

Raising the Minimum Wage in America: San Francisco Rides the \$15 Wave

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It seems that Seattle has officially passed the \$15 baton to San Francisco, and they're running with it. On May 5th San Francisco had its first public organizing meeting to prepare for a ballot measure to raise the minimum wage to \$15. The Labor movement and broader community organizations were well represented, and with them all the potential to achieve a great victory.

The San Francisco [\\$15 proposal](#) is stronger than the Seattle mayor's version: the time line to get to \$15 is shorter, and there are fewer exceptions.

San Francisco companies with more than 100 employees would have until 2016 to raise wages to \$15 an hour, but they must lift wages to \$13 an hour by next January. Businesses with fewer than 100 employees have until 2017 to raise wages to \$15 an hour, but must raise them to \$13 an hour by 2015 and \$14 by 2016.

Polling has already indicated [overwhelming support](#) (59 percent) for the initiative.

The process that San Francisco is using also has other advantages over Seattle's. The unions and community groups are working as a united front in San Francisco, whereas in Seattle there was constant tension between the socialist city council member Kshama Sawant and her \$15 Now group of supporters versus the unions: Sawant wanted a strong version of \$15 and several of the unions just wanted a deal, seemingly more interested in working with the mayor towards "consensus" between the unions and the corporations.

In San Francisco "consensus" was thankfully blown to pieces. The ballot initiative process goes over the head of the City Hall corporate politicians, destroying the consensus that San Francisco mayor was desperately seeking between the Chamber of Commerce — representing the giant corporations — and the unions. This has infuriated the 1%.

The San Francisco Chronicle [reports](#):

"The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce said it was 'outraged by the preemptive minimum wage ballot measure' designed by SEIU and its allies."

This is exactly the kind of outrage that should warm the heart of all working people.

The ballot initiative is also superior because it opens up the doors to wider participation of various community groups, who can mobilize their members to collect signatures, organize rallies, etc, instead of simply having four or five union reps cut a backroom, watered-down

deal with the mayor and corporations.

Which begs the question: why don't unions and community groups work together on inspiring ballot initiatives more often? Half the states in the country and many municipalities have the legal authority to evoke this brand of direct democracy, yet it's rarely done.

The answer is, sadly, that this weapon is rarely used in an inspirational way because of the "partnership" between unions and the Democratic Party. The Democrats are adversaries of anything potentially harmful to the big corporations, which any economic measure that inspires working people will inevitably be.

This is why — as Obama's presidency proved yet again — the Democratic Party is where hope goes to die.

Which makes the events in San Francisco all the more important: the \$15 dollar initiative is an example of the unions making a big break, in practice, from the Democrats, which hopefully others around the nation will follow.

And follow they must, since it would be suicide for the national labor movement to sit idly as the fight for \$15 snowballs. Union and community groups should be working together across the country for similar ballot initiatives wherever possible.

For those states without ballot initiatives, \$15 can still be used as a rallying cry and a mobilizing force for change. Wherever the Democratic Party blocks this process, unions should come together and form a labor party. Working people are tired of excuses.

The fight for \$15 also gives a boost to organizing new workers into unions as well. For example, Walmart workers would love to make \$15 an hour, and the labor movement has been trying in vain to organize them for years. The slogan "\$15 and a union" would resonate far better with Walmart workers than anything the unions have yet put forth.

There are also many other unions that have already-organized workers who don't make \$15, and now they can have the confidence to demand \$15 at the bargaining table, knowing full well that the broader community will come to their aid.

The \$15 demand is especially important because it's the first time in decades that the labor movement is going on the offensive. This is crucial. Three decades of playing defense — and playing it poorly — has had a demoralizing effect on the entire working class. A big offensive victory opens the doors wide to new possibilities and new horizons. It boosts confidence. One year ago \$15 seemed like a fantasy; in five years we'll hopefully be looking back at \$15 with nostalgia, having achieved many other offensive victories.

The possibilities for unions and community groups to organize around \$15 are endless. And if other unions don't follow the example of the San Francisco unions and community groups, they'll be acting as willing participants to the ongoing corporate onslaught. Not fighting back is no longer an option.

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Notes

<http://sflaborcouncil.org/2014/05/06/campaign-for-a-fair-economy-launch-of-fight-for-15-min-wage/>

<http://www.sfgate.com/politics/joegarofoli/article/Thumbs-up-for-15-an-hour-minimum-wage-in-new-5321206.php>

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