



Letter to Maud Younger  
Samuel Gompers, May 17, 1912  
in Peter J. Albert, Grace Palladino, eds,  
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Miss Maud Younger,  
2008 Lyons Street, San Francisco, Cal.  
My dear Miss Younger:

I have your favor of May fourth in which you say you are thinking of securing a minimum wage under the initiative and referendum next November,<sup>1</sup> and that some of you incline to a minimum wage of ten dollars per week or twenty cents an hour, which under the Eight Hour Law would equal nine dollars and sixty cents per week, for women. You say further that it will be as easy to get that as to get seven dollars per week. Further along in your letter you say: "Some of the legislative committee of the council wish to provide for twenty cents for women and thirty cents for men as a minimum, but I believe the labor movement as a whole stands for equal pay for equal work, etc., etc."

I trust that you will proceed with the utmost caution in any effort to establish a minimum wage by statutory law. Speaking fundamentally a minimum wage should be established and maintained by the organizations of labor. If a minimum wage law for working men is established by law, by the same token it is more than probable that it may finally transpire that another law will be enacted, compelling working men to work for such a minimum as a maximum. When that time comes, when by statutory enactment wages are set, it will only be another step to force working men to work at the behest of their employers, or at the behest of the State, which will be equivalent to, and will be, slavery.

We want a minimum wage established, but we want it established by the solidarity of the working men themselves through the economic forces of their trade unions, rather than by any legal enactment. The question of regulating wages by law is indeed a most delicate one, and it is questionable whether beneficial and lasting results would accrue to the working people of any country were wages fixed by statute. We see that now most glaringly in the cases of the civil service employes of the Federal Government, where it is physically impossible to adjust such wages or salaries in order that such public employes' income may correspond with the increasing cost of living.

I think it advisable to call to your attention, and trust that you will profit by it, this observation: many persons appear to be impressed with the notion that legal enactments will solve the labor problem, and much theorizing is indulged in relative to the extent to which legislation can favorably affect working people, but they fail to counterbalance their reasoning by recognizing a possibility that if laws can be

placed upon the statute books establishing minimum wages, and kindred measures, by the same process of reasoning, there may be other laws placed upon the statute books that will be extremely detrimental to the working people. Those who are familiar with the struggles of the workers must fully realize that the trade union method is by far the best and most substantial method to be employed to attain rights and advantages as well as to redress grievances of the workers.

Many partisan and side issue political movements are indulged in, with the deliberate calculation to attract working people so that they may be diverted from the substantial accomplishments of the trade unions. It is therefore timely to advise the members of the organizations of labor not to forget that their economic organizations must be preserved and strengthened, so that the improvements and advantages which their members have enjoyed in the past, may be not only maintained, but that they may have a substantial foundation upon which to build a better future.

From the knowledge I have been able to glean from history, and from other countries where legislative means have been utilized to interfere with the natural growth and development of the economic advance of the toilers, I am compelled to view such efforts with many misgivings, and the instance that you now portray of establishing minimum wages of twenty cents an hour for women and thirty cents an hour for men, is repulsive to our professed principles of equal pay for equal work, whether performed by men or by women. I think the preferable plan for you to attain your ends is to make an effort to secure a "prevailing rate of wages law" for employes of the State and the political sub-divisions thereof, and also to make it apply to those employed by contractors and sub-contractors doing public work for the State or its political sub-divisions. If you will follow these lines it will be found that you will not be hampered with any hard and fast established wage rate. The greatest freedom of action will be at your disposal, and in proportion to the strength of your organizations the wage rate can be increased and maintained by your own free will, without let or hindrance by statute or by interpretation of such statutes by courts. Such legal interpretations under a hard and fast minimum that you propose to establish might also make it to appear as the maximum wage, and then you see that you would be handicapped and the obstacles confronting you would have a most depressing effect upon individuals and upon organizations that are doing their best to improve conditions steadily.

The prevailing rate of wages idea has a stimulating effect, at least in two directions. First, it places the workers in an affirmative and aggressive position, and as a consequence they incessantly strive to emulate;

and in the second place, every success inspires them with confidence and resourcefulness, so that at almost all times they are capable of making a vigorous defense. Viewing the struggle from another aspect, it improves the quality of citizenship by such mental and physical activities. It inspires to a healthy discontent. It prevents them from saying, "let well enough alone." If they succeed in securing an advantage today, they want something better on the day following, and on the day succeeding that, they still want more and better things. Whereas, under any proposed minimum set by law, there is always the danger of indifference, lassitude, reaction and weakness that would eventually result in decay. We must not, we cannot, depend upon legislative enactments to set wage standards. When once we encourage such a system, it is equivalent to admitting our incompetency for self-government and our inability to seek better conditions.

Do nothing that will retard your growth or encumber your activities. Be always prepared to move forward. Invite no shackle that will prevent progress. Remember nature abhors a vacuum. There is no such thing in this life as standing still. We either go forward or backward. A prevailing rate of wages law will give you the opportunity to go ahead. A legally enacted minimum will say, "thus far and no farther." I hope you will have none of it, that is not for men. It may be justifiable and defensible for women, but if so, then only on the theory that they are in a sense the "wards of the state."

Trusting that these few observations may be of assistance to you in the problem that you have in hand, I remain, with much esteem,

Very truly yours, Saml Gompers.

President, American Federation of Labor.

TLpS, reel 166, vol. 178, pp. 1-5, SG Letterbooks, DLC.

1. No initiative or referendum question relating to the minimum wage appeared on the 1912 California ballot. In 1913, however, the state legislature enacted a measure establishing the California Industrial Welfare Commission and empowering it to set minimum wages and maximum hours for women and children (Laws of 1913, chap. 324).