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The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDLED

VOLUME 92 - NUMBER 50

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2013

TELEPHONE (919) 682-2913 PRICE: 30

Pressure Continues to Build for Higher Minimum Wage

By Freddie Allen

NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Fast food workers won't get a 15 living wage in time for Christmas, but their nationwide protests continue to draw attention to the growing income gap between the working poor and the super rich. During an organized national day of action in early December, thousands of fast food workers went on strike in dozens of cities including Chicago, Boston, New York, Los Angeles and Oakland.

It has been more than four years since living wage advocates and low-wage workers won their last victory when the federal minimum wage was increased from \$5.15 to \$7.25. According to a report on the minimum wage by the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington D.C. think tank, based on low- and middle-income families: "The value of the minimum wage peaked in 1968 at \$1.60, which is equivalent to \$9.44 measured in today's dollars; the current minimum wage of \$7.25 is 23 percent less than it was in 1968 in real terms."

Even though economic productivity grew more than 80 percent between 1973 and 2011, EPI reported that "real per capita compensation of the median worker grew by less than 11 percent."

Economists have found that if the federal minimum wage had kept paced with inflation and productivity growth, that wage would have reached \$25 per hour. According to the Labor Department, by 2014, 21 states and Washington D.C. will have minimum wages that exceed the federal minimum wage.

In recent months, President Obama has also expressed support for a higher minimum wage.

President Obama stepped up his vocal support for a higher federal minimum wage, during a recent speech in the White House, Washington, D.C., one of the nation's poorest neighborhoods. Obama said that he's not surprised that Americans are frustrated with Washington, after the government shutdown and the rocky rollout of healthcare, but that he knows that their frustration runs deeper. Their frustration is rooted in their own daily battles - to get their kids to college, to pay for college, buy a home, save for retirement. It's rooted in the nagging sense that no matter how hard they work, the deck is stacked against them."

President Obama continued: "The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental challenge to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe. And it is not simply a moral issue that I'm making here. There are practical consequences to rising inequality and reduced mobility."

Practical consequences that include workers increasingly dependent on the very safety net programs that many Republican lawmakers want to cut.

A report, titled "Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Economic Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry" sponsored by the University of California, Berkeley, Center for Labor Research and Education and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Department of Urban & Regional Planning researchers found that "more than half (51 percent) of the families of front-line fast-food workers enrolled in one or more public programs, compared to 15 percent of the workforce as a whole."

Black workers account for 23 percent of front-line fast-food workers and 73 percent are women.

According to the report, "The federal minimum wage is not providing sufficient income for workers to provide for housing, health care, transportation and other basic needs for their families."

When employers don't pay their workers livable wages, the rest of us pick up the tab.

