

CAFÉ J and the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage by Scott Myers-Lipton



Historical Background:

In 2010, the cost of living in the U.S. was going up, while wages for the working class were stagnant. In Silicon Valley, rent was \$1,600 for an apartment, gasoline was \$4 a gallon, and the cost of tuition had increased by 141% over the past several years. At that time, minimum wage was \$8 an hour in San José, which if working full-time, wasn't even enough to rent an apartment. Since the majority of SJSU students work during their college-years, and with about one-quarter of them making minimum wage, and many more making just above minimum wage, it was the perfect storm.¹

It all began when Marisela Castro, an SJSU student and daughter of farmworkers, was working at an afterschool program. At that program, Marisela saw kids taking snacks and putting them into their backpacks. When she asked the kids about why they were taking the food that was meant for the students in the program, they disclosed that they did this because they didn't have enough food at home, and their brothers and sisters were hungry. Marisela asked them if their father and mother were working, and the kids told her that both of them were working, but they were at minimum wage, so there wasn't enough money to buy food sometimes. Moreover, Marisela learned that one of the dad's was working two jobs, making it difficult to provide the necessary support structure for their children to be successful in school. Marisela was outraged.

During her Wealth, Poverty and Privilege course, she told Professor Myers-Lipton the story and said, "Profe, we have to do something. This can't continue for another generation." In the course, the students had read about raising the minimum wage at the local level, and after class, she came up to the professor to discuss the possibility of doing this in San José. Dr. Myers-Lipton told her that there was no action component in the Wealth, Poverty and Privilege course, but there was an action component in Social Action, and that she should consider taking it the following semester, which she did.

The Events:

ELISHA IS WORKING TO PUT HERSELF THROUGH SCHOOL AND SUPPORT HER FAMILY... SHE SHOULD MAKE A FAIR WAGE.



"\$8 dollars an hour just isn't enough to support myself and my 6-year old son in San Jose. With the high cost of day care and rent, a modest increase in the minimum wage to \$10 an hour will give single mothers like myself a better chance at being self-sufficient."

*Elisha St. Laurent
SJSU Student and Mother*

VOTE YES ON MEASURE D



At the beginning of the next semester, Marisela presented her idea of raising the minimum wage to her Soci. 164: Social Action class, and three students—Leila McCabe, Saul Gonzalez, and Heather Paulson—decided to join her campaign. First, the students reviewed the literature and found that the research showed that three cities had already significantly increased their citywide minimum wage: San Francisco (\$10.24 an hour), Santa Fe, New Mexico (\$10.29 an hour), and Washington, DC (\$8.25 an hour). Furthermore, the raise in the wage did not increase the unemployment rate or had little to no negative impact on small businesses because they generally passed on the cost by raising prices slightly. In fact, the research showed that there was a positive impact on businesses since minimum-wage workers stayed in their jobs longer.²

After several meetings, these four students decided to put forward a city-wide ballot measure to be voted on to raise the minimum wage from \$8 to \$10, with an annual cost of living increase. The students named their group the Campus Alliance for Economic Justice (CAFÉ J), and for four consecutive Social Action classes, the students—including two amazing student leaders, Elisha St. Laurent and Diana Crumedy—worked on this issue. During the two-year campaign, the students and their allies tabled, conducted a poll, held rallies and sleepouts, gathered signatures, and made 1,000s of phone calls to potential voters. The students' main target was the voting population of San José, with a secondary target being the City Council, since they had the power to enact the measure once the students and their allies had gathered 36,000 signatures, which was considerably more than was necessary.

In November of 2012, the students along with the help of their labor, faith, and non-profit allies, had a huge victory, as San José voters passed the minimum wage increase by 60% to 40%. This increase to the minimum wage was one of the largest one-time increases in the history of the nation, and it won easily, even though the students and their allies were outspent 10 to 1.³

Students push for faster wage increases



Caitlyn Sullivan, a member of CAFE J and a San Jose State student, speaks out about her issue with the 15 dollar wage change going into effect in 2022.

By Jose Munguia
Staff writer

Members of SJSU Campus Alliance for Economic Justice (CAFE J) hosted a rally Monday afternoon to voice their opinions to San Jose City Council members on the new law that will increase minimum wage to \$15 by 2022.

The students protested that the minimum wage increase of \$15 needs to come into effect by 2018, rather than 2022.

The cost of living in San Jose has increased over time, with it being named the third most expensive city to live in. The cost of living in San Jose is more than living in Los Angeles.

"Not only does the living cost affect students with increasing their hours at work, but it impacts their grades while at school," said Caitlyn Sullivan, rally organizer and junior sociology major.

