

A \$15 Minimum Wage Is What We Need - and Here's Why the Attacks on It Are Bogus

By [David Rolf](#) ^[1] / [The New Press](#) ^[2]
March 1, 2016

The following is an excerpt from the new book [The Fight for Fifteen](#) ^[3] by David Rolf (The New Press, 2016):

Throughout a century of public debate, business lobbyists, trade associations, and the economic right have portrayed minimum wages as harmful to business. The criticisms raised by minimum-wage opponents display a remarkable consistency over the past hundred years, despite huge changes in our economy. Data and experience, in other words, have been irrelevant to those who oppose higher minimum wages. This is not because minimum wages actually cause widespread harm to business—the evidence is quite the opposite. It has nothing to do with the greater good of the American economy or the average American worker. It is because some conservative politicians, low-wage industry lobbyists, and large business associations (such as the National Restaurant Association and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) habitually reject any “interference” in their pursuit of corporate profits. But it’s not just the big-business–right-wing nexus that has created a political environment in which wage hikes are seen as potentially toxic moves. Over the past four decades, liberals also have largely accepted the trickle-down explanation of what growth is (higher profits, rather than more jobs and higher wages) and where growth comes from (lower taxes and less regulation on businesses and the wealthy). Since the late 1970s, even most liberal Democratic proposals have done little more than tinker around the edges of century-old minimum-wage laws, increasing the wage by a quarter here and fifty cents there, allowing its value to erode precipitously over the past decades, afraid to claim the moral and economic center.

And so through Republican and Democratic administrations alike, corporate America has fought for and won less regulation, lower taxes, and higher profits, while middle-class America has gotten the shaft— policies that helped lead to the economic disaster of the Great Recession and the slow recovery that followed. For a generation, America’s political class has lacked the vision

or courage to articulate or defend the true interests of American workers and the middle class.

The National Employment Law Project (NELP) examined a hundred years of criticism of the minimum wage and found three distinct themes that persistently reappear: (1) raising the minimum wage would impair the economy; (2) a higher minimum wage would ultimately harm the very workers it is intended to help (otherwise known as “concern trolling”); (3) the minimum wage violates America’s commitment to freedom and liberty.

When a federal minimum wage was first proposed in 1937, Gary Harrington of the National Publishers Association said, “Rome, 2,000 years ago, fell because the government began fixing the prices of services and commodities. We, however, know what has always happened when governments have tried to superintend the industry of private persons. The final result has always been distress, misery and despair.” In the years since Harrington made his dire prediction, the minimum wage would rise over two dozen times and nearly identical predictions of job loss and economic contraction—without regard or reference to the effects of earlier raises—would be voiced each and every time. This is despite “nothing short of a sea change in [economists’] understanding of the effects of minimum wage increases”: that raising minimum wages does far more good than harm. NELP calls these criticisms “little more than articles of faith repeated by the adherents of a stubborn ideology and expressed without reflection on the prevailing economic or political conditions.”

The real-world, experiential data are ever clearer—raising wages lifts workers out of poverty, creates new customers, boosts the economy, leads to imperceptibly small price impacts, and does not reduce job growth. And yet the same old scare stories that have been repeated for the past century are trotted out every time a minimum-wage increase is proposed—even though the sky has yet to fall.

Corporate America has fought for and won less regulation, lower taxes, and higher profits, while middle-class America has gotten the shaft—policies that helped lead to the economic disaster of the Great Recession and the slow recovery that followed. For a generation, America’s political class has lacked the vision or courage to articulate or defend the true interests of American workers and the middle class.

One of the most data-resistant anti-minimum-wage messages is that higher wages will force businesses to close their doors. When Congress was

considering a federal minimum-wage increase in 1991, a Hardees VP said, “I don’t know what kind of dream world they’re in. When [the cost of] your labor component goes up, it ultimately gets passed on to the consumer. [If another wage increase were enacted], we’d probably be out of business at some point.” Hardees, is, of course, still churning out fast food to this date.

In 2003, San Francisco voters adopted a citywide minimum-wage law. The Golden Gate Restaurant Association called it a job killer that would “bankrupt many restaurants.” But as we’ve seen before, the city saw no statistically significant negative effects on the number of firms or employment as a result of the San Francisco law. In fact, firm growth was actually higher in the city than in neighboring cities, unemployment was below the statewide average, and job growth in bars and restaurants led the region. Though we don’t see net negative effects on business closure, there’s no doubt that wage hikes do require businesses to make changes to absorb the new costs.

