

# Outlook

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## Minimum-wage proposal an attack on freedom

By J. BRIAN PHILLIPS

**A**S the owner of a small business, I face many obstacles and threats to the well-being of my company. Now I face a new threat — the voters of Houston.

The proposal by local labor union leaders to hold a referendum on increasing the minimum wage in Houston to \$6.50 per hour is an attack on my freedom. Indeed, it is also an attack on the freedom of my employees and potential employees, and the freedom of every productive Houstonian.

To understand this, consider exactly what the proposed law means. This law would force — not suggest, not encourage, but force — employers to pay a minimum of \$6.50 per hour, regardless of the economic consequences. Violators would be subject to fines of up to \$200 per day per worker.

Thus, I could become a criminal for no reason other than offering a job to an unskilled high school dropout for \$6 per hour. I could have my business destroyed by offering an opportunity to a young man or woman.

The wages I pay are based upon an employee's productive ability, i.e., the skills he possesses. An individual who can competently operate an airless paint sprayer is more productive than one who can only use a brush, and therefore, I pay such individuals more. An individual who can execute sheet rock repairs is more valuable than an individual who possesses no skills.

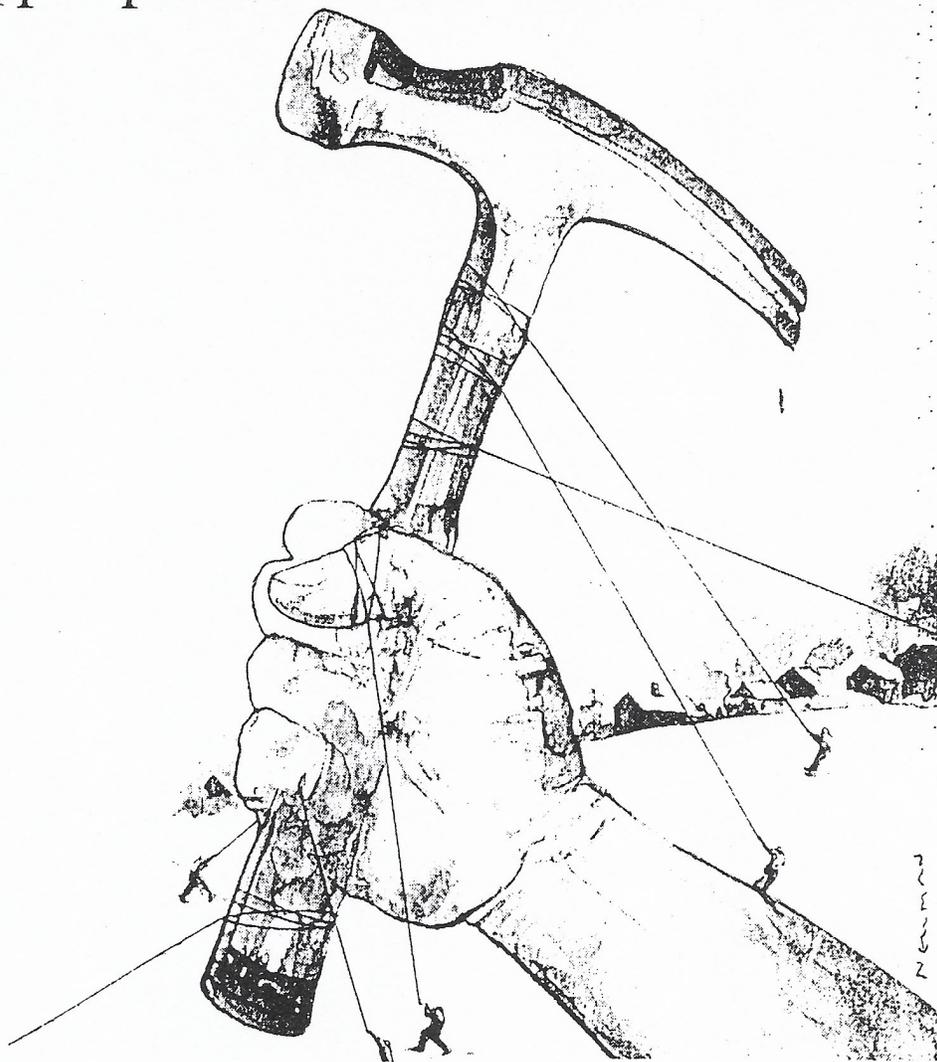
The proposed law is an attempt to deny the fact that higher wages must be earned by increased productivity. It is an attempt to "create" wealth through legislation. If this were possible, why not make everyone rich by raising the minimum wage to \$50 per hour? The truth is that wealth is not, and cannot be, created in this manner.

By forcing employers to pay arbitrarily higher wages, the proposed law would deny opportunities to workers with the lowest skills. It would prevent those workers from learning and developing the skills necessary to earn higher wages. In fact, the proposed law is an attempt to gain the unearned — to increase wages when skills have not increased. Which means, employers will be compelled to pay more than a particular position is worth.

The American system of law was created to protect an individual's right to produce and trade values. This is the only proper purpose of government — protecting the rights of citizens to engage in peaceful, voluntary activities.

The proposed law would turn government from a protector of rights to a violator of rights. By prohibiting employers and low-skilled workers from agreeing to any wage under \$6.50 per hour, the law forces those individuals to act contrary to their judgment and mutual self-interest. Rather than allow individuals to act voluntarily, according to their own values, the law would declare certain actions — while voluntary and a violation of nobody's rights — illegal.

Any law which restricts the peaceful activities of individuals empowers some at the expense of others. Such laws impose undeserved penalties and award unearned benefits. For example, this proposal would



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give minimum-wage workers a raise they have not earned, while arbitrarily imposing higher costs on employers.

That labor union leaders seek to obtain public approval for their proposal does not change this. It simply makes voters co-conspirators in an immoral scheme to deprive employers and low-skilled workers of their rights. The support of a majority does not make an idea true or proper. An individual's rights are not subject to a public vote.

If rights were a matter of public approval, then nobody's rights would be safe. The rights of any individual could be revoked simply by vote, and the realm of politics would be transformed into a constant struggle to convince voters that one's cause serves the "public interest." If rights were subject to a referendum, one could never be certain that what is legal today might not make one a criminal tomorrow.

The truth is that the public interest can only be served by protecting the rights of the individuals who constitute the public. Those

rights are not a matter of one's race, gender or economic status; they apply to all individuals equally. To invoke the cause of "public interest" while violating individual rights is a fraud.

Rather than turn city government into a clash between competing interests, we must identify and protect the one interest which every individual shares — the need and right to be free to pursue his own values without interference from others. This is the meaning of individual rights, and government's only proper purpose is to protect this right.

Those who support the proposal to raise Houston's minimum wage to \$6.50 have dismissed objections to their proposal, claiming that increasing the minimum wage would actually benefit employees. I greatly resent the arrogance of those who believe that they have a right to compel me to act contrary to my own judgment, and then justify their actions by claiming that I will benefit. Forcing me to act in my own "benefit" is a gross contradiction.

Initiating force against citizens who have not violated the rights of others is a crime. That duly elected officials, acting with the public's approval, are the instigators of such acts does not change that fact.