ADDRESSING AMERICA'S INEQUALITY GAP: HOW THE FIGHT FOR $15 CAMPAIGN WENT FROM FARFETCHED TO WIDESPREAD

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Preface

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!
As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.
As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.
As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.

-James Oppenheim, "Bread and Roses,"
The American Magazine, December 1911.

On Friday, January 12, 1912, in the unassuming industrial New England city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, residents awoke to rumors swirling from the day before: two hundred laborers at the local Everett Mill ceased production and silently protested at attention beside their looms.[i] When they refused to work, they were ordered away and subsequently responded with civil unrest.[ii] Their protest was a reaction to the consequences of a recently enacted law that reduced workweek hours from fifty-six hours per week to fifty-four hours per week. Initially hailed as a victory for labor, workers supported the law on the condition that fewer hours would not correlate with lower take-home wages. At Everett Mill, however, workers were notified that their weekly earnings had been cut by $0.32 to offset the loss in productivity; the following day at nearby Washington Mill, the largest in Lawrence, workers were told the same. Inspired by the events of the previous afternoon, workers of Washington Mill followed suit and walked off the job. In short order, the protests grew as workers from mill after mill joined the ranks of disgruntled laborers. At its peak, the workers of Lawrence amassed a crowed of thirty-thousand demonstrators in the streets, united by a simple yet unconventional demand: greater pay.[iii] For nine weeks, the protestors clashed with factory owners and local authorities until the employers acquiesced to the strikers' demands and agreed to a 15 percent increase in pay.

The tomes of history affectionately recall the demonstrations as the “Bread and Roses” strike, inspired by James Oppenheim’s poem from which it borrows its name, and due to the workers' demand for fair wages in addition to dignified working conditions. It was the largest exercise of its kind and its time, captivating the imagination of the nation’s workforce and provoking the consternation of industry owners. Unbeknownst to the masses in northern Massachusetts, the strike in Lawrence was a milestone for the organized labor movement. In June of that year, amidst pressure from the bottom and fears of revolt from the top, Massachusetts state legislators enacted the first-ever state-wide minimum wage. Within the decade, thirteen states and the District of Columbia passed similar measures.[iv] The momentum, it appeared, was with the movement. At the federal level, however, minimum wage laws were met under a diametrically divergent climate.

In 1918, the Supreme Court held in *Hammer v. Dagenhart* that the Keating-Owen Act of 1916, which was authorized by Congress and which prohibited the interstate commerce of goods manufactured by child workers, was unconstitutional on the grounds that such products insufficiently met the standard of other “inherently evil” goods such as liquor, lotteries, and prostitution.[v] Furthermore, the Court maintained that production was not tantamount to commerce and thus was beyond the authority enumerated to Congress in Article 1, Section 8, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution, colloquially referred to as “the Commerce Clause.”[vi] Five years later in *Adkins v. Children’s Hospital of D.C.*, the Court ruled that a 1918 law that established a minimum wage for women and children working within the District of Columbia violated one’s "freedom of contract included within the guaranties of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment," adding, "the right to contract about one's affairs is a part of the liberty of the individual protected by this clause."[vii] In short, the majority opinion found the minimum wage law violated one's ability to contract labor to satisfy and receive employment. Furthermore, the Court viewed the law as arbitrary as it set a compulsory and standard rate of compensation for all women and children, regardless of need, ability, or occupation. The highest court in the nation was inextricably opposed to nationalizing wage and labor standards, holding that such measures were an overextension of Congressional authority and were in violation of the states' rights as protected by the 10th Amendment of the Constitution, which plainly and succinctly reads: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."[viii] In a period of unprecedented economic expansion, the Court's textual interpretation of law during the "Roaring Twenties" proved hostile to any national efforts aimed at bringing about labor and wage reforms. Life, for many in America, was good; the national wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929; the social culture was vibrant with the emergence of prolific "Lost Generation" artists including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway; and the consumer culture thrived with the introduction of cutting edge technologies from the automobile to household electrical appliances. The conditions required to necessitate the reforms demanded by labor were, simply put, nonexistent. Limited government was the preference. It had worked so well and for so many, the twenties reflected that success. But then the bottom fell out.

The stock market crash on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, marked the beginning of the worst financial crisis in US history – one that would not abate until the end of the following decade. Economic and governing principles that had served the country so well in the preceding years, suddenly paralyzed the nation in depression. At its bottom, the stock market had lost 90 percent of its value, over a third of banks failed, and nearly thirteen million, or 25 percent of the nation's population, were out of work and unemployed.[ix] An amalgamation of conditions led to the system's collapse: "Free marketers look at the economic disaster and blame the Smoot-Hawley tariff, which inaugurated a global trade war; monetarists attack the Federal Reserve for its tight-money policies; Keynesians berate [President] Herbert Hoover for his attempts to balance the budget as the crisis worsened."[x] Whatever the reasons, the nation was in crisis, new prevailing political and socio-economic philosophies were required, and the people demanded change. In the first presidential election since the crisis began three years earlier, the American people handsomely handed the election to New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ousting incumbent Herbert Hoover in an electoral landslide: 57.4 percent to 39.7 percent.[xi]

