

THE MINIMUM WAGE DEVASTATES THE UNSKILLED

O SALÁRIO-MÍNIMO DEVASTA OS NÃO QUALIFICADOS

EL SALARIO MÍNIMO DEVASTA A LOS NO CALIFICADOS

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Recebido: 2025-03-07

Aceito: 2025-07-11

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SUMMARY: *Introdução, 2 Context, Conclusion, References.*

CONTEXTUALIZATION: Minimum wage legislation enjoys widespread popularity, with virtually no serious movement advocating for its complete abolition. The spectrum of mainstream opinion is limited to keeping the current rate, modestly increasing it, or significantly raising it.

OBJECTIVES: This paper aims to argue that the minimum wage law is an unjustified violation of individual rights. It holds that consenting adults should be legally free to engage in any “capitalist acts” they choose, even if these acts contravene minimum wage regulations.

METHODOLOGY: The study adopts a theoretical and normative approach, grounded in political philosophy and classical liberal economic thought. It critically examines the state’s interference in voluntary contractual relationships between employers and employees.

RESULTS: It concludes that the imposition of a minimum wage not only unjustly restricts contractual freedom but also leads to unemployment among society’s most vulnerable groups—namely, the poor, the unskilled, and racial minorities—who are least able to bear such outcomes.

KEY WORDS: Empirical Evidence; Logic; Minimum Wages; Productivity; Unemployment.

CONTEXTUALIZAÇÃO: A legislação do salário mínimo goza de ampla popularidade, com virtualmente nenhum movimento sério defendendo sua completa abolição. O espectro da opinião mainstream se limita a manter a taxa atual, aumentá-la modestamente, ou elevá-la significativamente.

OBJETIVOS: Este artigo tem como objetivo argumentar que a lei do salário mínimo é uma violação injustificada dos direitos individuais. Sustenta que adultos que consentem devem ser legalmente livres para se engajar em quaisquer “atos capitalistas” que escolham, mesmo que esses atos contrariem as regulamentações do salário-mínimo.

METODOLOGIA: O estudo adota uma abordagem teórica e normativa, fundamentada na filosofia política e no pensamento econômico liberal clássico. Examina criticamente a interferência do Estado nas relações contratuais voluntárias entre empregadores e empregados.

RESULTADOS: Conclui que a imposição de um salário-mínimo não apenas restringe injustamente a liberdade contratual, mas também leva ao desemprego entre os grupos mais vulneráveis da sociedade—a saber, os pobres, os não qualificados e as minorias raciais—que são os menos capazes de suportar tais resultados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Desemprego; Evidência Empírica; Lógica; Produtividade; Salários Mínimos.

CONTEXTUALIZACIÓN: La legislación del salario mínimo goza de amplia popularidad, con virtualmente ningún movimiento serio que abogue por su completa abolición. El espectro de la opinión dominante se limita a mantener la tasa actual, aumentarla modestamente, o elevarla significativamente.

OBJETIVOS: Este documento tiene como objetivo argumentar que la ley del salario mínimo es una violación injustificada de los derechos

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individuales. Sostiene que los adultos que consienten deben ser legalmente libres para participar en cualquier “acto capitalista” que elijan, incluso si estos actos contravienen las regulaciones del salario mínimo.

METODOLOGÍA: El estudio adopta un enfoque teórico y normativo, fundamentado en la filosofía política y el pensamiento económico liberal clásico. Examina críticamente la interferencia del Estado en las relaciones contractuales voluntarias entre empleadores y empleados.

RESULTADOS: Concluye que la imposición de un salario mínimo no solo restringe injustamente la libertad contractual, sino que también conduce al desempleo entre los grupos más vulnerables de la sociedad—a saber, los pobres, los no calificados y las minorías raciales—que son los menos capaces de soportar tales resultados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Evidencia Empírica; Lógica; Salarios Mínimos; Productividad; Desempleo.

INTRODUCTION

I now offer you a wage of \$3 per hour, gentle reader.² If I were serious about this, I could be imprisoned for making this offer. If you accepted it, you, too, would be vulnerable to a jail sentence; the overwhelming probability is that you would suffer no such fate even though you, too, had violated the minimum wage law,³ which mandates that a multiple of this amount must be paid in salary. But where is the per se rights violation? Two consenting adults by stipulation would have agreed to this commercial arrangement. Thus, in addition to being un-pragmatic, and anti-utilitarian, this enactment is unjust to boot.

