

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

Joel Barlow High School and Westhill High School

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Resolved: The US should significantly raise the minimum wage.

Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Economics of the Minimum Wage**
- **Critique of the Final Round**
- **The Negative Burden**

Introduction

This is the October edition of the 2015-16 CDA season. Previous year's editions can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#). Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Joel Barlow High School presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

The Economics of the Minimum Wage

I don't like the minimum wage as a debate topic. It's been kicking around for a long time, and I don't think that it is very exciting. But as an economics topic it's something high school students should understand. Most of the jobs open to teens pay minimum wage or a something close. And properly argued, it requires that you understand and work through certain basic principles of economics.

Individually, each possible effect of an increase in the minimum wage is easy to understand and explain. The complexity arises when you realize that all of them are operating simultaneously and one affects another. But this provides plenty of material for

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selecting and emphasizing the effects that favor your side. Explaining, comparing and contrasting these is what debate is all about.

Minimum Wage and Workers

Raising wages increases income which increases spending. Workers receiving the minimum wage are mostly lower income workers which means most of what they receive will be spent. (Higher income workers tend to save a portion of their earnings, the higher the income the greater the savings.) This means that their standard of living will improve because they can consume more, and the increased spending will help the economy by increasing the spending on and hence the demand for goods and services. So everything else being equal, raising the minimum wage will increase income which will increase spending, consumption and demand.

The phrase “everything else being equal” or “all else equal” is the simplifying assumption for doing something called “comparative statics.” If you have a complex system, one way to analyze it is to try to change one thing at a time and work through the consequences. Of course, in a complex system if you change one thing it doesn’t stop there. Lots of other things adjust, and that is what complexity is all about. But comparative statics is a good place to start.

There are other things to consider, some of which are mentioned in the packet. One question is how many people earn the minimum wage (or a wage that is near to it). This will tell you how much of a spending impact an increase in the minimum wage will have. A second is whether minimum wage workers are really poor. Certainly someone whose only income is a minimum wage job is poor, but a teenager taking an after school job or a spouse who takes part-time work may be part of a family with relatively high total income. Raising the minimum wage for these workers will still help the economy, but it won’t reduce poverty.

Higher wages should encourage more people to look for work. Those who do not have jobs but who are not looking for work are not considered to be unemployed, but are sometimes included in a count of the “underemployed,” individuals who would work (or work more) if they could find suitable employment. So perversely, raising the minimum wage may increase unemployment, though if this is because more people are drawn into the labor force that may be a good thing.

The effects mentioned so far are all due to direct incentives: more pay, more income, more spending; more pay, more incentive to work. Indirect or secondary effects take longer. For example, the fact or promise of a higher income may encourage people to get more schooling or training. Higher wages mean you can earn the same amount in fewer hours which may enable some to afford school part-time when they could not before. Young people may also be more willing to borrow to go to school or training programs because higher future wages will enable them to repay the expense. But it also means a part-time worker like a teenager or a college student with a dollar income target may choose to work less.

Note you can also argue just the opposite: young people seeing they can earn higher wages will skip school and go directly into the labor force. They will earn more in the

short run, but in the long run their lack of education and training will reduce what they can earn over a lifetime.

Minimum Wage and Business

Money doesn't just appear out of thin air.² Whenever you hear someone say "let's raise wages" or "let's raise spending" someone has to pay for it. With respect to the minimum wage, those somebodies are the businesses that employ the minimum wage workers. Let's work through the issue from their perspective.

Raising wages raises one cost of doing business, the price of labor. Raising the price of anything usually means less is bought. So raising the minimum wage should mean businesses will hire fewer workers (or buy fewer hours from each worker). But hold that thought for a second!

The day the minimum wage goes up businesses are sort of stuck. Most businesses match employment to their needs, so unless they think they will have fewer customers or sell fewer widgets, they still need the same number of employees as they did the day before. So the initial impact just reduces the business owner's profit and transfers that money to the workers. This does counter somewhat the increased consumer spending argument given above, but since owners are generally better off than workers and tend to save more, moving money from owners to workers will increase spending, but not as much as you would think due to reduced spending by owners.

With more time, businesses can do several things:

- They can raise prices to make up for the increased cost. If all businesses are equally affected, everyone can raise prices and this might restore profits and, of course, harm consumers. If you raised all prices including all wages by the same amount, nothing really changes. But some business will be able to raise prices and some won't, depending on how an increase in prices affects demand for their products and services. Businesses that can't raise prices will suffer, either by making lower profits, or possibly getting smaller or going out of business. This is the first way that raising the minimum wage might reduce employment and harm workers.
- Businesses can try to increase productivity rather than raise prices. If workers are more productive then the business can afford to pay higher wages and still make the same profit as before. Raising productivity takes time: investing in new equipment or in developing better techniques, investing in training workers, managing the business more closely to work employees harder. Again some businesses will be able to do this and some won't. In general, higher productivity is good for the economy, and in the long run the only thing that can raise incomes. If raising the minimum wage encourages investment and productivity, it can be a very good thing. Higher productivity is usually associated with higher education and more training. Raising the educational requirements for workers may encourage some to stay in school, but it may condemn those who dropped out to permanent unemployment. But raising productivity means producing the same goods or services with fewer employees.

