

Pennsylvania Governor Wolf raises minimum wage for state employees, calls for a \$15 statewide minimum

Douglas Lyons
6 February 2022

On Wednesday, two-term Democratic Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania announced an executive order raising the minimum wage for state employees to \$15 per hour, two years earlier than expected.

The wage increase would apply only to a small share of the state's workforce. According to data from the Pennsylvania Office of Administration's statistics for 2021, it may affect 5,616 hourly workers out of a total state workforce of 77,417 workers, about 14 percent.

Term-limited and leaving office after the election this fall, Wolf has also called on the Republican-dominated state legislature to raise the state's minimum wage to \$15. There is little prospect the proposal will go into effect.

An estimated 1.5 million workers in the state's private sector currently make below \$15. With a current minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, Pennsylvania has a lower minimum wage than its neighboring states. It has not moved in 15 years, including the last seven in which Wolf has been governor. The minimum wage in Maryland is \$12.20; in Delaware, \$10.50; New York, \$13.20; New Jersey, \$13; and Ohio, \$9.30. Even West Virginia, among the poorest states in the United States, has a higher minimum wage, at \$8.75.

A Franklin & Marshall College poll says 67 percent of eligible voters throughout the country support raising the minimum wage. As elsewhere, in Pennsylvania there is immense anger at stagnating incomes, skyrocketing inflation, and the criminal response of the entire political establishment to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even as political theater, Wolf's claim that \$15 is a livable wage does not hold water. At this wage, 40 hours per week would equal \$31,300 in yearly pay,

before taxes are taken out. Yet, in order to support a family of four at a "living wage" in Pennsylvania, according to data from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), a worker would have to make \$65,502, before taxes. For a single mother with one child, \$27.57 per hour is needed for a living wage.

Wolf's "Fight for 15" comes nearly a decade after the Democratic Party-led and corporatist union-backed publicity campaign first began. The governor's modest proposal would only incrementally raise the minimum. The \$15 wage would be reached only in the far off year 2028. By that time, inflation, currently at 7 percent, will have rendered it largely meaningless, even if it were to be passed.

Wolf is being backed by the unions, which aim to channel working class anger into the safe confines of the Democratic Party. The union officials hope that in return Wolf will help to funnel workers into union "organizing drives." The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Pennsylvania, representing 80,000 workers, announced its support this month for state Democrats, saying "[we] need a team who will make it easier for every Pennsylvanian to join or form a union and ensure that every worker earns at least \$15 an hour." In fact, for more than four decades the trade unions have been an instrument through which wage suppression has been achieved in the United States.

Wolf's political posturing will do nothing to rein in social inequality, which has been deeply accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the latest State of Working Pennsylvania report by the Keystone Research Center, the state's billionaires raked in piles of cash during the pandemic, while over 2.5 million

residents have been infected and almost 41,000 have died under the “herd immunity” policy pursued by both capitalist parties.

The report notes the “savage inequalities characterized by the US and Pennsylvania economies.” The 17 billionaires in the state, from March 2020 to August 2021, doubled their wealth by \$28 billion, reaching \$61 billion. The income shares of the top 1 percent and 10 percent nationally have reached, or have just surpassed, any previous record in US history. On the other hand, workers in the hospitality and service industry—the low wage sector of the economy—are still facing a loss of 20 percent employment while small business owners’ incomes are 30 percent or more below pre-pandemic levels.

Wolf’s minimum wage announcement comes at a time when the Biden administration has failed to garner enough votes in the Democratic Party-controlled U.S. Congress to pass either the grossly inadequate and pro-business Build Back Better legislation or its much touted voting rights bill.

In a sign Pennsylvania Democrats are already distancing themselves from the Biden administration, Democratic gubernatorial front runner, Attorney General Josh Shapiro conspicuously avoided attending a public event during Biden’s recent January 28 visit to Pittsburgh to tout his infrastructure bill, citing scheduling conflicts. His approval rating stands at 40 percent, just 3 points higher than his predecessor Donald Trump’s lowest rating of 37 percent.

Republican candidates for Pennsylvania governor, such as Trump sycophant and January 6 cheerleader Doug Mastriano, whose slogan throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been “walk as free people,” are promising to move forward with an attack on democracy in the state. The Republicans intend to repeal 2019 mail-in voting legislation, impose ID requirements at polling places and win the office of Pennsylvania secretary of state, which oversees the certification of election results—a crucial position, given Trump’s baseless lies of nationwide voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, which targeted Pennsylvania, among other states.

While the coup plotters in the Republican Party are setting their chess pieces in place to overthrow the 2024 election, Pennsylvania Democrats, taking their cues from the Biden administration, are reaching out across

the aisle for compromise with the conspirators in the Republican Party. Shapiro, though unveiling plans to make voting easier and pledging to appoint a “pro-democracy” secretary of state once becoming governor, refused to rule out some variation of a voter ID requirement.

The defense of democracy, just like the fight for a livable wage, will not come through the capitalist Democratic Party but only from a united movement of the working class fighting for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact