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Could you live on the minimum wage?

VOCABULARY

Measly =

Small, insignificant
(negative)

Utilities =

Necessary household
bills such electricity,
water

Spontaneous, spontaneity =

To do something
suddenly, with
planning. "on the spur
of the moment"

Discussion questions

1. Does Japan have a legal minimum wage? What is it? If not, what's a typical low-salary?
2. Have you ever tried to survive on minimum wage? How was it?
3. Do you think you could survive on the minimum wage now? Why? Why not?
4. What do you think is the most difficult aspect of living on the minimum wage?
5. Should the minimum wage be increased? What do you think is a fair level?
6. What money-saving tips would you give to a minimum wage worker?

VOCABULARY

Bologna =

A cheap processed meat
product used in
sandwiches

Gimmick =

A trick or device to
attract attention
(negative meaning)

Single-parent =

A parent (usually
mother) who is raising a
child without a partner

Have you ever seen a congressman snacking on a measly tin of sardines? Or maybe a governor ordering a McChicken off the dollar menu? In Washington this week that scene was reality for three Democratic politicians who are taking the Live the Wage challenge.

Reps. Tim Ryan and Jan Schakowsky joined former Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland in taking the challenge and are each living on a budget of \$77 for the week—the same amount that a minimum wage worker typically has to spend on food, transportation and day-to-day expenses, after factoring out major costs such as rent and utilities.

“I basically had a couple bags of peanuts in the cloakroom—and there was a little fruit in the office that I ate yesterday,” Rep. Ryan told ABC News. “I spent about seven bucks last night on a couple cans of sardines and a bag of crackers from a convenience store.”

The congressman began the “Live the Wage” challenge last week with hopes of bringing attention to the hardships facing minimum wage workers around the nation. Members of Congress Plan to Live on Minimum Wage for a Week

Rep. Jan Schakowsky also began the challenge Thursday, telling ABC News “It totally changes your perspective. I make a shopping list when I go to the store usually. I think about what I want and I put it in the cart. I truthfully rarely think about how much it costs. I’ll walk down the aisle and I’ll see something and I throw it in the cart. There’s just no spontaneity when you’re on that kind of budget.”

Strickland even took a trip to McDonald’s to try out the fast food chain’s dollar menu, noting that workers there “deserve a raise.” In an op-ed, Strickland explained that he was unable to complete the week-long challenge with a budget of just \$77. One particularly difficult aspect the governor discussed was eating a healthy diet while living on a \$7.25 hourly wage.

“Because fresh fruits and vegetables are hard to find at a price within a minimum wage budget, I

turned to bread, peanut butter, bananas and bologna more than anything else. That was what I could find when I took this budget to the grocery store last Sunday. And that’s why I ate lunch from the McDonald’s dollar menu.”

Schakowsky and Ryan have also taken to social media in recent days to share their message about the challenges facing minimum wage workers. “There are a lot of people out there who do this for extended periods of time—years—so the idea is to get the message out and raise awareness about some of the difficulties that can happen to you,” Ryan told ABC News. “We realize it’s not going to be exactly like the challenges that a minimum wage family faces, but the country is talking about the minimum wage right now. And I think that’s exactly what we want to do.”

Schakowsky echoed Rep. Ryan’s sentiments. “I’m not going to pretend that now I understand what it’s like to live on the minimum wage. I think it’s a taste of it. But for anyone who thinks it’s a gimmick, my suggestion would be—try it. You will get a small sense of what it’s like to be constantly thinking about how much you’re spending.”

Ryan and Schakowsky were co-sponsors of the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2013. Their goal is to increase the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10. The push to increase the national minimum has steadily intensified in the past year—as the minimum wage has remained unchanged since 2009.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the minimum wage doesn’t get you very far. “On average, a single-parent household (One parent, at least one child under 18) will spend \$5,457 per year on food, or about \$105 per week.” That’s \$28 above what a minimum wage worker has to live on for a week.

“Let’s increase the minimum wage and get people to work and make sure work pays. That’s ultimately the conversation we want to have.”