

The Senate says no to \$15

written by Stephen Millies
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The United States Senate voted unanimously against raising the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 per hour. Not a single senator yelled “nay” in a Feb. 4 voice vote that prohibited the pay increase.

Could any of these senators live on \$7.25 per hour? Hell, none of them could live on \$70 an hour! They take home \$174,000 per year.

The amendment offered by Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst prevents raising the wage during the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s a slap in the face to millions of essential workers, many of whom earn poverty wages but deserve much more.

Ernst claims that “a \$15 federal minimum wage would be devastating for our hardest-hit small businesses at a time when they can least afford it.”

This is the same old argument that claims a small business “can’t afford safety equipment.” It’s too bad a worker had their hand cut off. At least they had a job.

The labor movement’s answer is that if a capitalist can’t afford to operate their business safely, they shouldn’t be in business. The same applies to poverty wages.

Sen. Ernst’s crocodile tears about small business shouldn’t fool anybody. She has never complained about Walmart, which drove thousands of mom and pop stores out of business.

The current \$7.25 federal minimum wage is actually a 40% cut from what it could buy in 1968. To match the buying power of the 1968 wage, \$12.19 would be required, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ inflation calculator.

The wage cut of nearly \$5 per hour amounts to over \$10,000 stolen from workers over an entire year of 40-hour workweeks. The tens of billions of additional profits are supersized wage theft. Millions of workers who may get tips don’t even qualify for \$7.25.

\$15 will be won on the streets

In a surprising move, Sen. Bernie Sanders also supported the Ernst amendment. His excuse was that this would prevent an immediate vote on a bill to increase the minimum wage, which would probably lose.

Several Democratic senators, including Manchin from West Virginia and Teeter from Montana, oppose a \$15 wage. That's what the AFL-CIO leadership gets in return for endorsing these politicians.

Sanders' action will be confusing and probably demoralizing to millions of people who consider the Vermont senator as their champion. What difference does it make if raising the minimum wage is shot down by an amendment or by a losing vote on an actual bill?

Here's how Sanders explained his position: "It was never my intention to increase the minimum wage to \$15 immediately and during the pandemic. My legislation gradually increases the minimum wage to \$15 an hour over a five-year period and that is what I believe we have got to do."

Well, millions of workers need that \$15 and more right now. Landlords aren't waiting five years to collect their rent.

One of the demands of the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom — where Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech — was a \$2 minimum wage. Its biggest advocate was A. Philip Randolph, the protest's organizer and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

According to the inflation calculator, a minimum wage of \$16.97 would be required to match the \$2 per hour that was demanded in August 1963.

The only way we can overcome a bought-and-paid-for Congress is for millions of

people to take to the streets.

