

A Fair Minimum Wage is a Measure of Decency

Written by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr.
Wednesday, 15 May 2013 00:00



The April jobs report has been hailed as good news by the nation's newspapers. But a look under the numbers is more sobering. In Chicago and cities across the country, extreme poverty remains high, and the jobless still haunt our streets.

Washington would rather sell optimism. We've seen 38 straight months of private-sector jobs growth. The stock market is at record heights. Corporate profits are setting records as a percentage of the economy. Compared with Europe and Japan, the U.S. is doing well.

But more than 20 million people are still in need of full-time work. That level of unemployment undermines wage growth. Housing construction is stirring, but manufacturing still lags. The jobs being created tend to be low-paid jobs in the service and entertainment sectors — waiters and waitresses, clerks, maids and custodians.

People of color are particularly struggling. The National Urban League's State of Black America reports that the unemployment gap between whites and blacks remains at nearly 2 to 1, not much changed since 1963. Blacks have closed nearly 60 percent of the high school graduation gap. Black college enrollment is three times higher than 50 years ago.

But African-American teenagers have an unemployment rate of a staggering 40.5 percent as of April 2013. (White teenagers suffer a debilitating 21.8 percent unemployment rate.)

And the wealth gap has gotten wider in recession and the faltering recovery. In 2010, white families earned on averaged about \$2 for every id="mce_marker" that African-American and

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Hispanic families earned. White wealth was on average six times as great as that of minority families.

The median wealth of a single African-American woman at the peak of her working years — ages 36 to 49 — is \$5. That isn't a misprint. For white married or cohabitating women, median wealth is id="mce_marker"67,500; for African-American married or cohabitating women, it is \$31,500. As a result, young African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to get help from their families to pay for college, for a down payment on a home or for seed money to start a business.

In Chicago, high unemployment rates lead to poverty. Chicago now suffers the third-highest rate of “extreme poverty” of the 10 largest U.S. cities: 10.4 percent. That means 10.4 percent earn \$9,500 or less in a year.

Dr. King taught us the economy best grows from the bottom up, not the top down. We have to raise the floor under workers to ensure that they can be paid fairly for the work that they do. Democrats have introduced legislation to lift the minimum wage to id="mce_marker"0.10 per hour, and to lift the minimum wage for “tipped workers” (waiters and waitresses, for example) for the first time in 20 years. This will enable a full-time minimum wage worker to lift a family of three out of poverty.

The Economic Policy Institute estimates that 30 million workers would benefit from the hike in the minimum wage and that would help generate about 140,000 new jobs.

Dr. King's last action was a poor people's campaign challenging the nation to allow people to work their way out of poverty and desperation. As we celebrate 50 years after the March on Washington this fall, let us not just simply admire his poetry, let us follow his teaching. The Bible says a servant is worth his or her hire.

The Fair Minimum Wage Act is only a start. We still need a plan for America's cities. We still need to repeal the sequester cuts and make the investments vital to our future. But a decent minimum wage is a common sense measure of simple decency. Workers should be paid fairly for the work that they do. It is time to raise the roof to raise the floor.

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Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the work of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org