Roosevelt's mandate was compelling, and he immediately went to work. The first one-hundred days of his administration are storied, a standard against which all subsequent presidencies have been measured. He ushered in sweeping reforms to jumpstart the nation's economy and instill confidence among the population. In his July 24, 1933, Fireside Chat, Roosevelt revisited the subject of a federal minimum wage. Assuaging the nation and calling for action, Roosevelt proposed, "If all employers will act together to shorten hours and raise wages we can put people back to work. No employer will suffer, because the relative level of competitive cost will advance by the same amount for all. But if any considerable group should lag or shirk, this great opportunity will pass us by and we shall go into another desperate winter. This must not happen."[xii] Despite his widespread popularity, such an initiative would not come to fruition for another five years. The Supreme Court continued to apply restrictive scrutiny to expansions of national government, striking down parts of Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act, the hallmark *New Deal* legislation from his first term. Frustrated by the Court's intransigence and opposition to his agenda, Roosevelt embarked upon one of his greatest political foibles: "packing" the Court.

The Constitution does not delineate how many justices shall compose the Supreme Court. Historic precedence set the number at nine, but Roosevelt, dismayed by the Court's arguably right-leaning legal interpretations, assumed a liberal reading of the founding document's ambiguity and proposed adding up to six new justices, one for each judge over the age of seventy. The idea proved disastrous, arousing the ire of Congress, the American people, and the Court itself. However, in what became known as the "Big Switch," Justice Owen Roberts, nominated to the bench by Roosevelt's predecessor, suddenly began siding with the left-leaning minority.[xiii] The reasoning behind Roberts's jurisprudential turn-around remains lost to the sands of time, but historians reference the phenomenon as "the switch in time that saved nine," suggesting the Justice's actions were politically motivated to preserve the integrity of the Court.[xiv] Regardless of his motivations, the switch ushered in a new order, marking new legal attitudes towards social and economic legislation. A year later, on Saturday, June 25, 1938, President Roosevelt signed into law the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing the first-ever *federal* minimum wage at twenty-five cents per hour.[xv] It was implemented without judicial opposition.

The minimum wage is not tied to inflation, meaning that its increase or decrease requires Congressional authorization. On twenty-two occasions since 1938 has Congress succeeded in doing so, the last of which was July 24, 2009, when the wage was raised to $7.25 per hour.[xvi] But in neglecting to subject the minimum wage conditional to the rate of inflation, also known as indexing, the purchasing power for those living on the minimum wage is at the mercy of Congress's political appetite. Therefore, if Congress neglects to increase the wage, low earning workers may not receive a raise; the result of this is systemic and pervasive income inequality. Parity in purchasing power is paramount for a healthy economy with a thriving middle class. Yet despite this fact, the wage has remained unadjusted at the national level for almost a decade. While some states have taken the lead by increasing their wages, none until 2016 did so to the extent necessary to either mitigate or reverse the inequality that arises from depressed wages. But in 2016, two states did. And they did so in a dramatic fashion. Not only did they equilibrate the wage against inflation, they exceeded it. They raised their states' minimum wage to a previously unthinkable $15 per hour. The story of how this came to pass is neither quick nor short, and it is remarkable. As with Lawrence a century before, it came about when underpaid, over-worked workers came together, demanded more, lobbied, demonstrated, strategized, and organized. They would reignite the labor movement, earning its most impressive victory in recent history. Their efforts became known as the "Fight for $15," and their achievement may not only change the course of America's history – it may also reverse some of its consequences.

The Spark

"The bottom has fallen out of America's wage floor. And the erosion of the minimum wage has lowered pay and working standards for all of us." –Richard Trumka, *President, AFL-CIO, 2 December 2013*

By 2017, income inequality in the United States had become among the highest on earth. Over 70 percent of countries have a more equal distribution of family income than the United States.[xvii] A leading cause behind the phenomenon is pervasive wage stagnation in low-earning industries. Just before the Great Recession of 2008, the average income of the middle 60 percent of American households was $76,443, nearly $18,000 less, or 23 percent lower, than it would have been in the absence of widening inequality, which had grown more pronounced since the 1970s.[xviii] This didn't happen by accident – it was deliberate. Long-standing economic views and antiregulatory policies suppressed wealth distribution and perpetuated the trend. Furthermore, in "the housing boom and bust cycle that precipitated the financial crisis, low- and middle-income homeowners were hit particularly hard, with households in the bottom four-fifths of the wealth distribution experiencing a 39.1 percent decline in net worth between 2007 and 2010. The top 20 percent, by contrast, lost just 14 percent of their net worth."[xix] In its aftermath, the American labor force was transformed for the worse. More people were forced to shift into lower-paying jobs than they had previously held. The recovery was built on the backs of a low-wage workforce in a low-wage economy. Job growth was concentrated in low-wage service occupations that paid an average salary of just $26,600 a year.[xx] Despite the obvious earnings crisis, in the years following the Great Recession, Congress has refused to raise the federal minimum wage since 2009. As a result, more Americans struggled; there was social derision and unrest. More and more citizens felt alienated from the American dream, unable to get their fair shake at life. Adults working full-time were working an average of 47 hours per week – nearly a full workday longer than the traditional schedule.[xxi] "[H]alf of all full-time workers indicate they typically work more than 40 hours, and nearly four in ten say they work at least 50 hours."[xxii] Days grew longer and dividends were smaller. The new American norm appeared unsustainable. Something had to give.

