

Even Seattle liberals think a \$15 minimum wage goes too far

By Erin Shannon

As Seattle officials continue pressing forward with plans to impose a \$15 minimum wage, some of the city's liberal business owners and nonprofit organizations are sounding the alarm. Following a narrow victory in Sea-Tac, where a \$15 minimum wage measure passed by 77 votes out of some 6,000 cast, labor activists say they plan to push the same measure in communities around the state.

Even some Seattle liberals, however, are having doubts. Recently *The Seattle Times* has featured three prominently left-leaning business owners who say a \$15 minimum wage would hurt their businesses.

Molly Moon Neitzel, owner of a chain of ice cream shops, is active in the progressive Main Street Alliance of Washington, which advocates for mandated paid sick leave, rails against "the wealthiest people and large corporations," and counts Obamacare among its top accomplishments. Neitzel hosted a press conference with Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Susan DelBene pushing a higher federal minimum wage of \$10.10 an hour, but she says the \$15 wage under consideration in Seattle might go too far.

Neitzel told the *Times* she pays her ice cream scoopers the state minimum wage of \$9.32 an hour and they get a further ten dollars or so an hour in tips. Washington is one of just seven states that does not allow tips to count toward the minimum wage, so her ice cream scoopers are earning around \$19 an hour. Increasing that wage to \$15 an hour (plus tips) might hurt her company says Neitzel. Of course, she says big corporations like McDonald's would have no problem paying a \$15 wage, ignoring that fact that 90% of the nation's 14,000 McDonald's restaurants are owned by independent small business owners operating on slim profit margins.

Restaurant owner John Platt, described by the *Times* as a "liberal do-gooder" who routinely feeds the homeless, volunteers at public schools and organizes fundraisers for environmental causes, offers a stronger opinion of Seattle's proposed \$15 minimum wage. Calling such a wage "outlandish" and "radical," Platt told the *Times* he would be forced to either close his business or eliminate the health coverage he currently provides. Platt said the wage movement is becoming "cultlike," with dissenters, regardless of their liberal resume, being attacked for being "too rich" or "exploiting the working poor."

Bill Hobson is director of Seattle's nonprofit Downtown Emergency Service Center. He says a \$15 minimum wage would be devastating to his organization's efforts to help the homeless. Calling himself a "1960s radical," Hobson told the

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March, 2014

washingtonpolicy.org

Times he supports the idea of such a high wage, but he simply cannot pay an additional \$1.25 million to the 520 full-time employees who work for the Center. A \$15 wage would force him to cut services, which include providing shelter, care and counseling to the city's thousands of homeless people.

Hobson gave voice to one of the most frequently-ignored aspects of increasing the minimum wage; it comes with a cost. "We can't talk about income inequality and act like the \$15 wage is cost-free, with the burden borne only by someone else," Hobson says, "We have to address how we're going to pay for it."

Scores of other small business owners have expressed opposition to a \$15 minimum wage, warning city leaders they would be forced to lay off employees, raise prices or even close their business. Burke Shethar of the Madrona Ale House says Seattle could become "the city of the \$18 hamburger."

Left-leaning activists and union executives would like to get a \$15 minimum wage imposed in towns around the state, but if the idea is opposed in liberal Seattle it is unlikely it will be adopted in other communities.