PREFACE

With President Joe Biden advocating to gradually raise the federal minimum wage to $15 as part of his COVID-19 economic relief package, the Puget Sound’s ground-breaking success in raising the minimum wage bears revisiting.

SeaTac and Seattle became the first cities in the nation to gradually increase their minimum wage to $15 an hour in 2013 and 2014, respectively. Since then, relatively liberal states, such as California, and more conservative ones, such as Florida, have passed similar legislation.

The Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies (labor.washington.edu) at the University of Washington is proud to have supported a wide range of research related to the minimum wage. This report summarizes and reflects on that research as a contribution to the ongoing debate around the benefits and costs associated with increasing the minimum wage to $15.

The research profiled in this report identifies important political strategies for minimum wage policy changes, highlights nuanced perspectives on the implementation and enforcement of wage policy, and underscores the impacts of minimum wage legislation on working people and their families. Taken together, these lessons spotlight innovative perspectives and methods that are often overlooked in much of the mainstream debate thus far.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2013, the small suburban city of SeaTac passed Proposition 1, authorizing a $15 minimum wage policy phased in over several years; after surviving a lawsuit filed by business groups, the policy went into effect in January 2014. Six months later, the Seattle City Council legislated a similar $15 minimum wage policy grounded in incremental increases over several years. These policy innovations arose from struggles by broad coalitions of labor unions, community partners, and elected officials around a host of issues concerning low wage workers’ rights in the years following the Occupy movement.

The victories in the Puget Sound region quickly catalyzed a proliferating array of campaigns to raise the minimum wage in many cities and states around the nation. In the election cycle of November 2014, four states (all “red” states: Alaska, Arkansas, Nebraska, South Dakota) passed new minimum wage initiatives (although all lower than $15). The momentum continued; in 2021, half of the states planned to raise their minimum wage standards. At the national level, in January 2014, President Obama called for raising the federal minimum wage to around ten dollars, although Republicans opposed it. More recently, the Biden administration has advocated raising the federal minimum wage to $15 as part of an ambitious economic stimulus and equity program.

Despite continued resistance from some business interests and most Republicans, opinion polls reflect that a large majority of Americans support increasing substantially the minimum wage. The logic of support is simple: gainfully employed people who work hard should not live in poverty, which is the case now for millions who make only the present federal minimum wage.
The Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies (Bridges Center) has been engaged with the campaign for a $15 minimum wage from the start. Indeed, several Bridges Center faculty leaders (former and later chairs) started working on initiatives calling for an elevated “living wage” at SeaTac in the very early 2000s. In 2014, the Bridges Center committed funding from its Washington State Labor Research Fund to sponsor development of the SeaTac-Seattle Minimum Wage History Project digital web archive led by UW Labor Archivist Conor Casey and myself (https://content.lib.washington.edu/projects/sea15/index.html). The web archive chronicles roughly eighty interviews with persons who experienced, in different ways, the campaigns in the Puget Sound area along with a wide range of secondary and media resources about the political and policy significance of the $15 minimum wage campaigns.

Many scholars and pundits continue to study the implications of the expanding $15 wage phenomenon. The Bridges Center provided support from the Washington State Labor Research fund and other labor-affiliated grants for a variety of original, highly competitive research projects regarding the minimum wage campaign legacy in Washington and beyond. The four funded projects highlighted in this report represent unique perspectives and data that are often overlooked in mainstream studies by economists regarding the significance of the increased minimum wage.

The Bridges Center supported projects direct attention to three important dimensions of all policy legacies. First, Megan Brown, who was involved in both the SeaTac campaign and the digital archive development, offers comparative perspectives on the political campaign strategies for policy change in three different geographic contexts (Seattle, Chicago, North Carolina). She finds important differences in strategies responding to varying political and geographical contexts, but she stresses that labor strikes were effective in all three cases. Emma Rodman shifts attention from strategies for policy change to the ever-important issues of policy implementation and enforcement. Her study focuses on the lessons of a famous lawsuit by female workers in Wenatchee challenging non-compliance of an early minimum wage law during the 1930s. Rodman underlines that the women plaintiffs won their case before the U.S. Supreme Court and received their entitled wages, but the male-dominated legal and political process reinforced gendered expectations about women’s dependence on men and denied women’s voices in the labor movement. Rodman thus invites us to complicate our understandings of legal impact, underscoring that worker agency and organization matters as much as policy compliance.