In 2011, a wave of large sit-ins and demonstrations erupted throughout the country, drawing attention to the growing disparities caused by income inequality. The movement was called "Occupy Wall Street," and its members reflected the heterogeneous mass of Americans coping with the acute effects of working more for less. At the time, it appeared that the movement was indicative of a change that would fundamentally uproot the system and challenge the status quo, but such a change failed to materialize. As the days stretched into weeks and months, Occupy camps slowly packed up and shipped out. The status quo prevailed, seemingly unscathed.

Low-earning Americans were overdue for a raise. The spirit of what arguably began as a ragtag band of disaffected citizens coming together in precarious communes for Occupy Wall Street would reincarnate as the "Fight for $15." Unlike previous efforts, Fight for $15 had specific, simple, and understandable demands: a $15 an hour minimum wage and the right for fast-food workers to unionize. They were organized, disciplined. In just four years, they would rally millions to the cause and dramatically shift the national dialogue. They were old and young, mothers and fathers, native born and immigrants. They put a face to a side of America's inequality gap that had largely gone unnoticed. Their victories at first were small, but as their fight waged on, momentum grew. Their succinct, persuasive call for higher wages was palpable. In time, they would even bend the will of entire states to change.

An Era of Deregulation

"The Great Depression, like most other periods of severe unemployment, was produced by government mismanagement rather than by any inherent instability of the private economy." –Milton Friedman, *Economist, University of Chicago, 1 December 1962*

Republican governor Ronald Reagan campaigned during the 1980 presidential election on an economic message of cutting taxes, slashing government spending, and deregulating the entire system to spur the entrepreneurial spirit of America and release it to capitalize on the promise of the free market. He proposed an economic model that benefitted the poorest in society by increasing the wealth of its richest, asserting that rewards would "trickle down" the economic ladder. His opponent, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency George Herbert Walker Bush, famously cast Regan's polices as "voodoo economics," yet they would go on to become central tenets in his administration, earning the nickname "Reaganomics."[xxiii] The mastermind behind Reagan's philosophy was a Nobel Prize winning economist named Milton Friedman. Friedman hailed from the University of Chicago and espoused the evils of government interference in the market. He rose to prominence for "emphasizing the role of monetary policy, which affects interest rates, and the benefits of laissez-faire or free-market approaches to the economy."[xxiv] He faulted the Federal Reserve for deepening the Great Depression through excessive austerity and restricted money supply. Further, he decried social programs like Social Security for restricting retirement choice, advocated for a regressive flat-tax to limit complexity, and called for sweeping regulatory reform. Reaganomics and its architect fundamentally reconstructed the model of government's role with respect to the economy. It was a paradigm that would be replicated by multiple administrations for decades to come.

The Reagan/Friedman economic approach was not bound by political philosophy or allegiance. In his 1996 State of the Union Address, Democratic President Bill Clinton professed to a joint session of Congress and the American people that "the era of big government is over."[xxv] He continued in the tradition of previous presidents by curtailing the role of the federal government and emphasizing the authority of state and local governments. He enacted policies aimed at cultivating a more enterprise-friendly economy. To the president's success, the US economy continued to grow leaps and bounds, resulting in budget surpluses, job growth, and significant investments in education and research. By modernizing government, Clinton streamlined services and aggressively pursued regulatory reform. One of those reforms included a piece of legislation that regulated the banking industry and had been on the books since the Great Depression: The Glass-Stegall Act.

Named after its co-sponsors, Senator Carter Glass of Virginia and Representative Henry Steagall of Alabama, Glass-Steagall was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. At that time, the prevailing opinion behind what caused the Great Depression was the risky, intertwined relationship between commercial and investment banking. In response, The Glass-

Steagall Act barred commercial banking and securities transactions from taking place within the same financial institution.[xxvi] Years later, domestic banks regularly denounced the limitations that Glass-Steagall imposed, arguing the law placed them at a considerable disadvantage against European competitors. In keeping with the reforms of the day and in an effort to stay true to the principles of deregulation and smaller government, in 1999 Congress passed, and Bill Clinton signed into law, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, overturning Glass-Steagall. This was an action which both President Clinton and then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich would later regret.[xxvii] Critics cautioned that repeal would lead to risky banking behaviors similar to those witnessed during the eve of the Depression; they warned that blurring the divisions between commercial and investment banking would super inflate the wealth, influence, and control major banks had over the United States' economy and gross domestic product (GDP). Its proponents, like New York Senator Charles Schumer, resolved "There are many reasons for this bill, but first and foremost is to ensure that U.S. financial firms remain competitive."[xxviii] What had begun as a new way of doing business just two decades before under Reaganomics had become the established norm, codifying, both in law and institution, conduct that rewarded wealth and limited safeguards against loss. It had become the status quo.

