raised from $5.15 to $7.25.

Still, there is resistance.

Republican leaders say raising the minimum wage will cost jobs. But opponents, such as economist Jared Bernstein, argue that rather than job loss, employers compensate by charging higher prices and increasing productivity.

According to the Economic Policy Institute of the workers who would benefit from the raise:

* The average age of affected workers is 35 years old;
* 88 percent of all affected workers are at least 20 years old;
* 35.5 percent are at least 40 years old;
* 56 percent are women;
* 28 percent have children;
* 55 percent work full-time (35 hours per week or more);
* 44 percent have at least some college experience.

Approximately 3.6 million workers, or 4.7 percent of all hourly paid workers are at or below the federal minimum wage of 7.25 an hour. Employers are allowed to pay students and the disabled – defined as those "whose earning or productivity is impaired by age, physical or mental deficiency, or injury" – less than the minimum wage. It also places limits on workers who derive part of their income from tips.

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A study by the Congressional Research Service found that 40 percent of those earning the minimum wage or less work in "food preparation and serving related occupations." Robert Greenstein, president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities testified before Congress in February: "I would note that over recent decades, the minimum wage has been allowed to erode and is now 20 percent lower, after adjusting for inflation, than in the late 1960s. For this and a number of other reasons (relating in part to globalization of the economy), wages for low-paid jobs have fallen."

A fact sheet by Economic Policy Institute found, "A disproportionate share of minorities will benefit from a minimum wage increase. African Americans represent 11 percent of the total workforce, but are 18 percent of workers affected by an increase."

Washington State has the highest state minimum wage at $9.19, indexed to inflation. California enacted a law that will raise its minimum wage to $10 over three years. Some cities have wages that are even higher. The minimum wage is $10.55 in San Francisco. And in the recent election, New Jersey voters approve a constitutional amendment increasing the minimum wage from $7.25 to $8.25.

In March, the House voted 233 to 184 against raising the minimum wage to $10.10 by 2015, with all Republicans voting in the majority.

Two Democrats, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa and Rep. George Miller of California have sponsored legislation, called the Fair Minimum Wage Act, to raise the federal minimum wage. In his State of the Union address in February, President Obama proposed a federal minimum wage of $9.

The EPI study stated. "When describing who would see a raise if the minimum wage were increased, it is important to look at everyone who earns between the current minimum wage and the proposed new one, as well as workers earning just above the new minimum wage. The typical worker who would be affected by an increase in the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour by 2015 looks nothing like the part-time, teen stereotype: She is in her early thirties, works full-time, and may have a family to support."

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of Emerge magazine, is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service.

Needs and Wants are Not the Same Thing

Economic Empowerment

James Clingman

During a seminar in Buffalo, N.Y. a few years ago, noted author and financial adviser, Brooke Stephens, said, "How you handle your money is a reflection of how you feel about yourself." Many of us, including me, may not want to admit it, but there have been times in our lives when we did some pretty stupid things with our money. We spent all we had and then some; we ended up with more month than money; we bought things we thought would bring us satisfaction but later found they had little lasting value.

As mature adults now, our financial mistakes and indiscretions should be used to help our young people, many of whom find their self-esteem and self-worth in their possessions. And, sadly, the more they pay for those things, the greater their perceived self-worth. Shahrazad Ali once said, "Black folks brag about how much we pay for things, and White folks brag about how little they pay." Our economic empowerment will never come from spending alone; it will come from ownership of production capacity, distribution channels, real estate, and businesses through which we circulate our dollars among ourselves.

Our lifestyles are definitely reflective of our penchant for purchasing "top shelf" items and, thus, illuminate our need to impress others with those items. For instance, the television commercials featuring various brands of alcohol being promoted by Black icons of the rap music industry carry the subliminal message of being accepted and affluent. Clothing and shoe commercials lull many of us into a continuous state of "I gotta have that." The automobile ads, especially the high-priced autos, feature all kinds of reasons for going into debt for seven years to drive them. And it goes on and on.

> "Black folks brag about how much we pay for things, and White folks brag about how little they pay"

When do we get off this train of consumption? How do we begin to establish self-control when it comes to how we handle our money? How do we immunize ourselves against the disease of allowing our wants to morph into needs simply because of a commercial, a billboard, or a cute jingle or saying recited by some superstar? A lot of our purchasing habits really do reflect the saying, "We buy what we want and beg for what we need."

Jonathan Weaver, pastor at Greater Mt. Nebo A.M.E. Church, in Bowie, Md. and founder of the Collective Empowerment Group, conducts a daily prayer teleconference (712-432-0255; access code 372536#). In a recent session, Pastor Weaver stated, "Know the difference between needs and wants. You need transportation to get to work or your business, but it doesn't mean you need to buy a $50,000 car. What you need is a ticket to get on the metro or subway or bus fare. You need to have some clothes, but you don't need a $10,000 mink coat."

Weaver went on to add some very important tips, such as, avoiding the use of credit cards, and refraining from "window-shopping," because you may be drawn into the store and buy something you did not consider until you saw it. ("Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things…" Psalm 119:37). Marketers, to their credit, know how to turn a consumer's wants into needs. So, beware of all the ways to get your money out of your pocket and into someone else's.

It all boils down to what Brooke Stephens said about how we view ourselves. We have been so programmed to believe that having "things," especially the best and highest priced things, is the key to our personal value. We are mesmerized by luxury and excess and have become obedient consumers who will rush out, sleep out, and even knockout someone else just to have the latest fashion, gadget, or whatever anyone is selling.

Maybe we can change our tenuous and abbreviated relationship with our money by holding on to it a little longer. Maybe we can educate our children and guide them in such a way that they will not make the same mistakes we made when it comes to handling money. Maybe we can gain a new and different perspective on ourselves as a people and as individual consumers. And, maybe, just maybe, we will take that first giant step toward economic self-reliance and achieve a proportional level of ownership and control of income-producing assets in this country. After all, we have been here since it began, yet we lag far behind where we should be economically, slavery and mistreatment notwithstanding.

I believe those of us who have been through some "stuff" and made poor decisions in our lives have an obligation to at least share our experiences and use them to help others.

Jim Clingman, founder of the Greater Cincinnati African American Chamber of Commerce, is the nation's most prolific writer on economic empowerment for Black people. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati and can be reached through his Web site, blackonomics.com.