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OUR VIEW

Pushing minimum wage to the max

Oregon will soon have a higher minimum wage, but it's unclear if Governor Kate Brown's compromise plan will please both sides of a complicated argument.

Brown's proposal, as has been reported in this newspaper, divides Oregon into two separate geographic and economic regions, with wage rules differing in each.

Rural Oregon will have a lower minimum wage than its urban counterparts, especially Multnomah County and the greater Portland area. It will also increase here at a slower pace.

That makes sense. The economic reality is far different in Pendleton

than Portland, in Hermiston than Hillsboro. But the Legislature will certainly tinker with Brown's proposal, and how it emerges from that tinkering — and how it will effect rural Oregon — remains to be seen.

Still, some action on minimum wage is a critically important component of the short legislative session that will begin just over a week from now. The legislature must take action or it leaves Oregon vulnerable to the blunt hammer of a citizen initiative to decide state economic policy.

Though that is an ineffective and inflexible way to operate, union and worker rights organizations have not been dissuaded by Brown's bill and say they plan to go forward with petitions that could bump statewide minimum wage to \$15 an hour in a faster time frame, and in all corners of the state.

With a plan similar to Brown's enacted by the legislature, it may take the starch out of those initiatives.

But what about minimum wage, in general, and allowing Eastern Oregon to play with different rules than its urban overlords? We opined last June that a jump to a \$15 minimum wage would be no problem for the Nikes and Intels of

the world, but would be devastating to small businesses and to much of rural Oregon. Agriculture, most notably, would be thrashed by the new rules.

We argued, too, that the problem of low wages would be much more efficiently handled by the private sector than by government decree. Nationwide, long stagnant wages were slowly increasing, but the recent stock and oil tumble has put that once again at risk.

It is understandable that minimum wage should be tied somehow to a "living" wage — enough money to put a roof over a person's head and food on the table.

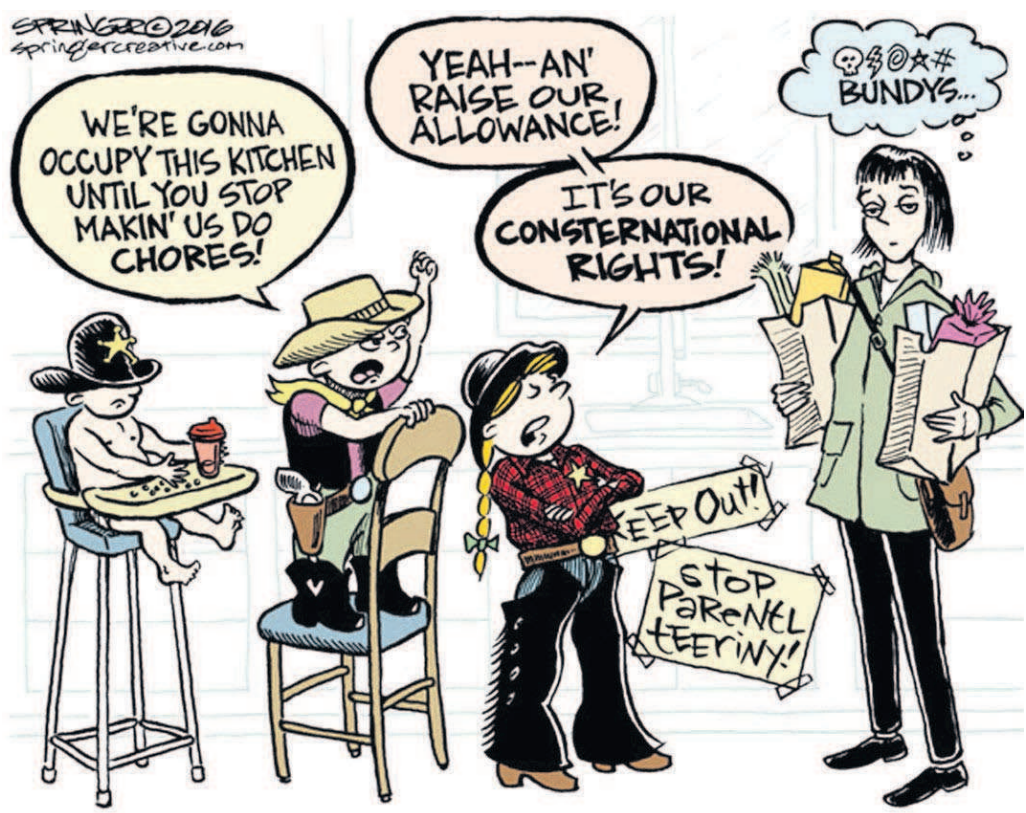
And it's easy to see that \$9.25 per hour doesn't quite cut it in Portland, much less in New York City or Chicago or San Francisco.

