

March 16, 2006

## Help the Working Poor

Just over a year ago Confronting Poverty addressed the need to increase the minimum wage. It stated: “In keeping with our Jewish tradition, the JCPA has long-standing [policy](#), last updated in 1998, affirming support for a fair and realistic minimum wage that enables low-income workers to support themselves and their families. The current minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour, a rate that has not been increased by Congress in seven years. Minimum wage has failed to keep pace with both inflation and the rising cost of living. As a result, millions more Americans are qualifying as “working poor.” The entire newsletter can be found [here](#).

Since 1997, the minimum wage has remained at \$5.15 an hour. At the same time the prices we pay for necessities like milk, bread, and gasoline have had significant increases. At \$5.15 per hour, a person working full-time all-year will earn just \$10,700 annually. Elaborating on that idea, Representative Major Owens (D-NY), a senior Democrat on the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections, stated “at \$5.15 per hour, you’d have to work for an hour just to pay for two gallons of gas.” Raising the minimum wage is a matter of fairness, and by avoiding a vote members of Congress are impeding the ability of low income workers to provide for themselves and their families.

With that in mind, on February 15 Representative John Barrow (D-GA) introduced House Resolution 614, a petition that would force debate and a vote on raising the national minimum wage. House Resolution 614 requires the sign-on of a majority of lawmakers, 218 of the 435 members in the House of Representatives. If the Barrow petition receives enough signatures, it will force a vote on H.R. 2429, a bill introduced by Representative George Miller (D-CA) to raise the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 per hour. The bill would raise minimum wage in three stages, over a little more than two years. It would also extend the minimum wage to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory where workers lack many basic labor protections. As of March 16th, 170 Representatives had signed on to the petition. You can use the following link to see if your Representatives have signed on: <http://clerk.house.gov/109/lrc/pd/Petitions/Dis11.htm>.

Research has shown that 7.3 million people would benefit from raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 per hour, including 1.8 million parents with children under the age of 18. We must work together with Congress to create more opportunities for those trying to help themselves out of poverty. And let us not forget that there are significant numbers of low-income Jews in our own community. As Confronting Poverty mentioned last week, the Jewish community must work together to make people independent and to improve the quality of their lives based on the teaching of our sages, who taught that all Jews are responsible for each other. An increase in minimum wage will help lift up low wage workers.

### **Suggested Reading:**

What is a Living Wage? By Jon Gertner

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/magazine/15wage.html?ex=1142658000&en=433b5cfd4b8989a0&ei=5070>

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