

## THE FIGHT FOR \$15

by Mary Zepernick

“Worker pay is rising at the slowest pace ever recorded. But it’s worse than that because the new data include *everyone* who’s paid --- including the top CEOs and Wall Street Moguls. The fact is, most people’s pay is stagnant or dipping when the adjusted costs of living, including rents, are going through the stratosphere,” according to Robert Reich, former US Labor Secretary.

Reich goes on to say that “Conservative Republicans like it that way. They’ve long said that the only way to revive the economy is for pay to drop. That’s why they don’t want to raise the minimum wage, why they advocate so-called ‘right to work’ laws that destroy unions, why they’re in favor of outsourcing jobs abroad through policies like the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), and why they’re happy for companies to shift from hiring people full time to relying on independent contractors and part-time workers.

“But Republicans have it completely backwards. When pay stagnates or declines, people don’t have the money to buy beyond necessities, which causes the economy to slow, as it’s been doing (the latest report showed the U.S. economy grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent in the latest quarter, but the Commerce Department also marked down its growth numbers for prior years). Add to this the record share of workers who don’t know how much they’ll earn from week to week in independent work. That uncertainty is also holding back

spending, which in turns retards the economy.

“Repeat after me: Higher wages for middle and low-income workers are good for the economy. Lower wages are bad.”

-----

In late July a New York State panel recommended that **fast-food workers be raised to \$15 an hour**. However, as they celebrated, the new minimum wage level didn’t cover other low-wage workers, such as home care or day care center workers. The New York Times reported that in New York City, “the decision created a stark new divide between low-wage workers who will receive the boost in their paychecks and those who will not.” For example, a Wendy’s worker celebrated while her granddaughter earns the minimum wage of \$8.75 an hour at a day care center.

Some 50,000 fast food workers are expected to benefit, estimates James Parrott, chief economist at the Fiscal Policy Institute, a nonprofit research group. However, about 1.25 million workers who earn less than \$15 an hour do not work for fast food chains and will not benefit, Parrott said.

Not surprisingly, fast-food companies complain that they are being required to raise wages while other businesses are not. So it follows that only the fast food workers are happy with this bargain! However, Stefanie Luce, a professor of Labor Studies at the

City University of New York, said the decision might lead “to pressure for the state to raise the minimum wage statewide.”

In June, Larry Cohen stepped down at a relatively young age from his ten-year tenure as president of the 700,000-member Communications Workers of America. A progressive, he sees trade unionism as a social cause, “not an end in itself but a means of transforming society.” Asked whether U.S. unions have a weaker political agenda than labor movements in other industrialized countries, he replied, “Yeah, for sure that tension over whether the main federation of unions can agree on a common strategy has been there since the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, and I don’t think it’s improved enough. The United States is ranked at the bottom in worker’ rights by the International Trade Union Confederation.”

Asked for his assessment of non-traditional organizing campaigns like the SEIU-backed Fight for \$15, Larry Cohen replied: “They are models of what we need to do and at least as important as political activity. They speak directly *to* working people, rather than hoping to elect those who will speak *for* working people. One of the advantages of the \$15 an hour minimum wage demand is that over time it sounds more and more realistic. The question is: How do we make such organizing sustainable and get results?”

## POTPOURRI

In late 2012, 200 New York restaurant workers walked out in the nation's first-ever fast food strike, and they were mocked for demanding minimum pay of \$15 an hour. This past July Governor Andrew Cuomo appointed a New York state panel that recommended \$15 minimum wage for the state's 180,000 fast food workers.

Kendall Fells, the campaign's chief organizer, said: "It's huge. It's hard to believe, going back to that first one-day strike, with people saying, they're crazy." He noted that Tacoma, Washington, was considering \$15 following Seattle, and San Francisco voted to adopt a \$15 minimum, phased in over several years.

"This is a trend that cannot be stopped," said Gary Chaison, a professor of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who is seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, introduced a bill to **raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2020**. This puts pressure on other candidates and ups the ante for the discussion of wages and working conditions in general.

Clearly, the pot is boiling with the "Fight for \$15." It's not just a slogan, but a catalyst, an incentive for workers on the low rungs of ladders to politicize and organize — from manufacturing and transportation to health care and education, from government to **the financial industry**. The Security and Exchange Commission is poised to issue a rule that businesses must share their "pay ratio." This means that millions of

workers will know how their top boss's pay compares with their own.

As the song goes: **IMAGINE!**

p.s. One tool corporations are using to fight against the growing "Fight for \$15" movement is to claim their rights as "persons" under law. In response to the City of Seattle's law to raise the minimum wage, McDonald's Corporation and the International Franchise Association filed suit in May claiming the new law "discriminates" against the corporation under the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. That's the Amendment, passed in 1868 and intended to provide freed slaves equal protection and due process of the laws. But 129 years ago it was high-jacked by corporate lawyers who maneuvered a Supreme Court to decide that its protections also apply to corporations.

In the case of Seattle, because the law calls for implementation of the \$15 minimum wage in three years for larger corporations and seven years for small businesses, lawyers for mega corporate franchises are crying that their clients are being "discriminated against" in violation of the Constitution.

It's important that this legal strategy be defeated — in the courts to be sure, but just as importantly, if not more so, in the streets and all public places where we can clearly proclaim that corporations are *not* people and cannot be victims of "discrimination" under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Yet one more reason why we need an amendment to the constitution declaring that only human beings,

not corporate entities, are human persons — one of the two anchors of the Move to Amend movement.

A Publication of the PROGRAM ON CORPORATIONS, LAW & DEMOCRACY

**By What Authority** (ISSN: 524-1106) is published by the Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy. The title is English for *quo warranto*, a legal phrase that questions illegitimate exercise of privilege and power. We the people and our federal and state officials have long been giving giant business corporations illegitimate authority. Today, a minority directing giant corporations and backed by police, courts, and the military, define our culture, govern our nation and plunder the earth. **By What Authority** reflects an unabashed assertion of the right of the sovereign people to govern themselves.

POCLAD is a group of 10 people instigating democratic conversations and actions that contest the authority of corporations to govern. Our analysis evolves through historical and legal research, writing, public speaking and working with organizations to develop new strategies that assert people's rights over property interests.

**BWA** is a tool for democracy proponents to rethink and reframe their work. To that end we encourage readers to engage us with comments, questions and suggestions.

POCLAD  
P.O. Box 246  
South Yarmouth, MA 02664-0246  
508-398-1145; 508-398-1552 (fax)  
[people@poclad.org](mailto:people@poclad.org); [www.poclad.org](http://www.poclad.org)

POCLAD is a project of the Jane Addams Peace Association  
David Cobb, CA Karen Coulter, OR  
Greg Coleridge, OH Mike Ferner, OH  
Dave Henson, CA Lewis Pitts, NC  
Jim Price, AL Virginia Rasmussen, NY  
Kaitlin Sopoci-Belknap, CA  
Mary Zepernick, MA

Distribution policy: POCLAD welcomes all interested people to join our mailing list. Please consider an annual minimum contribution of \$25 to support POCLAD's ongoing work (or whatever you can afford).

Copyright 2015 by the Programs on Corporations, Law and Democracy. The content of BWA has been copyrighted only to ensure that it is not appropriated by others. POCLAD encourages the noncommercial reproduction and widespread distribution of material in BWA without prior approval, provided the material is unchanged and attribution is given to both BWA and the author(s). Please send us two copies of any material. Thank you!

