

Labor Rights and the Minimum Wage in America: The Strategic Significance of the Fight for \$15

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The fight for \$15, a movement that started two years ago with a walkout of fast food workers in New York, has been gaining momentum ever since. In early December 2014, workers staged one-day strikes in over 150 cities, creating what [The New York Times](#) called “the largest labor protests in the nation in years.”

Additionally significant is the fact that the movement has been reviving the principle of solidarity — a principle so often forgotten in the current labor movement — with home care aides and convenience store workers joining the protests. These workers fully grasp the principle that if they step up and help other workers in struggle, they will get support when they themselves are in need.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has played an indispensable role, helping crystallize the movement by supplying \$10 million to help finance the organizing operations. By underwriting a struggle that not only benefits some of their own workers but those outside of its ranks as well, SEIU is embracing the finest principle of the union movement: Instead of pursuing their own narrow self-interests at the expense of everyone else, like those unions that support the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, SEIU is championing the interests of the working class as a whole. Even workers who make more than \$15 will benefit from a substantially higher minimum wage because the bottom will have been raised and expectations adjusted accordingly.

Yet, surprisingly, some on the left have been disparaging the fight for \$15, basically calling it reformist or something that does not deviate from what the Democratic Party itself might endorse. They point to San Francisco, for example, where the Democratic mayor and the entire Board of Supervisors who are overwhelmingly Democrats all endorsed the November 2014 \$15 ballot initiative in San Francisco.

However, the Democratic Party itself, while vaguely endorsing a higher minimum wage as a gimmick to help win elections, has certainly come nowhere near to endorsing \$15. President Obama’s proposal for a federal minimum wage of \$10.10 is pathetic in comparison. Democratic Governor Jerry Brown of California recently signed legislation that will raise the state minimum wage to \$10 by 2016.

In San Francisco, the individual Democratic Party politicians who supported the \$15 ballot initiative were clearly trying to cling to political relevance. Prior to its passage, according to [the San Francisco Chronicle](#), “Advocates and pollsters were thrilled — and somewhat stunned — at the level of support [the \$15 minimum wage proposal received]...,” registering 59 percent. When the election actually occurred, it won an amazing 77 percent of the vote. Significantly, none of these Democratic Party stalwarts was

responsible for initiating the fight for \$15. Mayor Ed Lee tried to negotiate a lower version to placate business interests, but the unions refused to accept anything under \$15.

In January 2014 the San Francisco Labor Council unanimously passed [a resolution calling for \\$15](#) in San Francisco. And, SEIU 1021, the largest union in San Francisco, took full command of the campaign, creating the ballot initiative and leading it to victory.

Some on the left have argued that the \$15 minimum proposal must be evaluated within the framework of the “objective needs” of the working class. By this they are referring to the needs of working people that can be inferred stemming from their class position in capitalist society and the exploitation they suffer for the sake of maximizing profits. And they have calculated that urging organized labor to break with the Democratic Party must prioritize over the fight for \$15.

Certainly, any objective observer would have to agree that the Democrats have consistently sold out the interests of the working class in favor of the 1%, except when massive social movements have pushed them in a more progressive direction and they are intent on averting a real revolution. As long as the Democratic Party remains true to its historic roots and accepts financing from the 1%, it will at best support tepid raises to the minimum wage in order to feign support for working people, except when confronting massive public pressure. Shamefully, its current reluctance to embrace \$15 occurs in a shocking context where 95 percent of all new income goes to the 1% and inequalities in wealth keep growing rapidly.

But the fight for \$15 surely qualifies as an objective need of the working class. During the past four decades there has been a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich. The fight for \$15, however, represents a modest but significant shift in the opposite direction. It will actually transfer wealth from the rich to the working class. In San Francisco, for example, 23 percent of the workforce will receive a raise, at the expense of profits, thanks to the passage of the initiative. The fight for \$15 is a small victory in the much larger class war.

Yet, the concept of the “objective needs” of the working class, when pursued independently of the needs actually embraced and articulated by working people themselves, becomes a sterile, academic category that risks isolating those who use it from those they are trying to lead. By brushing aside those issues that in reality resonate with working people and inspire them to action, the concept of “objective needs” harbors the danger of engendering a patronizing condescension by those who claim to champion the working class.