Paying higher wages can require thought and change on the part of small businesses. But we know that after even major wage hikes in San Francisco, the number of businesses didn’t shrink—it grew. And let’s keep our eye on the other prize: employees are taking home more money to allow them to (still, barely) survive in one of the nation’s most expensive cities.

After the \$15 minimum wage passed in Seattle last year, local lifestyle glossy Seattle Magazine ran an article with the inflammatory headline “Why Are So Many Seattle Restaurants Closing Lately?” It claimed that a number of recent restaurant closures were in part due to the wage increase.

Conservative pundits jumped all over the article. The right-wing think tank the Washington Policy Center went straight for the most hyperbolic anti-raise argument: \$15 was shutting down businesses and depriving unfortunate low-wage workers of their jobs. “The shutdowns have idled dozens of low-wage workers, the very people advocates say the wage law is supposed to help,” it claimed. “Instead of delivering the promised ‘living wage’ of \$15 an hour, economic realities created by the new law have dropped the hourly wage for these workers to zero.”

Forbes covered the story, with an article titled “We Are Seeing the Effects of Seattle’s \$15 an Hour Minimum Wage.” But when the Seattle Times went and actually talked with these businesses, they found that none of them listed the \$15 minimum wage as a reason for ceasing operations. Renee Erickson was indeed closing her Boat Street Cafe, but she runs three others and is in the process of opening two more. Asked in an e-mail about the closure being

associated with \$15, she replied, “That’s weird, no, that’s not why I’m closing Boat Street. . . . I’m totally on board with the \$15 min. It’s the right thing to do. . . . Opening more businesses would not be smart if I felt it was going to hinder my success.”

<http://www.alternet.org/print/books/15-minimum-wage-what-we-need-and-heres-why-attacks-it-are-bogus>

ISSUES

How the Fight for a \$15 Minimum Wage Became a Reality

By DAVID ROLF

May 12, 2016



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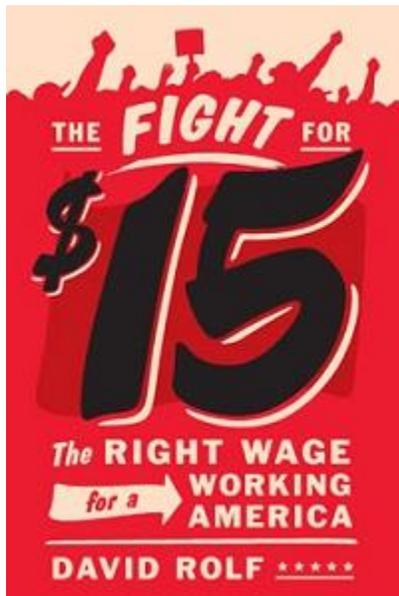
Fast food, home health care, and other low-wage workers rally to advocate for the Fight For \$15 in Chicago, Illinois, 2014 © Marie Kanger Born/Shutterstock

EDITOR'S NOTE:

David Rolf is the president of SEIU 775, the fastest-growing union in the Northwest. He is most recently the author of *The Fight for Fifteen*, and joins Signature to discuss how a \$15 minimum wage passed easily in Seattle, and how its within reach for the rest of America.

When a federal minimum wage was first proposed in 1937, Gary Harrington of the National Publishers Association said, “Rome, 2,000 years ago, fell because the government began fixing the prices of services and commodities. We, however, know what has always happened when governments have tried to

superintend the industry of private persons. The final result has always been distress, misery and despair.”