Sullivan also discussed the struggles of working in a city where you can afford so little. "I actually work retail so I know the struggle of having to pay for everything. When I was making minimum wage I would be working 40 hours a week," Sullivan said. When I was called to come into work I would choose work over school because I needed

the money." Mountain View and Sunnyvale have already passed a bill to have the \$15 minimum wage go into effect in 2018. The increases would start at \$11 beginning this year, \$13 in 2017 and \$15 by 2018. CAFE J is fighting to have the increase be a regional effect, meaning all of the mayors from San Jose, Los Gatos, Cupertino, Los Altos and Santa Clara would have to pass a similar bill.

Guest speakers, such as City Councilmember Don Rocha, said it was time the rest of the council took a look into this matter. Other speakers included NAACP member Jeff Moore, who said if San Jose can't have a mayor that can make this happen, the city should find someone that will.

CAFE J presented the average cost of living in a two-bedroom apartment in San Jose \$2,750. In some instances people and families would have to pack a two-bedroom apartment with more than four people.

SJSU student Chris Doan has struggled to make ends meet, but still enjoys attending school.

"No matter what minimum wage is, it still doesn't let you enjoy

anything. When people ask me what we do in San Jose, I say we work (and) that's it," Doan said.

Doan was a student affected by the high cost of living in San Jose. He has couch surfed from place to place since starting to attend SJSU.

"What job opportunity do students really have? One semester you can work in the morning and attend night class, then the next semester you switch. It's hard to find a job nowadays that is actually flexible with your school schedule," Doan said.

The rally drew a crowd outside City Hall in hopes of making their voice heard to the council members. CAFE J plans on attending the City Council panel discussion and accountability session at SJSU on April 27.

CAFE J was the first in Silicon Valley that got the ball rolling when minimum wage was raised to \$10 and want to continue that trend and be the first to increase it to \$15 by 2018.

Follow Jose on Twitter
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■ Refer to page 6 for more on the minimum wage changes.

In the years since the implementation of San Jose's \$10 minimum wage, the results were all positive, as the numbers of businesses grew, unemployment was reduced, the number of minimum-wage jobs had expanded, and the average employee hours remained constant. In the fall of 2016, CAFÉ J students worked with the Mayor, City Council, and community groups to push the minimum wage to \$15 by 2019.⁴

Resources:

- "Measure D", Albert Hernandez, October 14, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-OoyidhWY (accessed February 4, 2018).
- "Vote YES on Measure D, Nov 6 2012", Sacred Heart CS, October 30, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB6LTknmUPM (accessed February 4, 2018).
- "Raise the Wage, To Raise My Son", Silicon Valley De-Bug, October 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbrVNa0MHwE> (accessed February 4, 2018).
- Julia Reis, "San José State Students Led Winning Campaign to Raise Minimum Wage", Peninsula Press, November 9, 2012 <http://peninsulapress.com/2012/11/09/san-jose-state-students-wage-winning-campaign-to-raise-minimum-wage> (accessed February 4, 2018)
- Melissa Harris Perry, "San José Students Champion Citywide Minimum Wage Increase," MSNBC, December 7, 2012, www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/san-jose-students-champion-citywide-minimum-wage-increase-11596355925 (accessed February 4, 2018).

¹ Nona Willis Aronowitz, "The Off Line Wage Wars of Silicon Valley", *Next City*, August 12, 2013, <https://nextcity.org/features/view/the-offline-wage-wars-of-silicon-valley> (accessed November 14, 2017).

² Aronowitz, "The Off Line Wage Wars of Silicon Valley"; Gabriel Thompson, "How Students in San Jose Raised the Minimum Wage, *The Nation*, December 17, 2012, www.thenation.com/article/how-students-san-jose-raised-minimum-wage (accessed November 14, 2017).

³ John Woolfolk, “San Jose Voters Embrace Minimum Wage Hike,” *San Jose Mercury News*, November 6, 2012, www.mercurynews.com/ci_21943918/san-jose-minimum-wage-hike-leads-early-returns (accessed November 17, 2017).

⁴ Scott Myers-Lipton and Patrick Quyo, “San Jose Minimum Wage: A Year-Old Success Story,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2014/03/10/san-jose-minimum-wage-a-year-old-success-story> (accessed November 17, 2017); Bruce Druzin, “Berkeley Study: Here's How SJ Minimum Wage Raise Impacted Restaurants,” *Silicon Valley Business Journal*, November 30, 2016, www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/news/2016/11/30/heres-how-sj-minimum-wage-impacted-restaurants.html (accessed November 17, 2017).

Chapter 8