There is one anomaly about this entire episode. If I offered you an internship, and paid you zero, nada, nowt, nothing at all, and you accepted this proposal of mine, we could both get away with our otherwise lawless behavior. Why this should be the case is beyond the scope of the present paper. I only mention it to highlight but one aspect of this irrationality.

What are its economics effects? The minimum wage law is not akin to a floor undergirding wages. It is not true that as the level of compensation mandated by this legislation rises, it boosts salaries along with it. Rather, if a physical analogy is required⁴ to shed light on his phenomenon, it would be a hurdle⁵ or a high jump bar.⁶ The more elevated it is, the harder it is to elevate oneself over it and arrive at employment. When it gets high enough, no one can catapult himself over it. Then, we would not only all be unemployed, but unemployable as well. For example, if it was pegged at one trillion dollars per hour no employer would be willing to pay any employee that amount of money for labor services. Then, there would not be, there could not be, any such thing as employment.⁷

On the other hand, at the other end of the spectrum, suppose that this law required everyone to be paid at least one cent per hour.⁸ Then, there would be mighty few of us who could not overcome that barrier.⁹ Such an enactment would only render unemployable those few of us whose contribution to the economy is less than that amount.

Those who think that this law props up wages must contend with the following objection. The minimum wage law was only introduced in 1938.¹⁰ Before that, wages were not zero. This could not have occurred if it were true that this law serves as a necessary floor, guaranteeing that compensation cannot fall below the level envisaged by law.

² I am not serious about this. I do not wish to violate the law and be considered a criminal. I only use this as an academic example.

³ The criminal case against the two of us would be dismissed in your case. The interpretation would be that I exploited you; you were the victim. This, despite the fact that we both gained from the arrangement, at least ex ante.

⁴ None of them are entirely accurate, but this one is better than most

⁵ The height of the hurdle is in the 110 meter event is 42 inches. https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+the+height+of+the+hurdles+in+110+meter+event&rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS796US796&oq=what+is+the+height+of+the+hurdle%3F&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqCQgBEAAyChiABDIGCAA-QRRg5MgkIARAAGAoYgAQyCagCEAAyFhgeMggIAxAGBYHjIICAQAQABgWGB4yCagFEAAyFhgeMggIBhAAGBYHjIICAcQABgWGB4yCagIEAAyFhgeMggICRAAGBYHjIBCTE3NjE2ajBqN6gCCLACAFELRhrz0bqMY&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

⁶ The world's record in this event is 8 feet and one quarter on an inch. Only one person on the planet has so far exceeded that height. https://www.google.com/search?q=The+world%E2%80%99s+record+in+the+high+jump&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqCQgBEAAyChiABDIGCAA-QRRg5MgkIARAAGAoYgAQyCagCEAAyFhgeMggIAxAGBYHjIICAQAQABgWGB4yCagFEAAyFhgeMggIBhAAGBYHjIICAcQABgWGB4yCagIEAAyFhgeMggICRAAGBYHjIBCTE3NjE2ajBqN6gCCLACAFELRhrz0bqMY&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

⁷ For the general case against the minimum wage on the ground that it causes unemployment for the unskilled, see Batemarco, et.al. 2014; Becker, 1995; Block, 2001; Cappelli and Block, 2012; Deere, Murphy and Welch, 1995; Friedman, undated; Hamermesh and Welch, 1995; Hanke, 2014A, 2014B; Hazlitt, 1946; Hovenga, Naik and Block, 2013; Howland, 2013; Joint Economic Committee Republicans, 1995; Lingenfelter, et al., 2017; McCormick and Block, 2000; Mincer, 1976; Neumark, 2015; Neumark and Wascher, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000; North, 2014; Powell, 2013; Rothbard, 1988; Sowell, 1995; Vuk, 2006; Williams, 1982

⁸ They have better hurry up on this since Mr. Trump is in the process of ridding the economy of this coin. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/analysis-trump-announced-he-is-getting-rid-of-the-penny-what-are-the-consequences>

⁹ There would be some. To wit, those with a negative productivity level. What kind of worker would qualify? Those who steal from the employer, or wreck his merchandise, or deflect others from producing. According to some this accurately describes labor unionism: Baird, 1990, 2000, 2013; Block, 1984, 1991, 1996A, 1996B, 2008, 2010; Evans and Block, 2002; Heldman, 1977; Heldman, Bennett and Johnson, 1981; Hutt, 1973, 1989; Petro, 1957; Reynolds, 1984, 1987, 2009; Rothbard, 1993, n.d.; Schmidt, 1973; Shea, 2010;

¹⁰ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=minimum+wage+law+was+only+introduced+in+1938>

Let us now ponder an even more basic question: what determines wage levels in the first place, assuming no such mandate as the one we are now considering? Why is it that remuneration for labor differs among workers? According to one theory, wages are dictated by employers. Some are very generous, and pay at high levels. Others are moderate, and offer lesser amounts. And some, like the characters in a Dickens novel, are cheapskates and compensate their employees at penuriously low levels.

