

Cities, States Take On Wages

BY DON LEE

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WASHINGTON — While President Barack Obama and Congress keep talking about the plight and economic cost of Americans' declining incomes, a growing number of states and municipalities frustrated by federal inaction are moving to do something about it.

Legislators and voters in five states — California, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Rhode Island — and in four local governments this year approved measures raising the minimum wage above the current national rate of \$7.25 an hour, in one case as high as \$15 an hour.

At least five more states, including Maryland and South Dakota, and several cities are expected to take up the issue next year. Though states in the past have approved increases in the minimum wage, this year's developments provide a higher floor for wages next year in at least 21 states, a record number.

The burst of activity, which has alarmed business groups, reflects a growing concern over stagnant wages, lost purchasing power and the widening gap between the richest Americans and everyone else — a gap that is now at its widest since the Great Recession.

Moreover, many of the new jobs being created in the economic recovery are in industries most likely to pay the minimum wage. Retailers and restaurants accounted for nearly one-third of job growth in the last 12 months.

Inflation, meanwhile, has steadily eroded the value of the federal minimum wage, which last rose in 2009 and peaked in 1968 at \$8.56 an hour in inflation-adjusted 2012 dollars.

With labor unions weakened and employers feeling little pressure to pay more in a slow economy, market forces are offering no relief for low-wage workers, said Georgetown University economist Harry Holzer.

Partisan divisions in Washington have continued to stymie efforts to increase the national minimum wage. So state legislatures and even city councils are jumping into the void.

"There's nothing else positive — no other force out there — so people are willing to say, 'Let's try it,'" Holzer said.

In Maryland, councils in Montgomery and Prince George's counties — suburbs of the nation's capital — last month approved a minimum-wage increase to \$11.50 an hour by 2017. The District of Columbia last week endorsed a similar measure.

"Clearly, Congress is non-functioning," said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin of Montgomery County, a mostly affluent area with significant pockets of poverty. "As the groundswell of support continues to come from cities and towns, we are going to create the movement from the bottom up."

Obama called for a higher minimum wage in his State of the Union address this year, and he repeated it Wednesday, a day before unions and workers staged one-day strikes and



METRO GRAPHICS

protests across the country demanding better pay at fast-food restaurants and other businesses.

But with the White House occupied by health care, immigration and budget issues and a sharply divided Congress showing little urgency, few expect Washington to enact a minimum-wage increase any time soon. A Senate bill that would increase the federal rate to \$10.10 an hour over a two-year period may come to a vote this week, but prospects for passage by both houses are dim.

At the state level, the highest current minimum wage is offered in Washington state, where the pay is indexed to inflation annually and will climb to \$9.32 an hour in January.

California's minimum wage is scheduled to rise to \$9 in July and to \$10 at the start of 2016.

Those wages are well below the \$15 an hour that voters in the Washington town of SeaTac approved last month for airport and hotel workers within their borders, giving them the highest minimum wage in the nation.

Now, the Service Employees International Union and other groups that organized the fast-food protests last week are pressing for SeaTac's rate to become the new national standard.

Restaurant and other business groups have become accustomed to periodic pushes for a higher federal minimum wage but said they have seen nothing like the current wave, especially among local jurisdictions.

"The activity at the county and municipal level is getting a bit out of control," said Scott DeFife, executive vice president with the National Restaurant Association.

Although labor activists are hoping the movement will spur other cities and counties to follow suit, DeFife said what might happen instead is that employers will move to neighboring areas for cheaper labor.

"The dramatic increases are definitely going to impact prices and could start to impact small businesses to

compete with other people across the country line," he said.

Union organizers said that even in states with higher minimum wages, workers are struggling.

On Thursday, workers at fast-food restaurants walked off the job in 100 cities.

Fanny Velazquez, a cashier at a McDonald's in Los Angeles, Calif., was one of them. The 34-year-old said she earns \$8.70 an hour, but that's after eight years on the job and is still not enough — with just 20 work hours a week — to move out of her parents' home in South Los Angeles.

"I want to be independent," she said.

Many economists warned that a hike in the minimum wage sometimes results in a modest reduction in overall employment as businesses downsize. Holzer said the effect is likely to be about 1 percent of lost employment among the most affected groups — young or low-wage workers — for every 10 percent increase in the minimum wage.

Proponents argued that giving raises to minimum-wage workers would lift the overall economy by boosting their spending, but most economists said the stimulative effect would be minor.

