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Ky. minimum wage fight likely

Editorials

One sure-fire Democratic campaign promise in 2006 was to increase the minimum wage, either in their home states or at the federal level or both. Now the victorious candidates must be acutely aware labor unions and employers will be watching to see if those promises are kept.

A 2007 showdown already has begun shaping up in Kentucky's General Assembly over raising the \$5.15-an-hour minimum wage. Democrats have pre-filed several bills, while Republicans say Kentucky should leave it to Congress to set a federal rate. Ohio voters already have spoken. By a decisive 56 to 43 percent margin Nov. 7, they approved a state constitutional amendment to raise Ohio's minimum wage to \$6.85 by Jan. 1, and require automatic cost-of-living increases in later years.

In Washington this August, Senate Democrats rejected a Republican-engineered bill that packaged a \$2.10-an-hour minimum wage increase with cuts in the estate tax. Democrats and a few Republicans - include Ohio Sen. George Voinovich - balked at such a deal that would have benefited the wealthiest Americans. Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Republicans' new Senate minority leader, is still insisting on a package if Democrats expect to win Republicans' 49 Senate votes. So even with the Democratic takeover of Congress and a minimum wage rate that hasn't been raised in a decade, a federal increase will not be automatic. Kentucky lawmakers should not leave the decision to deal-makers in Washington, nor adopt Ohio's complicated constitutional amendment strategy, but also make sure any Kentucky minimum wage raise does not reduce the number of jobs available for low-skill workers.

A coalition of Catholic and Protestant churches and the Kentucky Education Association backs a wage increase. Child advocates argue that a more livable wage rate will help reduce child poverty in a state where 216,000 youngsters live below the federal poverty line. That's about \$20,000 a year for a family of four. Kentucky's child poverty rate is 22.5 percent, the national average 18.5 percent.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce opposes state action on the minimum wage. Restaurant officials in Ohio already have warned the public that they can expect to see higher-priced meal checks as a result of Issue 2 passing.

Kentucky Democrats so far have not adopted Ohio's Issue 2 strategy, which amended the Ohio Constitution to lock in a specific wage increase, impose onerous record-keeping on employers and disclose personal payroll data. Ohio employers are expected to file lawsuits challenging Issue 2's constitutionality. Kentucky's Democratic senators have pre-filed a bill that would gradually raise the state's minimum wage to \$7.25 by July 2009. A House bill sponsored by Rep. J.R. Gray would raise the rate to \$6.50 by July 2008. If Congress were to raise the national minimum wage above Kentucky's, it would rise to match the federal rate. Lawmakers also should explore other ways to lift low-skill workers, not just mandates on employers.