² Actually the banking system, especially a central bank like the Federal Reserve, can "create money" in some sense. But banking and finance are even more complicated than what we are discussing here.

This is often thought of as replacing people with machines but that's not exactly true. However, the effect can be to reduce employment.

Over time there will be a gradual shift in employment from firms that can't adjust to higher wages to those that can. To the extent this is done by raising prices and sloughing off workers it can be considered harmful. To the extent this is done by new investment and increased productivity it can be good for the whole economy. It is unclear whether the total number of workers hired by firms that can adapt will exceed those lost by firms that cannot.

What Is Debate?

Most of the economic effects discussed above can be found in the packet. Together they clearly support and defeat the resolution. This is exactly the case in the real world, where deciding whether and by how much to raise the minimum wage is hotly argued by workers, business owners, politicians and economists.

As a debater your job isn't to find the truth. The packet is like one of those computer games with weapons hidden all around. Your job is to find the best ones and use them to counter your opponents. Sometimes you win by having better weapons. But most of the time you win because you do a better job wielding those weapons. After all, we do try to make sure there is plenty for both sides in the packet.

Your most important weapon, independent of the packet or any research, is your ability to explain your arguments and to cover those of your opponents. Most debates are won because you provide a better, more convincing explanation to the judge, and because you clearly and carefully reply to everything your opponent says. That is what debate is all about.

Critique of the Final Round

I judged the final round at Joel Barlow, and one of the teams asked for a critique. I've cleaned it up a little and expanded it here. It's a bit more detailed than what you usually see, but I had the leisure of writing it at home after the tournament. To understand it, you may want to take a look at my flow of the round on the CDA website.

My critique has three parts: the reason for the decision, tactical issues, and a variety of issues that did not factor in my decision but which I think the debaters should know.

Reason for the decision (RFD)

Neg wins because they show that the Aff never makes its case. The key Neg argument is that basic economics says raising the minimum wage will lead to fewer jobs, higher prices and overall lower economic activity. They use this against all three Aff contentions—growth, reduced income inequality, providing a living wage—and Aff never comes to grips with it. This economic argument is also the basis of the first two Neg contentions.

There is a lot of "evidence" thrown back and forth, but the most effective pieces support the Neg logic, particularly that 80% of minimum wage workers are not poor and 99% of the poor will not benefit from a higher minimum wage. Aff evidence doesn't have the

same impact. Aff argues correctly that raising the minimum will increase take home pay for those receiving the increase, but by the above most of those aren't poor. Nothing shows that the increased spending is significant relative to the economy. Neg argues and Aff admits at one point that the higher minimum wage is still not a living wage. Raising the minimum will have some impact on income inequality, but it doesn't seem significant compared to the disparity cited by Aff. It may raise some 900,000 out of poverty, but Aff doesn't tell us how many poor there are (an Almanac, one of the three resources you are allowed to bring to a CDA tournament, has numbers like that in it!) If you know something about the US economy, that 900,000 is not inconsistent with the 80%/99% figure mentioned in the first sentence.

Some Aff evidence is questionable, and I will say more on "facts" below. Australia and France do not have lower unemployment rates than the US. The minimum wage might be \$21/hr if it matched productivity increases, but \$21/hr is a lot more than 50% of the median wage target as defined by the Aff (again, more on this below). I agree Neg doesn't raise these last two points specifically, but they do question the relevance of Australia and France as compared to the US, and question the impact of an increase in the minimum raise in general. As a rule I find it hard to credit items I know to be wrong though I don't hold mistakes like this against debaters.

So matching the three Aff contentions against the first two Neg contentions, it's at best a draw and probably tilts Neg. Either way that is a Neg win.

The Neg counterplan in their third contention doesn't affect my decision. It is clear from their presentation and answers in cross-ex that Neg doesn't understand the Earned Income Tax Credit. Aff briefly raises the "counterplan exclusivity argument" (see below) but again it is clear they don't really understand the argument or drive it home. Arguments for and against the counterplan are unclear and inconclusive.

Tactical issues

Neg does a better job of covering than Aff. The 1NC and 2NC both cover every contention of both teams in order and by name. 2AC drops the first Negative contention and it's unclear whether there is any reply to the second. (I credit a reply in my flow but this is generous on my part; it could have been just a further comment on the third contention.)

