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Will Sonoma County Join the Fight for \$15?

by Martin J. Bennett

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors could give final approval to a Living Wage Ordinance on August 11th. However, the broad coalition of labor, faith, environmental and community organizations that initiated the living wage campaign has issued a statement opposing the legislation as revised by the board. Why should all residents be concerned?

In September 2014 the coalition unveiled a comprehensive living wage law requiring the county, large county contractors, firms leasing public property, and companies receiving economic development assistance, concessions, and franchises to pay their employees \$15 an hour. The proposed legislation would also cover more than 4000 in-home supportive services (home care) employees.

At the June 9th board meeting, 200 people turned out to support the proposed legislation, 60 speakers representing two-dozen organizations spoke in favor, and the coalition presented the Board of Supervisors with signatures from more than 2200 local residents. Prior to the meeting, board members received over 500 phone calls from constituents who supported the coalition's ordinance.

Coalition's Proposed Legislation Not Adopted

The board unanimously rejected the coalition's proposal and preliminarily approved an ordinance after drastic revisions by county staff and Blue Sky consultants. The ordinance does require a phased-in \$15/hr. wage, but it contains so many loopholes, carve-outs, and exemptions, that it drops the number of workers covered from an estimated 5500 to little more than 1000. Overall, the legislation is one of the weakest and least effective living wage laws ever considered.

Some board members may hope that by approving a token ordinance the issue will be removed from public debate and discussion. However, living wage proponents understand that compared to the living wage laws implemented by Sebastopol, Sonoma, and Petaluma, and other Bay Area municipalities (such as Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Jose) and counties (such as San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz), the Sonoma county legislation is a huge step backwards.

National Fight for \$15 Movement

Moreover, the issue will not die as the nationwide 'Fight for \$15' movement is spreading like wild fire across the Bay Area and the nation in response to the dramatic growth of low-wage employment. According to a report by the [National Employment Law Project](#), 42 percent of the nation's workforce earn less than \$15 an hour and the median wage for six out of ten of the top job growth occupations in the next decade will be less than \$15 an hour.

Beginning in 2012 an upsurge of worker protests and one-day strikes has forced Wal-Mart, McDonalds, and other large retailers such as the Gap and Target to raise entry-level wages to \$9-\$10 an hour. Recently, the Massachusetts Legislature voted to raise the wages of home care workers to \$15/hr., a New York state labor commission approved \$15/hr. for fast-food workers, and UC President Janet Napolitano mandated a \$15/hr. minimum wage for all UC workers and employees of UC contractors.

Since Seattle implemented a \$15/hr. minimum wage law in 2014--lifting wages for all workers in that city--other cities have followed, including San Francisco and Los Angeles. Richmond, Berkeley, Emeryville, Oakland, Sunnyvale, and Mountain View have also passed minimum wage legislation ranging from \$12-15/hr. One hundred and forty cities and counties have implemented living wage laws, and the list continues to grow. The County of Santa Clara in 2014 passed the highest (\$19/hr.) and most comprehensive living wage ordinance affecting workers with government ties, and the County of San Mateo will soon approve a similar measure.

Public Opinion and Economic Inequality

Public opinion strongly supports the Fight for \$15 and raising the wage floor. A 2015 national poll by Peter Hart Associates indicates that 63 percent of the public support raising the \$7.25/hr. federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2020. In 2014, a Pew Research Center survey revealed that nearly 70 percent believe government should “do a lot” to address economic inequality and 60 percent think that the economic system is unfair and benefits the wealthiest.

In addition, the presidential campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is now gathering momentum and reflects public support for government action to address economic inequality. Sanders has proposed a \$15/hr. federal minimum wage, massive government spending to create good living wage jobs by rebuilding our infrastructure and investing in renewable energy, and sharp increases of the tax rates for corporations and the wealthy.

The Sanders campaign highlights that a deep split exists within the Democratic Party between corporate Democrats and progressive Democrats about economic policy to address the gap between the rich and the poor.

The Fight for \$15 and a Sustainable Sonoma

In a recent American Prospect article, “The Revolt of the Cities,” Harold Meyerson argues that often in American history when the federal government will not act, local and state government have done so to create pressure from below which later leads to reform and structural change at the national level. The Fight for \$15 is now clearly such a grassroots movement. Will the Board of Supervisors provide the leadership so that Sonoma County can join the movement to raise the wage floor?

We so often hear elected officials and community leaders proclaim that Sonoma County is the Bay Area model for sustainable development and smart growth, particularly for protection of open space, clean energy and mass transit. Nearly one in three families in the county are the working poor earning less than \$48,500 a year for

a family of four, however. Sustainability is not possible without equity. To increase economic opportunity, improve educational achievement, close the jobs-housing mismatch, and decrease reliance on public safety-net programs by low-wage workers, we must boost wages and incomes.

The board should amend the legislation as recommended by the coalition or set aside consideration of the revised ordinance and encourage a vigorous public debate before the 2016 elections. Let the voters decide.

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