

How Did a \$15 Minimum Wage Become an Achievable Goal?

The Fight for \$15: The Right Wage for a Working America, by David Rolf (New Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Lennart Seufert

The fight for a higher minimum wage has become one of the defining national labor campaigns of recent decades. Since the federal floor was last raised in 2009, a conservative majority in Congress has blocked all attempts to close its many exemptions, strengthen its woeful enforcement and raise it above a sub-poverty-level \$7.25/hour. Starting in November 2012 in New York, strikes by low-wage fast-food workers spread across the nation, arriving in Seattle in May 2013. Within a year, Seattle had somehow won a \$15 minimum wage—the highest in the United States—without a gory political fight.

David Rolf was one of the leaders of the campaign for this first \$15 minimum wage law, drawing immediate national attention. After years of union organizing experience in New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles, Rolf became founding president of Seattle-based local 775 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 2001. By the time of the minimum wage campaign, Local 775 had over 40,000 members – enough to earn Rolf's voice the attention of both the city's progressive community groups and liberal power brokers. Here he compiles the interesting history of his life as part of an (almost) dead American labor movement, bringing personal narrative and politics into a captivating story. He writes about the people and the strategy that, with shocking speed, won the country's highest minimum wage. Rolf combines economics, history, and commonsense political wisdom to lay out a blueprint for achieving a \$15 national minimum wage and building an economy that works for working people.

Especially noteworthy here is the sweep of the history he relates. While the book centers around the chapters specifying the battle for a decent wage in SeaTac and Seattle, there is likewise extensive work done to outline this moment inside the recorded setting of the political clashes of the most recent forty years, viz., the solidification of neoliberal authority. The author makes a profoundly educated case for a national \$15/hour minimum wage as the main useful answer for turning around America's decades-long slide toward turning into a low-wage country.

The author wants to answer two questions: (1) How did the American Dream, where hard-working Americans could obtain good jobs and a road to middle-class stability, change into a nightmare of increasing inequality and insecure work? And (2) What are unions and workers going to do to bring workers on the way from poverty to prosperity? Rolf argues that increasing the minimum wage to \$15/hour is one of the defining working-class issues of our time. The book is structured into three main parts: describing the increase of low-wage work and disparity, recounting to the story of how laborers and unions are sorting out the fight for \$15 campaign, and exposing common myths the campaign is hitting against.

David Rolf's examination of the ascent of imbalance and unstable employments in the United States tracks recognizable familiar territory. He contends that conservative policies like deregulation and tax cuts, started to grab hold among portions of the regular workers spurned by growing unemployment and inflation. The conservative movement through the 1980s and 1990s was hence capable to advance their longstanding fantasy about disintegrating the intensity of unions and working standards.

The decline of the middle class was followed by the ascent of "new work" which is divisive and unstable, but also adaptable. Laborers are atomized in the workplace and their aggregate power and solidarity have been dissolved. He demonstrates an incriminating picture of work today, with its multiplication of subcontracting, part-time, temporary, and freelance work. Rolf additionally notes there are presently more workers in the U.S. who have no lawful option to frame a union than workers who do.

Rolf's investigation of the changing workplace is valuable, however, even if it somewhat underplays the role the attack on the welfare state has played in the subversion of working people's certainty and security. For example, the ascent in post-secondary education fees for students has been a significant motivation behind why part-time work has spread. In like manner, the gutting of welfare entitlements

during the 1980s and 1990s took care of a feeling of insecurity among low-wage laborers. This disintegration of social projects and public infrastructure added to a feeling of isolation and financial dread among the common laborers. The political defeats endured by the regular workers are not just as significant as the mishaps suffered by laborers in the workplace - they are interlinked.

Rolf emphasizes that it is important to understand that the ideological move in workers' confidence and feeling of aggregate force is the consequence of both the rebuilding of employment relations and political defeat is essential to get a handle on the genuine measure and effect of "new work". In the 21st century, workplaces and work are changing, though it is significant not to carry this approach too far or presume the working class is either a dying concept or a weak political power.

