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The Strange Black Lives Matter Partnership With Fight For \$15

BY: LT. COL. ALLEN B. WEST

Following recent minimum-wage setbacks in Baltimore, Flagstaff, Ariz., and Miami Beach, the Fight for \$15 is attempting today to regain its momentum for raising the minimum wage — with another round of coordinated protests in major cities nationwide.

This marks at least the twelfth coordinated Fight for \$15 protest paid for by the Service Employees International Union since 2012. To keep the protest fresh for the media and ensure its quota of sympathetic news stories, the Fight for \$15 has partnered with the activist group Black Lives Matter.

"What we both realize is we're stronger when we operate together," says Fight for \$15 organizing director Kendell Fells.

It's a strange association for many reasons. For unions, which have spent upward of \$100 million on the Fight for \$15 in recent years, they risk alienating some of their more centrist supporters by partnering with a group built on the misconception that there is an epidemic of racially motivated police shootings.

But the association is even weirder for Black Lives Matter, given the role of minimum-wage increases in creating additional barriers to black employment.

A recent review of minimum-wage research by economists at the San Francisco Federal Reserve concludes, "A higher minimum wage results in some job loss for the least-skilled workers — with possibly larger adverse effects than earlier research suggested." Because they often face failing public schools and divided families, black job-seekers are often less skilled than their counterparts and are disproportionately

impacted by such entry-level wage increases.

According to a report last year by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, roughly one in three black men aged 18 to 34 is either jobless or incarcerated. Among those without a high school education, that figure approaches two in three. The CBO cites the numerous recent minimum-wage increases at the state and local level as a cause of this employment carnage.

Ironically, unemployment among black youth is worst in the cities where Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter are protesting today. In Philadelphia, the current rate of black teen unemployment is 27%. In Baltimore, it's 35%. In New York City and Los Angeles County, it's 33%. In metro Atlanta, where I grew up, it's 38%. And in Washington, D.C., it's 39%. In black neighborhoods in these cities the unemployment rate regularly exceeds 50%.

Now is not the time to increase barriers to employment for black youth by dramatically increasing the minimum wage. Black youngsters need a job more than a raise.

Why aren't these staggering black unemployment statistics common knowledge? Because for minimum-wage or black activists to acknowledge them would mean admitting that the minimum wage has nothing to do with the problems facing the black community. In fact, to the extent that the minimum wage keeps black people out of the workforce, it exacerbates their problems.

Such an admission would mean having to tackle issues facing black communities today that are not politically correct.

These include divided families, broken public schools, gang violence and a lack of entrepreneurial opportunity.

Rather than supporting counterproductive increases to the wage floor, activists should fight to raise the wage ceiling for average job-seekers. In other words, fight for \$50,000-a-year careers, not \$15-an-hour mandates. Fight for victors, not victims.

This is not a far-fetched goal. Roughly half of the current 5.6 million unfilled jobs nationally pay this amount or more. These include hundreds of thousands of jobs in fields like sales, maintenance and trades.

But before job-seekers can get these good jobs, they first need jobs in which they can gain a toehold on the bottom rung of the career ladder and learn soft skills like customer-service, communication, and camaraderie to quickly move up it. For black youths, who often don't get this training at home or in the classroom, this is especially important.

As Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen highlighted in her speech to the National Community Reinvestment Coalition last week, the research connection between entry-level jobs and career prospects is robust. To win the fight for \$50,000, these jobs must be protected.

The black community has many issues to protest about today. The minimum wage is not one of them.

Lt. Col. West (retired) is a former U.S. Member of Congress, current executive director of the National Center for Policy Analysis and an advisor to the Job Creators Network.