

Point of View

To Be Equal

MINIMUM WAGE FALLING BEHIND

by John E. Jacob

The federal minimum wage hasn't been raised since 1981, and Congress is finally getting around to raising it. But, as with any measure intended to put more money into the pockets of the poor, a new minimum wage is being fought.

The grounds for opposing a higher minimum though, are falling away by the minute. The federal minimum wage of \$3.25 an hour is so low that a dozen states already have higher levels or are considering raising their state minimums above the federal level.

The rap against the federal levels include:

First, inflation has eroded the purchasing power of the \$3.25 wage—it's now worth \$2.35 in 1981 dollars.

Second, it's even below the poverty level—a full-time, year-round worker at the minimum earns almost \$1,800 a year less than the poverty line for a family of three.

Third, the minimum no longer tracks the average national wage. Traditionally, the minimum was about half the average; today, it's closer to a third.

Fourth, equity demands that work be rewarded with a fair wage and that work should be encouraged. But the minimum wage's purchasing power has fallen so low that many states have welfare benefits higher than the minimum wage.



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Bills sponsored by Senator Edward Kennedy and Representative Augustus Hawkins would raise the minimum wage to \$3.85 in 1988, \$4.25 in 1989, and \$4.65 in 1990. After that, there would be automatic adjustments to keep the minimum wage at a level of at least half the national average hourly wage.

The standard complaints have been made however, with opponents of a higher minimum charging that such a move would create unemployment.

It's true that employers may think twice about hiring new employees, but it's hard to imagine that an employer who would add some workers for sound business reasons would be put off by a few cents difference in the minimum.

Many employers already offer wages for entry level workers that are higher than the minimum wage — an

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indication of how unrealistic the legal minimum is.

Opponents say that young minority workers will be hit hardest by a rise in the minimum. But studies of past raises are inconclusive. They suggest that there might be some shrinkage of job opportunities for new entrants into the workforce.

But at the same time there are gains for people who work at the legal minimum — and some five million workers do, and over a million of them live in poverty. Many of the rest include young people whose wages mean the difference between minimally decent living standards and poverty for their families.

Even opponents of the minimum and those who say only the market should set wages, are no longer making charges we heard some time ago that a higher minimum would be a drag on the entire economy.

Low-skill jobs are shrinking due to automation; wages are higher to attract more skilled people, and the impact of the minimum wage on the national economy is correspondingly less.

A higher minimum has become an important equity issue — a symbol of fairness. So long as the minimum wage is below poverty line levels, we're sending a message to people that it doesn't pay to work — and that's the wrong message.

So Congress should act swiftly to pass a higher minimum wage.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 1988

by Norman Hill

Traditionally, Black History Month has been a time when we acknowledge and celebrate black achievement and black culture and the many contributions of black America to this country's character and growth. This election year, however, we must do more than recognize past gains, people and events; we must endeavor to broaden the impact of black history and the influence of black America. And this must be done in two important areas: education and politics.

To date, our public schools and universities have, to a large extent, been woefully deficient in incorporating black history and culture into existing curricula. The de-emphasis on core subjects over the last two decades has served to further relegate black history to virtual obscurity. How many students, for example, know about Joshua Johnson, the 19th-century black artist whose work recently sold for \$660,000 in New York? Or

that Admiral Perry, the famous polar explorer, had a black as his right-hand man? It is little solace that today many American students don't know who Admiral Perry was. The point is that

gears up for the important national election this fall. In the last decade, the black vote has become a potent force in this nation's political dynamic. Not only are more blacks being elected to pub-

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the contributions of black artists, doctors, scientists, writers, social thinkers and activists are not taught in our classrooms.

Clearly, black institutions, community groups, unions and parents' organizations need to continue to press educators and the education establishment to revise curricula to include more material on all facets of black American culture and history. A critical first step in stemming the rising tide of racial polarization and stereotyping in this nation is better education.

Black History Month this year must also be a time when the black community

lic office, but blacks are providing the crucial swing vote in close elections, particularly in the South. This growing influence is perhaps the most significant development in contemporary American political life. Therefore, voter-participation must be a top priority for the black community to further broaden our increasing political clout.

So as we proudly celebrate our accomplishments and our place in enriching this country's development, we must look beyond the past and ensure that, through education and politics, our concerns will be voiced and heard, and our future secure.

CHILD WATCH

By Marian Wright Edelman
President Children's Defense Fund

Growing Up in a Black Skin

A little black girl is given a white doll to play with in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (Washington Square Press, 1970). Instead of making her happy, the doll makes the child sad, because she feels that the secret of being lovable belongs only to those who are "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned."

Things have not changed that much for our children since Morrison wrote her poignant story. Despite a sprinkling of black faces, most of the magazines, story

books, newspapers, and television programs our children see still send the un-



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spoken message that white is beautiful.

And too many of our chil-

dren are still taking this message to heart. In a recent study in New York City, two-thirds of black preschool children who were shown two otherwise similar Cabbage Patch dolls chose the white doll over the black one. Furthermore, most of the children said they would rather be a white doll than a black one. These results echo the experiment described in social scientist Ken Clark's study that was cited in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.

Growing up is a hard job for any child. But it is even more difficult for children who are cut off from an important part of themselves: their identity as blacks. Knowing who they are can

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