It is only when workers become activated in class struggle that their political consciousness begins to develop at a rapid pace. Workers experience first-hand the camaraderie of those who are fighting for a common cause and depend on one another’s commitment for success, an experience that serves as the foundation of working class solidarity. They quickly learn to distinguish their true friends and allies from those who pay lip service to their needs but find every opportunity to condemn workers who are actually putting up a fight. For this reason, every positive opportunity should be seized to encourage working people to engage in struggle, and this means choosing issues that will activate them.

Moreover, once workers have the experience of engaging in struggle and actually win significant victories, a new reality opens up. They quickly realize that by practicing the

principle of solidarity on an ever-larger basis and engaging in common struggle, greater victories can be achieved, and hence victories have the potential to beget even bigger victories. But workers are not going to commit themselves to struggle for gains that are dictated to them by those who are devoted to theory. Working people will always insist on defining these issues themselves.

On the other hand, the concept of “objective needs” cannot be rejected either. Relying exclusively on the consciousness of working people as a compass for political prioritizing can be equally dangerous. Workers, after all, have at times exhibited “false consciousness” in such forms as racism, xenophobia, sexism, etc. In such cases, having an understanding of the objective needs of the working class that include, for example, the need for working class solidarity and class struggle in the fight to end exploitation, is indispensable in sorting out which struggles of workers should be supported and encouraged and which might deserve condemnation. And what would be the point of mastering revolutionary theory if one only followed the lead of the masses?

In actuality, both objective needs and subjective working class consciousness must be embraced in a dialectical synthesis to maximize the effectiveness of working class struggles. And the fight for \$15 achieves such a synthesis. Aside from the fact that it represents an objective financial class victory, it has succeeded in inspiring an actual movement, unlike the call to run independent labor candidates for political office. Working people are becoming engaged and putting up a fight for a better life in a way that hasn't been seen in decades, as *The New York Times* noted. And this should not be surprising. The fight for \$15 holds immediate and huge rewards for low-wage workers who wage this battle and win.

Further, little is accomplished by counterposing the fight for \$15 and, for example, the running of independent electoral candidates, as some who have championed the latter have done. In fact, the fight for \$15 helps lay the foundation for the more advanced fight to win elections with independent labor candidates because working people, acting independently of the Democrats and Republicans, are struggling for their own class interests as they fight for \$15. Here they are acting as a class “in itself,” as Marx observed. In other words, they are unconsciously defending their class interests. But this is a necessary step in the development of working class consciousness. The next step is to become conscious of themselves as a distinct class with opposing interests to those who exploit them. When working people begin to understand the necessity of establishing their own political party, they will be self-consciously defending their class interests, or as Marx said, they will be acting as a class “for itself.”

In Oregon, where the minimum wage can only be raised on a statewide basis, not in individual cities, union activists have launched a robust campaign to raise the state minimum wage to \$15. They began by passing resolutions in their local unions and created a diverse steering committee for their “[\\$15 Now](#)” campaign where many unions and community groups were represented. Then they invited the political director of SEIU 1021 of northern California to come up and explain how they won the initiative in San Francisco. They also began a serious campaign to solicit union [endorsements](#) and have already assembled an impressive array, including over two dozen local unions as well as the state AFL-CIO and the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. They have drawn community allies into the struggle, such as Jobs With Justice. Next they are planning a huge rally in Salem to promote public awareness of the fight. This entire campaign is an example of working people relying on themselves rather than turning to the Democrats to beg for handouts and could be used as a model throughout the country.

The fight for \$15 is a battle actually unfolding before us, the kind of battle we have not witnessed for decades. Right now it is the only battle on the horizon. The call for \$15 has inspired low-wage workers and youth to act. To the degree that they achieve victories, they will open up the potential to change the course of history and trigger a resurgence of a working class movement. If they fail, then workers will lose their confidence, and the class struggle will suffer another serious setback. The stakes are high, and for this reason at this time the fight for \$15 deserves all available support. Organized labor should schedule a national conference of union representatives and their working class community allies in order to strengthen and widen the national fight for \$15 while insisting they will settle for nothing less.

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