

Opinion: At a minimum - the wages debate in New Jersey -  
NorthJersey.com

NorthJersey.com

Carl Golden, a former press aide to Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman, is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

KEVIN R. WEXLER / STAFF PHOTOGRAP

Newark Mayor Cory Booker speaking in favor of a state-wide minimum wage at a press conference June 19 at New Hope Baptist Church in East Orange. Joining him were, from left, Assembly Speaker Sheila Y. Oliver, Sen. Barbara Buono and Charles Hall Jr., chairman of Working Families United for New Jersey.

I LANDED my first fulltime, adult, career-launching job in 1955 as a copy boy for the Easton (Pa.) Express, my hometown daily newspaper. The ink hadn't dried fully on my high school diploma before I immersed myself in my new environment — cigarette smoke, stale coffee and an atmosphere so electric and fascinating I spent the next seven years of my life there.

For \$35 a week, I worked five and one-half days, making coffee runs, ripping copy off teletype machines, re-filling paste pots and generally following whatever orders were sent my way by editors.

After six months or so, I was offered a reporter's job, given a company car to use and a beat to cover.

One day, the paper's business manager approached me and said: "You're going to get a five-dollar-a-week raise."

I was ecstatic; obviously, my work had attracted the attention of my editors and I was being rewarded for my efforts.

When I expressed my gratitude, the business manager replied sourly: "Congress just passed the minimum wage of one dollar an hour, so we have to pay you forty dollars a week instead of thirty-five."

Ego soundly deflated, I attempted bravely and not a little ruefully to find some humor in the situation, so I decided to tell friends that the U.S. Congress had voted overwhelmingly to grant me a pay raise and that President Eisenhower had signed off on it.

I received subsequent merit-based salary increases as I made my way first through 12 years of journalism and later in government, but the memory of that first raise is the one that has stayed with me all these years. I confess I felt a little pride, but a sense of gratitude as well toward a government that recognized there were occasions when it was necessary to extend assistance to people.

Each time a legislative body — federal or state — takes up a proposal to increase the minimum wage, I'm reminded of that day and the way I felt with an additional \$5 a week in my paycheck.

For New Jerseyans working at minimum wage, it appears an increase for them will be granted by the state's registered voters who, this November, will decide on a ballot question increasing the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$8.50 an hour and tie future increases to the cost of living index.

Governor Christie vetoed the original legislation and recommended instead that a \$1-an-hour increase be phased in over three years and that the automatic cost of living provision be eliminated. The Legislature responded

Opponents contend that an increase in the minimum wage will force small businesses in particular to meet the additional cost by laying off employees, freezing hiring or passing the added expense along to consumers in the form of higher prices.

Supporters argue that, in addition to easing the burden on low-income employees in meeting daily living expenses, placing more money in their pockets will lead to increased spending on their part, thus boosting overall economic activity.

#### Expenses passed along

Consumers understand and accept the fact that most business expenses are passed along to them, whether they are employee wages, leases and rentals, energy or regulatory costs. As a group, consumers are savvy enough to know that businesses don't always simply or quietly absorb the additional expenses placed on them, but anticipate the money will be recouped from the sale of goods and services.

Beyond that, however, there is a genuine empathy on the part of most people toward those who are experiencing difficult economic circumstances. Some have undergone similar difficulties and many have relatives or are acquainted with someone who has.

The 77 percent support level expressed in polls is not surprising given the natural inclination of people to offer assistance to those in need. It is not viewed as charity; rather, it is a response that understands that those who need help are employed and continue to work in pursuit of advancement and a brighter future.

In all likelihood, the referendum will easily win approval. For me, though, I'll continue to impress people by telling them Congress and the president gave me a raise.

---

North Jersey Media Group Inc.