The Fight for Fifteen

by David Rolf

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But while the public has been sold a steady stream of data-resistant anti-minimum-wage messages, American workers have been falling behind. Families at the middle and bottom of the income spectrum are experiencing stagnant wages and disappearing middle-wage jobs. Wage growth has flatlined for a generation — hourly wages for most workers increased a mere 0.1 percent per year on average since 1980, and between 2000 and 2013 the median family income actually decreased by seven percent (despite a sixty-five percent increase in worker productivity over the same period). Even arch-conservative U.S. senator Ted Cruz acknowledged this reality: “You want to talk about what’s making life hard for working men and women, [it’s] wage stagnation,” he said. And that’s why we’ve seen a major shift in who makes the minimum wage. These workers aren’t teenagers who are being supported by their parents while making a little money on the side — eighty eight percent of minimum wage earners are over the age of twenty, and the average minimum wage earner is thirty-five years

old. Minimum wage workers are older and have greater family responsibilities than is often portrayed in the media and minimum-wage debates. These are breadwinners, and need higher wages to keep themselves and their families out of poverty.

Which brings us to Seattle in 2014.

Every great movement for justice in American labor history has begun with a seemingly implausible demand: An end to child labor, when one in five American workers was under sixteen years old. An eight-hour day when full-time manufacturing and construction employees worked an average of a hundred hours a week. The fight for \$15 was also called impossible, even “near insane,” “killing flies with a shotgun,” and “an economic death wish.” Yet the movements to end child labor, establish a fair workweek, and expand civil and human rights all produced powerful policy victories that created a more just society within a generation. **Every great movement for justice in American labor history has begun with a seemingly implausible demand.** [TWEET THIS QUOTE](#)

A \$15 minimum wage wasn't on anyone's radar screen as a potential civic issue before the first of the fast-food strikes happened in New York in November 2012. However, it would be only a year from the first Seattle strike in May 2013, to a unanimous city council vote to raise the wage to \$15 an hour in June 2014—with the support of 74 percent of the public.

We knew we were operating in a changed public opinion environment post-Occupy, when income inequality and wage stagnation finally took their place among the principal moral issues of our time. After forty years of stagnant and declining wages, people had had enough.

How did the impossible become the standard that mayors and governors around the nation are rushing to emulate — *how did Seattle win \$15?*

First, in Seattle the government was very clearly on the side of the workers. Going into 2014, we had a mayor-elect and a city council majority that had already declared their support for \$15. The question then became how to get there

in a way that was both sound policy and sound politics. Mayor Ed Murray positioned himself as the convener of the debate and negotiations were held in city hall itself. He appointed a committee that was well balanced and had public credibility. The research and staff work were paid for by city dollars. When committee negotiations broke down, Murray threatened and cajoled to get them restarted. Murray used the bully pulpit and his own political capital to advance the debate.

And the message was sent to the business lobby: the government is committed to addressing worker poverty and income inequality, so if business wants to influence how that happens, it had better claim a seat at the table, not just say no. Having a government that operated openly on the workers' side was one reason we got done peacefully in Seattle what it took a fight to accomplish in SeaTac (where workers won the nation's first \$15 minimum wage in 2013).

Second, the campaign in Seattle proved the value of having an organized and demanding left wing of the debate. Socialist Alternative city council candidate Kshama Sawant made \$15 the centerpiece of her campaign, and shocked the political establishment by winning election in 2013 against a respected Democratic incumbent. She and her organization 15 Now were disruptive of the political status quo, frightening many city hall officeholders and much of the city's business elite. If business elites, mainstream politicians, and even the business-as-usual elements of our labor-progressive coalition didn't get on board to produce a center-left minimum-wage proposal, they were certain to face a far-left proposal on the ballot that had a good chance of success. (Inside the labor-led \$15 for Seattle Coalition, our view was that we should be absolutely prepared to wage and win an initiative war if necessary. But we felt that a peaceful settlement of the issue without resorting to a costly and risky initiative would be even better, because the victory would be more certain and potentially more sustainable.)

Third, the victory in Seattle showed that business doesn't have to be the enemy. In Seattle, there were certainly parts of the business community that ended up wanting to say "hell no" to any minimum-wage agreement, but they were decidedly in the minority. And although the restaurant lobby in particular was

slow to come to the table, there were many, many businesspeople (such as Howard Wright, David Watkins, Nick Hanauer, and Maud Daudon) who recognized that in the long term economic inequality is bad for everyone, even the rich. Wright said of his role on the committee that brokered the final deal on \$15: “I took a lot of flak [from business], but we’re different here in Seattle. We try to take care of our own.”

