

Washington, D.C., political establishment blocks minimum wage increase for city's tipped workers

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13 January 2020

The *Washington Post* published an article last week which further exposes the fraudulent character of the Democratic Party's supposed concern for the interests of working people.

The article, titled "D.C. officials passed a law to help tipped workers after repealing a wage increase. It was never funded," notes that "[m]ore than a year after D.C. lawmakers overturned a voter-approved initiative to raise the wages of tipped workers, city officials have yet to implement measures to improve working conditions for food servers and bartenders."

In October 2018 the Democratic Party-controlled Council of the District of Columbia, the legislative body of the United States' capital city, repealed a voter-approved ballot item, Initiative 77, which would have eliminated the minimum-wage exemption businesses use to heavily exploit tipped workers—ranging from waitresses and waiters, bartenders, parking attendants, and nail salon workers, to name a few.

The initiative was ratified by voters in June 2018 by over a 10-point margin despite heavy opposition from Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser and the council. In a brazen act of subservience to the restaurant and tourist industry, the legislature overturned the public's vote, replacing it with a toothless bill titled "Tipped Wage Workers Fairness Amendment Act of 2018."

"If the law is a bad law, it should be amended or repealed. It does not matter if the law was adopted by the council, the voters or Congress," D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson declared at the time. A subsequent effort to amend the initiative by exempting bartenders and other workers who expressed concern that raising their wages would decrease tips was likewise shot down by the legislature's majority.

The new bill, which did nothing to raise wages for

tipped workers who can make as low as \$3.89 per hour plus gratuity in a city where the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is an outrageous \$3,100 a month, was supposed to create a Tipped Worker Coordinating Council, along with a hotline for workers to report wage theft and sexual harassment along with minimum-wage law training for restaurant managers. The city, moreover, said it would set aside \$700,000 for a website informing workers about their labor rights and an additional \$100,000 for a public awareness campaign.

However, even this pitiful consolation proved to be too much for the city's government. Fully in the pocket of big business, Mayor Bowser and Chairman Mendelson, who draws a yearly salary of \$210,000 for his work on the council, never included the \$2.6 million in the city's latest budget necessary to enforce these cosmetic initiatives.

The callous behavior of the city's lawmakers provoked denunciation even from supporters. "It's egregious because they overturned a vote and they claimed they were going to do all this stuff to get at the issues people cared about and never did. It tells voters they don't matter, they don't count," Reverend Grayland Hagler told the *Post*.

Mendelson placed the blame on the public for his legislature's blatant disregard for low wage workers, citing the group responsible for placing Initiative 77 on the ballot, Restaurant Opportunities Center D.C., for failing to "lobby us as far as I know."

ThinkProgress and Public Citizen analyzed the past two District election cycles starting in 2018 and discovered that restaurant industry lobbyists contributed more than \$236,000 to the campaigns of Mayor Bowser as well as multiple council members. Over half went to three people: Bowser, Mendelson, and former Democratic mayor and

current member of the council, Vincent Gray, all of whom opposed the ballot.

On Wednesday, Bowser denounced the District legislature after an ethics probe of long-serving Democratic councilman Jack Evans revealed numerous conflicts of interest, forcing the latter to announce his resignation. After admitting Evans made “some very significant mistakes,” Bowser, referring to the few council members who had expressed support for the wage bill, lamented the existence of “enemies of economic development on the council, and that concerns me.”

Restaurant and other tipped workers comprise one of the most exploited sections of the working class. If the total earnings of a worker fall short of city’s current poverty-level minimum wage of \$14, employers are, according to law, supposed to make up the difference. Under such conditions, a worker earning the minimum wage working full-time would earn less than \$30,000 a year.

The overturned Initiative 77, though slightly increasing the wages of workers, would have done nothing to decrease poverty and low wages in the nation’s capital. As with many cities across the country that have instituted minimum wage increases, Initiative 77 would not have allowed tipped workers to make the minimum wage until 2026; by then, inflation would have eaten up most of the increase in wages.

According to SmartAsset, in 2019, the average amount of rent paid annually for a two-bedroom apartment in the nation’s capital is an outrageous \$37,200 a year, making D.C. the third most expensive city in the US. The average rent accounts for nearly half of the median household income which is \$82,000 a year. As of 2018, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness reported there were 6,904 individuals living homeless in the District of Columbia. According to the U.S. Census, over 111,000 people, or 17.4 percent of the city’s population, live in poverty.



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