The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MINIMUM WAGE

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, yesterday, the House of Representatives with very little discussion and debate voted themselves a $4,600 pay increase. The Senate passed a similar measure earlier this month. Fair is fair. If Members of Congress deserve a raise, then surely the hard-working, lowest paid workers across this country deserve an increase in the minimum wage as well. Shame on this Congress when we vote ourselves a $4,600 pay increase, yet do nothing for the lowest paid workers in America.

I intend to do all I can to see that Congress acts to raise the minimum wage as soon as possible. When President Clinton signs the law to raise the pay for the 535 Members of Congress, he should also have on his desk the bill to raise the pay for the 11 million Americans who work for the minimum wage.

The case for an increase in the minimum wage is overwhelming. Since 1991, congressional pay has increased $39,400. In the same amount of time, a minimum wage worker has seen a pay increase of only $1,870.

Legislation to raise the minimum wage—the Fair Minimum Wage Act—has been installed for many months by this Republican Congress. Our proposal will raise the federal minimum wage from its present level of $5.15 an hour to $5.65 on September 1, 1999 and to $6.15 an hour on September 1, 2000.

Speaker HASTERT said last March, ''I feel Members of Congress come here, they do their work. I know there are Members that have three or four kids in college at a time. I'm not crying crocodile tears, but they need to be able to have a life and provide for their family.''

I say minimum wage workers have a life, too. They need to provide for their families, too. They need to put their children through college, too.

Under our proposal, a minimum wage worker would earn an additional $2,000 a year. That amount will pay for 7 months of groceries to feed the average family. It will pay to house an average family for 5 months. It will pay for 10 months of utilities. It will cover a year and a half of tuition and fees at a 2-year college. It will provide greater opportunities for all those struggling at the minimum wage to obtain the skills they need for better jobs and better careers and better support for their families.

We know that under current law, minimum wage earners can barely make ends meet. Working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, they earn $10,712 almost $3,200 below the poverty line for a family of three. A full day's work should mean a fair day's pay. But for millions of Americans who earn the minimum wage, the pay is unfair.

Opponents complain that increasing the minimum wage hurts small business and causes job losses. But these claims have been proven wrong. In fact, since the most recent increases in the federal minimum wage—a 50-cent increase in October 1996 and a 40-cent increase in September 1997—employment has risen in virtually all sectors of the economy. Over 8 million new jobs have been added to the workforce, including 1.1 million retail jobs, 350,000 restaurant jobs, and more than 4 million jobs in the service industry. The increases boosted the earnings of 9.9 million low-wage workers directly, and millions more indirectly, but far from enough.

As Business Week has stated:

> [H]igher minimum wages are supposed to lead to fewer jobs. Not today. In a fast-growth, low-inflation economy, minimum wages raise income, not unemployment. . . . A higher minimum wage can be an engine for upward mobility. When employees become more valuable, employers tend to boost training and install equipment to make them more productive. Higher wages at the bottom often lead to better education for both workers and their children.

Even Business Week agrees, ''It is time to set aside old assumptions about the minimum wage.''

The national economy is the strongest in a generation, with the lowest unemployment rate in almost three decades. Under the leadership of President Clinton, the country as a whole is enjoying a remarkable period of growth and prosperity. Enterprise and entrepreneurship are flourishing—generating an unprecedented expansion, with impressive efficiencies and significant job creation. The stock market has soared. Inflation is low, unemployment is low, and interest rates are low.

But despite this unprecedented economic growth, too many workers are not reaping the benefits of this prosperity. To have the purchasing power it had in 1968, the minimum wage should be at least $7.49 an hour today, not $5.15. This unconscionable gap shows how far we have fallen short over the past 30 years in granting low-income workers their fair share of the country's extraordinary prosperity.

Since 1968, the stock market, adjusted for inflation, has gone up by over 150 percent—while the purchasing power of the minimum wage has gone down by 30 percent. Shame on Congress for allowing that decline.

As the economy reaches new heights, so do CEO salaries, often reaching tens of millions of dollars a year. At that rate, it takes a CEO barely 2 hours to earn what a minimum wage worker earns in an entire year. The rise in income inequality between the country's top earners and those at the bottom makes our Nation weaker, not stronger.

In a strong economy, we can clearly afford to give low income workers a rise. Our national wage total is over $4.2 trillion. That is what American employers are paying in wages today. The increase of one dollar that we proposed would raise the national wage total by only one-fifth of 1 percent.

That is a drop in the bucket in the overall American economy, but a significant benefit for low-income workers.

According to the Department of Labor, 59 percent of minimum wage earners are women. Nearly three-fourths are adults. Forty percent are the sole breadwinners in their families. Almost half work full time. They are teachers' aides and child care providers, home health care assistants and clothing store workers. They care for the elderly in nursing homes. They stock the food shelves at the corner store. They clean office buildings in thousands of communities across the country.

The minimum wage is a women's issue. It is a children's issue. It is a civil rights issue. It is a labor issue. It is a family issue. Above all, it is a fairness issue and a dignity issue. It is time to raise the federal minimum wage again. No one who works for a living should have to live in poverty.

This chart over here indicates clearly what has happened to the unemployment rate with previous increases in the minimum wage. For years, we have often heard that an increase in the minimum wage would see an increase in unemployment. In 1996, we had an increase in the minimum wage to $4.75 an hour, and we have seen the gradual decline in unemployment. Then we raised it to $5.15 an hour in September 1997, and we continue to see the decline in unemployment.

This chart over here indicates how long an average CEO has to work in order to make what a minimum-wage worker earns over the year. By 10:06 a.m. on the first working day—say, for January 1st—the average CEO has made what will take a minimum-wage worker to earn by 5 p.m. on December 31. In just over 2 hours, the average CEO has made what a minimum-wage worker will make by the end of the year.

Finally, this chart over here shows what the poverty line is for a family of three. The lower line here shows what the annual minimum-wage earnings are. What we see in 1999 is the continuing decline in the value of the minimum wage as minimum wage earners fall further below the poverty level.

It is time those men and women who work hard—play by the rules, work 52 weeks of the year, 40 hours a week, 8 hours a day—are not going to have to live in poverty. We are going to insist this issue be before the Senate in these next very few days or weeks.

THE PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I rise to express my deep disappointment by the failure of the parties to move forward with the peace process in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Peace Agreement was endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland, and it offers the only