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Ten of the Best Things That Happened to American Workers in 2015

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Historians may remember 2015 as the year of the minimum wage -- and for good reason. Twenty-one states and multiple cities raised the minimum wage in the past 12 months, scarcely two years after the "Fight for \$15" was dismissed as a pipe dream by some observers. The past year also saw other major advances for working Americans. Here are ten of the most important:

1) Bottoms Up: L.A. Minimum Wage Increase Caps Historic Year for Low-Wage Workers

This summer the City of Los Angeles enacted the most far-reaching minimum wage increase of any municipality in America. L.A. County did the same soon after, which means that over the next five years nearly one million people will see their pay rise to \$15.37 an hour. They will also be covered by some of the strongest wage theft protections in the nation, ensuring they actually get the increases mandated by law.

2) Independence Daze: Landmark Ruling Against Misclassification of Drivers in Port Trucking Industry

This month, port truck drivers were awarded nearly \$7 million in damages, back wages and illegal deductions by a California agency. More importantly, the drivers were found to have been misclassified as independent contractors, rather than correctly as employees, by Pacific 9 Transportation, a major player in one of the nation's most exploitative industries. The ruling, consistent with voluminous others at the state and federal level, sends a message loud and clear to the trucking industry that misclassification carries a high price -- multi-million dollar liability and recurring labor unrest. These victories add further momentum to the efforts by labor, community activists, and high road employers to dismantle a system that for decades has stripped workers of the most basic protections.

3) Share This: Uber Lawsuit Could Upend Gig Economy

In another potential blow to the increasingly popular strategy by large companies of treating employees as independent contractors, a judge certified a class action suit against Uber, the ride-sharing giant. If the plaintiffs prevail in this closely watched case, more than 100,000 current and former Uber drivers could be reclassified as employees -- a move that force Uber and its competitors to dramatically alter their business model, which relies on a temporary workforce without benefits.

4) Silicon Valley Rising: Tech Companies Give Way to Demands of Low-Wage Workers

In a series of surprising developments, workers at some of the world's largest tech firms won major improvements over the course of just a few months. The victories at Apple, Facebook and Google are part of an ambitious new campaign, Silicon Valley Rising, which has shined a spotlight on the vast disparities between the rich tech titans and their army of low-paid service workers.

5) Feeling the Bern: Bernie Sanders Campaign Puts Inequality Front and Center

Whether or not you plan to vote for Sanders, there's no question that the feisty Vermont senator has changed the national conversation on wealth and inequality. In language rarely heard from major American presidential candidates, Sanders has indicted an economic system that has produced record levels of inequality even as those at the top have amassed riches greater than at any time in the past 100 years. In so doing he has delivered a desperately needed wake-up call that the country would do well to heed.

6) The Injured List: Pro Publica's Workers Comp Series Reveals Huge Gaps in U.S. Labor Protections

One of the best investigative reporting projects of 2015 exposed how the nation's workers compensation protections have been steadily dismantled by corporate America. The series has already led to congressional hearings and calls for reform.

7) Crime Doesn't Pay: California Law Reins In Wage Theft

This fall, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law a new statute that should be a game-changer when it comes to the [scourge of wage theft](#) in the nation's largest state. The legislation requires that employers with unpaid judgements post a bond and allows the Labor Commissioner to file a lien on their property. In Los Angeles alone, an estimated \$26.2 million in wages are stolen from workers every week, so this law was long overdue.

8) Leaning In: Fair Pay Law Mandates Equal Compensation

Another landmark law signed by Governor Brown this year was the California Fair Pay Act, which mandates [equal pay for men and women who perform similar work](#). This would seem to be a no-brainer in 2015, but studies have found that women continue to lag behind men in wages -- especially women of color. The new law is expected to have national impact as other states look to close the gender pay gap.

9) Revenge of the Fourth Estate: Union Victories Shake Up Online Media World

This year, workers at some of the most popular online news sites, including Gawker, Salon and Vice, [moved to unionize](#), sending shock waves through an industry that has thrived on underpaid, overworked talent. The organizing drives may have been part of the residual effect of increasing media scrutiny of inequality, as those who produce the news realized they had the power to change it.

10) Step Back, Big Mac: Ruling Could Transform Relationship Between Corporations and Franchises

A potentially [far-reaching decision by the National Labor Relations Board could alter the relationship between corporations like McDonald's and their franchisees](#). Under the ruling, two or more companies are "joint employers" of a workforce if they share the ability to govern workers' terms and conditions of employment. So, if more than one employer has sufficient authority to control such things as workers' salary and working conditions, they are considered the employer of such workers, even if another company also qualifies as an employer of those same workers. This could set the stage for dramatic changes in working conditions in industries that rely on franchising or outsourcing of work and are some of the nation's largest sources of low-wage labor.

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