The first two Neg contentions directly clash with the Aff case, so you could say Aff replies by default, but they never tell me that is what they did. It looks like they are dropping arguments, whatever their intent. When contentions clash directly, a good debater should combine them and deal with them together, but make sure you explain to the judge that this is what you are doing while you are doing it.

Coverage isn't substance, but part of debate is making it clear to the judge that you have replied to all of your opponents' arguments. Neg does this, Aff does not.

The 2AC and the 1AR were also both almost 2 minutes short of using their full time, not a good sign in a Varsity debate.

Finally, the 2NR brings the debate to a voting issue: will Aff solve any of the problems it raises? (Which also turns out to be my RFD.) The 2AR tries to answer particular

outstanding arguments and ends with a pitch for the American Dream without dealing with the solvency issue or proposing another voting issue for the round. So Neg guides me to a decision and Aff does not.

Miscellany

There are a number of things I noticed or knew that the debaters may not have:

1. France and Australia do not have lower unemployment rates than the US, as Aff says. US unemployment has been below 6% for about a year. The packet cites Australia's at 6.1% (p. 9) and notes France is "significantly higher" (p. 5). French unemployment is actually in the 10% range.
2. Aff cites the packet as saying the minimum wage would be \$21 if it increased along with productivity over the years. But that is way higher than "50% of the median wage" Aff defines as its plan to "significantly raise the minimum wage." The national median is \$16.87 (p. 3), so 55% of that is \$9.28, which is lower than the lowest proposal in the packet (\$10.10) and way lower than the calls for \$12 or \$15 elsewhere in the packet. If Neg read the packet closely, they could have shown the Aff case achieves nothing by noting the Aff examples are all based on a minimum wages far higher than what Aff is proposing.
3. I would not have accepted the Aff definition. I would have challenged whether 50-55% of median wage is a "significant raise" and asked them to commit to a number. A stock argument to use whenever a motion calls for a "significant" change is to put Aff in a Goldilocks dilemma: usually too low has no impact, and too high has a lot of negative impacts, and "just right" is hard to find.

Both teams could read the packet more closely. I can understand that the first round may be a little rough, but you have a lot of time between rounds and during lunch. You should use some of that time to research things that came up in previous rounds so you are prepped for the next. If you make the finals you shouldn't be answering "I don't know" in cross-ex when the answer is in the packet.

Look It Up!

Over the summer a debater asked me how I know so much as we were discussing issues that came up in a round. The answer is I don't. But I look up anything I come across that I don't know. Aff and Neg have some homework to do, and I provide some answers here. And I had some homework too, and I give you what I found out below.

1. As noted, neither Neg or Aff understands the Earned Income Tax Credit. Basically, if you work and your income is low, instead of you paying taxes the government sends you a check to raise your income and encourage you to keep working. You can think of it as a tax refund when your income is too low to pay taxes, or a way of providing income-linked welfare using the income tax system. But both teams should look it up. There are two lessons here. First, don't use a counterplan if you can't explain it. Second, if your opponent can't explain their counterplan (or plan), use cross-ex to keep asking them to explain it until the truth is embarrassingly obvious. That's what

cross-ex is for, and it saves you the trouble of your having to explain it in order to discredit it.

2. “Counterplan exclusivity” is the argument that a counterplan and the plan must be incompatible in some way so that they both can’t be implemented at the same time. If Neg introduces a counterplan, there are three options³ on the table: do the plan; do the counterplan; do both. If you choose the first or third option, you are agreeing to adopt the plan, which means you are agreeing to adopt the resolution, so Aff wins. Neg has to show that the counterplan is better than either the plan or the plan plus the counterplan in order to win. If there is a reason the counterplan and the plan both can’t be implemented at the same time—counterplan exclusivity—you can eliminate the third option and limit the debate to comparing the plan with the counterplan. Otherwise you have to deal with all three. In this debate, Aff suggests in cross-ex that the counterplan isn’t exclusive, but never makes the full “do both” argument. Neg suggests in passing that the harm from the minimum wage increase would overwhelm the good from the expanded EITC, but also does not really make that argument either.
3. In the 1AR Aff quotes Russell (Bertrand, I assume) as to Russell’s something or other (which I didn’t catch) which is that “the burden of proof is on the believer” (which phrase I did catch). There are a number of problems here. First, it’s okay to use a reference that your audience—especially the judge—is familiar with. But using an obscure sophisticated reference you don’t clearly explain to the judge is probably a mistake. It’s possible the judge may be impressed by the fact that you are better read than he is, but that is a long shot. Second, Aff never explains why this is relevant to the debate. It was clear the intention was to impose a rule on the Negative requiring they do something and then explaining that they haven’t done it. But—see below—there are no rules of debate! Make the argument by clearly explaining to the judge what the Neg has failed to do and why that works in favor of the Aff. Finally, I look up anything I don’t know. I believe this is a reference to “Russell’s Teapot” which is specifically an argument about religion, or more broadly about making unfalsifiable assertions, which is not the case in this debate. (See “Russell’s Teapot” in Wikipedia.) Aff probably meant to say “he who asserts must prove” or *semper necessitas probandi incumbit ei qui agit*. (See “Legal burden of proof” in Wikipedia.) But this is also neither here nor there unless you tell me what your opponent asserted and how they didn’t prove it and why it should matter to the decision. Otherwise you are just asserting and guilty of the same sin.