Building on the momentum of his predecessors, President George W. Bush, whose father had once vilified the core values of Ronald Reagan and Milton Friedman's economic policies, took the Reagan model and accelerated it. Bush's approach to fiscal policy rested on the strength of the "Ownership Society," a model that valued personal responsibility, freedom, and the ownership of property[xxix]. "Bush paired his belief that Americans do best when they own their homes with his conviction that markets do best when left alone. Bush pushed hard to expand home ownership, especially among minority groups."[xxx] Tax cuts were passed that lowered the marginal rates on all

Americans – not just once, but twice, and the Federal Reserve rapidly cut interest rates to spur housing and consumer spending. As a result, the housing market underwent a boon. And everyone partook in its spoils, from homebuyers who were able to secure mortgages while putting almost nothing down, to the banks eager to lend loans backed by historically low interest rates. In Congress and the White House, elected officials celebrated their success in helping the people of the nation achieve their American dream. With all this success, no one questioned anything. Why would they? The secular fiscal trend that Ronald Reagan began, that Bill Clinton mimicked, and that George W. Bush built upon helped more Americans achieve success than at any other point in history. Why should they question anything? What was the worst that could happen?

The Collapse

"One of the most constant aspects of American life is change, and nowhere is it more evident than in our financial markets." –Hank Paulson, *Secretary of Treasury, United States of America, 31 March 2008*

On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers, a financial services firm located on New York City's Wall Street and responsible for over $600 billion in liabilities, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. It remains the largest bankruptcy filing in U.S. history. For years, Lehman Brothers had been borrowing large amounts of money in a practice known as leveraging to keep its low-rated and subprime mortgage assets solvent. A subprime mortgage is a loan given to individuals with poor credit histories and who are otherwise unqualified for traditional loans. Unlike conventional mortgage bonds backed by the full faith and credit of the United States, subprime bonds are private. The highest rated bond is rated AAA and the lowest is rated B. AAA bonds are low-risk, low-reward investments, whereas B rated bonds are risky and especially vulnerable to default. Subprime loans are rated B. To protect against loss, banks anchored subprime loans against the more secure AAA, AA, A, BBB, and BB bonds in a financial structure known as a tranche.

But as lower-rated bonds defaulted, a toxic bottom-up percolation occurred where each low-rated bond slowly eroded at the value of the higher-rated bonds above them. Over time, this rendered an entire market susceptible to collapse. Throughout the history of the United States, the housing market had been the proverbial gold standard security. No one thought it would default. But in 2008, that's exactly what happened.

If the US housing market was a powder keg, Lehman Brothers was its spark. Its collapse reverberated around the world, and it became the catalyst for the worst financial recession since the Great Depression. In the wake of the collapse, U.S. GDP shrank 5.1 percent.[xxxi] Over seven and a half trillion dollars in housing wealth was lost, with millions of Americans either forced to default on their homes or owing more on their mortgages than their homes were worth.[xxxii] Retirement savings were left in shambles, losing an estimated 25 percent of their value.[xxxiii] Wealth disappeared over night. The national unemployment rate nearly doubled from 5.0 to 9.5.[xxxiv] The most highly educated generation in the nation's history found itself walking off the commencement stage and into a labor force that was all but boarded shut. Those who were fortunate enough to find work did so in part-time or low-wage industries where a college degree was optional. Workers, therefore, often possessed skills far exceeding what the position required and were undercompensated as such. It's estimated that approximately one out of every six U.S. workers, or 27 million people, were either out of work or underemployed during this period.[xxxv]

Low-wage employment was not simply a symptom of the crisis, but its chronic condition. All industries experienced major losses in the Great Recession. High- and mid-wage industries each shrunk by 11 percent, and low-wage industries were hit the hardest with a 22 percent reduction.[xxxvi] But as the nation's economy improved, low-wage employment ballooned, recovering not only its initial 22 percent loss but extending further to absorb those from other income industries to a net growth of an additional 22 percent, accounting for 44 percent of the total jobs in the labor market.[xxxvii] According to the National Employment Law Project, there were 976,000 fewer jobs in higher-wage industries and 958,000 fewer jobs in mid-wage industries than at the start of the recession. Conversely, low-wage industries now amass 1.85 million more workers than at the start of the recession. In real terms, nearly 1 in 5 Americans lost their pre-recession socio-economic status, falling down the social ladder into poorer states of existence.