Some business leaders agreed to negotiate because they were afraid of a worse outcome if Sawant ran a ballot measure. Some agreed because the mayor and city hall generally were clearly heading toward \$15 and they didn’t want to lose a chance to influence the policy. Even leaders of the local chamber of commerce and the local restaurant association played far different roles than the U.S. Chamber and National Restaurant Association play in Washington, D.C., contributing to the debate and even in some cases offering support for the final deal.

Fourth, it mattered significantly that we had union leaders who were willing to make the demands of largely nonunion workers their top political priority. (The pro-\$15 forces were led by unions in the “\$15 for Seattle” coalition and SEIU-backed activist group Working Washington, along with Sawant’s 15 Now.) The Seattle campaign aimed to raise the wage to \$15 not just for union members or people who could become union members — but for everyone in an entire city. And as Murray advisor Brian Surratt stated, “labor knew it needed to be inclusive if the model was to translate and spread further than progressive Seattle.”

The victory in Seattle lifted wages for one hundred thousand people, far more than just about any union leader could ever hope to do at the bargaining table. And over ten years, it will transfer \$3 billion in income from corporations to the workers who help make those businesses profitable. As Danny Westneat of *The Seattle Times* said of labor’s success in broadening its tent: “Instead of trying to organize workers business by business—the ‘rusty old machine called collective bargaining’ — the idea is to wage broader, public-spirited campaigns like the \$15 wage fight. It’s been decades since anyone said this: Unions are back.”

Finally, the most critical element was workers themselves taking action. In this case, it was the fast-food workers going on strike, holding mayoral debates, organizing boycotts, marches, weeks of action, street demonstrations, and attendance at city hall forums, public debates, and town halls. By taking direct action, workers changed the terms of the debate as well as public perception of their value from that of French fry cooks to their value as human beings, parents, neighbors, and citizens, and focused public attention on the fact that no one could live with dignity in Seattle on a \$9.32 minimum wage. As *The Stranger's* Anna Minard said, “A lot of people deserve credit for getting the \$15 minimum wage from the streets to City Hall. But most of all, a bunch of people who work for terrible wages, and who have little power in a world that strives to disempower them, decided to take enormous personal risk and walk off the job, walk in a picket line, sit in the street, even get arrested. The fact that this debate has happened at all is thanks to low-wage workers fighting back.”

The fight for \$15 movement, while only a few years old, has already won major victories for workers. And as Americans see that another world is possible, our hopes will continue to rise — along with our wages.

<http://www.signature-reads.com/2016/05/how-the-fight-for-a-15-minimum-wage-became-a-reality/?ref=BEBF7DBE6741>

THE ECONOMY

Thinking Bigger in Local Minimum Wage Campaigns: The Fight for \$15 in Seattle

by *David Rolf*

Seattle recently passed the highest minimum wage in the country, \$15 an hour phased in over 3-7 years, with temporary credits for health care spending and tips. While Seattle's \$15 agreement is complex, the principles it reflects are straightforward: Workers get a substantial pay boost to \$15 an hour, smaller businesses get time to adapt, and our local economy sees a \$3 billion boost to the paychecks of 100,000 low-wage workers over the next decade.^[i]

This victory for low-income workers was the product of multiple intersecting forces including: The national economic and political climate; local political shifts; and smart, strategic organizing that seized this moment of opportunity.

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Why raise the minimum wage?

At a moment when the labor movement is losing ground – including basic collective bargaining rights following recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions^[ii] – some workers and labor institutions have decided to take a new approach to building power and supporting struggling families. Raising the minimum wage is the most potent poverty reduction tool in our current economic and policy arsenal. Even for low-income Americans receiving public assistance, 70% of their income is tied to their wage and employment status^[iii].

Workers at the bottom of the income ladder have also been hit particularly hard by widening income inequality and increasing long-term unemployment in the recession and post-recession economy^[iv]. Wage income is more important than ever to raising the fortunes of low-income families^[v].

Yet rising inequality has broken the link between economic growth and broadly shared prosperity that characterized post-WWII American history^[vi]. Without strong pressure on companies to share the wealth with workers, gains have increasingly accrued to the top earners.

So how do we reverse wage stagnation?

Historically, major advances for workers have been won through politics at the federal level, or through campaigns to organize workers at major employers. But political gridlock means Congress an unlikely to yield any progress. And the current state of collective bargaining law presents few viable opportunities to take on corporate recalcitrance and bargain new worker victories on any significant scale.