Yet there is an economic and social benefit to a country, a state, and a business, that some employees can get experience without breaking the budget. Teens, especially, benefit from entry level jobs. Low paying jobs do benefit part-time and seasonal workers, too, who can use it to supplement their regular income. True, they can be taken advantage of. But a higher minimum wage is just as likely to harm them as it is to help them, by causing their employers to reduce hours and reduce labor costs.

There is plenty to debate. Minimum wage will without a doubt go up in Oregon, and the effect of that will be wide-ranging and significant. Right now, the pressure is on the legislature to come up with a plan that cuts the legs out from under those who would codify seismic economic shifts, while still allowing working class people to make a decent living and maybe even save a few dollars each pay period.

It will be difficult to thread that needle, but doing nothing will be far more problematic for our side of the state.

Some action on minimum wage is critically important component of the short legislative session.



OTHER VIEWS

America the unfair?

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders don't agree on much. Nor do the Black Lives Matter movement, the Occupy Wall Street protests and the armed ranchers who seized public lands in Oregon. But in the insurgent presidential campaigns and in social activism across the spectrum, a common thread is people angry at the way this country is no longer working for many ordinary citizens.

And they're right: The system is often fundamentally unfair, and ordinary voices are often unheard.

It's easy (and appropriate!) to roll one's eyes at Trump, for a demagogic tycoon is not the natural leader of a revolution of the disenfranchised. But the populist frustration is understandable. One of the most remarkable political science studies in recent years upended everything rosy we learned in civics classes.

Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin I. Page of Northwestern University found that in policymaking, views of ordinary citizens essentially don't matter. They examined 1,779 policy issues and found that attitudes of wealthy people and of business groups mattered a great deal to the final outcome — but that preferences of average citizens were almost irrelevant.

"In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule," they concluded. "Majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts."

One reason is that our political system is increasingly driven by money: Tycoons can't quite buy politicians, but they can lease them. Elected officials are hamsters on a wheel, always desperately raising money for the next election. And the donors who matter most are a small group; just 158 families and the companies they control donated almost half the money for the early stages of the presidential campaign.

That in turn is why the tax code is full of loopholes that benefit the wealthy. This is why you get accelerated depreciation for buying a private plane. It's why the wealthiest 400 U.S. taxpayers (all with income of more than \$100 million) ended up paying an average federal tax rate of less than 23 percent for 2013, and less than 17 percent the year before.

Conversely, it's why the mostly black children in Flint, Michigan, have been poisoned by lead coming out of the tap: As Hillary Clinton noted Sunday in the Democratic debate, this wouldn't have happened in an affluent white suburb. Lead poisoning permanently impairs brain development, but it's not confined to Flint. Some 535,000 children across the country suffer lead poisoning, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Those kids never have a chance — not just



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

because of the lead, but also because they don't matter to the U.S. political system. U.S. politicians are too busy chasing campaign donors to help them.

There are solutions — more about that in a moment — but a starting point is to recognize that this public mood of impotence and unfairness is rooted in something real. Median wages have stalled or dropped. Mortality rates for young white adults are rising, partly because so many self-medicate with painkillers or heroin. Blacks have been protected from this phenomenon by another unfairness: Studies indicate that doctors discriminate against black patients and are less likely to prescribe them painkillers.

America's political and economic inequalities feed each other. The richest 1 percent in the U.S. now own substantially more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.

Solutions are complex, imperfect and uncertain, but the biggest problem is not a lack of tools but a lack of will. A basic step to equalize opportunity would be to invest in education for disadvantaged children as the civil rights issue of the 21st century.

"I think any candidate seriously aiming to reduce inequality would have a mild increase in tax on the rich to fund higher school spending," says Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford expert on inequality. I would add that investments in education should begin early, with high-quality prekindergarten for at-risk children.

We also need political solutions to repair our democracy so that ordinary citizens count along with the affluent. "There is no magic bullet that will set things right, but meaningful campaign finance reform must be at the center of a reform agenda," Gilens says. "States and cities are leading the way. Arizona, Maine and Connecticut have had statewide, publicly funded 'clean election' systems for some time with varying degrees of success."

One step toward transparency: President Barack Obama could require federal contractors to disclose political contributions.

