**6 questions emerge as minimum wage rises**

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I’m confused about the minimum wage debate.

Although President-elect Donald Trump has vacillated on whether the nation needs a higher federal minimum wage – currently $7.25 an hour which hasn’t been changed since 2009 – his nominee for Labor secretary is decidedly no fan of any minimum wage.

Andy Puzder, the fast-food CEO running the Carl’s Jr. and Hardee’s chains, has been a loud critic of rising minimum wages and other worker protections. Why? To Pudzer et al, the wage rules unfairly raise the cost of doing business for restaurant operators and the like who heavily depend on low-paid workers.

However, raising the minimum wage seems certainly popular at the state level. On Jan. 1, California’s minimum went up 50 cents to $10.50 an hour for employers with 26 or more workers.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, 18 other states also raised the minimum wage this year either through legislation, ballot box initiatives or previously agreed-upon increases. Conversely, 21 states have a minimum wage at the national level.

While I certainly understand businesses’ cost-averse nature to keep and grow profits, I’m often confused at how industry’s critics of the minimum wage, especially those in consumer-centric businesses, seem to concurrently intertwine their disappointment with labor-friendly regulations into broader criticisms of the overall economy.

Don’t workers making higher salaries spread positive vibes – not to mention cash – throughout the business climate?

This hot debate directly impacts 2.6 million U.S. workers, according to Pew Research Center, just 2 percent of the workforce. But another 20.6 million, or 30 percent of the workforce, gets paid near minimum wage levels, Pew said.

Here are six things I can’t easily explain to myself about this debate.

**Too many?**

There maybe one item of somewhat near-universal agreement about the economic recovery: too many of the jobs created in the rebound out of the Great Recession paid wages at or not-too-far-above the minimum wage.

Some folks, those who often lean conservatively, tend to blame wrong-headed economic policies for these labor-growth shortcomings. More liberal critics like to blame penny-pinching business owners for small or stagnant paychecks.

Either way, the rebound also created many solid, high-paying jobs – careers that require high levels of education, experience and/or professional skills. And this growing flock of deep-pocketed people like to buy goods and services that frequently are created or provided by minimum-wage workers.

So business opportunity adds to this hard-to-solve puzzle.

**Too high?**

Numerous critics of minimum wages say it’s not the concept that’s bothersome, rather it’s that the bar is set too high.

The growing movement to move minimum wages to $15 an hour, as California has set in place for as soon as 2022, does put some business models in doubt. The higher cost-per hour of labor – on top of other salary regulations such as overtime rules – may force certain business owners to cut the number of minimum-wage workers they employ or limit the hours for workers who get paid at that level.

There’s plenty of academic debate surrounding whether higher minimum wages harm employment levels, with many studies suggesting these wage rules likely cap the bottom-paid workforce.

That said, we’re all complaining about the high number of low-paid jobs. So why would we worry if the minimum wage creates barriers to more of this work?

**Other costs?**

Higher labor costs are not the only challenge facing the many businesses that heavily use minimum-wage workers.

Commercial real estate owners are pushing up rents as vacant space becomes more scarce. Yes, you can hear quiet mutterings about the soaring real estate costs that have put numerous mom-and-pops out of business. I don’t see any major political push to limit what “greedy landlords” can charge.

Also, the cost of goods used by businesses is also on the rise, particularly for many food providers. I don’t hear, say, restaurant groups loudly protesting that possible Trump-era limits on future trade deals could push up the cost of imported meats and vegetables.

Why is the labor cost such a hot-button issue?

**Push buttons?**

One threat some business operators with minimum-wage workers have made – including labor secretary nominee Puzder – is that higher labor costs will bring automation to the replace that low-paid worker.

Technology advancements could slash the need for certain minimum-wage, customer-service positions. Like order-takers at fast-food joints.

Is that all bad? I’m not sure as a consumer I would complain too much if I ordered electronically, as I already do at Starbucks. At least I know my order is put into the system correctly!

The East Coast’s Sheetz convenience store chain has used touchscreen ordering for its food offerings for decades. It’s a perfectly acceptable experience.

And one thing the human cashier does that a machine doesn’t do well? Up-selling the customers. You know, the annoying “would you like fries with that?” It’s a big moneymaker.

**Higher prices?**

As the anti-minimum-wage argument goes, consumers better prepare to pay more for goods and services provided by workers at the low-end of the pay scale.

When other costs are on the rise – food, rent, utilities or other supplies – businesses adapt. So what’s the rub with wages? And now we are seeing a shortage of workers at the low-end of the pay scale in some industries, and wages paid have risen above the minimums. Any noteworthy complaints?

When costs are up, bosses have always faced tough choices: Raise prices, cut profits or retool the strategy behind the pricier part of the business equation.

And if I have to pay extra so a server can make a better wage, I won’t complain.

**‘Those’ workers?**

Indirectly, the minimum wage debate crosses paths with the possible immigration upheaval.

It’s no great secret that many workers getting paid minimum wage don’t have the legal right to work. If Trump’s promise to deport millions of undocumented workers and their families is kept, who will do the work in industries like restaurants, retail, tourism, agriculture and building services?

Are there huge numbers of unemployed Americans ready to pick up this work?

And in those same industries with leaders today loudly complaining about higher minimum wages, what do they expect will happen to the supply of employees and/or wages if that undocumented workforce is no longer available?

Like I said. It’s confusing.