

Hunger Action Network of New York State Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS – Occupy Albany Faith and Hunger Network - FOCUS Churches New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness

Media Release

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Cuomo Must Do More to Lift New Yorkers Out of Recession, Provide Jobs Minimum Wage, Stronger Safety Net, Fair Taxes, Campaign Finance Reform Highlight People's State of the State.

Anti-hunger, faith, community and labor groups gathered at the Capitol today to call for the Governor and State Legislators to take action to strengthen the state's safety net while raising wages for workers and enacting political reforms.

The long awaited hike in the state minimum wage was at the top of the agenda of the 23rd annual People's State of the State, held the day before the Governor's official address. The event outlines the problems of hunger, poverty, and income inequality that negatively impact millions of New Yorkers but often go unmentioned in the formal address.

After the rally, the groups delivered the "People's Litmus Test" to Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, who is expected to co-lead the Senate in a power sharing arrangement even though the Republicans will have fewer seats than the Democrats. The People's Litmus Test responds to the set of indicators issued by Governor Cuomo, late last year, designed as a gauge for good governance and accountability. In addition to raising the minimum wage, the need for campaign finance reform, tax fairness and equity in rebuilding NYC post-Sandy were additional key issues included in the test.

“The New Year holds the promise of clarifying what our priorities are as New Yorkers. Will we strive for fiscal fairness and equity? Will we seek to protect the most poor and vulnerable – those who are jobless or under-employed, hungry, or without adequate housing or education? Our children? We must continue to move to a straightforward commitment, beyond all the particular issues, post-Left and Right to a rekindling of a most old and yet timely and necessary image: the idea and spirit of the common good. There are essential moral choices to be made as a state and nation,” said Rev. Debra Jameson of FOCUS Churches.

“The political agenda and set of decisions made in Albany increasingly strays from the basic needs and directives of New York's people. During the People's State of the State, we present our own litmus test for effective, representative governance. We need to see substantive change, not watered-down reforms. To start, the legislature must raise the minimum wage to approach a living wage of at least \$10 an hour, and include indexing as a critical component of the legislation.,” said Sara Niccoli, Executive Director, Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS.

Groups participating in the event included Hunger Action Network of New York State, Faith and Hunger Network, Labor-Religion Coalition of NYS, FOCUS Churches, New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness and Occupy Albany.

Barbara Zaron, representing the Reform Jewish Voice of New York State (RJV), the Reform Jewish Movement's social justice advocate in NYS, said "As Jews, we have an obligation not only to feed the hungry but also to help those in need become self-sufficient. The Torah emphasizes the importance of economic justice and of a worker's wages; and emphasizes our responsibility to treat all workers well and not to oppress the laborer. Earning less than it costs to live is a form of oppression."

Robb Smith, Executive Director of Interfaith Impact of NYS, said, "We have a moral obligation to ensure that the economy functions every neighborhood, including the poorest. The Legislature should raise the minimum wage to a living wage as its first order of business."

"We doubt that Governor Cuomo will say tomorrow that New York leads the country in income inequality. Instead of yet another austerity budget from the Governor that would make the recession worse, we have to raise wages for the working poor and provide community-serving public sector jobs. We need the Governor to propose at least a \$10 million hike in funding for emergency food programs where too often the cupboards are bare.," said Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of the Hunger Action Network.

Susan Kent, President of the Public Employees Federation, added, The devastation that the greed and manipulation exhibited by Wall Street has caused through misplaced blame on working people, and unions in particular, has provided us with an opportunity -- the opportunity to unite the community in an expectation that employers will provide good wages, affordable health care and pensions to allow for a retirement with dignity.

The groups are also urging state legislators to close corporate tax loopholes and restore fairness to the state tax system to close a projected billion dollar state budget gap and to make needed investments in job creation, human service programs and Hurricane Sandy rebuilding. The groups also want the Governor's commission looking at the state tax system to address the regressive property tax.

"New York restored some much-needed progressivity to its tax system through temporary changes enacted in 2003, 2009 and 2011. It now needs to make a longer term commitment to 'tax fairness' based on a thorough and objective examination of the overall state-local tax system." said Frank Mauro of the Fiscal Policy Institute. "New York State's personal income tax is not progressive enough to balance out the regressivity of the rest of the state-local tax system. Corporate income taxes are full of ineffective preferences and credits that were added over the years in the name of economic development but which fail to deliver on that promise. Overall, New York should rely more on progressive taxes that are based on the 'ability to pay' and less on regressive taxes," said Frank Mauro of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

Dr. Andy Coates, the newly-elected national President of the Physicians for a National Health Program, discussed how a single-payer, Medicare for All program, would save New Yorkers tens of billions annually if enacted at the state level like Vermont has done.

The groups pointed out that domination of big-money campaign contributions have been long time obstacles to reforms. The groups delivered The People's Litmus Test to Senate Republican leader Dean Skelos, who will co-chair a Senate governing coalition with Sen. Jeff Klein of the Independent Democrat caucus. Additional issues in the pledge included gun control, a ban on fracking, ending hunger and homelessness, education funding, and passage of the Dream Act.

"Because of money's stranglehold on the Capitol, issues like creating good jobs, raising the minimum wage, and making our tax system more fair, don't get the fair shake they deserve in the legislative process," said Karen Scharff, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York. "As the Legislature returns to Albany, they should be acutely aware of the demand evidenced by this year's elections that the people want publicly financed Fair Elections, and they won't accept anything less."