

A Brief History of the Minimum Wage Campaign and Why it is Important to Raise the Minimum Wage in Greensboro

JAMES G. BOYETT
COMMUNITY MEMBER

For the past two years a grass roots campaign to raise the minimum wage in Greensboro to \$9.36 per hour has been waged by a racially mixed group of democratic activists. They call themselves the Greensboro Minimum Wage Committee. They are old, they are young, they are middle class professionals, they are the working poor and all are united in the belief that America is headed in the wrong direction. Inflation-adjusted wages are declining because many find their wages are not rising as fast as inflation.

Government is not responding to our cries for help. We are not willing to accept the status quo. We want our real wages to stop going down. We want to have a meaningful voice in the economic decisions that affect our lives. \$9.36 per hour was adopted as a goal because that was the inflation adjusted value of the minimum wage in 1968. (1) Why can't business afford to pay its employees at least as much as they paid in 1968?

Forty years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went to Memphis to support striking garbage workers making poverty wages. He died supporting their demands for economic justice. There is no more important civil rights issue then economic justice. King and others knew it doesn't do much good to have the right to sit at the lunch counter if you don't have enough money to pay for a cup of coffee. When King went to Memphis the garbage workers were making an inflation-adjusted wage in 2008 dollars of approximately \$10.00 per hour. Today the Federal Minimum Wage is \$5.85 per hour. Millions of people are now being paid 40 % less then the garbage workers King died to help forty years ago.

We have been living Dr. King's dream in reverse. Talking about values is no substitute for valuing hardworking men and women who need better pay. Workers should not have to choose between paying the rent and buying food for their children. A job should keep you out of poverty, not keep you in it.

Locally, here in Greensboro, the slide towards poverty for most people has been accelerating. Paychecks are not growing. The city's median household income

adjusted for inflation, dropped 21 percent from 1999 through 2005. Other large North Carolina cities reported income declines of from 11 to 14 percent. (2)

For the past 20 years we passively watched as our friends and families were being economically destroyed. It was a time when hundreds of thousands of people in North Carolina and ten's of thousands of people in Greensboro lost their jobs. We think it is time for righteous indignation, understanding of the problem and action. This economic destruction was caused by the collapse of the textile and furniture industries. The collapse continues today in manufacturing and is now spreading to service jobs. The situation is getting worse, not better.

The preeminent challenge to the human family is the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power. Any political system that refuses to reckon with these realities is both cruel and increasingly irrelevant and undeserving of our support. Some people seem to have an unquenchable desire to dominate and control other people. These dominators have called themselves Pharaohs, Kings, Communist, Fascists, Mercantilists and Free Market Capitalists. They rule by exploitation of fear and greed. Despite what name the leaders go by the end result always seems to be the same. A small group ends up with all the good things of life and everyone else ends with the crumbs. Humanity has bled a river of blood because of this continual quest for domination and control. Our country was established to escape the domination of the King of England. In the recorded history of civilization, society has always organized itself so that a privileged few rule over everyone else. The only exception has been the democratic experiment of the past few hundred years. Property and opportunity were spread to enough people to create something new and revolutionary in the human experience--- a middle class. Broadly distributed wealth and opportunity greatly expands society's potential.

A critical question is how can we stop the present trend towards concentration of power and wealth and move more towards the expansion of opportunity and property for more of our citizens? The Greensboro Minimum Wage Committee's answer to the problems that confront working people today is reclaiming democracy, a democracy that faces the problems and provides answers that will protect and expand the middle class. We are not ready to hand over our freedom to a new corporate royalty. We think government has a vital roll to play in this process. We

need the power of government to secure economic justice both here and overseas. The exploitation of workers in China and Mexico creates the economic leverage for control of working people in the United States. We can't have economic justice in America if we allow American companies to practice economic exploitation in foreign countries. Economic policy decisions should be designed to improve the economic status of people everywhere. We should not allow large corporations to drive down wages in America as they exploit workers in other countries.

We should pose the question: "What is democracy?" Democracy, the rule of the people, rests upon the ability of the people to make choices freely. That, in turn, demands independence. Independence rests upon a person's secure access and control of the necessities of life. If I depend upon someone else for my food, shelter and clothing, then I am not free. In the final analysis, I am compelled to do that person's bidding no matter how subtle the command may be. (3) Working people are going to have to rethink the issues of democracy and property rights within the context of a modern economy. How are people going to live without jobs that provide adequate pay? What kind of an economic social system will we have in the future? President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 called on the country in his state of the Union address to make the right to a job and adequate pay a constitutional right.

This is the debate we are returning to in our time. Do we have a right to work, or is it a privilege? Is society organized to encourage business because business will work in a way that will benefit society or does business operate independent of society? Should business control society? (4)

This is really what our campaign is all about. It is a democratic reaction of the working majority against the oppressive and unfair policies of the wealthy few. Many of us believe that raising the minimum wage in Greensboro is only a starting point for all that needs to be done. In the words of President Roosevelt, "We have come to a clear realization of the fact that individual freedom cannot exist without economic security. Necessitous men are not free men".

Political rights are not enough. Individual economic rights are just as important as political rights. Freedom has no meaning and liberty is a hollow concept, if a man has no job or his job does not pay enough for his support. We need to finish the changes that Roosevelt started during the depression. It is profoundly unjust that 1%

of the population controls more of the assets and production of this nation than the bottom 90% of the people. (5) This has not happened because the 1% is hundreds of times more qualified or deserving than other people in society. It has happened because we have allowed the wealthy to write the rules of property in such a manner so that over time it concentrates more and more wealth in fewer and fewer hands.

We feel that our first objective should be to stop the decline in real or inflation adjusted wages. Eight thousand plus people signed our petition asking the city leadership to recognize their humanity, their human rights and their economic rights. The people wanted to set their own standard of minimum pay for work in their city at \$9.36 per hour. They feel that the standard being set by the economically powerful is not enough. It is morally and economically inadequate. They feel and we feel that minimum standards of pay are an appropriate subject for our democratic system.

By a vote of seven to two the City Council voted to accept our petition to increase Greensboro's minimum wage and send it forward for certification of the required number of voters by the Board of Elections. Two weeks later, after the Council received substantial pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, they reversed themselves and voted to stop the petition process. They were able to stop us because of technical mistakes that were made in the citizen initiative process. We have learned from our mistakes and will not make the same mistakes again.

We will build on the experience of our first campaign. We have learned how to do it. Our next petition will have at least 25,000 signatures and make three times as strong a statement as the first petition. We can do it because of the contacts we established with churches, colleges, labor unions and other civic organizations. We have proven that we can force the power structure to listen to our demands. We have a method whereby we can impact the agenda of our city. Three members of the city council share our vision for Greensboro. We can elect two more that share our goals. Five members of the council will give the people control of their city.

We can make this happen!

If the people can regain control of their cities they can control their states. When we control the states we can once again control our government. Democracy can

guarantee the right of every person in our society who wants to work the right to a job. Democracy can guarantee that every job pays enough to support a worker and his family. Real freedom requires government protections of our economic rights. Individually we don't have the power to deal with the Wal-Marts and General Electrics of the world. Together we can use the power of democracy to gain freedom from those who think they are the masters of the world.

"We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (1936)

NOTES

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Government Urban Workers Cost of Living Index
2. American Community Survey, The U.S. Census Bureau, cited by the Greensboro News and Record in Paychecks not Growing 10-23-06
3. The Future is Up to Us, by Nelson Peery, page 49
4. Screwed, The Undeclared War Against the Middle Class, by Thom Hartmann, page 117
5. Inequality Matters by James Lardner and David A Smith, page 31