

Welcome to Idaho's low-wage economy, y'all

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Just four years ago, Idaho had won the race to the bottom.

Nowhere else had a higher percentage of its workers earning the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour - or less.

Over time, the state's ranking improved - to second place in 2013 and then to ninth place the following year.

Which is where it remained in 2015. Of the 458,000 hourly workers in Idaho, about 21,000 earn the minimum wage or less.

Call that progress if you like. But consider where that leaves the Gem State - smack dab in the middle of the Old South.

As the Boise Weekly's George Prentice noted, Idahoans are the only non-Southerners in the top 10 minimum-wage states. Here are the rankings:

- Louisiana - 6.4 percent.
- Mississippi and Virginia (tied) - 6.2 percent.
- Alabama - 5.6 percent.
- North Carolina - 5.1 percent.
- South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas (tied) - 4.7 percent.
- Idaho - 4.6 percent.
- Georgia - 4.4 percent.

That makes Idaho's low-wage economy an outlier in its own neighborhood.

Thanks to voter initiatives that elevated state wages above the federal minimum, Washington and Oregon have dramatically lower segments of workers at the bottom tier - 1.1 percent and 0.7 percent respectively. In fact, Washington voters will decide this fall whether to pass Initiative 1433, which would take the minimum wage to \$11 next year and then increase it incrementally to \$13.50 an hour in 2020.

In Nevada, the percentage of workers earning the federal minimum wage is 2.5 percent; in Montana, it's 2 percent.

Utah's share of minimum-wage workers is 3.3 percent, and Wyoming comes in at 3.5 percent.

Working for wages in Idaho may feel like living in the South - but it's worse. At least your money buys more in the South.

The cost of living in seven of those Southern states is lower than in Idaho. Virginia and Texas are the exceptions.

Now if you wanted to turn that around, you'd attract industries that pay higher wages. Instead, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter has gone so far as to recruit businesses based on Idaho's comparatively cheaper labor.

You'd do something about the gap between high-paying jobs that go unfilled and workers who lack the skills.

Instead, Idaho remains \$5.5 million short of the amount it was spending on its institutions of higher learning when the economy collapsed eight years ago. To compensate, tuition has been steadily increased - placing a college degree beyond the reach of Idaho families who are earning the nation's second-lowest per capita income, at \$37,509. Only Mississippi earns less, at \$35,444.

To their credit, Otter and lawmakers have begun restoring public school budgets. But two years of spending increases will not reverse 15 years of neglect - especially if Idaho is going to become a competitive player in the teacher recruitment job market.

And there would be a couple of things you would avoid.

Such as talking about cutting state taxes - which is something House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, as well as Otter continue to promote.

Such as stopping Idaho's communities from following the example set elsewhere in the West and raising the minimum wage for themselves. Republicans - including Sens. Dan Johnson of Lewiston and Sheryl Nuxoll of Cottonwood, as well as Reps. Caroline Troy of Genesee, Shannon McMillan of Silverton and Paul Shepherd of Riggins - passed the so-called preemption bill.

So Idaho may be stuck in this Southern-style economy for some time.

Might as well get used to it,

y'all. - M.T.