

Empower workers with higher pay

By Keith Mestrich

Right now, despite many bank CEOs making tens of millions of dollars each year, the average bank teller makes just \$25,800. Here in New York, 39 percent of bank tellers are forced to rely on public assistance programs just to make ends meet. This is morally wrong, yes, but it's also just bad business.

In a few short generations, the wage gap between the average CEO and the average worker has increased significantly, making it harder and harder for working people to join the middle class, and leaving their spending power greatly diminished from where it would have been just decades ago. Since 1973, productivity has gone up 75 percent, but pay has only gone up 9 percent.

At the same time, New York

has become one of the most expensive states in the country. The rising cost of living means that working families need a higher wage to simply make ends meet, let alone thrive.

In the face of this growing income inequality, we have an opportunity to set a nationwide precedent and bring \$15.3 billion in new spending power into New York's economy. Lawmakers should agree to increase the state's minimum wage to \$15, as proposed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Raising the minimum wage will empower more than 3.2 million New York workers to spend at local businesses, bringing new money into local economies and reducing the burden currently placed on public assistance programs. This money will bolster business earnings, and give all low-wage workers the opportunity

to invest in local goods and services.

At Amalgamated Bank, we made a decision in August of last year to pay our employees a livable wage. Making the change to a \$15 minimum wage not only formalized our recognition of our employees' worth, it increased our customers' faith in our commitment to empowering people.

The banking industry is not alone in its underpayment of workers; 56 percent of home care workers in the state are enrolled in some form of public assistance program, and 30 percent are on food stamps. These workers, whose industries are expected to grow the most by 2022, are having their wages subsidized by government programs instead of being paid fairly by their employers. All taxpayers are supporting corporate profits and CEO salaries,

holding back our potential for economic growth.

For-profit and not-for-profit companies should embrace the proposed wage increase as a tool to both bolster their consumers' confidence in the quality of their work, and as a chance to preserve the integrity of our state's economy as a whole.

Every business in New York has a stake in seeing our economy grow.

By increasing the minimum wage, lawmakers will be endorsing the not-so-radical notion that all workers deserve the chance to provide for their families, and that our economy does better when we work together.

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