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HEADLINE: Rising Tide for an Increase In State's Minimum Wage
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About three weeks ago a crowd of 275 people assembled in East Harlem in support of raising the state's minimum wage to \$7.10 an hour from \$5.15 by 2006.

The group was expecting to meet with state Senator Olga Mendez, a Republican. When she didn't show up, the fired-up low-wage workers marched to her home and got her to come outside and make a somewhat generalized commitment of support.

The evening dramatized that after four years of futility, this issue is finally becoming a cause, fueled by editorial support from the Daily News and community organizing by the Working Families Party.

State Senator Eric Schneiderman of Manhattan told me, "If it comes to a vote, the law will pass by a large margin. All the Democrats and half the Republicans in the state Senate will vote for it this year. The only question is, will [Majority Leader] Joe Bruno allow it to get a vote." The stars may finally be in alignment to pass this landmark legislation. Low-wage jobs and the economy have become huge issues. The minimum wage in Connecticut (\$7.10) and Massachusetts (\$6.75) is higher than it is in New York, and these states have more job growth than New York, as well as a much lower cost of living. The main argument against a higher minimum wage has been that it would kill jobs. This is no longer true, if it ever was.

Ten of the 12 states with minimum wage laws higher than New York's have faster job growth than we do. And the two that do not - Oregon and Washington - have suffered specific economic misfortunes by the local economy.

Polling data show that between 75% and 80% of the electorate believe an increase in the minimum wage is fair; there has not been an increase since the national minimum wage went up in 1997. An increase would help 500,000 residents of New York City and 750,000 statewide. These working poor have not been able to keep pace with inflation, especially in rents and health care. Another argument against raising the wage floor is that most minimum wage jobs are filled by teenagers without families. But recent studies indicate that 74% of the legislation's beneficiaries would be adults, 20 or older, and half of them work full time. Even making \$10,500 a year, they would still not be getting a living wage in this costly city.

Those who work for the minimum wage tend to be immigrants, people who work in retail chain stores and fast food shops, garment workers, and dishwashers. They are disproportionately women and minorities. They do not have health insurance, paid sick days, or the protections afforded by labor unions.

A raise in the minimum wage law would also benefit people earning between \$8 and \$10 an hour, bumping up their earnings. This group includes home health aides, janitors, and nonunion security guards.

The bill has passed the Assembly's labor committee, 21-to-1. It will soon pass the full Assembly - as it has the last four years - without much debate. But the Senate, with a seven-vote Republican majority, is the impediment to reducing economic inequality. In 2002, the bill had a sufficient number of Republican sponsors to pass the Senate easily. But it never came to a vote. It was pulled at the last minute, after the Assembly had passed it.

During the final night of negotiations, an aide to Mr. Bruno called a group of union leaders waiting in a hotel room to report there was "a deal to make it \$6.75 and pass it." But two hours later, this aide called back to say that Governor Pataki had killed the bill and asked that it be pulled from the calendar.

Mr. Pataki was then facing an electoral challenge from the wealthy independent conservative Tom Golisano, and he was fearful that if he signed a bill raising the minimum wage - and did not veto it - this might hurt his fund-raising prospects in a campaign year. By killing it with an invisible hand, he saved himself from deciding whether to sign it or veto it.

This year Mr. Pataki is not running, but every member of the Legislature is. A broad coalition, including some religious leaders, is trying to mobilize the local constituents of six Republican state senators who could make sure the bill comes to a vote and passes this session, before they face the voters in an atmosphere of economic crisis.

These six swing votes belong to: Republican convert Olga Mendez of East Harlem and the South Bronx; Frank Padavan of Queens; Guy Velella of the Bronx; Nick Spano of Westchester; John Marchi of Staten Island, and Martin Golden of Brooklyn. They all suggest or imply they would vote for the bill, but probably prefer not to stand up on a recorded roll call. The key player in the back-room maneuvering is Mr. Velella, chairman of the Senate's Labor Committee and a sponsor of the bill increasing the minimum wage to \$7.10.

Mr. Velella also happens to be under indictment on felony corruption charges filed by Manhattan's District Attorney Robert Morgenthau and has been stalling going to trial for two years.

Mr. Velella has been trying to negotiate a compromise bill at \$6.75 an hour with Messrs. Bruno and Pataki, and union leaders. If Mr. Velella pulls this off, he may be able to escape a tough, well-financed opponent this November and be able to concentrate on his coming trial.

This is how inside politics really works in Albany's culture of sleaze and deal-making.

In the moral ambiguities of the Albany jungle, only an indicted politician is trusted to be the "honest broker" who might be able to move history forward an inch.

The working poor get a small break, if a politician charged with corruption gets a pass for re-election.