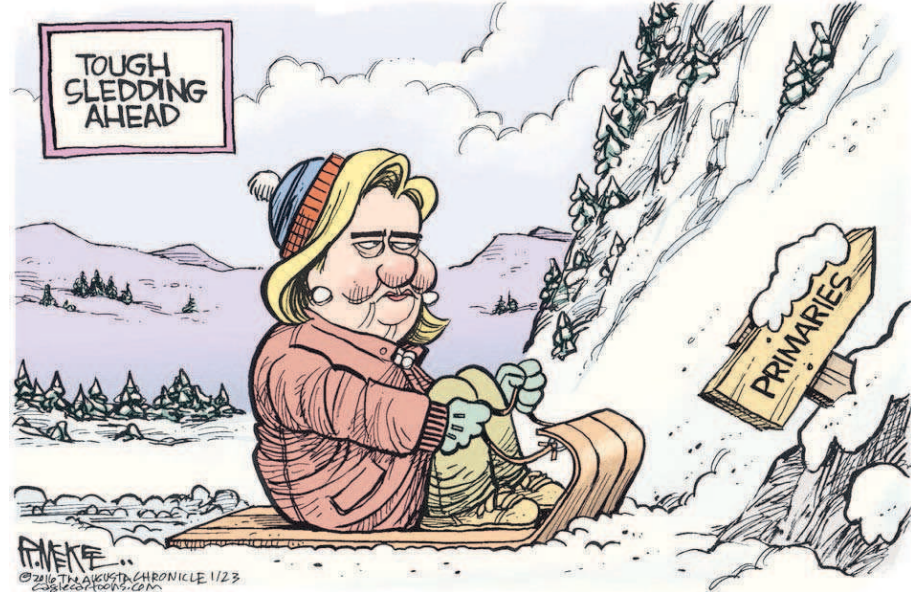
Right now, the bitterness at America's grass-roots is often channeled in ways that are divisive and destructive: at immigrants, say, or at Muslims. The challenge will be to leverage the populist frustration into constructive postelection policy. But it has been done before.

"Reforms were adopted in the first Gilded Age, an era similarly plagued by government dysfunction, political corruption and enormous economic inequality," Gilens notes. "Perhaps they will be again." For the sake of our country, let's work for an encore.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill, Oregon. A columnist for The New York Times since 2001, he won the Pulitzer Prize two times.

Tycoons can't quite buy politicians, but they can lease them.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



LETTERS POLICY

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YOUR VIEWS

Hiring non-tribal member a step back for CTUIR

This is in response to the *East Oregonian* article on the hiring of Jane Hill for the Umatilla Confederated Tribes legislative manager. It is important for the reader to know that while Chuck Sams is the spokesman for the tribal government administration, in no way is he the spokesman for the hundreds of grassroots tribal members who are the heart of the Umatilla Confederated Tribes. I state this because the article implies the entire tribe supports this hire. That is hardly the case.

Our tribal constitution has the important provision that tribal government will implement tribal self-determination and tribal self-governance to the "maximum degree." In other words, we will work for our tribal goals ourselves. We will be self-sufficient, independent, and non-dependent on outside assistance. The most obvious demonstration of self-governance can be seen in our employment ranks — that we fill employment openings with our own qualified tribal members.

There were three qualified tribal members who applied for the legislative manager position. One of them should have been hired. They are all college graduates with many years of experience in tribal issues and affairs. This new person hired knows nothing about our tribal values and issues. We also have a policy that calls for qualified tribal members to be

hired first, over non-tribal member applicants. Tribal employment preference policies have consistently been upheld by the courts because they are not based on race, but on political affiliation (membership) with a federally recognized tribe.

The former legislative manager is a CTUIR tribal member, so it is obvious that with this hire the tribe is regressing, not progressing, in our self-determination efforts. The tribe has taken a huge step backward. Our senior managers should be assisting in advancing our qualified tribal member job applicants, yet time and time again they are denying our qualified tribal members jobs in favor of non-Indians, who always get the benefit of the doubt.

And what does our newly elected Board of Trustees have to say about this situation? During their recent election campaigns, most of them spoke boldly about what they would do to improve conditions (including employment) within tribal government.

This letter is nothing personal against Jane Hill, it is about senior tribal management once again intentionally denying, without justification, tribal members an employment position they are more than qualified for. I can safely state that a majority of Umatilla tribal members are not supportive of this hire, in consideration that there were three qualified tribal members who applied for the position.

Bob Shippentower
Pendleton