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Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee
Topic: Pennsylvania's Minimum Wage
McKeesport Area Senior High School
McKeesport, PA

Representative Gergely and Committee Members:

Good afternoon. I am (Rev. Dr.) Donald Green, a Lutheran pastor (ELCA). I serve as Executive Director of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, a regional ecumenical agency which brings together 24 judicatories, representing 14 Christian traditions – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant - in the 10 county southwestern region of our Commonwealth. I am testifying as an individual today sharing with you the positions of some of our member denominations, but I am not speaking on behalf of the Council of Bishops and Executives. Our Council only speaks when they have consensus among all of the partners. I will focus particularly on positions of Protestant and Orthodox bodies who are also members of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. Mr. John Hannigan will ably present to you the position of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference.

In their "Principal for Public Advocacy," the Pennsylvania Council of Churches "envisions a Commonwealth characterized by a profound sense of justice and shalom in human relationship and social structures at all levels of society... Life in a Commonwealth characterized by justice and shalom would be drastically different for most Pennsylvanians...the Council supports a vision for a just Commonwealth... presented as follows: All persons would receive respect, regardless of their place in society. All would have a voice in government at all levels, and access would not be limited because of situational factors such as lack of wealth or distance, or demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or religious affiliation. All would have everything they need – living wage jobs, and adequate health care, housing, food, and education."

In that same document the Council further states, "Labor is not a commodity, but a means to benefit society and also a means to affirm the dignity and worth of workers. All workers, including those whose work has traditionally been under valued, deserve a family-sustaining wage." "The Council affirms the need to eliminate poverty as a destructive and dehumanizing force in people's lives, and also affirms the goal of self-sufficiency for those caught in the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency. The Council therefore, supports legislation that would raise the minimum wage in Pennsylvania."

Mr. Chairman, I urge Leadership of the Democratic Party in the House of Representatives to initiate legislation that would dramatically increase the minimum wage in our Commonwealth. Let me give witness to some groups who would be the recipients of such an act of "justice and shalom."

Teenagers and twenty-somethings begin their working careers in entry level jobs, most often paying minimum wages. For many of these youth, summer employment and part-time jobs during school are essential to assist in paying for their post-secondary educations. In recent weeks our Pennsylvania supported universities, along with Pitt and Penn State have announced tuition increases for the coming academic year. For several years such increases have become standard expectations for students and have increased faster than the rate of inflation. Without an increase in the minimum wage, these very students will be the beneficiaries of even larger student loan obligations. Your action to increase the minimum wage would be an act of justice and shalom for the youth of our Commonwealth. Youth whom we desperately need to remain in our state's economy after graduation.

Our region is beginning to experience an influx of immigrants – Russian Jews, Somali Muslims, Mexican laborers – to name just a few groups. They have come to our land seeking liberty and self sufficiency. These new residents to our Commonwealth which already is so rich in ethnic diversity often take jobs which others in our society refuse. Because of a strong work ethic and a desire to move up the economic ladder, they will work multiple jobs. These new residents who clean our hotel rooms and wash dishes in the restaurants in which we dine, deserve the justice and shalom of a higher minimum wage.

TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) has changed the nature of welfare, the protective safety net for the poor in our country. Mandatory work requirements no longer permit a young, single mother to remain home and nurture her babies. Contrary to our junior senator's book, not all mothers are career driven feminists, but driven by the need to survive and sustain their families, and therefore must work. Safe, affordable, available childcare and adequate health care minimize the earnings of the working poor. Some of us continue to be engaged in seeking the return of jobs for janitors at a downtown office building after they were fired, because a new contract demanded affordable family health care coverage. Justice and shalom demand an increase in the minimum wage for the working poor.

The President of US Steel recently retired with a package of over 45 million dollars; this is the same company who has dumped pensions and medical coverage for retirees. A prior CEO of US Airways has departed that airline with an extravagant golden parachutes of 6.3 million dollars, while union workers have sacrificed wages and benefits to save the airline, and retirees must continue working because promised pensions were stripped by the bankruptcy courts. The Walton's of Arkansas are some of the wealthiest Americans, yet their employees are some of the most underpaid, under insured workers in our Commonwealth. Increasingly our older, retired population no longer has the option to choose to work in their retirement; they must work in order to survive. Big box retailers

like Wal-Mart who need these workers, need to share the profits of their enterprises with their workers by being forced to pay a higher minimum wage. Only legislative action on your part with bring justice and shalom for our retired work force.

Next Monday, you, the members of the Senate, the Administration and the Judiciary will begin receiving larger salaries; excuse me, "unvouchered expenses." The collusion and deception of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of the people's government in adopting this stealth legislation, Under the cover of darkness and secrecy, and without benefit of public input and legislative debate is a moral disgrace to our citizenry. Your "unvouchered expenses" circumvent the clear intent of the law. With your enhanced wages, health and pension benefits, auto leases and per diem expense payments, you join the likes of Tom Usher, David Siegel and the Walton family in prospering at the expense of others, namely the tax payers of this Commonwealth. If you have the gall to enact self-serving legislation in such a manner as you have, then you ought to at least have the courage to boldly stand up and enact legislation that would increase the minimum wage for the working poor, immigrants, youth and retirees. Such legislation would be an act of justice and shalom for the least of our working citizenry, and may in some way redeem your egregious offence in enacting a legislative pay raise.

Again, I urge you to promote and enact an increase in the minimum wage for the workers of our Commonwealth so that all may experience justice and shalom. Thank you.

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