# Magic number for a just living wage

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Here, at last, comes a serious and determined push in Congress to increase the minimum daily salary in the private sector, some 36 years after the country’s workers experienced their last across-the-board wage hike.

The proposed raise—set initially at P100 by the Senate and now doubled by the House of Representatives to P200—offers not just relief but salvation to millions of working-class Filipinos whose earnings have failed to keep up with skyrocketing costs of feeding, clothing, and housing their families.

What made everyone sit up and take notice wasn’t so much the announcement itself but where the announcement was coming from: Speaker Martin Romualdez, who on Wednesday pledged to speed up deliberations on the minimum daily wage hike bill, following a meeting with labor leaders.

The Senate had done its part when it passed its P100 wage hike proposal in February last year. Then on Thursday, the House labor and employment committee promptly endorsed the Speaker’s pitch for a P200 wage hike bill, bringing it a step closer to approval in plenary session.

Romualdez said the House had resolved to double the Senate proposal to provide employees economic relief while ensuring the sustainability of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), as “a critical step toward achieving inclusive growth and addressing the immediate challenges faced by Filipino families.”

## The greater good

On Thursday, Senate President Francis Escudero said his chamber looked forward to working with the House to harmonize the two versions of the bill at the bicameral conference.

But the timing raised questions about the lawmakers’ motive in pushing for the measure so close to the midterm elections in May: Is this what they call “legislation in aid of reelection”?

Then again, do the legislature’s intentions matter when the outcome redounds to the greater good for the greatest number?

The case for a wage hike is not only compelling—it is undeniable.

Over the years, inflation has whittled away at the purchasing power of Filipino workers, reaching 2.9 percent in December. Yet, today’s minimum wage remains woefully inadequate to meet the basic needs of a family, while scant regional wage increases consistently fail to keep up with soaring costs of food, transportation, and utilities.

## Drop in the bucket

In July 2024, the Regional Tripartite Wages and Productivity Board approved a wage hike of P35 in Metro Manila, which might well have been a drop in the bucket for urban poor families trying to stay afloat. Other regions saw even smaller increases, rubbing salt to the wound of struggling workers across the nation, whether in cities or provinces.

The proposal has been greeted with stiff opposition.

The Employers Confederation of the Philippines (Ecop) warned that a legislated wage hike could stoke inflation and drive investors away. “This will just make investors hesitate more with the uncertainty it creates. And we are already lagging behind our neighbors in terms of investments,” Ecop president Sergio Ortiz-Luis Jr. said.

But that argument pales in comparison to what the wage hike could mean for ordinary workers.

Deputy Speaker Democrito Raymond Mendoza of the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines said higher salaries would “lift over 5 million minimum wage earners out of poverty, put nutritious food on their table, send their children to school, and give them a fighting chance for a better life to overcome hardships and attain prosperity.”

## Backbone of nation’s economy

As the House begins debates on the wage hike bill, the challenge for lawmakers now is finding the magic number that is acceptable to both labor and business sectors. The P200 proposal is a step in the right direction, but by no means is it an upper limit. Lawmakers must engage in genuine dialogue with stakeholders and be open to compromise. For instance, a possible middle ground is the grant of wage subsidies to MSMEs. In the end, the final product must not fall short of a sustainable wage increase that lifts workers out of poverty without crippling employers.

The clock is ticking, and the onus is on both legislative chambers and Malacañang to rally behind this long overdue measure. It may well require President Marcos certifying the bill as urgent for it to be enacted before the midterm poll winners take office. But whether motivated by the people’s welfare or their odds of being reelected, lawmakers must act quickly to ensure the proposal does not get drowned out by election noise.

For too long, the government has failed to recognize economic justice as the bedrock of a functioning democracy. A legislated wage hike is not just about fulfilling workers’ wishes but affording them the dignity of living meaningful, purposeful lives rather than just toiling away to put food on the table and keep a roof above their heads.

Workers are the backbone of the nation’s economy, and they deserve nothing less than wages that allow them to live, not just survive.