This situation has left an opportunity at the local level to find real solutions to these challenges. And as public opinion consolidates — minimum wage increases tend to poll well — state and local minimum wage initiatives are sprouting up across the country^[vii].

Setting the stage for change: Shifts in the economic and political climate

The overall picture of the deterioration of our economy and increasing concentration of wealth is by now well-known:

- The gap between the top 1% and the rest of us has grown to crisis levels not seen since the Great Depression^[viii].
- Real hourly wages have been stagnant for several decades^[ix].
- Low-wage jobs are growing much faster than the rest of the economy^[x].
- Labor unions represent an ever-decreasing share of workers^[xi]. The share of income going to the top 10% has a consistent inverse relationship with union membership over the past 100 years^[xii], and as membership has fallen, the top 10% have grown wealthier.

While income inequality, depressed wages, and declining unions represent long-term trends, the magnitude and permanence of the economic change we've undergone has only become widely recognized since the Great Recession, the bank bailouts, and their aftermath.

During the bleak times of recessionary free-fall in 2011, the Occupy movement emerged. In a moment when the people had little real economic power, activists created a new term — the 99% — that summarized many Americans' frustration and emphasized our shared economic pain not to mention our political divisions. Occupy focused public attention on the issue of income inequality and helped create a sense of moral and economic crisis about the gap between the top 1% and the 99%.

Since Occupy, worker unrest has continued to grow and amplify the public narrative about inequality. In late 2012, the Walmart Black Friday strikes and national fast food strikes set the stage for climate in which workers' demands for a better life could be taken seriously. ^[xiii] When fast food workers launched the first strike in their industry with a bold and even somewhat implausible-sounding demand for \$15 an hour, it sparked a level of attention surprisingly strong support. Suddenly — or rather, at last — we had a movement exciting enough and a demand transformative enough to measure up to the crisis at hand, launched by a radically disempowered and disrespected workforce in one of the least-paid and lowest-status occupations.

Many would have called organizing in the rapidly growing fast food industry impossible. It was common for critics to dismiss a much-stereotyped workforce of “teens and dropouts” paid minimum wage for serving customers of large profitable corporations, while trying to survive in some of the most expensive cities in the world. Against those odds, it was these workers, instead of the frustrated narrative of Occupy, who were fighting back to change the economy — and winning broad public support for their efforts.

Testing the waters: Airport workers win \$15 at the ballot box in SeaTac WA

In November 2013, the first \$15 minimum wage in the nation was passed in SeaTac, Washington (a suburb of Seattle). SeaTac Proposition 1 established an inflation-adjusted \$15 minimum wage for workers at large transportation and hospitality employers in and around Sea-Tac International

Airport. The first time the \$15 minimum wage was tested at the ballot box, workers won, demonstrating that \$15 was not a dream or a negotiable demand, but the spark of a new movement for economic justice.

The \$15 minimum wage went to the ballot in SeaTac only after a long period of workplace-based mobilization by airport workers. Baggage handlers, cabin cleaners and other service workers had once been direct employees of airlines or the airport, but over the past decades their jobs have been contracted out and their wages eroded. As a result, a publicly owned airport was staffed by thousands of invisible poverty-wage workers, employed by an alphabet soup of little-known contractors to serve the customers of national-brand airlines.^[xv] After a high-profile campaign failed to win concessions from the dominant local airline or the public agency that runs the airport, workers and community supporters were left with only one option: take it to voters with a local initiative. Though the victory in the November election was a narrow one, it remains a signal success for the \$15 movement, showing the scale of change that is possible in the current climate.

Although court challenges have meant that Proposition 1 remains unrealized for many workers, the political momentum for higher wages continues to build. Alaska Airlines — the dominant economic player at the airport and a key corporate target of the worker campaign — has recently paid for its subcontractors to raise wages to \$12/hour, and announced this move to the media.^[xvi] And the governmental body that controls the airport, the Port of Seattle, is touting a process to establish new wage guidelines for airport workers.^[xvii] While neither of these moves is sufficient, they do reflect the intense level of public support for lifting up poverty-wage workers, and the ongoing political pressure to find a way forward.