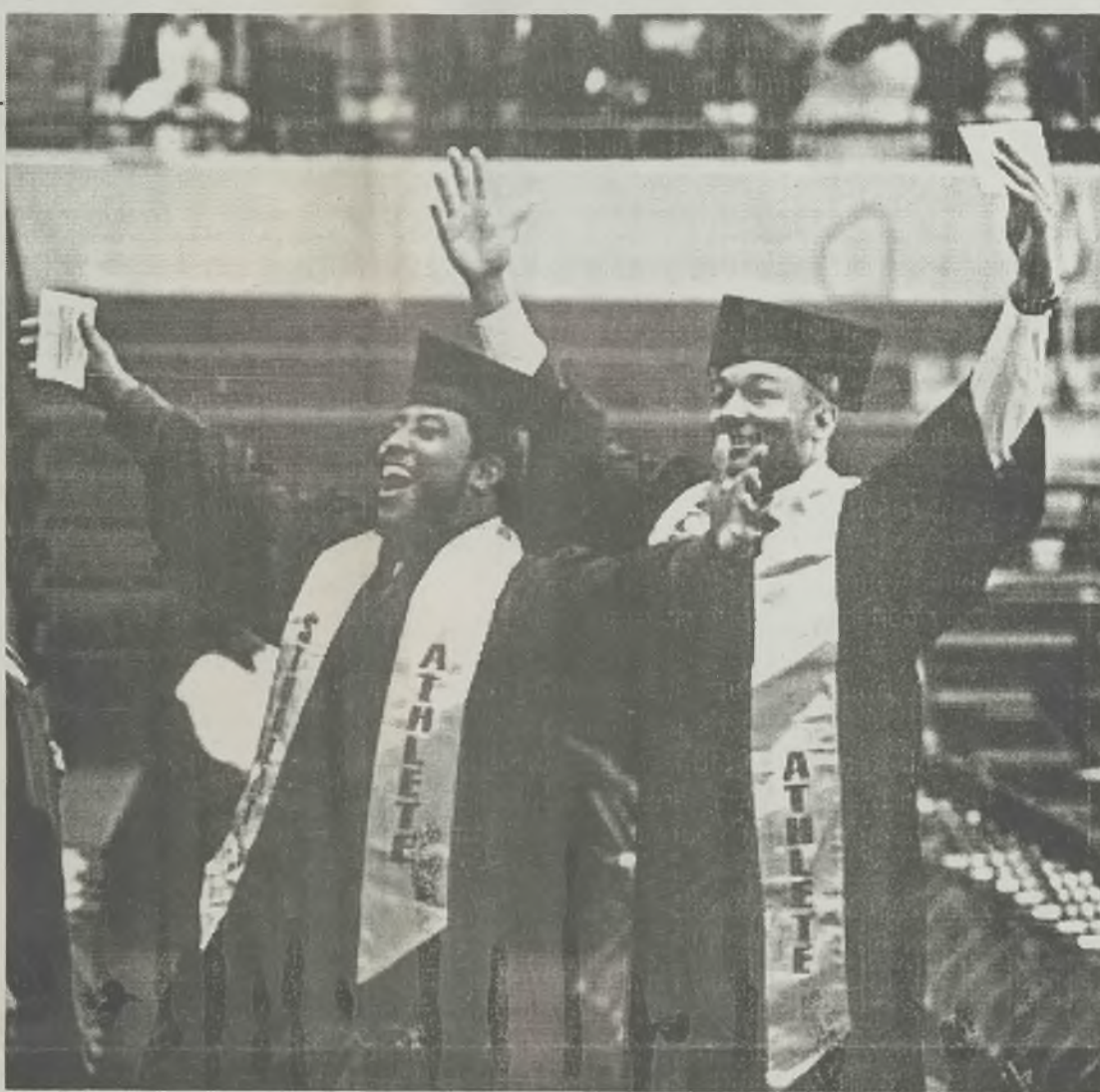
Due to low earnings, fast-food workers' families also live on an annual average of \$1.04 billion in food stamp benefits and \$1.91 billion in Earned Income Tax Credit payments. People working in fast-food jobs are more likely to live in or near poverty. One in five families with a member holding a fast-food job has an income below the poverty line, and 43 percent have an income two times the federal poverty level or less," stated the report.

Bernard Anderson, professor emeritus at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, said that consumer spending represents two-thirds of economic activity. Anderson added that if workers are not getting significant increases in their pay they're not going to have as much to spend.

Anderson continued: "When you increase the minimum wage you give additional income to people who will spend it out of that income. That will help the economy it won't hurt the economy."

Steven Pitts, an economist and associate chair at the Labor Center at the University of California at Berkeley said that oftentimes people who oppose a hard minimum wage say that you can give workers any job and in a year they'll be doing something else.

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Some of the NCCU Winter Graduates(NCCU Photo)

"Success Lies Beyond Fear" NCCU Commencement Speaker Tells Graduates

The youngest commencement speaker in North Carolina Central University's history told some 600 new graduates that they must push aside normal fears of failure in order to successfully pursue far-reaching goals.

"Your desire to succeed must surpass your fear," Dr. Annika Barnett told graduates during NCCU's 122nd commencement ceremonies, which took place Dec. 14, in the McDougald-McLendon Gymnasium.

