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**KENNEDY: TODAY'S VOTE ON MINIMUM WAGE WILL TEST WHETHER WE
ARE SERIOUS ABOUT FIGHTING POVERTY
*REPUBLICAN PLAN HAS ANTI-WORKER POISON PILLS THAT WOULD HURT
MILLIONS***

Washington, DC: Today at 4:30 pm the Senate will vote on two proposals on minimum wage: Senator Kennedy's amendment and the Republican plan that contains anti-worker poison pills. Last night, to ensure bipartisan support, Kennedy changed the amount of the increase to match the amount of the Republican plan, but without their poison pills. Kennedy reached across the aisle to ensure that a minimum wage increase has the best chance of success given dire and urgent circumstances facing the 37 million Americans living in poverty. The Republican amendment, offered by Senator Enzi, is loaded with anti-worker provisions that would severely hurt millions and millions of workers, including those that a minimum wage increase is supposed to protect.

Kennedy's new proposal -- which he considers just a down payment -- would raise the minimum wage to \$6.25; currently the minimum wage is \$5.15. In March, 50 Senators supported Kennedy's initial plan to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 while an additional 35 supported the Republican plan to raise it to \$6.25 -- so clearly there should be broad bipartisan support for raising it \$1.10.

"The Bush Administration and Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have talked a lot about poverty in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But actions speak louder than words. These two amendments will test whether we are truly serious about fighting poverty," Senator Kennedy said. "If we are serious about helping hard-working families, we will give a fair raise to America's low-income workers without taking away essential protections or allowing special interests to trump states' rights. The Republican amendment will actually plunge more children into poverty, and that's simply unacceptable."

The minimum wage hasn't been increased since 1997, yet during that time Americans increasingly feel the squeeze of the Bush economy. Americans are spending 74 percent more on gas than they did at the beginning of 2001. Heating oil prices are expected to rise by 56 percent this winter. Such rapid price increases will force consumers, especially the poor, to cut spending on clothing, health care and food just so they can get to work and keep warm this winter.

Hurricane Katrina demonstrated in stark terms that so many Americans live every day on the brink of economic disaster and for them any setback becomes a major obstacle to survival.

Below are two floor speeches, which Kennedy plans to give during today's debate.

**Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy
Against the Enzi Amendment
October 18, 2005**

For eight long years, Democrats have been trying to pass an increase in the minimum wage from its current level of \$5.15 an hour. For employees working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, that's \$10,700 a year – \$5,000 below the poverty line for a family of three.

That's why I've offered the Kennedy amendment, which will raise the minimum wage to \$6.25 an hour in two steps – by 55 cents 6 months after enactment, and by another 55 cents one year later. This increase is simply corrects for inflation since the last minimum wage increase in 1997.

This is not an ideal increase – it's a down payment. Much more needs to be done. But we owe it to the millions of Americans suffering in poverty to make every effort to get a bill passed that will provide them with some assistance in their struggle to stay afloat in this difficult economy.

My colleague, Senator Enzi, has also introduced a bill today that would increase the minimum wage by \$1.10 per hour, over the same timeframe as my amendment. But my amendment is two pages, while the Enzi Amendment is 87 pages. That's right – 87 pages. Friends, it just doesn't take 87 pages to raise the minimum wage.

Why so long? Because increasing the minimum wage is not the real goal of the Enzi amendment. That proposal would increase the minimum wage with one hand, while taking away minimum wage, overtime, and equal pay rights from millions of workers with the other hand. The Senator from Wyoming has a record of opposing an increase in the minimum wage. He has voted against it, time and again, over the last 10 years.

Today is no different. The Enzi amendment is loaded with anti-worker poison pills that would severely hurt millions and millions of workers, including those that a minimum wage increase is supposed to protect. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing, and it's a threat to American workers. By ending the individual coverage under the Fair Labor Standards Act and raising the threshold to \$1 million a year, 10 million workers currently protected by the Fair Labor Standards Act would no longer be eligible for the minimum wage, no longer eligible for overtime pay, and no longer eligible for equal pay rights. This dramatic change hurts the garment worker working 80 hours a week to provide for her family. It also hurts her husband, a janitor, who relies on overtime to pay for food, rent, and schoolbooks for their children. Both will lose their FLSA coverage under this amendment, and both will lose access to overtime pay.

The Enzi amendment also prohibits states from providing stronger wage protections than the federal standard for tipped employees like waiters and waitresses. Thirty-one states have elected to provide stronger protections for tipped employees than the federal law. Seven of these states require that tipped employees be paid the full minimum wage. The Enzi Amendment would preclude states from adopting more generous protections for workers, trampling upon states rights.

This intrusion into states rights hurts the single mom with two kids working as a waitress in Minnesota. She will lose her guaranteed right to an employer-paid minimum wage under the Enzi amendment, leaving her paycheck and her children less secure.

The Enzi Amendment would be the death of the 40-hour workweek and the American weekend.

After the Administration's denial last year of overtime protections for 6 million workers, this proposal would further undermine overtime by allowing employers to refuse to pay workers up to ten hours of earned overtime pay every two weeks.

This hurts all workers who are eligible for overtime, not just those that make the minimum wage. It means a pay cut of \$3,000 a year for a median income earner (\$44,000/year) and an \$800 pay cut for minimum wage workers. Employers are already free to offer more flexible schedules under current law—the only difference is that now they have to pay workers overtime when they work more than 40 hours in a week.