Lifestyles in which so many had found comfort and security ran afoul. In the carnage of the Great Recession, four million additional Americans found themselves in poverty, totaling 44 million, or one in seven people.[xxxviii] Millions more survived only though expanded social services like unemployment insurance and other assistance. Low-wage living, an issue previously relegated to the "other" America, became a salient concern for the shrunken middle class whose refugees found themselves as bona fide members of the working poor, strapped to the vestiges of their former lives by the precarious tethers of the minimum wage. Compounding their grief was the depressed value of the dollar and the stagnation of its buying power. Three decades of shortsighted economic policy influenced by supply side economics rendered the federal minimum wage an inadequate measure of the wage floor. Left unadjusted for inflation and other economic measures, rising prices ate away at its value so that the $7.25 per hour minimum wage in 2015 had the purchasing power about 25 percent below its peak value in 1968.[xxxix] The decline in purchasing power meant low-wage workers had to work longer hours just to achieve the standard of living that was considered the bare minimum almost half a century ago.[xl]

Generations of workers who had enjoyed the fruits of the American dream suddenly found themselves scrounging for canned good giveaways at their local food shelter. The pangs of light purse strings weighed on the minds and lifestyles of more people than ever before, and the sober reality of surviving on the minimum wage was less a prospect than a death sentence. This gap in equality, this normalization of inequity, this descent of millions into lower socio-economic classes set the stage for the most radical increase in low wage earnings since the establishment of the minimum wage during the Great Depression. The demand was decried by critics as a sheer pipe dream, yet the proponents remained resolute in their aim: effectively calling for a doubling of the federal minimum wage. It was in this setting, in the shadow of the financial collapse compounded by a thirty-year secular trend of deregulation, that the Fight for $15 began.

Fight for $15

"I'm protesting for better pay. I have two kids under 6, and I don't earn enough to buy food for them." –Pamela Waldron, *Fast-Food Worker, Kentucky Fried Chicken, 29 November 2012*

At 6:30 AM on Thursday, November 29, 2012, outside of an unsuspecting McDonald's restaurant located at Madison Avenue and 40th Street in New York City, hundreds of fast-food workers walked off the job and took to the streets.[xli] The move came after months of calculation and organizing amid an escalating climate of discontent between low-wage workers and the major corporations with whom they held employment. Goaded by sky-high corporate profits while receiving only the minimum wage, over two hundred employees from Burger King, Taco Bell, Wendy's, McDonald's, and other fast-food restaurants in New York City protested throughout the day, demanding higher wages and the right to unionize. "By far the largest series of job actions at fast-food restaurants ever," the demonstration was organized under the banner of a unionization drive called Fast Food Forward, sponsored by New York Communities for Change, UnitedNY.org, The Black Institute, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).[xlii] SEIU, the most influential of the organizers, is an international labor union with over 2 million members.[xliii] It came on the heels of recent protests in other low-earning industries by employees who had grown increasingly frustrated over their low, stagnated pay.[xliv] A full-time employee making the $7.25 per hour federal minimum wage earned less than $14,000 a year. Those making $8 or $9 per hour earned between $16,000 and $18,000 annually. Excluding overtime or tips, 13 percent of fast-food workers made below the federal minimum wage; 70 percent earned the minimum wage; less than 10 percent earned between $10 and $12 an hour; and less than 10 percent earned over $12 an hour.[xlv] Contrary to popular belief, these workers weren't the iconic teenager of 1950s yore. They were grown adults. They were parents with dependent children. The average fast-food worker was now 29 years old.[xlvi] "Forty percent were 25 or older; 31 percent had at least attempted college; more than 26 percent were parents raising children."[xlvii] Almost 85 percent have a high school degree or more and over one-third have spent at least some time in college.[xlviii] "About half of the families of front-line fast-food workers depend on public programs, compared with 25 percent of the American workforce. About 87 percent of fast-food workers lack employer health benefits, compared with 40 percent of the general workforce. And roughly one-fifth of workers' families are below the poverty line. That adds up to some $7 billion in benefit payouts each year."[xlix] Meanwhile, the industry as a whole enjoyed record profits, and in the case of McDonald's, spent $6 billion of those profits on share repurchases and dividends and compensated its CEO with a salary approximately 580 times that of the company's average worker.[l]

The Great Recession was felt by everyone, but no one felt its stinging effects more than the poor and the newly minted working poor communities. Earning at or near the minimum wage left millions trapped in poverty. After the Great Recession, low-wage industries accounted for a larger share of the labor force than ever before. The United States' economy had fundamentally changed. The recovery was a low-wage recovery, and the spoils of wealth failed to trickle down to working class Americans. What began on a quiet morning in Midtown Manhattan by a group of tired, underpaid fast-food workers would reverberate across the nation, galvanizing communities and awakening the sleeping giant of Labor to march on for a new cause: raising the minimum wage.

