

Hiking the Minimum Wage Is Tzedakah at its Finest

Opinion

Rabbi Jill Jacobs | Fri. Feb 02, 2007

Congress seems set to raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour. The House approved a minimum-wage hike in late January, and the Senate appears poised to follow suit. The Jewish community has stepped up to advocate for the proposed \$2.10 minimum-wage increase, the first in almost 10 years. The Jewish Funds for Justice and the Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism collected signatures from more than 450 rabbis and rabbinical students — among them the leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements — calling on Congress to pass this bill. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, with the support of dozens of local and national groups, has made passage of the minimum-wage bill a policy priority. Rabbis in cities across the country are delivering sermons on the topic.

Labor, of course, has long been a Jewish issue. The central narrative of Jewish history revolves around an experience of slavery and liberation. Pages and pages of Jewish legal texts are devoted to the relationship between the employer and the employee. In medieval Europe, Jews formed their own craft guilds, and in 20th-century America, Jews played a leading role in building the modern-day labor movement. Jews continue to be disproportionately represented among union leaders and organizers, and two of the largest unions in the country— the Service Employees International Union and Unite Here — have Jewish presidents.

Yet today, when Jews are more likely to be owners or managers than to be low-wage workers, labor has largely slipped off the Jewish communal agenda. Most of the major religious movements and policy organizations are on record as supporting the rights of low-wage workers, but they have focused their major advocacy campaigns in the past few years on Israel or Darfur.

Why, then, has the proposed minimum wage hike captured the attention of American Jewry?

Though Jews are, as a whole, a relatively affluent community, most of our families came here as poor immigrants who worked hard at low-wage jobs to make a better life for their children. Many of our families moved into the middle class as a direct result of New Deal programs, including the institution of a minimum wage. Perhaps the renewed media attention to the challenges of the working poor has awakened us to the difference between today's economic situation and the circumstances that allowed our parents and grandparents to get ahead.

Today, a full-time minimum-wage worker earns just over \$10,000 a year — not enough even to lift a family over the federal poverty line. For many workers, minimum-wage jobs have become a dead end rather than a stepping stone to a better life. Despite the persisting stereotype that most minimum wage workers are teenagers working to earn money for cars and iPods, the Economic Policy Institute found that more than 80% of minimum-wage workers are over the age of 20. On average, the minimum-wage earner's salary constitutes 59% of his or her family's total income, and 46% of families rely solely on the wages of one minimum-wage worker. A study of low-wage workers conducted by EPI economist Heather Boushey found that during the period from 1992 to 2003, less than 40% of these workers transitioned into higher-paying jobs. For women, foreign-born workers and those without high school degrees, the rate of advancement was even lower.

For our parents and grandparents, minimum-wage jobs represented a path toward achieving the American dream. For today's workers, the American dream has become a near impossibility.

When it was instituted in 1938, the federal minimum wage represented an attempt to ensure that no full-time worker would find him or herself in poverty. Similarly, traditional Jewish employment law attempts to create a system in which even the lowest-wage workers are able to meet the basic needs of their families.

The memory of bondage in Egypt inspires a series of laws aimed at protecting those most likely to be exploited — including foreigners, widows, orphans and low-wage workers. Famously, the Torah mandates that workers be paid on time, as their “life depends on [these wages]” (Deuteronomy 24:15). In a poignant comment on this verse, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, better known as Nachmanides, explains, “if he does not collect the wages right away as he is leaving work, he will go home, and his wages will remain with you until the morning, and he will die of hunger that night.”

This comment is significant both for what it says and for what it assumes. Here, Nachmanides places full responsibility for the welfare of the workers on the employers. We can only imagine what he might say to employers who feign surprise upon hearing that their minimum wage workers are applying for food stamps or forgoing health care.

Beyond demanding that employers assume responsibility for the welfare of their workers, Nachmanides also assumes that a worker who does get paid on time will certainly be able to survive. In America today, this assumption no longer holds true. Given that food is now much cheaper than other vital expenses, we no longer worry about low-wage workers literally starving to death overnight. We do, however, worry about these workers being unable to afford permanent housing, health care or other basic needs.

The most well known Jewish text about support for the poor, or tzedakah, makes a similar assumption. In his so-called “ladder of tzedakah,” Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, or Maimonides, defines the highest level of tzedakah as the act of giving a poor person “a gift or a loan or entering into partnership with him or finding him work in order to strengthen his hand so that he will not need to ask in the future.” Neither Maimonides nor

Nachmanides ask, “What if we find a person a job, ensure that she or he is paid on time, and this person still cannot meet his or her family’s basic needs?” While Judaism recognizes that low-wage workers will be poor enough to live paycheck to paycheck, the possibility that full-time workers will still need to depend on tzedakah never enters into the discussion.

Most Jews will not directly benefit from an increase in the federal minimum wage. The renewed attention to this issue within the Jewish community, therefore, results not from direct self-interest, but rather from an awareness of historical and religious obligation. Jewish law and tradition assumes and demands a system in which full-time workers are able to meet their families’ basic needs. The historical experience of Jews in America teaches us that good jobs can make all the difference.

These are the Jewish voices that the senators are hearing as they consider a minimum-wage bill that can help almost 15 million people come closer to realizing Maimonides’s highest level of tzedakah.

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