

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 6, 2014 at 3:01pm

Momentum seen building to raise minimum wage, says advocacy coordinator

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

Washington — Popular support is building to raise the federal minimum wage, currently \$7.25 an hour, said Judy Conti, federal advocacy coordinator for the National Employment Law Project.

Companion bills in each chamber of Congress would raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 an hour. The bill also would raise the wage rate for "tipped" workers -- most commonly found in food service and airport work -- to 70 percent of the minimum wage; it is currently at \$2.13 an hour and has not risen since 1991. A third provision would also index the minimum wage to inflation.

Eighty-eight percent of those at the minimum wage are adults over age 20, and the median age of all minimum-wage workers is 35, Conti told participants during a workshop Tuesday as part of the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington.

Other numbers Conti revealed in her presentation: 43 percent of minimum-wage workers have a college education; 56 percent are women and nearly half are people of color, not to mention that two-thirds of tipped workers are women; 17 million children's parents would get a raise if the minimum wage were lifted. She also cited an Economic Policy Institute study that estimated that 140,000 new full-time jobs would be created if the minimum wage were raised.

"The job-loss myth is just that -- a myth," Conti said.

She said many of the 30 million workers now making \$10-\$13 an hour would likely get a raise to stay above their minimum wage co-workers.

Opinion polls show both Democrats and Republicans are OK with a raise in the minimum wage to \$10 an

hour. GOP members' approval rates vary from 52 percent to 62 percent, said Conti, and one supporter is Bill O'Reilly, Fox News Channel commentator.

Fr. Ty Hullinger, a pastor of three Catholic parishes in Baltimore, noted that even if the minimum wage is raised, it would still fall short of a "just wage," which he pegged at \$15-\$20 an hour, "but in the real world, work for what you can get," he said.

The federal minimum wage prevents states from adopting a wage rate lower than it. Close to half of all states have a minimum wage higher than the federal minimum, Conti said, and some municipalities have also increased the minimum wage for workers in their jurisdictions.

Conti bemoaned the situation of tipped workers. She recalled that because her parents made her get a job in high school to help pay for college, she took a job waiting tables in a restaurant.

"It was the hardest work I've ever done," Conti added, including her law school studies.

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Hullinger told the story of an airport worker who works at two fast-food jobs to keep his family afloat. He wondered aloud whether parishes should change their Mass schedules and add more evening Masses to accommodate the growing number of parishioners required to work Sundays.

"We're missing the contributions of a large number of people," Hullinger said, adding that workers are less able to contribute to parish life if worship opportunities are taken away from them or they are too tired to contribute because of working multiple jobs.

He also related the story of a woman who works at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport who, like many of the airport workers, takes a light-rail train to work because she cannot afford the daily \$20 parking fee. One evening at a light-rail station on the way home from work, she was robbed not only of her money but her airport pass. She did not have the \$25 to replace it, rendering her unable to work for an even longer time.

But there was also the tale of the Costco worker who was loading what Conti said was "\$500 worth of soft drinks" that she and her husband had purchased for an upcoming Catholic schools event. As the employee was loading the drinks onto pallets, Conti asked if she could tip him.

She said the employee told her: "No, they pay me real well here. This is the best job I've ever had. I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do."

To which Conti's husband told the worker, "You just said that to the best possible person you could've said it to."

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