

# The Register-Guard

## Eugene should lead way for \$15 minimum wage

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The fight for an honest living wage is gaining momentum across the nation and in Oregon, with grassroots organizations and community activists demanding a fair wage of \$15 an hour.

There was a time in this country when honest business people understood that they had a responsibility to their workers and their communities. A time when workers were seen as an investment in the future of a business, not as a burden or a cost to be cut. We used to value hard work — and it didn't matter if that work was done behind a desk, swinging a hammer or sweeping up a floor.

Half of all American workers earn \$505 or less a week. These are poverty wages that exploit honest hard-working Americans and provide a corporate welfare system for the rich and powerful. With the cost of rent, utilities, child care and other necessities increasing every year, low-wage workers are forced to rely on public assistance such as food stamps, low-income housing and other programs that cost the taxpayer.

A recent report from the Cato Institute claimed that the federal government spends \$668 billion per year on 126 welfare programs. When we add in spending by state and local governments, the figure is pushed up to \$1 trillion per year. Many blame the poor, insisting that they are lazy or want a free ride, but the average American is not lazy and is not looking for a handout.

We know that 32 percent of all working families are considered to be among the “working poor,” and that one out of four Americans makes less than \$10 an hour. We also know that with today's cost of living, working families can't survive on that amount. So Americans who work hard for 40 or more hours a week are forced onto public assistance and welfare programs. Taxpayers are supplementing wages for irresponsible employers.

Yes, we live in a welfare state — welfare for corporations and employers who forget that they have a responsibility to their employees and their communities, not just their stockholders. They can pay their workers poverty wages because they know that the taxpayer will supplement those wages with welfare programs.

It is time that we start paying workers fairly by raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. This will happen — and Oregon and the city of Eugene should be leading the way, because in Oregon

we believe in hard work and we believe in doing what is right. But we have to start somewhere, and a good place to begin is with those who work for the city of Eugene.

The city has an estimated 300-plus temporary and contract workers, many of whom have been employed by the city for more than three years. Many more of them are paid poverty wages. Fifteen dollars an hour is not a lot of money. It is the true minimum wage a person needs just to scrape by.

So on Sept. 28, citizens who still believe in fair wages for hard work will show their support for their fellow citizens by showing up at the Eugene City Council meeting at 7 p.m. in Harris Hall, 125 E. 8th Ave., to demand that the city of Eugene live up to its responsibility to its employees and provide all city workers and city contract workers a fair living wage. Raising these workers' wages is the right thing to do.

*Lonnie Douglas of Eugene is chairman of the Eugene Springfield Solidarity Network's Action Mobilization Committee.*