Barnett, 26, received her bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in chemistry from NCCU in 2009 before attending Harvard University Medical School. She is the first NCCU alumna to graduate from Harvard Medical School, where she earned the Dr. Bemy Jelin Prize for academic excellence.

"There are three things that you should never fear: fear of failure, fear of change and fear of the unknown," said Barnett. "If you learn to face these head on, it will lead to success that you could never imagine."

In order to complete her medical degree, Barnett said she had to overcome each of these fears.

"No one wants to fall flat on his or her face in front of everyone," said Barnett. "In this age of social media, it is very easy for everyone to see when you succeed and when you fail."

She said she viewed her application to Harvard as "just one more application to put out there" as she neared the end of her studies at NCCU.

Barnett encouraged the class of 2013 to push past the isolation of the unknown.

"When you do something that no one else has done before you, it is lonely," said Barnett. "It is uncomfortable being the different one. But you have to go out of your comfort zone to grow."

Barnett graduated from the prestigious medical school in May 2013 and earned a spot in the highly competitive Johns Hopkins Hospital pediatrics and anesthesiology residency program. There are only four pediatrics and anesthesiology residency program in the country and a total of just eight slots.

"Something in me knew that if I didn't at least go and try, I would regret it. I would always wonder 'what if,'" said Barnett. "Don't live your life in regret. Don't let fear of failure keep you from going for what may seem like a long shot."

Barnett urged the graduates not to view her story as an anomaly.

"You all have the capability and gifts to achieve your dreams. The thing holding you back is fear," said Barnett in closing. "I pray my story of fearlessness liberates you today. I challenge you to embrace your fears. If your dream makes you nervous, then you are on the right track."

Before the conferring of degrees, NCCU Chancellor Debra Saunders-White presented a proclamation from U.S. Rep. and NCCU alumnus G.K. Butterfield to Dr. Bernice Johnson, interim provost and vice chancellor for Academic Affairs. Johnson will retire from NCCU on Dec. 31, after 34 years of service. "For more than three decades, Dr. Johnson has positively impacted the lives NCCU students," said Saunders-White. "Her service to NCCU is beyond compare."

Saunders-White hosted the traditional reception for graduates and their families on Friday, Dec. 13. Separate receptions by campus colleges and departments took place after the Commencement ceremony.

Durham Branch NAACP to Meet

The Durham NAACP of North Carolina will be conducting a meeting this Sun., Dec. 22 at Saint John's Baptist Church, 917 Onslow Street at 4 p.m. The topic of discussion is Roses Department Stores and Maxway Department Stores. This is a prelude to the December 23rd Moral Monday gathering in Raleigh against Art Pope and the Governor for declining Healthcare and Unemployment for thousands which will result in a not so Merry Christmas for the myriad of North Carolinians being affected.

For more information contact: Vivian Timlic, executive director 919-682-4930

Credit Card Debt Threatens Black Middle Class by Jazelle Hunt

By Jazelle Hunt
NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Still reeling from the Great Recession, middle class Blacks are maintaining their status by using credit to help cover their basic living expenses, according to a report from the NAACP and public policy research organization, Demos.

In the Recession's aftermath, 79 percent of middle class African American households carry credit card debt. And although they have less debt than before the Recession, the credit crunch continues as Black households spend an average \$368 on credit to make ends meet.

"The report highlights the need to look at how much credit is serving middle class Americans and how much it's giving a false illusion," says Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, senior director of the NAACP Economic Department and co-author of the study. "Everybody needs credit but it should be a tool to help your economic life. Now we see it as a drain on African Americans trying to gain a middle class life."

Released earlier this month, the report, "The Challenge of Credit Card Debt for the African American Middle Class," is an outgrowth of a larger national study on middle class credit card debt since 2010. It found that although African Americans owe less than they did in 2008, 42 percent of households are relying on their cards for basic living expenses when their incomes and savings fall short, a trend that persists across the entire middle class. Black families are also building their futures on credit, using cards to support higher education, entrepreneurship, and medical expenses.

"Use of credit in long term investments for the future is a specific African American (Continued On Page 3)