

Introduction

NICOLE LAMBELET
COMMUNITY MEMBER

Give a man power over my subsistence and he has a right to my whole moral body.

In the main it will be found that a power over a man's support (salary) is a power over his will.

– Alexander Hamilton

Over two centuries ago one of our nation's founders, Alexander Hamilton, repetitively warned about the unjust disconnection between those who work and those who benefit from the fruit of the worker's labor. The statements above, although completely applicable to many circumstances in today's society, were uttered in the context of the late 18th century as the young nation of the United States struggled to be free from the economic grip of the motherland, England. This paper, however, is not about the economic underpinnings of the American Revolution. Rather, it will effort to position the struggle for a just minimum wage in twenty-first century Greensboro, North Carolina within a historical (and particularly American struggle) for economic justice and democracy.

As a white, upper-class, heterosexual, and probably slave owning man, Hamilton's words help us quickly discover that the history of the American laborer is a history of being subjected to blindness, inequality, abuse, and even oppression across the intersections of race, class, and gender. If Hamilton, who was in many ways, a top America's socio-economic ladder, found himself enraged about his absorption into a matrix of exploitive relationships via England, the cause to denounce the vile, presumptuous power exercised over those in our nation who were brought here as laborers on slave ships was and is paramount. In order to understand the soil upon which all Americans stand, work, and find meaning is to understand that it is a ground soiled with blood and haunted by a failure to recognize and value the multiplicity of beings connected to the work of our mutual survival.

Therefore, we ask that as you read through this collection of pieces on raising the minimum wage that you not just think of Greensboro, North Carolina. We ask that you call up the stories of the Bostonian mechanics who threw tea into the docks of the Atlantic in protest of high tariffs unjustly laid upon the colonies. We ask that you remember the Workingmen's Parties of the early 1800's whose courageous organizing efforts paved the way to the Trade Union Movement. We ask that you remember the legacy of the abolitionists, those in the women's movements, and those condemned to the fate of "communists" by working to expose some of the shortcomings of capitalism. Remember the farm workers, the LGTBQ movement, and others in our history that have and continue to demand changes in the conditions of their workplace and in their wages to reflect their dignity as fellow human beings. Joining the legacy of Americans who have struggled to gather the heart of our nation, the power of its workers, the Greensboro Minimum Wage Committee asks for your support and your partnership as we all strive to make Greensboro a more hospitable place in which to live and labor.

According to one scholar named, Learned Hand, raising the minimum wage is one of the best places to start. He says the following in one of his essays during the year of 1915:

It is a means of education, a step forward in the standard of living. Much will depend upon the way the increase is used, but it has been long recognized that a sudden rise in the standard of living may alone be enough to raise the class which gets it, since it reacts upon their own mental attitude toward life. Some relief from the oppression of physical privations, some security for the future, some provision against disease and unemployment, may so change the workman's approach to his daily routine as to make the increased wage a cheap expedient, even when viewed in the most mechanical way. The result stands in trial, not in dialectic; but we must insist upon the reasonable expectation of those who view it hopefully, and we must seek to advance it, at least until it has been demonstrated to be false.¹

1 Learned Hand, "The Hope of the Minimum Wage," *The New Republic*, November 20, 1915, 67.