# Struggle for living wage continues

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Several wage hike bills have already been filed in just over a month since the 20th Congress commenced: at least 10 in the Senate and 15 in the House of Representatives.

In the previous Congress, legislators failed to ratify the measure at the last minute due to disagreement over the amount of the wage hike. The Senate proposed P100, while the House wanted P200. The measure died when both houses adjourned sine die in June without ratifying the measure, but this was the closest that the labor sector got to pushing for a legislated wage hike. The last one was in 1989, during the 8th Congress, with the passage of Republic Act No. 6727, also known as the Wage Rationalization Act.

It has been almost four decades, and over 12 congresses, since Filipino workers have been granted a legislated wage hike. Just like the anti-political dynasty bill, previous congresses had fallen short in seeing the wage hike measure through.

The new Congress does not have any excuse to procrastinate or sit on the refiled measures though, as it has more than enough time to thresh out and debate the proposals. The Senate bills propose an increase of either P100 or P200, while the House proposals range from P100 to P1,200.

One of the arguments against a legislated wage hike was the pressure it would place on micro-small, and medium-sized enterprises that could not afford it and would be forced to close down, which might cause further unemployment.

## Historic injustice

However, the needs of the working class, especially the more than five million minimum wage earners, on whose backs the economy rolls through their hard labor, should not be neglected either. A wage hike, as the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) stated, will be a huge relief for them and their families.

“The P200 wage bill is their only hope for a decent increase … Minimum wages were never meant to be stagnant and starvation wages even below the poverty line which is exactly what the broken system of regional wage boards has delivered for nearly four decades already — a permanent class of poor people,” said TUCP Rep. Raymond Mendoza, who was among the first to refile a wage hike proposal in this Congress.

He said that a legislated wage increase “will correct that historic injustice and restore minimum wages nationwide as a safeguard against exploitation and a stepping stone towards the constitutional mandate of living wages for all.”

## Band-aid solution

TUCP also cited the latest survey of the Social Weather Stations, where 49 percent of Filipino families rated themselves as poor; this figure represents around 13.7 million families. The survey also saw 41 percent of families rating themselves as food-poor, making it even more urgent for the government to hike wages to help improve their plight.

TUCP criticized as “unacceptable, unfair, and unjust” what it called the measly increase of P50, or to P695 from P645, for workers in the National Capital Region (NCR) that took effect last month. “[Fifty pesos] is only one-fourth of our P200 wage hike bill and will put the NCR minimum wage only a little over half of the daily family living wage estimated by the IBON Foundation at [P1,222]. This once more is too little, too late,” Mendoza said.

Progressive lawmakers in the House, citing IBON, said the P645 minimum wage represents only 52.8 percent of the P1,222 family living wage needed in NCR, and that the new P695 rate still falls short of what families needed to survive.

“This P50 increase is nothing but a band-aid solution to the worsening poverty of Filipino families,” ACT Teachers Rep. Antonio Tinio said.

Mendoza added that it was as if the government was telling workers: “You do not deserve to provide your family a healthy meal, much less a decent life.”

## Economic hardships

In his fourth State of the Nation Address (Sona) last month, President Marcos said it himself: “Maayos na hanapbuhay talaga ang mabisang pantiyak laban sa kahirapan at laban sa gutom (Decent livelihood is truly an effective safeguard against poverty and hunger).”

But what if current wages, as TUCP pointed out, are not enough for honest, hardworking parents to feed their children nutritious meals, send them to school, access health care, and get a fighting chance at a decent life?

Mr. Marcos also acknowledged that a robust economy, strong business confidence, lower inflation, and more jobs are only mere decorations (“palamuti”) if the ordinary Filipino continues to face economic hardships.

And yet, despite these pronouncements, there was no mention of the proposed legislated wage hike in this year’s Sona. Mr. Marcos was also silent about it in his address last year.

The President, if he truly wants to uplift the lives of Filipinos in the last three years of his administration, should walk the talk and certify the wage hike bills as urgent. This is the only way to help generations escape the cycle of poverty and inequality: by giving workers living wages that dignify their labor and afford them a decent life and a better future for their children.