WORKING for a living

It's Labor Day, raise minimum wage

Monday is Labor Day, a holiday set aside to honor the working men and women of our nation.

The day of honor was established as a national holiday in 1894 in an attempt to soothe worker unrest after federal troops killed striking railroad workers. It was the height of the Industrial Revolution and workers were organizing for fair treatment after decades of making company owners wealthy while working long hours in dangerous conditions for meager pay.

While it was nice to get a day off, what workers really needed were shorter hours, better working conditions, better pay and other benefits. It would take many more years — and more blood would be spilled — before they made progress. In fact, the battle's tide turned in Scranton in 1902 when United Mine Workers union president John Mitchell negotiated an eight-hour day and a minimum wage for mine workers from President Theodore Roosevelt to end an economically crippling coal strike. A statue of Mr. Mitchell holds a place of honor on Lackawanna County Courthouse Square today.

KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

Bare minimum

A national minimum wage for all workers was not established until 1938 under the Fair Labor Standards Act. The rate was 25 cents an hour. Currently the minimum wage is $7.25 an hour, where it has stood since July 2009.

RaiseTheMinimumWage.com is a website run by the National Employment Law Project with the goal of, as you may have guessed, raising the minimum wage. There seems to be momentum building nationally, and locally, for the cause, as illustrated by some of the following examples listed on the site:

- **In December, Chicago voted to raise their minimum wage, in steps, to $13 an hour by 2019.**
- **In June, Los Angeles voted to raise theirs, in steps, to $15 an hour by 2020.**
- **The New York State Wage Board recommended raising the minimum wage for fast food workers to $15 an hour by 2018.**
- **This year, 19 cities and counties raised their minimum wages above the national rate.**
- **Twenty-nine states and Washington, D.C. already pay workers more than the national minimum.**

The site features other examples of municipalities acting on their own to raise the standard of living for people on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. There are several bills in Congress advocating raises in the national minimum ranging from $12-15 an hour, and then indexing the wage so that it rises with inflation every year. They also propose getting rid of the sub-minimum, which is $2.13 an hour for tipped workers.

Pennsylvania does not pay more than the national minimum, but some large companies in the state are doing it on their own. Weis Markets, based in Sunbury, increased its minimum rate to $9 an hour in August. Geisinger Health System, based in Danville, will raise its minimum rate to $10 an hour starting tomorrow.

Minimum not enough

The website is full of information, articles, studies and polls that support the argument for raising the minimum:

- **The wage today is 24 percent below the 1968 level in actual purchasing power, despite worker productivity more than doubling in that time.**
- **A national poll from January shows 75 percent of Americans support raising the wage to over $12 an hour.**
- **The best research shows that raising the minimum wage does not increase unemployment or cut into profits. Reduced turnover costs and increased productivity make up for higher labor costs.**
- **The minimum wage disproportionately affects women, especially minorities.**

A person working a 40-hour work week for the minimum wage will earn $15,080 a year. If they're attempting to support a child on that wage, they're below the poverty line and are eligible for federal benefits. That means taxpayers are picking up part of the tab to support them while their employer is off the hook.

If the minimum wage is raised to $15 an hour, or $31,200 a year for a 40-hour week, it would certainly help, but it wouldn't necessarily be a living wage. According to the Economic Policy Institute's online Family Budget Calculator (which has a link on the site), a family of four in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area needs to earn $63,913 a year to make ends meet.

The site notes that it's mainly large companies, not small businesses, that employ the majority of minimum wage workers. These companies are making record profits and their CEOs are earning hundreds of times the wages of the average worker. They can afford to raise wages. Congress needs to stand up for workers and raise the minimum wage.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites and apps with him at koneill@timesshamrock.com.