The most intriguing aspect of his book is the point at which he changes gears from a more extensive analysis of the American economy to a story about how a \$15 minimum wage was gained in Sea-Tac and Seattle. Sea-Tac is a little suburb outside of Seattle that incorporates the city's airport. It was the first jurisdiction to execute a \$15/hour minimum wage in the U.S. The airport, which once gave hundreds of middle-class occupations, is currently the site of much outsourced low-wage employment. This restructuring-related with a powerful transformation in working-class demographics in the community, together with a rise of a considerably immigrant population. The huge efforts at the airport were connected with the more extensive fight for \$15 campaign started by SEIU in 2012. SEIU coordinators, union staff members, and local activists wanted a \$15/hour starting wage and a union at several subcontracted firms based at the airport. Finally, they were able to agree on a \$15 minimum wage.

The enormous mobilization for the municipal triumph in Sea-Tac, which beat a well-funded employer campaign, made the fight for \$15's first legislative triumph in the nation – while also advising the movement's subsequent strategies and mobilizing new layers of activists. As Rolf notes, the underlying goal of the Sea-Tac campaign was to gain employer acknowledgment of unions right to negotiate for wages, "rather they wound up composing an accepted association contract legitimately into city law." (121) While he does not do enough to build up this point further, this thought of treating employment standards as aggregate negotiating for non-union laborers is one of the key vital bits of knowledge the fight for \$15 has demonstrated in a period of legislative and legal assaults on union rights.

His solution is addressed to unions to push for preferred negotiating models over the 1935 NLRA/Wagner model, for instance, sectoral dealing, that better mirror the present realities of work. The old NLRA approach to a great extent misses how transforming the economic struggles into more extensive political fights is a way for laborers to reverse the situation on employers and remove sectoral obstructions that frequently hold up the traffic of more extensive laborer solidarity. Increasing the minimum standards can help

declines the gap between unionized laborers and non-unionized laborers, permitting the former to set the bar of workplace standards significantly higher

Rolf portrays how the campaign utilized the movement of the Sea-Tac triumph to push for and gain \$15/hour in Seattle. He clarifies that this triumph was the result of an inside-outside procedure. Socialist Alternative and its partners pushed and kept the issue in the foreground while David Rolf and his partners used that outside pressure to get a deal on the inside. His good cop/bad cop story about how Kshama Sawant's selection and formation of the \$15 Now alliance made the impulse for rational members of the business community and union pioneers to work out a trade-off flattens and contorts the genuine results of the fight for \$15. This is not just a story about going to a reasonable trade-off with employers from which everybody benefits or indicating to supervisors there is another way. The power of the fight for \$15 is tied in with shaping class outrage and injustice into a demand that strikes at the core of power imbalances and provokes people to action.

The limits of David Rolf's book originate from his emphasis on backroom negotiating, legislative change, and policy formation. Instead of addressing the underlying drivers of disparity and critical work, he yearns for work to bring back the middle class of former years. Rolf's purpose is to re-create working-class affluence within capitalism. His point of view underestimates the tradition and the part of radical working-class politics in animating and sorting out for changes that look to go past the bounds of liberal capitalism, where the interest of laborers is finely equal with interests of businesses to achieve lucrative profits.

The fight for \$15 is an impressive movement and the book makes a fine showing in illustrating the case for raising wages. With scholarly thoroughness and practical knowledge, David Rolf demonstrates vividly that increasing the minimum wage to \$15 is necessary, in order that the American dream of middle-class prosperity does not turn into a nightmare of enduring poverty for millions of workers in the bottom third of wage earners. What is missing in any case, is the more extensive political noteworthiness of this movement for the working class (development for the common laborers). His book serves as an outline for a hopeful American future – it offers practical tools, ideas, and motivation for those seeking genuine change in the working class. Anyone interested in fighting for workers and achieving results or making an impact should read David Rolf's new book on the significance of increasing the minimum wage. It documents what recent battles have shown can actually be done to close class disparities.

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