For example, owners of teams in the National Football League are extremely unstinting. That is why even the bench-warmers earn well-to-do salaries and the stars are paid at princely levels.¹¹ Others are more moderate, and compensate lesser amounts. And still others, Scrooge, for example, are skinflints and exploit their labor force. Doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers are just lucky to work in generous industries. People who ask if you want fries with that, or push a broom around, are just plain out of luck in that they have selected nasty areas of the economy to which to contribute their labor.

This is all just plain silly and hardly requires sober comment. Ditto for the claim that wages depend upon the generosity and wealth of employers and are high for those who are rich and well-meaning, and low for those who are penurious and nasty.

What, then, really determines wages? It is labor productivity.¹² That refers to the amount of value that an employee adds to the bottom line of his employer. If someone produces \$40 per hour, his salary will tend in that direction. If it deviates from that amount, market forces will be brought to bear to eliminate any gap between the two, wage and productivity, that may ensue. In equilibrium, towards which we are always heading but at which we never arrive, there can be no such thing as any deviation between the two. For example, suppose Joe has that amount of productivity, but his wage is \$50. Then the employer will lose \$10 hourly. If that sort of financial arrangement covers many workers and long continues, bankruptcy will beckon. This sort of thing cannot long endure.

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2 CONTEXT

On the other hand, suppose this worker is paid only \$25 per hour. Then, the employer will pocket a cool \$15 for every hour this man is on the shop floor or assembly line or sitting behind a company desk. This cannot last either. Some other employer will offer \$26, another \$27, and then we will be off to the races in the direction of \$40. We will reach that exact amount as long as the transactions costs of making new arrangements, finding new deals, signing contracts, can be ignored. Nor does the impetus for this process rest only with employers. This worker, too, can see other, higher paid, employment.

What then occurs in the face of a minimum wage of \$50? This laborer will be unemployable. This is simply basic math, with a little bit of logic thrown into the mixture for good measure.

That the minimum wage creates unemployment is as true, and is of the same logical order as, the Pythagorean Theorem, that $2+2=4$ and that triangles have three sides and all of their angles together total 180 degrees. One cannot test any of these apodictic certainties; claims about them cannot be falsified. Their truths can only be illustrated.

Here is one example of the latter. The foregoing analysis has been criticized by Card and Krueger (1994, 2000). They were not able to empirically discern any such unemployment effects between Pennsylvania and New Jersey when one of them raised its minimum wage and the other, serving as a control group, did not.

Namely, they failed to illustrate this primordial economic certainty in the one case of a comparative between two northeastern states. It is as if some geometrician examined a three-sided figure and, lo and behold, it did not sum up to 180 degrees. That failure hardly vitiates what we know of triangles any more than Card and Krueger's failure to

¹¹ If they are so generous, why don't they pay all their players at the same very high levels? There must be something else going on here. There is. Stay tuned.

¹² In more technical language, Discounted Marginal Revenue Product; Block (1990)

find a divergence of unemployment rates based upon differential minimum wage rates in the two states undermines what we know of this pernicious legislation.¹³

Moreover, their findings have been subject to withering criticism. The main one was failure to replicate, the gold standard of empirical research. Other dismal scientists simply could not replicate their findings. Perhaps the data used by these two authors¹⁴ was incorrect. It was garnered, after all, via telephone conversations, and who knows who was spoken to, or how truthful these respondents were.

If all that was at stake was failure to demonstrate, illustrate, a necessary economic result, such language, calling these authors “traitors,” would be far too harsh. But since their interpretation of this failure was that what the entire economics profession knows about minimum wages is entirely false, that criticism may not be altogether too far off the mark.¹⁵

Before the advent of this legislation, there was no gigantic difference in the unemployment rate based on race or age. More recently, there has been a radical shift in these statistics. Nowadays, the rate of joblessness for blacks is double that of whites. It is also roughly double for teens and young people compared to middle agers.¹⁶ As a result, the unemployment rate for black teens is quadruple¹⁷ that for whites in their middle years.¹⁸

Why should this be the case? For a whole host of reasons white productivity is higher than that of blacks.¹⁹ Newcomers to the work force typically have less on the job training, experience, know-how. As a result, both groups are less well able to jump over the hurdles into employment set up by the minimum wage law. Before the advent of this pernicious legislation, in sharp contrast, there was no need for anyone to jump over any high bar in order to be employed.

