

Workers Rally for Higher Minimum Wage in Alabama

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Groups representing the poor and union workers rallied on the Statehouse steps Tuesday in support of legislation that would boost the paychecks of an estimated 350,000 Alabamians by raising the minimum wage in the state to \$7.25 per hour.

The legislation's sponsor, Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, said Congress hasn't raised the national minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour in 10 years, and it's time for the Alabama Legislature to "give the working people a long-deserved raise."

Stewart Burkhalter, president of the Alabama AFL-CIO, said he doesn't know of any of his members who are paid the minimum wage, but union members showed up at the rally Tuesday to support those on the bottom of the pay scale.

"A minimum wage raise is overdue," he said.

Todd's bill is scheduled for consideration Wednesday by the House Commerce Committee. The freshman lawmaker urged about 50 supporters at the rally to call legislators about the bill, but Burkhalter said later it's an uphill fight.

"We don't have the votes in that committee," he said.

Research by the liberal-leaning Economic Policy Institute in Washington estimates that 126,000 Alabama workers, or 6.3 percent of the state's work force, make less than \$7.25 per hour and would directly benefit from Todd's bill.

Traditionally, when the minimum wage goes up, those making slightly above the minimum wage also see a pay hike, and that spillover effect should boost the bill's total impact to 350,000 Alabama workers, the institute estimates.

Business groups have lined up against the legislation.

Rosemary Elebash, state director for the National Federation of Independent Business, said raising the minimum wage could discourage a small business from adding an entry-level worker.

The reason, she said, is that once the minimum wage goes up, workers earning salaries above that must be raised, and soon a small business has no extra money left to hire a new employee.

"It would hit hard those people coming into the work force," she said.

Shay Farley, an attorney with the Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, and Kimble Forrister, executive director of Alabama Arise, said the minimum wage is no longer a sustainable wage for parents working full-time. Many are working two jobs to try to make ends meet, and

that means they have less time to spend with their children, Farley said.

"Today's minimum wage is not fair economically or ethically," Farley said.

Todd's bill would boost the minimum in Alabama \$5.85 in two months, \$6.55 a year after that, and \$7.25 a year later.

If passed, Alabama would join 29 other states and the District of Columbia in requiring businesses to pay more than the federal minimum wage.