Seizing the moment: Fighting for \$15 in Seattle

The national and regional stage was set for a big move in Seattle. Within just a few months of the first Seattle fast food strike in May 2013, both candidates in the race for Seattle mayor had publicly endorsed a \$15 minimum wage, and were even engaging in one-upmanship about who was a better champion of the issue.^[xviii]

At the same time, the only seriously contested race for City Council focused almost entirely on the \$15 minimum wage. Kshama Sawant — political outsider, academic, and socialist — emerged as a towering political figure in the city after successfully challenging a long-term incumbent on a pro-worker, \$15 wage platform. Between the Mayoral and City Council races and the SeaTac ballot measure on the ballot, the political debate in Seattle was shifting with extraordinary speed.

The momentum continued after Election Day. Even before his swearing in, incoming Seattle Mayor Ed Murray announced plans to convene an Income Inequality Advisory Committee (IIAC) to quickly produce recommendations on how best to raise the minimum wage. Co-chaired by myself and local hotel investor Howard S. Wright III, the IIAC brought together representatives of workers, business, nonprofits, and community groups to hash out a plan to raise the minimum wage. Working under a deadline set in part by the mayor and in part by the looming possibility of ballot initiative, the IIAC was, after a few fits and starts, able to reach overwhelming agreement on a compromise plan the mayor forwarded to city council. (Only two members of the IIAC voted no — a business owner who demanded less, and Councilmember Sawant, who demanded more. The head of the local Chamber of Commerce abstained.^[xix])

Though it does include some compromises, the IIAC agreement ratifies every key demand of the worker movement for \$15/hour. It ensures that:

- Every low-wage worker gets a significant raise every year on the way to \$15/hour and beyond.
- Every workers benefits from a robust system of community based enforcement of labor standards.
- After the phase-in period, everyone gets to a true \$15 minimum wage with no deductions for tips or benefits, adjusted annually for inflation.

Policy research helped to bring it home: Economic impacts of raising the wage

While worker voices changed what was possible, strategic data gathering and policy research helped win the debate on this new terrain. As part of its process, the city commissioned two reports that played a key role.

University of Washington researchers investigated which workers would be affected by a \$15 minimum wage, breaking down the numbers by industry as well as along demographic lines. This work established some powerful data points and lent them official bearing including, crucially, that there are approximately 100,000 workers paid less \$15 an hour in the City of Seattle (whose total population is about 600,000); and that these workers overwhelmingly are employed in larger worksites, not smaller ones.^[xxi]

University of California, Berkeley researchers took a close look at the economic impacts in other cities that had raised their minimum wages over the past decade. Their careful survey convincingly demonstrated to decision makers, journalists, and other influencers that higher wages do *not* result in job loss. Moving this key issue from a contentious question to a matter of settled fact has contributed greatly to the success of the campaign so far. Business claims about job losses have been greeted with an air of skepticism in many quarters quite unlike other recent debates on labor standards.^[xxii]

Locally, the community empowerment organization Puget Sound Sage generated a series of reports that responded quickly to key questions around impacts on different groups such as tipped workers; women, immigrants, and people of color. They also reported on the overall economic impact of higher wages. Puget Sound Sage's local credibility and ability to produce convincing and strategic analysis of emerging questions was a critical part of the effort for \$15.^[xxiii]

A summary of the data collected by researchers:

- Decreasing poverty: If there were no changes in the labor market, an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour would reduce the share of seattle residents whose family income was below the poverty line from 13.6% to 9.4% (University of Washington)
- Dispelling the myth that this hasn't been done before: A raise in the minimum wage of \$9.32 to \$15 would be a 61% increase. In 2003-2004, Santa Fe raised its minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$8.50, a 65% increase with no net impact on employment or store closures—IIR Policy Brief, "*Do Businesses Flee Citywide Minimum Wage,*" (Sept. 2006). When Washington State raised the minimum wage in 1989, the tip credit was also eliminated. The result was an 85% increase in the minimum wage for tipped workers over those two years. Restaurant employment continued to grow. (Source: *The Stranger*, 2/2/2014)
- Cost increases: a Political Economy Research Institute study (Sept. 2013) estimated that a minimum wage increase from \$7.25 to \$10.50 (45%) would increase fast food restaurants' cost of doing business by 2.7%^[xxiii]. The Seattle Times recently estimated

that raise in the minimum wage to \$15 would at most raise consumers' cost of dining out by 7% -*Seattle Times*, citing UC Berkley research (March 12, 2014)