CONCLUSION

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Is this enactment is so evil, so unfair, so discriminatory against the unskilled, those least able to bear such burdens, why on earth do we have this item on the law books in the first place? If we were detectives,²⁰ faced with a dead body, one of the first questions we would ask is “quo bono?” that is, who benefits from this death? If the deceased is an elderly man, we would look askance at his wife, other relatives who might be heirs, and are anxious to cash in on his wealth. We can do no less in this case, as we take on the role of economic detection.

So, just who gains from this law? One possibility is judges, policemen, jailors, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists. How so? Well, the minimum wage creates unemployment for teenagers. They are bored to tears since they cannot be gainfully employed. There is, however, an option open to them which will garner them some serious money and banish their anomie: crime. Thus, with this legislation on the books, we will need more cops and courts to put them in prison, more jailors to keep them there. As well, there will be a greater call for the helping professions. They all benefit, indubitably, from the advent of this wage minima. The only trouble with this hypothesis is that there

¹³ For a critique of these authors, see Block, 2001; Burkhauser, Couch and Wittenburg, David, 1996; Burkhauser and Finnegan, 1989; Gallaway and Adie, 1995; Hamermesh and Welch, 1995; Neumark and Wascher, 2000

¹⁴ They have widely been called “traitors” to the economics profession by other practitioners of the dismal science. See on this <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Card+and+Krueger+are+traitors+to+economics>.

¹⁵ One defense of this law is based upon the existence of monopsony. But this phenomenon, if it exists at all (Block and Barnett, 2009, deny this) applies to highly skilled workers, not those earning at or near minimum wage levels.

¹⁶ For evidence that the minimum wage creates crime, especially among the young, see Agan and Makowsky, 2020; Anderson, 2014; Beauchamp and Chan, 2014; Fone, 2020; Hashimoto, 1987; Lehman, 2021;

¹⁷ This is not a misprint

¹⁸ Desilver, 2013; Marte, 2020; Wilson, 2019

¹⁹ Some commentators trade this to the vestiges of slavery; others to Jim Crow mandates. There are other theories I cannot mention given the woke culture under which we still suffer, Trump’s heroic efforts to eradicate it notwithstanding.

²⁰ We are now taking on the role of economic detectives in wrestling with this question.

is not a scintilla of evidence to support the notion that folks in this demographic have been active in advocating this law.²¹ The evidence is non-existent to the effect that judges and policemen have been undermining the free enterprise system in this way.

Things are very different with regard to organized labor. They, too, benefit from this law. When they ask, scratch that, demand²², a wage increase, the natural tendency of the firm is to seek to substitute cheaper alternatives to suddenly more expensive labor inputs. In which direction do they look? They have in their sights unskilled job seekers. True, there cannot be a one to one substitution of this factor of production for the other; the rank and file is more skilled than these mainly youngsters. But, a dozen or so of the latter might well do as well as two or three of the former.

In the early days of labor organizing, the union members would characterize these “interlopers” as “scabs” and use violence against them. This was not a good tactic. First of all, the optics were all wrong. The union members were disproportionately middle aged white men, while the cheaper, competing workers were to a great degree young black and Puerto Rican males. Second, they could fight back. Whereupon organized labor hit upon a far more effective modality: the minimum wage law. Price them out of the labor market! Demand that the wage minimum be raised to a higher level than the productivity of these “scabs.” Then, the threat would dissipate with no fuss, no feathers.²³

Yet another group that benefits from this legislation is companies in the north, vis a vis their counterparts in the south. Those in New England and in the Mid-Atlantic have been traditionally more productive than the states in the Deep South. The manner in which the latter can compete against the former is by paying lower wages. How, best, for the north to cock a snook at the south? Simple. Encourage a national minimum wage level above the compensation paid by their competitors; that puts a spoke in their wheel.²⁴

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²¹ Many of them, especially social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, veer to the left and presumably support this law. But they have not been at all active in this pursuit.

²² hutt

²³ Organized labor favors the minimum wage law: Clemens and Strain, 2020; Rensi, 2017; Strain and Clemens 2023;

²⁴ See on this north-south geographical issue: Colberg (1960); Krumm (1981); Joint Economic Committee Republicans. 1995.

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