

Minimum-wage workers, bid Idaho farewell

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It's hard to imagine a place more desperate for a minimum-wage hike than Idaho.

With 5.1 percent of its workers clinging to the bottom rung of the economic ladder, it has the ninth highest percentage of jobs paying the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.

No wonder Idaho's per capita income - \$36,734 - falls below 47 states and the District of Columbia.

If you suddenly boosted the minimum wage to \$12 an hour, you'd benefit 55.1 percent of the women working in Idaho.

About 21.3 percent of the state's working mothers would take home more pay.

And 30.4 percent of workers in the 25- to 39-year-old bracket would benefit.

Where can they turn for help?

Not Congress.

It's been eight years and counting since the national standard was increased - the third longest period in history and within two years of setting the all-time record. Given congressional dysfunction and the GOP majority's antipathy toward labor, that's something just short of a sure thing.

Never mind the minimum wage has lost about a third of its purchasing power since 1968. If it were adjusted for inflation, the wage would be close to \$11 an hour.

Never mind that it's been a long time since this country rewarded work. Between 1948 and 1973, wages tracked productivity gains. Since then, productivity has grown eight times faster than hourly wages.

If you can't rely on a gridlocked Congress, where do you turn?

If you live in 29 states or the District of Columbia, you turn to your elected representatives.

For instance, Washington's hourly minimum wage is \$9.47. In Oregon, it's \$9.26. Nevada set its minimum at \$8.25 and Montana's wage is \$8.08.

But in Boise this year, the message working people got was not just no, but hell no.

When Rep. Mat Erpelding, D-Boise, proposed lifting Idaho's wage to \$8.25 on July 1 and then to \$9.25 next year, his comparatively mainstream measure got bottled up in House Speaker Scott Bedke's Ways and Means Committee.

When Democrats sought to pry Erpelding's bill loose, the GOP leadership locked down its members and defeated the effort on a 56-14 party-line vote.

Then, to make certain nobody got any other ideas, the GOP backed a plan to pre-empt any city or county from taking matters into its own hands. When McCall voters narrowly defeated an initiative to raise the minimum wage to \$8.75 this year and to \$10.25 next year, Republican lawmakers decreed it shall never happen again.

Conceding it was a slap at local control, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter held his nose and allowed the bill to become law without his signature.

So where are the working poor of Idaho to turn?

Absent a political revolution that puts Congress - or Idaho state government - under the control of Democrats, the doors have been closed to them.

That leaves moving to another state - a choice more and more young Idahoans appear to be making.

Which puts Idaho's GOP leadership roughly in the same spot former House Speaker Tom Stivers occupied three decades ago when a teacher disillusioned with stingy lawmakers told him she was leaving.

Stivers' response became famous: "Dear Mary: Goodbye!" - M.T.