

## **Paul Jenkins: Minimum wage campaign is about politics and is no help to workers**

By Paul Jenkins

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The funniest thing happened the other day, the kind of thing that might make you wonder what the fight over raising the minimum wage is really about. If you think it is about the welfare of those struggling at the bottom of the economic heap, you are wrong.

Alaska's minimum wage ballot initiative is about politics and money, part of a Democratic scheme hatched in Washington, D.C., as President Barack Obama scratches for a strategy -- any strategy -- to get his party off the tracks before November's train wreck.

The tip-off was when the boss of the state's largest labor organization, a guy who supports the August primary ballot measure to raise the minimum wage, balked after a legislator indicated a willingness to boost the rate before then.

"Suffice it to say, any attempt to introduce and pass a substantially similar bill, it not only undermines the process but deprives Alaska voters the opportunity to exercise those very personal liberties we all value so much," Alaska AFL-CIO President Vince Beltrami told a joint hearing of the House and Senate judiciary committees.

He and initiative sponsor Ed Flanagan, a former Alaska Labor commissioner, are still smarting from a 2002 kerfluffle in which lawmakers crafted a statute identical to a pending minimum wage initiative, which then was forced off the ballot as allowed by state law. Lawmakers later gutted it. Beltrami et al. fear a replay. That's the cover story.

Democrats are praying for big primary turnouts by their base -- and the minimum wage hustle helps. Legislative action before August could damage Sen. Mark Begich's re-election bid or the left's misguided oil tax repeal. It could hurt Democrats across the state. Outside money is being drawn here for a minimum wage campaign that benefits all Democrats.

All of that ignores the painfully obvious. Raising the minimum wage here -- or anywhere -- although popular, is dumb. Raising it by initiative? Even dumber. There is no debate, no vetting, no compromise.

Washington Post columnist David Broder got it right when he concluded initiatives are an assault on the Constitution, "the most uncontrolled and unexamined arena of power politics."

There is nothing noble about the initiatives to boost the minimum wage, no compassion or empathy for the poor. There are several campaigns across the nation -- including the president's drive to increase the federal minimum wage. They are aimed at increasing Democratic voter turnout in the fall, scams designed to help the left dodge fallout from Obama's disastrous Affordable Care Act.

Unfortunately, increasing the minimum wage would be disastrous for those at the bottom of the labor scale. If government mandates more be spent on labor, less labor will be hired. Simple economics.

The Cato Institute says a "comprehensive review of more than 100 studies on the minimum wage by David Neumark and William Wascher for the prestigious National Bureau of Economic Research found that 85 percent of the studies they reviewed found negative employment effects."

Who gets hurt? Not union bosses. They see the increases as a welcome tide raising their economic yachts. Those who suffer include the young, the less educated and women. Workers with fewer skills will be priced out of the market as labor costs rise

As of now in Alaska, the minimum wage is \$7.75 The ballot question would raise it to \$8.75 on Jan. 1, 2015, and to \$9.75 the next year. Afterward, it would be adjusted annually for inflation. If the new amount is less than a dollar above the federal standard, \$7.25 an hour, it would be set \$1 higher.

Initiative backers have found fertile fields in Alaska. In a Dittman poll late last year, 69 percent of respondents supported the increase: 87 percent among Democrats; 52 percent among Republicans. Nationally, about 70 percent support it.

House Majority Leader Lance Pruitt, R-Anchorage, told the Juneau Empire, "If it's something the people are after, we're the representatives of the people. Why not show them that we're willing to do it?"

He is, of course, right. The Legislature should embrace the issue. The same klutzes who toss cash to drunks on street corners and believe they are helping them no doubt will pass a minimum wage hike in August, good idea or no. Lawmakers at least could get it right during the legislative process.

Democrats and unions then could claim victory for forcing a minimum wage increase.

Instead, they will scream bloody murder.

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