The last two studies each examine whether and how the increased minimum wage impacted ordinary people in Washington State, and especially families of low wage, mostly female workers. Heather Hill studied a sample (55) of low wage, mostly women and immigrant families with children to assess how the minimum wage affected their lives over two years. She concluded that there is evidence of raised living standards, but the interviewees’ lack of understanding about the wage policy undercut their appreciation of it, and failed to reduce their sense of precarity as low wage workers. Diana Pearce similarly assessed the economic impact of the increased minimum wage in Seattle for families from a macro-economic perspective. While the minimum wage did not ensure what Pearce calls “self-sufficiency” for low wage recipients and their families, it did reduce poverty and increase progress toward self-sufficiency by measurable degrees. Together, these two studies go a long way toward making the campaigns for increased wages meaningful in everyday human terms.

The campaigns for a $15 minimum wage clearly hold important lessons about the significance of activism by labor unions, workers, and community groups striving to advance social justice and to improve life circumstances for vulnerable populations. There is still a great deal more to learn and to do, and the Bridges Center will welcome additional research on these topics in the future.
This project took a comparative approach to the Fight for $15 campaigns that swept the nation beginning in 2013. As a geographer, Brown analyzed the patterns of minimum wage increases and the spatial strategies of labor union campaigns in different areas of the U.S., exploring whether and why strategies stayed consistent or varied across different locales. Brown undertook field research in three different cities, Seattle, WA – ground zero for the Fight for $15 movement, and subsequent campaigns in Chicago, IL and Charlotte, NC. Her methodological approach consisted of participant observations and in-depth interviews.

“One of the major things I was interested in exploring was the extent to which these campaigns were, or were even able to, build success and momentum of the campaign in Seattle was most definitely aided by the progressive political climate that the city is known for. In Seattle, local government was comparatively receptive to workers’ concerns,” she continues.

Brown found that these local circumstances encouraged more union participation, which helped the movement to grow. In North Carolina, the situation was very different. “The campaigners in North Carolina faced significant opposition from the local authorities. For example, at the time of my research the state had just passed the now infamous ‘bathroom bill’ [a 2016 bill which banned transgender people from using bathrooms in state buildings that match their gender identity and prohibited municipalities from adopting anti-discrimination policies intended to protect LGBTQ people]. Part of that bill outlawed cities from increasing the minimum wage, which of course, clearly affected the campaign,” she explains.

Another interesting finding was the extent to which the campaigns themselves were connected. “One thing that was really apparent across the board was the role and effectiveness of the strike in all these movements. Short term visible strikes in workplaces (for example in the fast-food industry) became a way for the campaigns to get noticed and were an essential strategy to grow awareness and support,” Brown concludes.

“This was perhaps the biggest take away of the project in terms of what the Fight for $15 might mean for the labor movement moving forward. It brought back the strike as an effective tool of resistance and a little militancy back into organized labor,” Brown adds.
This project looked to the history of a past minimum wage fight to see what lessons it might hold for the Fight for $15. *West Coast Hotel v. Elsie Parrish* was a 1937 U.S. Supreme Court decision in which Elsie Parrish, a chambermaid at the Cascadian Hotel in Wenatchee, Washington, sued her employer for back pay after realizing that she was not being paid the state appointed minimum wage. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Parrish. This sparked a series of cases from other chambermaids in Washington state for back pay. Emma Rodman, and her co-author Helen Knowles, found sixty-five cases in total in the King County Archives. These formed the basis of the study.

Rodman, then a doctoral candidate in the University of Washington’s Political Science department, was especially interested in looking at the implementation of these laws and the material effects on the women who brought, and won, the cases. “We wanted to tell the story of what happened after the Parrish ruling, as women workers, lawyers, business owners, and judges wrangled over the enforcement of the law,” Rodman explains. “Myself and my co-author felt that this was an important history to explore during the Fight for $15 because while the campaign may have been successful, the fight rages on in battles around enforcement. How can the $15 minimum wage be enforced? Is it being enforced? And how do we make sure workers get the back pay they deserve? These were some of the questions that we hoped this project, and what happened in the 1930s, might help us answer.”

The Parrish case ended up being a somewhat cautionary tale. “For the female plaintiffs, the cases were certainly a victory in the legal and economic senses – the law was upheld, and they received the pay they were due. But we found that this was often at a social and political cost,” Rodman continues. When reviewing the cases, it became obvious that the women had a distinct lack of agency. “What tended to happen was that the women were pushed out of the discourse as soon as their cases were taken on by the male dominated unions and legal firms that came together to bring them. Cases were brought for the women rather than by them [emphasis added]. So, in this sense they were disenfranchised as political beings through these actions when one might think that the opposite would be true,” Rodman explains.

