

The Delray Democrat

Henceforth: “Nine Pennies for Everyone!” And the People Were Happy!¹

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Yes, Florida’s minimum wage just went up from \$8.56 an hour to \$8.65. Nine cents. And in the last election, Floridians approved a minimum wage hike to \$15 an hour. But that doesn’t take effect until 2026, when we’ll surely see a concomitant cost of living increase. Indexed for inflation, how much buying power will that \$15 really have? Prices in 2020 are 18.46 times higher than 1938, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Today’s dollar buys only 5.42% of what it did in 1938.

The Founders believed “the pursuit of happiness” to be an inalienable right, to be secured by “governments instituted among men.”

Today we call it The American Dream. And millions have enjoyed a quality of life unimaginable in other parts of the world. But the Dream is fragile. In 1929, as one example, that pursuit of happiness devolved into a struggle for sheer survival. President Roosevelt brought the nation back from the brink by using the powers of a strong, central government, a core principle of the Democratic Party.

To Roosevelt, the pursuit of happiness meant access to adequate food, clothing and shelter, with equitable pay to obtain those basics.

In his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt described the challenge: “We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people—whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth—is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure.”

Yet the Republicans have been quite content to allow the working poor of America to live like their antecedents in Victorian England.

Democratic presidents brought us Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment benefits, the Affordable Care Act, and more, saving millions from homelessness, illness, and starvation. However, a combination of corporate greed, congressional prostitution and the Republicans’ “bootstrap” doctrine has left a large segment of the population in gaping economic disparity and hopeless poverty.

Workers can put in a 40-hour week and not make enough to afford a one-bedroom apartment.

In 1938, Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act, guaranteeing a minimum wage of 25 cents per hour, about \$10 for a 40-hour week. That \$10 could buy a lot more than it can today.

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, January 2021, p. 3.

To effect real change, we've got to stop pretending that a "minimum wage" is the corrective and demand a "living wage" for all workers.

Meet Our Neighbor in Delray Beach. Her 40-hour, minimum wage weekly gross pay came to \$346.00, or \$1,499.33 a month. After the basic withholding taxes for Social Security and Medicare (7.65%), she netted \$1,384.63. (This example doesn't reflect other deductions that apply to different workers.) She's sitting at her kitchen table figuring out how to survive on that \$1,384.63.

- Housing. The average rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Delray Beach, FL is currently \$1,500. According to the Palm Beach County Housing Assistance of FL, applications for housing choice vouchers are closed. This writer called various programs and found some wait lists are 7 years long.
- Food. To qualify for Food Stamps, she can't make more than \$1,383 gross per month or \$1,064 net. If she qualifies, she will get \$44.50 in Food Stamps. They can't be used for toilet paper, detergent, shampoo or Tylenol.

Assistance for Our Neighbor's other critical needs can't be determined in this writing because of the variables. But this is what she faces:

- Medical Care. She will apply for Medicaid assistance, but she's worried. Only 42,000 Floridians are currently covered; 846,000 eligible people are denied Medicaid because our Republican governor refuses virtually free federal funds under the Affordable Care Act.
- Child Care. For working parents, there is subsidized childcare but it's dependent on availability. Otherwise, day care for one infant in Florida costs an average of \$770 per month; \$607 for a preschooler. Many places charge far more.

Our Neighbor puts her pencil down in despair. What of clothing, electricity, phone, car payments, gasoline, auto insurance (or transportation costs if she has no car), tenant's insurance and miscellaneous items such as haircuts or postage stamps?

She will try to get a second job. But who will care for the children in those extra hours? And if she makes just a little too much, she loses benefits. For her and millions like her, there is no pursuit of happiness. Just a struggle for survive.