

60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FAIR
LABOR STANDARDS ACT

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, sixty years ago today, President Roosevelt signed into law an historic piece of legislation. The Fair Labor Standards Act established a number of basic protections for workers, including one of the great landmarks of American law—the federal minimum wage.

President Roosevelt called that Act “the most far-reaching, far-sighted program for the benefit of workers ever adopted here or in any other country.”

And he was right. 700,000 workers got a raise in 1938. The minimum wage helped pull the country out of the Great Depression. And, in the decades that followed, it helped to lift millions of working families out of poverty.

Our standard of living has improved steadily and dramatically since 1938. And, for thirty years, the minimum wage kept pace with those improvements.

But the last thirty years have seen an about-face. The real value of the minimum wage has dropped steeply since 1968. To have the purchasing power today that it had thirty years ago, the minimum wage would have to be \$7.38 an hour—40% higher than its current level of \$5.15.

Working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, minimum wage workers today earn just \$10,700 a year—\$2,900 below the poverty level for a family of three. In the midst of what many experts are calling “the best economy ever,” 12 million Americans are earning poverty-level wages.

For them survival is the daily goal. If they work hard enough and their hours are long enough, they can make ends meet—but only barely. They don’t have time for their families. They can’t participate in activities with their children. They can’t afford to buy birthday presents or do the countless other things that most of us take for granted.

We know who minimum wage workers are. They are teachers’ aides and home health aides. They care for our children in child care centers and our parents and grandparents in nursing homes. They sell us goods at the corner store, and serve us coffee at the local coffee shop.

They clean office buildings in communities across the country.

They are workers like Valerie Bell, a custodian for a contractor in Baltimore, who told us what a higher minimum wage means in human terms. For workers and their families, it means far more than dollars and cents. It means dignity. As she said, “We no longer have to receive food stamps or other social services to supplement our incomes. We can fix up our homes and invest in our neighborhoods. We can spend more at the local grocery store.

We can work two low-wage jobs, rather than three low-wage jobs, and spend more time with our families. Our utilities won’t be cut off. We can pay the medical bills we accumulated from not having health benefits in our jobs.”

That’s why we say now is the time to raise the minimum wage. Our proposal will raise the minimum wage by 50 cents on January 1, 1999 and 50 cents more on January 1, 2000—bringing the minimum wage to \$6.15 an hour at the turn of the century. Twelve million working families across the country deserve no less.

Our Republican friends just cut capital gains taxes for the wealthiest Americans by more than \$300 million over the next five years. Yet they oppose giving minimum wage workers an additional \$1 an hour. “Let them eat cake,” they say.

Plums for the rich and crumbs for everyone else is the wrong priority. We need to do more for hard-working families in communities across America, and we can do more. We can raise the minimum wage. And with the strong support of President Clinton and Democrats in the Senate and House, we will raise it.

I intend to offer the minimum wage on the first available legislation after the July 4th recess. No one who works for a living should have to live in poverty.

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I rise today to commemorate the anniversary of the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act and the establishment of the federal minimum wage. For sixty years, this law has provided hard-working Americans a promise—a promise that, in this country, we value the labor of all of our workers.

Over the last several decades, we have kept that promise by periodically raising the minimum wage. We have passed legislation six times since 1955 to ensure that this vital safety net is not just symbolic, but, instead, a true standard of decency. It is time to do this again.

Just like investors who expect a fair return for the money they put into the stock market, workers should expect a fair return for the labor they invest. In today’s thriving economy, investors have gotten back more than they could have hoped for. Those making minimum wage, however, have seen a declining return on their investment. An hour of work does not give back what it used to.

In 1997 dollars, the minimum wage of today is more than two dollars less than what it was in the late 1960s. Our parents’ generation had a minimum wage equivalent to \$7.33. Now our children—despite an unparalleled booming economy—are faced with a minimum wage that places them below the poverty level.

That, Mr. President, is outrageous. People who work forty hour weeks year round, trying to provide for themselves and their families, are finding that their efforts are just not enough.

Perhaps, most troubling of all, this low minimum wage is having a disproportionately devastating effect on working moms. Sixty-two percent of all minimum wage workers are women, many the sole heads of their house-

holds. Where do these moms turn when they can’t provide for their hungry children?

Many have been forced to seek outside assistance. Last year, a US Conference of Mayors study indicated that eighty-six percent of cities reported an increased demand for emergency food assistance. Thirty-eight percent of those people seeking food at soup kitchens and shelters were employed. This is an increase of fifteen percent since 1994.

This new trend is alarming. In a nation as great as ours, in a time as prosperous as this one, we should guarantee the American people that, if they are willing to work, then they will be able to live off of their income; they will be able to feed their children; they will be able to afford clothing and shelter, and they will be able to live their lives with basic dignity and fair compensation.

I call upon my colleagues to raise the minimum wage so that we can help millions of working people lift themselves up from poverty. Opponents of the minimum wage claim that we cannot afford to do this. But, for the most vulnerable in America’s workforce, the truth is that we simply cannot afford not to.

TRULY A BRIGHT IDEA: NO COST
TO TAXPAYERS

Mr. HELMS. Mr. President, it is an exciting development that the electrical cooperatives in North Carolina are improving public education and the quality of classroom instruction without spending a dime of the taxpayer’s money.

Since 1994, the electrical cooperatives in my state have sponsored a grant program for teachers called “Bright Ideas”, and it has been a roaring success—encouraging creative teaching by awarding grants of up to \$2,000 to K-12 teachers in annual competitions. There is no restriction on subject matter to apply; in fact, Mr. President, teachers are not required to teach in a cooperative service area to compete.

Teachers need only to show that they are using original, innovative ideas to improve the education of young people. These new teaching methods range from reading and music programs to creative math and science programs; from research involving computers and video technology to career-oriented programs to prepare teenagers for the working world. 2,000 teachers applied to cooperatives for grants this year, and more than 400 classrooms in North Carolina became “Bright Ideas” classrooms.

Mr. President, North Carolina’s electric cooperatives operate in 93 of our 100 counties, providing power to almost a quarter of our state’s population. Most members of these cooperatives aren’t walking around with deep-pockets. They’re hard-working folks in rural areas who recognize the value of a good education.