Even more troubling was how the wording of the cases reinforced stereotypes of women as weak and dependent on men. “The language of desolation and abandonment – the type of language typically seen in divorce proceedings from this period - featured heavily. The women were presented as weak, dependent and in need of protection,” she continues. Thinking about the social and political effects of these laws therefore raises the question: to what extent can they be labelled victories? “With regards to seeing themselves as political actors, the West Coast Hotel cases arguably set women back in terms of legal consciousness,” Rodman argues. “Politically the real winners were the male-led and dominated unions – who mobilized around the cause and grew stronger and more organized as a result – and Stevenson and Gershon, the law company that almost exclusively dealt with the cases. Socially the language of the trials also strengthened the prevailing patriarchal discourse.”

So, what were some of the big takeaways for minimum wage campaigns today? “This project and history are a reminder...
for those fighting today that legal victories need to be consolidated in a way that clearly benefits those they are fought for. When we think about organizing for economic rights, we need to be attentive to the ways that some types of economic gains might have political and social costs in terms of mobilization and how different groups see themselves politically,” Rodman explains.

The Parrish ruling could have been a chance for women to get more power in the union and to flex their political muscles. It also could have been a moment to challenge gender stereotypes—but what happened was the opposite. “When enforcing legislation today and in the future, we therefore need to think about the material effects on the people impacted by the law and to make sure that implementation is not done in a way that allows existing power structures and hierarchies to take over,” Rodman concludes.

Emilia Rodman earned her doctoral degree from the University of Washington in 2020. She is currently a postdoctoral research associate at Princeton University with appointment in the University Center for Human Values and the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics. In the fall of 2021, she will be joining the Political Science department at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. Helen Knowles’s book about the Parrish case, Making Minimum Wage: Elsie Parrish v. The West Coast Hotel Company, will be published in 2021 by the University of Oklahoma Press.
Heather Hill’s qualitative study provides a perspective of workers and their families living and working in a low wage job in Seattle and investigated how the minimum wage increase might change these living conditions. Hill’s research was part of a wider University of Washington study, funded by the City of Seattle and several foundations, to evaluate the effects of the city’s minimum wage law that went into effect in 2015.

“To be eligible for the study workers had to be earning less than $15 at the start of 2015, they had to have children in the home and an annual family income of less than $50,000,” Hill explains. “I wanted to focus this study on families with children because that is where my research interests lie and because the hope was that the minimum wage increase would have positive effects beyond just the individuals receiving it.”

In the end, fifty-five participants were recruited for the study. “The sample ended up being 60% immigrant and majority women (70%) and we managed to collect a fairly diverse sample in terms of the kinds of jobs held — from those in restaurant work to the care industry,” Hill continues. Workers participated in three in-depth interviews over a two-year period as well as more regular phone check-ins. “We really wanted to get a sense of what it was like ‘living at the minimum’ and if the wage law had a material effect on the physical and/or emotional well-being of our participants, so we asked questions that we felt would give us a subjective sense of the quality of both their work and home life,” Hill elaborates.

The interviews unearthed some perhaps unexpected findings that were brought to the attention of the Seattle City Council. “One thing that became pretty clear early on was that the law was complicated enough that a lot of workers didn’t really know what to expect from it or what wage they should be getting. It was not as simple as everyone’s wage suddenly became $15. This was concerning because if the burden for reporting non-compliance is on the workers then the law should not be too difficult for most people to understand. We found that most participants, particularly those who were immigrants, had vague knowledge of how the law worked,” Hill reports.

The results of the study are still being reviewed and analyzed, but Hill is able to share some overall impressions. “In objective terms, it was clear that most of our sample saw an increase in their financial health over the period of study. This was most notably the case for those workers in stable employment with a long-term employer.”
As a tentative conclusion our data suggest that while the minimum wage may have improved wages and earnings for some workers, this may not be enough to keep up with how fast the cost of living is going up in Seattle.” – Heather Hill

However, these improvements are contextualized within a broader welfare frame. “Subjectively the extent to which workers felt that their financial health and well-being had improved was more difficult to gauge. The overall impression from our sample was that they were generally supportive of the law, but they did not feel like it made a significant enough impact, or that it offered much in terms of social mobility,” Hill elaborates. “The experience of living on low incomes is defined by precarity and the notion that when something improves financially in one area it usually means a loss somewhere else. One big worry for example was that with the minimum wage increase workers would lose out in other areas of public assistance and welfare.”