- On store closures and layoffs:
 - Other cities which have raised minimum wage showed no significant impact on employment or retail store closures. *Seattle Times* (relying on a UC Berkley report studying San Francisco + 8 cities and 21 states with higher base pay than the federal minimum wage) showed almost no effect on employment rates because of higher productivity, less turnover and modest increase in prices at the restaurants – *Seattle Times* (March 12, 2014)
 - Studies of the Washington/Idaho border showed that rather than business flight to lower-wage Idaho, wages rose in Idaho to remain competitive with WA. And Big Macs cost the same. *Washington Post* (Jan. 8, 2014)

For the next wave: Lessons from the \$15 campaigns in SeaTac and Seattle

The public mood on the economy has shifted, offering us the possibility to seize new political opportunities to win gains for workers on a historic scale. In fact, the 100,000 Seattle workers whose wages would be substantially lifted by the mayor's \$15 minimum wage plan is greater than the number of workers organized in any single National Labor Relations Board election in U.S. history.^[xxiii]

Seattle has shown that public and political opinion can be moved dramatically in a very short time. It was less than a year from the first time fast food workers strike demanding \$15 an hour on May 30, 2013 to the mayor's announcement of a concrete plan to reach a \$15 wage on May 1, 2014. This extraordinary speed wasn't borne of a longstanding plan; it happened because advocates had the flexibility to seize the new political opportunities before us.

Public debate in Seattle has been transformed through the relentless appearance of workers articulating their aspirations, and solidified by the new data-driven consensus that higher wages lift the economy. Supporters of the \$15 minimum wage of all stripes have been extremely disciplined in reiterating the commonsense "middle out" argument about how economics works: more people with more money means more customers for more businesses.

Notably, working people have presented as people, not just workers. They're seen as our neighbors first, not activists. Instead of talking about their jobs, they've talked about their lives, their families, their struggles, and their aspirations. This is a rare workplace struggle where the debate has not focused on the workplace itself, but rather on our communities and our economic future. The result has been new perceptions of who low-wage workers are, what they deserve, and whether they matter.

And perhaps because Seattle's \$15 movement began in fast food — an industry not generally considered to have much intrinsic value — the focus has remained sharp on the universal human needs of working people rather than the "worth" of the particular type of labor they engage in. Universalizing this sense of who is "deserving" has compounded the middle-out storyline, underlining the sense that higher wages are also a near universal economic benefit.

While polling has shown overwhelming support for the case workers have articulated, low-wage workers could not have won this struggle alone. It has been critical throughout the process to allow space for grassroots organizations and community business to come along. Their endorsements have been valuable ratifications of worker voices, helping move perceptions of worker demands from quixotic hopes to serious plans.

Another critical lesson is that high minimum wage numbers can rapidly become normalized. Initially, the demand for \$15 sounded quite high to many observers — including some staffers and even some low-wage workers — but with repetition and endorsement it became normalized.

Overall, the success of the \$15 effort in Seattle has demonstrated that worker voices can shape and move opinion about the economy — even more than business owners, elected officials, and journalists. In a recent poll, fast food workers registered as the group considered “most trusted” on the minimum wage. They came in significantly ahead of our new mayor, and far outpaced the Restaurant Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and the *Seattle Times*.^{[\[pdf\]](#)}

The same poll also showed that public can be quite sophisticated and engaged in understanding these issues. An astonishing 74% of Seattle voters offered support for the idea of a \$15 minimum wage, up slightly from 68% earlier in the year. And the support appears to be firm: 87% of Seattle voters said they’re paying attention to the debate. Perhaps this close attention explains why many have been able to sympathize with some business concerns while maintaining a sharp commitment to the clear call offered by workers that bold action is necessary to take on the central moral and economic crisis of our era.

Most importantly, Seattle shows that by positioning the debate as a question of corporate profits or workers’ lives, ongoing mobilization by workers can keep the political debate focused on friendly terrain, offering new opportunities for bold policy moves that take on income inequality and lift up workers.

Known nationally as an innovative labor leader, David Rolf is the President of SEIU Healthcare 775NW based in Seattle, the fastest growing union in the Northwest representing 43,000 home care and nursing home workers in Washington state and Montana. He also serves as an International Vice President of the Service Employees International Union, the international organization which represents more than 2.1 million workers in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

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<http://aspen.us/journal/editions/julyaugust-2014/thinking-bigger-local-minimum-wage-campaigns-fight-15-seattle>

Don't believe falsehoods about \$15 wage

May 28, 2016

Updated 12:00 a.m.



Araya's Place, a vegan Thai restaurant in an upscale Seattle neighborhood that the city had ordered to pay nearly \$6,500 in back wages plus fines totaling more than \$3,000, is open for lunch in March., ELAINE THOMPSON, ASSOCIATED PRESS

By DAVID ROLF / Contributing writer

True or false: A \$15 minimum wage will result in businesses laying off their workers and closing their doors? We've heard and read these assertions so many times – including in these pages – that it's hard to believe they are false. How could so many people possibly be so wrong, for so long?

Because trickle-down economics has been our national religion for 40 years, and we are still waking up to the reality that these policies have been a sham. They have resulted in flat wages for 90 percent of Americans, record income inequality and poverty rates that haven't budged since the 1960s.

A \$15 minimum wage can take a meaningful bite out of these depressing problems. But wait – here comes chicken little again, crying that the sky is falling! A brief history of these warnings:

- In 1923, a Washington, D.C., district court declared the district's minimum wage law invalid, claiming that "No greater calamity could befall the wage earners of the country. It will logically end in social disorder and revolution."
- In 1937 during congressional debate on the Fair Labor Standards Act which established the minimum wage, Gary Harrington of the National Publishers Association said, "Rome, 2,000 years ago, fell because the government began fixing the prices of [wages]. The final result has always been distress, misery and despair."
- In 1949, the National Restaurant Association argued that any minimum wage in their industry would cause "immediate unemployment."

In the years following these dire predictions (and thousands of others), our economy grew at a rate the world had never seen before. Because higher minimum wages have never caused economic contraction – quite the opposite. Our nation's economic growth has floundered as our wages have stagnated. The neoliberal wage, tax, and trade policies instituted since the 1970s that were supposed to help corporations "trickle down" the wealth have instead hurt average Americans, as well as our global competitiveness as nations like Germany have raced ahead. Even the International Monetary Fund has recently called on the United States to raise its federal minimum-wage rate, describing the U.S. minimum wage as low by both historical and international standards.

We have no reason to fear paying workers more. The OECD found higher minimum wages in advanced economies are in fact correlated with lower unemployment. And as Goldman Sachs analysts noted, citing a major 2010 study by University of California economists, "the economic literature has typically found no effect on employment" after wage increases.

Another major study, by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, reviewed the past two decades of research on the impact of minimum-wage increases on employment and also concluded that “the weight of the evidence points to little or no effect of minimum wage increases on job growth.”

Even the San Francisco Federal Reserve piece cited in these pages actually concluded – not that higher minimum wages lead to major job losses – but that a “small drop in aggregate employment should be weighed against increased earnings for still-employed workers because of higher minimum wages.” Not exactly a doomsday scenario.

Here in Seattle, we have seen the research borne out on the ground – as our minimum wage has risen, our unemployment rate is actually falling. The local economy is booming – in fact, our biggest economic debate is over whether the city is growing *too fast* for regular people to keep up. Business license applications for food services businesses are increasing year over year, and 2015 saw dozens of restaurants open in the Capitol Hill neighborhood alone. The Capitol Hill pizza joint that claimed it was closing because of the higher minimum wage? Another pizza place moved into their location and is thriving. Surely it isn’t government’s job to defend poorly run businesses, when others are jockeying to take their place.

A higher minimum wage won’t be the death of jobs or businesses here, any more than they have been over the past hundred years. Five years from now, when the new \$15 minimum wages are fully implemented, and the economies of Seattle and California are humming along, their businesses thriving, our modern-day chicken littles will never be challenged for the errors they have made.

It’s time to stop repeating their baseless predictions, and look at the facts. What has been the real impact, so far, of Seattle’s incremental raises toward \$15 an hour? It’s simple: Workers have more money.

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<http://www.oregister.com/articles/minimum-717425-wage-wages.html>