That's because their numbers are relatively small: The Labor Department estimated 3.55 million workers were at or below the minimum wage last year, out of more than 75 million who are paid on an hourly basis and about 128 million workers overall.

Still, polls show most Americans favored raising the minimum wage.

And an increase would have a meaningful effect on some of the lowest-paid workers, a growing share of whom is older and better educated.

"It's not the average teenager who wants money for an app for his cellphone," said Jared Bernstein, the former chief economist for Vice President Joe Biden.

Cancer Only A Speed Bump In White House Aide's Dream Career

BY MICHAEL DOYLE

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WASHINGTON — Stage IV colorectal cancer was not part of the game plan that brought Michael Robertson from Fresno, Calif., to the White House.

Nor did Robertson's career strategy anticipate the \$900,000 in medical bills, or the physical agonies and mental doubts. Instead, the Bullard High School graduate selected his goals and stepped from one achievement to another until he was climbing the ladder of the Obama administration.

And then he got sick.

"I went to bed one night relatively fine," Robertson said in an interview, "and I woke up the next day and I had a catastrophic disease."

Following grueling treatments and multiple surgeries by Fresno-based physicians, Robertson appears to be cancer-free. He has gone public with his experience, blogging about his medical travails on the White House website as part of the administration's larger campaign to promote the Affordable Care Act.

Technically, the Affordable Care Act did not immediately affect Robertson's cancer treatment. Already protected by insurance, he had to pick up only about 1 percent of his medical expenses. Now that he has a pre-existing condition, though, the health care law means Robertson can still secure insurance in the future. More broadly, this is a cautionary tale about being ambushed by misfortune.

"It can happen to anybody," Robertson said. "That's what insurance is for."

Robertson recently turned 37. He's a trim, athletic-looking man with a full head of dark hair. His job, which carries the dual titles of deputy assistant to the president and deputy Cabinet secretary, puts him in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. It's part of the White House complex, adrenaline central.

"It's a blast, an absolute blast," Robertson said of his work. "It's a vantage point over the executive branch that you don't get in a lot of places ... touching everything that goes on in the country."

It's also the kind of job that Robertson seems to have been preparing for his whole life.

The son of two Fresno teachers, John and Karyn Robertson, he graduated from the University of California, Berkeley. While in his third year at Golden Gate University School of Law, he began casting his net. He wanted to work in Washington, D.C., probably in the Senate. In late 2003, he learned about an up-and-coming Senate candidate from Illinois, Barack Obama.

"I started following him, monitoring him," Robertson said. "I did a lot of research."

Right after the 2004 Illinois Demo-



Robertson

cratic primary, Robertson contacted the Obama campaign. When he graduated from law school, he moved to Chicago and started as a full-time volunteer. After Obama won, Robertson was hired for the Senate staff, eventu-

ally becoming deputy to the senator's chief counsel.

Check.

When Obama announced his presidential bid, Robertson joined the campaign team. After Obama won in 2008, Robertson joined the presidential transition team. He got a job at the General Services Administration, eventually becoming chief of staff to the \$26 billion-a-year agency that oversees federal real estate and acquisitions.

Check.

Along the way, Robertson earned a master's degree from Georgetown University Law Center. He learned about the political hot seat, facing tough congressional questions about GSA spending. As Obama started his second term, Robertson moved up to deputy Cabinet secretary. His office helps coordinate the work of different executive branch agencies.

Check.

In July 2012, Robertson and his then-fiancee were vacationing near Santa Cruz, Calif. He hadn't been feeling well; he was fatigued, and suffering from upset stomach and other symptoms he attributed to stress and long hours. Still, he wanted to get checked out. He went to one doctor, who referred him to a specialist, who brought in other doctors. Within two days, Robertson was told he had stage IV metastatic colorectal cancer.

Stage IV is the highest stage in cancer. Beyond that, there is nothing.

"You go through incredible fear, you go through moments of injustice, you go through 'what does this mean?' All this stuff," Robertson said, but "I think I did pretty well in getting to, 'OK what's the plan,' in part because the other stuff is too scary and too hard to dwell on."

Robertson began a cross-country regimen. For his medical care, he stuck with the Fresno-area physicians he'd come to trust: oncologist Dr. Ravi D. Rao, with Saint Agnes Medical Center, and surgeon Dr. Susan Logan, with the University of California, San Francisco. He'd undergo treatments, then fly back to Washington for work, then fly back to California.

Robertson was last scanned for tumors in October. Doctors saw nothing. He's now back to his 12-hour work days, helping Obama finish out the term, more aware than most that there's both life and death outside of a political career.



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