“As a tentative conclusion our data suggest that while the minimum wage may have improved wages and earnings for some workers, this may not be enough to keep up with how fast the cost of living is going up in Seattle. The minimum wage has improved people’s bottom-line budgets, but it might not be enough to experience a drastic change.” Hill concludes.
This project took a macro level approach to exploring the impact of the minimum wage increase on Washington families. Using the self-sufficiency standard, which she developed in the mid-1990s, Diana Pearce sought to determine to what extent these minimum wage laws might lift families out of poverty.

The self-sufficiency standard is an alternate measure of poverty to the official poverty measure. It calculates the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs in a given state and is aimed at providing households with a sense of the income needed to become self-sufficient. “I wanted to see if the wage increases in Seattle would have a measurable effect on a household’s financial health,” Pearce explains. “The minimum wage laws were the most extensive and far reaching to date to try and deal with issues of stagnating wages and income inequality, so it was important to determine whether public policies like these would actually make a difference, and to think about what that might mean for family wellbeing.”

Pearce’s focus on families was pertinent as it reflected the wide-reaching aims of the minimum wage increase to help more than just individuals. “The family approach was central because it helped to defy stereotypes about who the minimum wage helps and who it was for. We wanted to move away from the notion that it was usually young, single people, in minimum wage jobs and that the policies therefore would not have much of an impact beyond these groups,” Pearce confirms.

To answer her questions, Pearce took a ‘reverse’ approach. “Instead of modeling the impact of raising the minimum wage, we simulated the impact of reducing the minimum wage to the federal minimum wage and then measured those numbers against the standard,” she explains. This was done using individual and household micro-data from the 2017 American Community Survey.

The results were striking. “What we found was that the increase in the minimum wage reduced the number of households in poverty (according to the self-sufficiency standard) by 6.9%,” Pearce continues, “That’s quite a big impact for a single policy!”

Looking at these data also gives a clearer picture of how many people are affected by these laws and who the typical minimum wage worker is. “We discovered that around 17% of workers in Seattle are on minimum wage. These tend to be people of color, especially women who are usually young, single people, in minimum wage jobs and that the policies therefore would not have much of an impact beyond these groups,” Pearce confirms.
“While the minimum wage is still by no-means a living wage—the standard is based on a bare minimum that households need to stay above water—it definitely will have had a measurable impact on many families and has also pulled more [families] out of poverty than any other single policy in Washington state.” – Diana Pearce

of color, and they are less likely to be U.S. citizens than higher paid workers,” Pearce elaborates.

With this research, legislators can see how a policy can impact improved quality of life for Washington families. “While the minimum wage is still by no-means a living wage – the standard is based on a bare minimum that households need to stay above water—it definitely will have had a measurable impact on many families and has also pulled more [families] out of poverty than any other single policy in Washington state,” Pearce concludes.

Beyond aggregate improvement, Pearce hopes for greater individual and familial empowerment through such legislative efforts. “I also hope this research will be empowering for working families by showing them that this minimum wage is needed to help them meet their basic needs and that they are not unable to make ends meet because of their own deficiencies with budget management, not working enough, etc. This has been my experience with the self-sufficiency standard more generally—that it empowers workers.”

The Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies supports students and faculty at the University of Washington in the study of labor in all of its facets. Through education and research, our mission is to develop labor studies—broadly conceived to include working people everywhere—as a central concern in higher education. We cultivate connections with labor communities locally and around the world, and inform policymakers about issues confronting workers.

Labor Studies is interdisciplinary. Understanding how and why work is performed, organized and divided in societies necessitates multiple scholarly perspectives. It demands recognition that labor occurs everywhere under many conditions—at home, in the workplace, waged and unwaged, organized and unorganized. Understanding labor studies broadly also demands that we understand labor movements broadly—to encompass struggles against oppression and hierarchy based on race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, nationality, ability and more, in their particularities and their many intersections.

The Center is led by the Harry Bridges Endowed Chair in Labor Studies, a faculty position that rotates every two to four years. Joining the Chair are three staff, an Associate Director, a Research Director, and an Assistant Director of Student and Community Engagement. The Center is located jointly in the departments of Political Science and History at the University of Washington Seattle, but works with students and faculty in departments and schools across all three University of Washington campuses.