The Enzi amendment gives a free pass to violators of a broad range of consumer, environmental, and labor protections by prohibiting federal agencies from assessing civil fines for most first-time reporting violations. It also preempts states' ability to enforce these laws. This hurts all of us. It would tie the hands of federal and state agencies trying to enforce federal laws designed to protect families and children and communities. It would weaken gun safety protections under the Brady Act, which could lead to an increase in weapon sales to criminals, jeopardizing our neighborhoods and our children's safety. It would weaken environmental laws that require companies to disclose their toxic emissions, and undermine consumer protection laws that require companies to report on the safety of their food. These provisions put our children at risk of increased exposure to pollution and toxic substances and increase their chances of becoming seriously ill from unsafe foods.

The Enzi Amendment also provides tax breaks for small businesses. While I question whether this is the right time for tax relief,

I have no objection to this proposal in principle. But we can find many ways to help small businesses without denying rights to millions of Americans. We have worked together in the past to provide a reasonable small business tax package along with the minimum wage, and I am more than willing to do that again.

Actions speak louder than words. The Bush Administration and Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have talked a lot about poverty in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But these two amendments will test whether we are truly serious about fighting poverty. If we are serious about helping hard-working families, we will give a fair raise to America's low-income workers without taking away essential protections or allowing special interests to trump states' rights. The Enzi amendment will actually plunge more children into poverty, and that's simply unacceptable.

It is shameful that in America today, the richest and most powerful nation on earth, nearly a fifth of all children go to bed hungry at night because their parents, many of whom are working full time at the minimum wage, still can't make ends meet. It's long past time for a fair increase in the minimum wage.

I've reached across the aisle to cooperate on this issue. I'm offering a clean bill that's just a minimum wage increase with no special interest perks or hidden poison pills. My proposal is not radical -- all it would do is correct for inflation since the last minimum wage increase. It just keeps minimum wage workers from slipping further behind when prices are spiraling out of

control. That's the least we owe to hard-working American families.

I urge my colleagues to support this amendment, and improve the lives of millions of American families.

**Statement of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on
Raising the Minimum Wage**
October 19, 2005

If the images that we saw on our television screens after the recent hurricanes have taught us anything, it is that a substantial part of America today is invisible and forgotten. It's a part of our country that we don't often see and don't often think about, and it's populated by families who live lives of hardship and quiet desperation because of poverty. The images are a shocking reminder that the American dream remains out of reach for millions of working families.

These Americans work as hard as anyone else – often harder. But the minimum wage that many receive cannot cover their bills or support their families. They can't afford the rising cost of higher education, so they don't send their children to college. They can't afford the rising cost of prescription drugs, so they don't take the drugs they need, and often they don't go to the doctor either.

Each paltry paycheck brings impossible decisions:

Do I pay my rent, or pay for heat, or pay for food, or pay for my new child's clothes?

In the current economy, these choices will only get more difficult. To anyone who has gone to the gas station or filled a prescription lately, it's no surprise to hear that costs of basic necessities are skyrocketing. Americans are spending 74 percent more on gas than they did at the beginning of 2001. Heating oil prices are expected to rise by 56 percent this winter. Consumer inflation is at its highest level in 25 years. Struggling families are being squeezed in every direction by the Bush economy. Many working families are balancing on a cliff of piling bills, just hoping they won't topple over.

While these costs are rising rapidly, wages are stagnant, especially for those most vulnerable workers at the lowest end of the wage scale. The minimum wage hasn't changed in nine years -- it's been \$5.15 an hour since 1997.

During this time, due to the effects of inflation, the real value of the minimum wage has declined by 17 percent. Thus, minimum wage workers are effectively, making 17 percent less than they used to. A minimum wage worker who works 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, makes about \$10,700 each year. For a single parent with two children, that's \$4,500 below the poverty line.

People who work hard and play by the rules should not have to live in poverty. It is shameful that in America today, the richest and most powerful nation on earth, nearly a fifth of all children

go to bed hungry at night because their parents, many of whom are working full time at the minimum wage, still can't make ends meet.

As everyone in this body knows, I have pressed for years to secure an increase in the minimum wage for workers. The proposal I advance today is not an ideal increase – it's a down payment. Much more needs to be done.

But we owe it to the millions of Americans suffering in poverty to make every effort to get a bill passed that will provide them with some assistance in their struggle to stay afloat in this difficult economy. It's long past time for a fair increase in the minimum wage.

So today I have reached across the aisle to work with my Republican colleagues and find a minimum wage increase that everyone can agree upon. The Kennedy Amendment would increase the minimum wage to \$6.25 an hour in two steps – by 55 cents 6 months after enactment, and by another 55 cents one year later.

Fifty members of this body, from both sides of the aisle, supported my last minimum wage proposal that would have raised the minimum wage by \$2.10. Thirty-five more voted for an alternate proposal to increase the minimum wage by \$1.10 – the same increase that I propose today.

There's just no reason why this Amendment should not pass with overwhelming bipartisan support. It's a clean bill that's just a minimum wage increase with no special interest perks or hidden poison pills

All this increase does is adjust for inflation since the last minimum wage increase in 1997. It just keeps minimum wage workers from slipping further behind when prices are spiraling out of control. It ensures that minimum wage workers can afford to heat their homes, and drive to work, and put food on the table every day. That's the least we owe to hard-working American families.

In today's economy, millions of Americans are suffering. 7.7 million are unemployed. 37 million are living in poverty, including 13 million children. Almost 46 million are without health insurance. As the pictures of Katrina and Rita so powerfully demonstrated, real faces are behind these numbers, and real lives are being jeopardized day after day, year after year by our delay in Congress.

We have the chance today to make a change that will help these people. That's what we're supposed to do. It's the least we owe to hard-working American families. I urge my colleagues to support this Amendment.

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