And the point of all this is...

My critique here is about three pages typewritten, much more than any judge has time to write on a ballot even if there were space to write it legibly. You’ve probably never gotten a critique like this, and likely never will. But that is exactly my point: this is the sort of critique you should give yourself after every round. No one else is going to do it for you. Some of this you should do immediately at the tournament, especially if there

³ There is a fourth options: do nothing a stick with the status quo. But by introducing a counterplan, Neg basically discards that option.

are more rounds to debate, such as filling holes in your arguments. The rest you can do afterwards, on the ride home or days later.

There are several things you need. First, you have to take good notes during the round: if you don't have a good flow you won't remember what happened. The ballot comments may be useful, but you can't count on that. Second, you must have the patience to reconstruct the debate speech by speech and argument by argument. Third you have to have an open mind to recognize the good and the bad. Fourth, you have to do the work to improve the arguments and your knowledge of the subject.

If you can get a skilled third party to critique your performance that's great. But most of the time the only one you have to do it is you (and your partner). As a debater I learned to review and evaluate my own performance. Am I a good, unbiased judge of my own actions? Not always, but I keep trying.

The critique above is a sample of the thought process I go through. It takes time, effort and practice, but it is something you can learn to do.

The Negative Burden

It seemed to be the month for requests from debaters. I received an email from another team saying that the Negative in one of their rounds did not seem to defend the status quo. Isn't that, they asked, something the Negative is required to do?

In short: No. The Negative's objective is to defeat the Affirmative. Nothing else is required.

If the Aff is advocating a change from the status quo—which seems to be necessary given this month's resolution—then one way to do that is for the Neg to show the status quo is better than the world with the Aff proposal. But there are at least three other traditional strategies open to Neg. First, Neg can show that Aff has not demonstrated their proposal will achieve anything, in other words that the Aff has not carried its own case. A second way is to show that while the Aff proposal will do what it claims, it will result in other damage that outweighs any good that might occur. The disadvantages of adopting the resolution outweigh the advantages. A third way is to propose a counterplan, something that is not compatible with the Aff plan (remember counterplan exclusivity above) but produces a better result. So there you have the four traditional Negative strategies, only the first of which can be considered "supporting the status quo" in any direct sense.

There is also the question of what exactly is the status quo. For example, both the minimum wage and the EITC (a potential counterplan this month) already exist. Some cities and states have a much higher minimum wage than others. As noted above, in the final round I saw, I would have questioned whether the Aff's specific proposal met the requirement to "significantly raise the minimum wage" and was even challenging the status quo. Rather than argue over a definition, I would have attacked the Aff proposal as ineffective, providing no real benefit. But with respect to the issue here, depending on how the resolution is worded and what the Affirmative proposes, Aff may or may not be advocating a change in the status quo. So it may not make sense for Neg to defend it.

Debaters get caught up in supposed "rules" of debate without realizing that there are no rules of debate. Yes, we do enforce rules on the order and length of the speeches, and a certain degree of decorum and good behavior is expected. But all of the "rules of argument" are, as Captain Barbarossa said of the pirate code, more guidelines than actual rules.⁴

"Supporting the status quo" is one of those guidelines. Because the status quo exists, we know the status quo is possible. It's familiar, it works and we can point directly to its consequences, good and bad. Change is uncertain and risky, a step into the unknown. A change may or may not achieve the intended result and may or may not have unforeseen consequences. The status quo has a lot of momentum behind it which makes defending it probably the simplest Neg strategy. But it is not the only strategy, and in many debates it may not be the best one.

Finally, if you build a case assuming the rules force a certain course of action on your opponent, you are making a fatal mistake. Just because you think your opponent has to do something doesn't mean your opponent (or the judge) will agree. If you saw the movie "Ender's Game" there is a scene where Ender meets Ben Kingsley's character, Mazer Rackham, who says to him "No one but the enemy will tell you what the enemy is going to do." Build the strongest case you can on its own merits and be open to defend it from whatever attack comes. The rules of argument can help you prepare—they are the accumulated wisdom of the ages—but they cannot protect you against an opponent who decides to do something different.

⁴ See *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*