

## **Group moves to establish living wage in Alabama Rally Tuesday to urge city ordinance**

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Last week's surging gasoline prices - and its impact on low-wage workers - could add fuel to an Alabama group's efforts to establish a so-called living wage in the state.

Members of the Alabama Alliance for a Living Wage are sponsoring a rally in Birmingham Tuesday, urging the City Council to establish an ordinance requiring businesses that get contracts with the city to pay employees more than the current federal minimum wage of \$5.15.

A gallon of unleaded gasoline surpassed \$3 in many areas last week, jumping as much as 50 cents after Hurricane Katrina. A year ago, gasoline was \$1.80 a gallon.

"Too many of our working poor are being hurt every time they have to go to the pump to buy gasoline," said Dewayne Parker, project coordinator of the Alabama State Partnership, a labor-backed group that is a part of the Alabama Alliance for a Living Wage. "I'm afraid unless we do something to lift their standard of living, many will have a difficult time buying things we take for granted like a loaf of bread and milk."

In Alabama, 4.6 percent of hourly workers, or 53,000 people, earn the minimum wage or less, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The alliance, composed of unions and nonprofit agencies from across Alabama, is starting its campaign in Birmingham and plans to target other cities over the next year. The rally, taking place a day after Labor Day, will be part of a nationwide Bridge the Economic Gap Day, coordinated by the Universal Living Wage Campaign, which is leading efforts in 83 cities.

"A lot of families that come to us have parents working two or three minimum-wage jobs and are still unable to make ends meet," said Tarri Williams, economic justice coordinator for Greater Birmingham Ministries. "Many of our homeless work but can't afford to put a roof over their heads. That is why it is crucial that we establish a living wage in Birmingham."

### Transportation problem

The problem, Williams said, is that Birmingham has inadequate public transportation, forcing many of the working poor to drive.

Carol Clarke, Birmingham's economic development director, said it would be up to the council, legal and purchasing departments to assess whether to implement a living wage in Birmingham.

Currently, 120 cities and counties have enacted ordinances requiring businesses getting local government contracts to pay above the minimum wage of \$5.15. They range from a minimum \$6.10 in Baltimore to \$7.50 with benefits and \$8.50 without benefits in Los Angeles and \$8.56 with benefits and \$9.81 without health benefits in Miami.

The federal minimum wage was raised from \$4.75 to \$5.15 on Sept. 1, 1997. The period since then represents the second longest without an increase since a minimum wage was established in 1938. The only longer period was nine years, when the rate was stuck at \$3.35 from 1981 until being raised to \$3.80 in 1990.

The Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank, says \$5.15 today is the equivalent of \$4.23 in 1995, meaning inflation has eroded the value of the lowest-paid full-time workers to less than the \$4.25 minimum wage in effect before the 1997 increase.

Some Birmingham businesses say that a minimum wage increase is unnecessary because many companies pay front line above the \$5.15 minimum wage.

"The minimum wage doesn't exist anymore, really," said George Sarris, owner of The Fish Market restaurant in Birmingham. "It is a moot point."

Jeff Fink, operating officer for the Alabama Policy Institute, a conservative think tank in Birmingham, said while many of the working poor are hurting, he

doubts a living wage will accomplish its goals.

Fink, a councilman in Anniston, said many contractors hired by cities are in construction and engineering fields paying well above minimum wage.

John Pickens, executive director of the Alabama Appleseed Center for Justice, said a 2003 study commissioned by Alabama Arise and the center estimated working parents with two children would each have to earn \$10.26 an hour to take care of necessities like food, housing and transportation.

"Our current minimum wage hasn't been adjusted enough for inflation," Pickens said.

Alliance members are the Appleseed Center, a Montgomery group funded by law firms; Alabama Arise, a Montgomery advocacy group for the poor; nonprofits in Birmingham such as the Church of the Reconciler, Urban Ministry Inc., Greater Birmingham Ministries and Birmingham Coalition for the Homeless; and unions including the Alabama AFL-CIO, United Central Carpenters Regional Council and IBEW-Local Union 136; the Birmingham Chapter of Alliance for Democracy and Latinos Unidos de Alabama.