A Victory

"The Fight for $15 movement is growing as more Americans living on the brink decide to stick together to fight for better pay and an economy that works for all of us, not just the wealthy few." –Mary Kay Henry, *International President, Service Employees International Union, 4 December 2014*

The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is a regional powerhouse, owned and operated by the Port of Seattle, that generates a net annual impact of $16.3 billion, $2.8 billion in direct earnings, $565 million in state and local taxes, and is responsible for creating more than 109,924 direct jobs.[li] So significant is the airport that the suburban community in which it resides, SeaTac, Washington, borrows its name from the facility. But the residents of SeaTac, Washington, were not unlike the residents of Cleveland, OH, Birmingham, AL, or any other small American community in 2013. The recession hit them hard; its effects were still visible, measured in street crime and urban blight. Despite having the airport in their back yard, SeaTac residents were among the poorest in the region: 16.4 percent of SeaTac's residents lived in poverty, 19.2 percent relied on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and over 41 percent of SeaTac's families with young children lived in poverty.[lii] Unlike pilots, flight attendants, and mechanics, the majority of the airline industry's employees, including baggage handlers and passenger service workers, work for menial wages. For years, Sea-Tac's low-wage workers had lobbied management for higher incomes to no avail. Coordinated efforts like the "Make Every Airport Job a Good Job" failed to translate into change.[liii] Workers and organizers had grown exasperated. But the fast food demonstration in New York struck a chord with disaffected workers across the country. In the months that followed, similar demonstrations occurred throughout other

American communities. As momentum grew, the once lambasted notion of a $15 an hour minimum wage no longer seemed so farfetched. Sea-Tac workers were inspired.

With outcry came inspiration. If management would not submit to workers' demands, perhaps the community would. There was a precedence in setting living wage laws for airports, particularly on the West Coast; San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Los Angeles had all already done so.[liv] Building on the national momentum calling into the light growing inequality and social disparity, Sea-Tac organizers set their sights on City Hall. Unsure of the success such a measure would receive through the normal legislative channels, organizers pursued an approach that put the adoption of a $15 an hour minimum wage directly in the hands of the people, a ballot referendum. After months of collecting signatures and strategically navigating the bureaucratic labyrinth, the workers, now united as the SeaTac Committee for Good Jobs, secured the position of Proposition 1 on the November ballot.[lv]

The proposal was ambitious: a $15 an hour living wage for people working for Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. If approved, the measure was projected to create 400 new jobs and generate $54 million for the local economy. In a depressed community like SeaTac, a higher minimum wage offered the promise of a revitalized middle class built on good-paying, honest jobs.[lvi] On November 5, 2013, SeaTac voters headed to the polls. Three weeks later, after challenges and a recount of the roughly 6,000 ballots cast, SeaTac, the small city of just 27,000 residents located to the south of Seattle, approved raising the wage of airport workers to $15 an hour.[lvii] The measure passed by 77 votes.[lviii] In less than a year, the call for a $15 an hour wage went from fantasy to reality.

Momentum

"We have shown that it's possible to succeed… having an unapologetic campaign platform for improving the living standards of Seattle's working people, and rejecting the business as usual." –Kshama Sawant, *Council Member, Seattle City Council, 6 January 2014*

It was once said that the human body was physically incapable of running a mile in under four minutes. In 1954, Roger Bannister did just that. Two months later, John Landy did the same with a mile time of 3 minutes and 58 seconds. When an idea goes from improbable to possible, it catches like fire. Following the victory in SeaTac, the Fight for $15 campaign took off. Fifteen miles north, mayoral hopeful Ed Murray watched the success of SeaTac workers in awe. In his own city of Seattle, workers had staged several successful demonstrations during the year, forcing several fast-food chains to temporarily shut down.[lix] The writing was on the wall: change was coming.

Seattle's economy was booming in 2013. An influx of high-tech jobs prompted precipitous development, attracted a migration of new, highly educated workers, and built the economy as one of the strongest in the nation. The landscape of Seattle had transformed so dramatically in such a short period of time that many of its residents were left behind. In order to live comfortably in Seattle, a person would need an income of over $93,500 a year, well above what a worker living on the minimum wage could hope to earn.[lx]

Emboldened by the momentum for the Fight for $15 campaign across the nation and the concurrent campaign by airport workers in neighboring SeaTac, workers organized under the SEIU-backed effort "Working Washington" for what would be an enormously consequential election year.[lxi] Incumbent mayor Mike McGinn was running for re-election after a lackluster first term in a crowded field of seven challengers, including two city council members from his own party and popular state senator Ed Murray. Throughout the primary, Working Washington fiercely fought to keep the concerns of income inequality and stagnated wages salient issues for the candidates to address. With media attention mostly fixed on the mayoral contest, little mind was given to lesser, down ballot campaigns which were considered safe. One of which was the seemingly ill-fated campaign for city council by Socialist Alternative candidate, Kshama Sawant, against four-term incumbent Richard Conlin. Much to the surprise of traditional observers, Sawant garnered 35 percent of the vote against Conlin's 48 percent during the August primary, forcing a face-off between the two in November's general election.[lxii] Propelled by the grassroots support of low-wage workers and her fervent support for a $15 an hour minimum wage, Sawant's message reverberated.

In the mayoral contest, the campaigns of Mike McGinn and Ed Murray were locked in a dead heat. The election could go either way. Bold action was required. Murray had criticized Conlin for his establishment ties and close relationship to the Chamber of Commerce. Endorsing a $15 minimum wage could be the issue necessary to separate Murray from the fray. On September 24, Ed Murray did just that.[lxiii] Two weeks later, Mayor McGinn did the same.[lxiv] At least in Seattle, a $15 an hour minimum wage had gone from fringe to mainstream.

