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Legislature raises minimum wage

By Jessica Calefati, Bay Area News Group

POSTED: 04/06/16, 10:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: 16 HRS AGO # COMMENTS

A first-in-the-nation plan to gradually boost California's minimum wage to $15 an hour won the Legislature's approval Thursday after rancorous floor debates over whether the move would strengthen or harm families and the economy.

Senate Bill 3, authored by state Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, passed the Assembly on a 48-26 vote and cleared the Senate 26-12. The measure now heads to Gov. Jerry Brown, who quickly announced after the Senate vote that he would sign the legislation in a ceremony Monday at Los Angeles' Ronald Reagan State Building.

The governor had resisted a more modest wage hike proposed last year before deciding to work with labor leaders to craft the framework of the historic compromise measure.

Echoing the enthusiasm over the bill that Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders shared earlier this week, legislative Democrats who support the measure said low-wage workers need a pay hike from the current $10 hourly minimum to stay out of poverty and keep up with California's high cost of living.

"No one who is working full time in California should live in poverty due to a low wage," Leno said. "Thanks to the workers, this concept is finally getting due recognition."

And unless there's a bump in the $7.25 federal minimum wage sometime soon, the momentum that propelled California's new wage floor will likely spread to other states, predicted Geoffrey Skelley, a political analyst at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

Blue states will hurry to catch up, he said, while red states rush to pass legislation that reasserts state control over hourly wages, preventing cities from acting to boost the rates locally.

"Just like in other policy areas, such as voting requirements, we are going to continue seeing a divide between blue and red states over minimum wage policy," Skelley said.

Calls for comment to the offices of North Coast lawmakers Assemblyman Jim Wood and Sen. Mike McGuire were unreturned at press time.

Back in Sacramento, however, Republican lawmakers and two moderate Democrats — Assemblymen Tom Daly, D-Anaheim, and Adam Gray, D-Merced — insisted the new wage would tank small businesses, send the state budget back into a free fall and hurt seniors on fixed incomes because it would be inflationary.

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"What this will do is impose almost impossible choices" for small businesses, said Assemblyman Jim Patterson, R-Fresno. "These choices would be to cut hours to stay open, cut employees to stay open, raise prices to stay open or perhaps go out of business."

Brown has said he felt compelled to act because of strong public support for two even more ambitious labor-backed minimum wage ballot initiatives — which proposed reaching a $15 minimum wage sooner. The Legislature would be unable to modify a law passed by voters, argues Brown, who calls the legislation "a matter of economic justice."

"Wages didn't get raised until workers raised their voices," said Laphonza Butler, California president

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of the Service Employees International Union. “The credit for making history today belongs to the workers who spoke out and risked it all.

“As a result, millions of Californians are on the path out of poverty,” added Butler, who negotiated the deal with Brown.

In addition to establishing a $15 dollar minimum wage by 2022 — a shift that will eventually cost taxpayers $3.6 billion annually in higher pay for state In-Home Supportive Services and Department of Developmental Services employees — SB 3 would tie future increases to inflation, just as the unions proposed.

The compromise plan, however, would give the governor leeway to delay scheduled minimum wage increases for one year in the event of an economic downturn or budget shortfall. It would also give businesses with fewer than 26 workers an extra year to comply.

UC Berkeley’s Center for Labor Research and Education projects that the ripple effect of the increase could boost wages for close to 6 million Californians by an average of 24 percent.

Latinos and workers in their 20s would benefit the most, the university researchers say, because they hold a disproportionate number of low-wage jobs.

“California’s minimum wage must also be a living wage,” said Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, D-Los Angeles. “Anyone who thinks $15 an hour is too much should try living on it.”

San Francisco, Los Angeles, Emeryville, El Cerrito and Santa Monica have already passed laws phasing in $15 wage floors. Just over 61 percent of Eureka voters in 2014 rejected an ballot measure to raise minimum wage from the state rate of $9 per hour to $12 per hour for businesses with 25 or more employees for employees who worked more than two hours a week within the city. The defeated Measure R also contained a cost of living allowance.

Speaking Thursday on the floors of the upper and lower houses, many Republicans — and even a few Democrats — criticized Brown and the labor leaders for working in secret in recent weeks to craft the agreement and rushing it through the Legislature with a single committee hearing and little to no public comment.

“How we got here doesn’t feel right,” said Assemblywoman Susan Eggman, D-Stockton, who added that she wished she had time to discuss the proposal with the Stockton City Council and local farm bureau.

“What’s the rush to do this?” she asked shortly before casting a yes vote.

The California Chamber of Commerce lodged a similar complaint.

“This is too much too fast,” said chamber President Allen Zaremberg. “It is unfortunate the Legislature didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to address the issue in a more balanced manner.”

But Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, D-San Diego, a leading labor ally, said that even though she and other lawmakers weren’t invited “to the table” to help negotiate the deal, she sees the legislation as transformative for low-income Californians.

“If you haven’t been talking about minimum wage in your district,” Gonzalez said, “you haven’t been talking.”

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