

Pssst. The Minimum Wage is Up. Pass It Along

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By Annette Bernhardt

If you were to poll your co-workers and neighbors, asking them what they think the minimum wage is in New York, probably just one or two would know that it increased to \$6 an hour on Jan. 1. At least, that's what we've been finding doing random interviews with employers and workers.

What's going on here? First, while the minimum wage increase was an amazing political victory, it did happen Albany-style - meaning a protracted, complicated fight over many months, with final passage happening only at the last hour. Many people simply lost track of what ultimately happened.

Which makes the second point even more important: there's been virtually no publicity surrounding the increase. The city and state can really make a difference. On the employer front, the state Department of Labor - if it isn't planning to do so already - should be sending notices to every business in the state, informing them of the increase and of their obligation to comply with it.

On the worker front, public service announcements in multiple languages should be flooding newspaper pages and subway cars. There is, after all, a strong incentive for the city and state to get the word out because the workers will spend their wage increases in local

shops, a great economic stimulus.

But there's more. After public education, there's the difficult challenge of enforcement. Unscrupulous employers were violating the law when the minimum wage was \$5.15, and they'll continue to violate it at \$6. In fact, the practice of paying below the minimum wage is a real problem in businesses and industries such as restaurants, greengrocers, apparel, car washes and industrial laundries as well as for day laborers and domestic workers.

A range of fixes is needed, none of them easy: for example, increasing the number of workplace investigators, stiffening employer penalties, making it easier to file claims and protecting workers from retaliation once they do file.

It's a long-term project that will require political will. But for a start, it would be great to see an infusion of extra investigators during the next several months to make sure that employers are complying with the new law.

The Fiscal Policy Institute estimates that by the time the final step of the minimum wage increase goes into effect on January 2007 (to \$7.15 an hour), upwards of 1.2 million New Yorkers would get a wage increase. Let's make sure that actually happens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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