Voters would go on to reward both Sawant and Murray in November, handing both of them handsome victories and fundamentally uprooting the status quo. Three days into his term as mayor, Murray signed Executive Order 1 into law, raising the minimum wage for all city employees to $15 an hour.[lxv] Five months later, the Seattle City Council expanded the effort and unanimously approved a $15 an hour minimum wage for all public and private sector employees.[lxvi] Its impact was monumental.

In a little over two years after the first strike for a $15 an hour wage, coordinated demonstrations would erupt in 190 cities, with low-wage workers taking to the streets to demand the same decisive action witnessed in Seattle.[lxvii] Pressured for change, cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles established $15 an hour minimum wages in 2014. By the end of 2015, fourteen cities, counties, and states had approved a $15 minimum wage.[lxviii] Fight for $15 could no longer be dismissed as modest unrest – it had grown into a fully-formed movement. Outside of legislative mandate, private companies opted to raise wages amid mounting pressure and awareness. Even companies notorious for underpaying their employees like Walmart and McDonald's conceded to modest, across-the-board wage increases.[lxix] Over 70 percent of the American public favored increasing the minimum wage.[lxx] What until recently had been the hushed whispers of discontent by the nation's poorest had amplified into a rallying cry of economic injustice and inequality. The political landscape had changed. The Machiavellian finesse necessary to raise wages had softened. And the focus of the movement fell back to where it all began: New York.

A Movement

"No one in New York can survive on $8.75 an hour... All we've ever asked for is a fair shot at the middle class and a chance to provide for our families." –Flavia Cabral, *Fast-Food Worker, McDonald's, 7 May 2015*

In 2013, the state of New York raised the minimum wage to $8.75 an hour from $7.25. In 2014, they raised it again, to $11.50 in New York City and $10.50 for the rest of the state. When pressured to do more by the liberal and newly-minted New York City mayor, Bill de Blasio, Melissa DeRosa, a spokeswoman for the state's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, professed that any effort to do so would be a "non-starter" in the eyes of the state legislature.[lxxi] Unlike Seattle, wages in New York are set by the state legislature. No city can unilaterally raise its minimum wage. Continued calls by the mayor for either extended authority to independently raise the minimum wage in New York City or another raise in wages state-wide was chided by the governor. "We are also one state and we don't want to cannibalize ourselves. We don't want to have different cities with different tax rates competing amongst themselves. … Or they have different wage requirements or different labor laws. … This could be a chaotic situation," Cuomo said in an interview with public radio host Susan Arbetter.[lxxii]

Andrew Cuomo, son of the lionized liberal icon and three term governor Mario Cuomo, was among the most accomplished governors in recent New York history. Having wrangled with a divided bicameral legislature since he took office in 2010, Cuomo passed marriage equality, gun reform, tax reform, education reform, reproductive health reform, prison reform, and a slew of other social issues into law while also investing historic amounts of financial capital aimed to revitalize the perpetually declining upstate economy. He also passed five consecutive, on-time, and balanced budgets, more than any New York governor in nearly a century. Cuomo was as renowned as he was feared for his success. Hailed as the "Albany Machiavelli" with "unmatched political virtuosity," he was tactical and deliberative.[lxxiii] If there was a politically opportunistic path to increase the minimum wage, Andrew Cuomo would have pursued it. But he made it clear in his remarks to Arbetter during the interview that if such a path did exist, it was one that he could not envision. But the Fight for $15 movement had taken root, and soon it would sprout for all to see.

By 2015, against the backdrop of continued protests to raise the wage with major victories in a handful of U.S. cities, the national discourse surrounding Fight for $15 had shifted, and those who previously had been opposed had warmed to the idea. New York state voters overwhelmingly supported raising the minimum wage to $15 dollars an hour by a margin of 62-to-35 percent.[lxxiv] Furthermore, there was strong support from every party, gender, age, and regional group except Republicans. In a state like New York where Democrats outnumber Republicans 2-to-1, the requisite political calculus necessary for executive action was clear.[lxxv]

On May 7, 2015, Governor Cuomo launched the "Fight for Fair Pay" campaign and impaneled a wage board to investigate and recommend adjustments to the minimum wage for fast-food workers. Special boards and similar commissions were policy developing tools of which the governor had grown fond. In the past, he had convened similar panels to address issues in education, public health, and government ethics. By stacking each board with friendly stakeholders who would vote in the governor's interest, Cuomo was able to elicit the results he wanted while safely distancing himself from serving as an issue's lightning rod. In the case of his wage board, Cuomo tapped Kevin Ryan, Vice Chairman of the Partnership for New York City, Mike Fishman, Secretary-Treasurer of SEIU, and the Democratic Mayor of Buffalo, Bryon Brown, who served as the board's chair. Together, the board represented the intertwined interests of business, labor, and government. Citing "that a substantial number of fast food workers are receiving wages insufficient to provide adequate maintenance and to protect their health at the current minimum wage rate," in his mandate to the board, Acting-Commissioner for the State Department of Labor Mario Musolino outlined that "60 percent of fast food workers in New York are in families enrolled in at least one public assistance program and… in New York, 75 percent of fast food workers earn wages at the lowest level reported."[lxxvi] New York also ranked first in the nation in public assistance spending per fast-food worker, spending an estimated $6,800 per person, or $700 million, annually.[lxxvii] Time was of the essence. The board was given an aggressive timetable of three months from the time of its convening to return to Musolino with a recommendation. They only took two.

Unlike previous boards, the wage board enjoyed extraordinary authority due to a rarely used and little known long-standing law, stipulated in Sections 653(1) and 659.1 of Article 19 of New York State Labor Law. The law granted the Commissioner of Labor unilateral control to set a minimum wage upon the receipt of board's recommendation, and it did so without requiring approval from the state legislature.[lxxviii] On July 31, the board submitted its Report and Recommendations.[lxxix] It recommended that the wage to be set to $15 an hour. A month later, on September 10th, Acting-Commissioner Musolino took action upon the Report and Recommendations of the Fast-Food Wage Board and issued the order pursuant to the law. Joined by Vice President Joseph Biden, Governor Cuomo celebrated the news of Musolino's order in front of 1,200 enthusiastic workers, advocates, and community leaders at New York's Javits Center. It was there – in the gaping underbelly of the cement edifice, where the confounding algorithm of change that the Fight for $15 campaign had come to embody synchronized with an ambitious governor's political sensibilities. And in what may be the most consequential declaration of his administration, Andrew Cuomo pledged:

> "I will propose to the New York State legislature, not just $15 for fast food workers – because a fast food worker deserves $15 an hour; construction workers deserve $15 an hour, and home healthcare aides deserve $15 an hour, and taxi cab drivers deserve $15 an hour, and every working man and woman in the state of New York deserves $15 an hour as a minimum wage. And we are not going to stop until we get it done."[lxxx]

In the following months, Cuomo raised the wages for all state workers to $15 an hour, and the state's major cities of Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse followed suit.[lxxxi] Back in the state's capital of Albany, legislative leaders who months earlier viewed the notion of raising the minimum wage to anything above $13 an hour as a "non-starter" suddenly had an appetite for the concept. Raising the minimum wage would directly benefit 2.3 million New Yorkers, [lxxxii] and raising the minimum wage to $15 would increase workers' incomes by nearly $13,000 per year – enough to lift them above the poverty line.[lxxxiii] On April 1, 2016, tucked in the Education, Labor, Housing and Family Assistance article of the state's budget, members of the New York State legislature gathered in their chambers and voted to increase the minimum wage to $15 an hour for all workers.[lxxxiv] It passed the Assembly 104-to-39 and the Senate 61-1.[lxxxv] Three days later, Governor Cuomo gathered again at the Javits Center and signed the bill into law – just half a mile from where the Fight for $15 movement began a little more than four years earlier.[lxxxvi] Hours later, California Governor Jerry Brown, executive to the largest state in the nation, signed a similar bill.[lxxxvii]

Hope

"We're putting our steps together to form a march towards economic justice. It is a march that says if you work full time, you shouldn't have to choose between paying the rent and buying food. A march that says, if you work full time you should not live a life in poverty." – Andrew Cuomo, *Governor, New York, 10 September 2016*

In just four years, the scoffed-at grievances of a few hundred cashiers, cleaners, and cooks metastasized into a fully-fledged national movement. The Fight for $15 is the most successful and effective labor movement in a generation. While once considered down and out, strategic and smart organizing with support from some of the country's largest unions created a platform for millions of workers to realize their worth and demand access to a better life. The conversations once relegated to the break room became mainstream. In the 2016 presidential election, the nominees from both major political parties, Secretary Hillary Clinton and Mr. Donald Trump, publicly stated that the current federal minimum wage is an unacceptable wage floor. "Fifty-nine percent of Americans, including 84 percent of Democrats and 58 percent of independents, support a $15 minimum wage."[lxxxviii]

In Seattle, the sky hasn't fallen. In New York, the price of a burger hasn't quadrupled. Increasing the minimum wage was a first step in reversing a secular trend that watched millions of jobs go from sustainable to insufficient. It keeps the flickering candle of America's promised light for a better tomorrow lit. It restores purchasing power to countless workers who have weathered living conditions unbecoming of the wealthiest nation on earth.

What accounts for the salience of the fifteen-dollars-an-hour minimum wage? The answer lies somewhere in thirty years of failed economic policy and a global recession that brought the world to the brink of collapse. Its face is the face of families trapped under the pernicious ceiling of a low-wage economy; its voice is the voice of millions calling for honest pay for honest work; its presence is felt in the clenched hands of the parent holding onto hope for the dreams of their child. The fifteen-dollars-an-hour minimum wage has presented itself as a relevant and worthy issue in a growing number of cities and communities nation-wide, and with millions of Americans still subsisting on inadequate earnings, one thing is certain: The Fight for $15 will continue to march forward.

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