

# State Supreme Court Upholds SeaTac's Minimum Wage Law

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**Voters approved a \$15 minimum wage for SeaTac in 2013.** COURTESY OF WORKING WASHINGTON

In a 5-4 decision today, the Washington State Supreme Court upheld the city of SeaTac's \$15-an-hour minimum wage law and ruled that it **should apply to hospitality and airport workers**. The ruling is a win for workers and labor advocacy groups and a loss for Alaska Airlines and the Washington Restaurant Association, [who fought the law](#).

In its decision, the court wrote, "There has been no showing that this law would interfere with airport operations." Today's ruling overturns a [lower judge's decision](#) that the port has exclusive jurisdiction over the airport.

"Thousands of hard-working men and women at the airport are sending each other jubilant text messages, happy that they will finally get the fair pay and paid sick leave approved by the voters 20 months ago," said Heather Weiner, spokesperson for Yes for SeaTac. "It's too bad Alaska Airlines and the Port of Seattle tried to block fair pay and paid sick leave for 4,700 people, but we're confident justice will be served when the workers receive their back pay going back to January 1, 2014."

"Once again, it takes the court system to remind employers, even public agencies like the port, that, as Woody Guthrie said, 'This land was made for you and me,'" said marine biologist [Fred Felleman](#), a candidate for port commissioner.

Today's opinion arrived after a two-year battle over SeaTac's voter-approved Proposition 1, which established a \$15 minimum wage and paid sick and safe time for hospitality and transportation workers. Even before voters approved the ballot measure,

airport businesses, including Alaska Airlines and the Washington Restaurant Association, [sued the city](#), arguing that the port has exclusive jurisdiction over the airport and that federal law preempted the local law. Weeks after voters approved the new minimum wage, a King County judge ruled that because the Port of Seattle was its own jurisdiction, the city's rules didn't apply. The Port of Seattle agreed with the ruling.

According to Working Washington, because of the ongoing court battle, about **4,700 people** working for airline contractors, cargo handlers, rental car companies, and other businesses in the airport were not being paid the higher minimum wage or given paid sick leave, which is also included in the law. By [Working Washington's calculations](#), that totals about \$15 million in lost wages and benefits.

The group highlights what that can mean for low-wage workers:

Airport workers covered by Prop 1 [SeaTac's minimum wage law] currently make an average of \$1,472 a month, **just below the federal poverty threshold** for a family of three (\$1,590) and far below a monthly budget required to make ends meet in the region for a family of three (\$4,136).

Socrates Bravo, 26, has worked for Alaska Airlines' subcontractor Menzies Aviation for close to 4 years. Sharing a Seatac apartment with roommates, he works **60-70 hours/week** to make enough to take care of his young daughter and to pay for classes at CWU in Criminal Justice, where he expects a degree this year.

Luis Careno, 44, has worked for Menzies since 2006, hired just months after Alaska Airlines **fired 500 employees** and replaced them with Menzies workers. He started working at Menzies for just \$9.75/hour and today, after almost a **decade at the company**, he makes the same as a new hire at \$12/hour. He lives in Seatac and pays child support for his 10-yr old daughter.

Last year, the port passed its own minimum wage ordinance that would have gradually elevated certain airport workers' salaries to \$15.50 by 2017. Still, it only applied to workers with access to restricted areas, and hasn't yet been enforced. Airlines for America is now suing the Port of Seattle over its own minimum wage ordinance.

Meanwhile, calls for a \$15 minimum wage are hitting other cities in the region and across the country.

Today's ruling is "just **one more accelerant for the national \$15 movement**," wrote SEIU 775 president David Rolf, who helped lead the work on Seattle's minimum wage, in an e-mail today.

"I don't think we've reached the tipping point yet on a \$15 national minimum wage," Rolf said, "but what's increasingly clear is that **\$15 is not going away**. Workers and voters are sick of waiting for politicians and CEOs to get this right. The question for today: Will workers have to **sue Alaska airlines and others for back pay**? Or will the Port, Alaska Airlines, and the myriad low-wage subcontractors that do business at the airport finally acknowledge that Prop 1 is the law and issue back pay checks tomorrow?"

At an unrelated city council meeting today, Council Member Kshama Sawant called the ruling a "huge victory" for workers and a "**huge smackdown**" for employers who've tried to stop the ordinance from taking effect.

In a statement today, Alaska spokesperson Bobbie Egan said: "Alaska Airlines respects the views of the Washington State Supreme Court and will carefully review the full decision as we determine the appropriate next steps. As the largest operator at Seattle Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac), Alaska Airlines voluntarily increased wages in April 2014 for more than 1,000 vendor employees at the airport."

**Update:** The Washington Restaurant Association sent along a statement saying they were disappointed by the ruling.

"We are disappointed in the court's decision. The WRA was hopeful that the agreement between port tenants and the Port of Seattle would move forward. This ruling seems to significantly alter previous decisions regarding the authority of cities and port jurisdiction. There are no appeals to be made as the Supreme Court is the highest law in the state, and we respect the court's judgment. Our focus is now on helping our members succeed as they deal with the results of this verdict."