

# On the Minimum Wage, Joe Biden Chose Failure

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By

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The Biden administration's preemptive surrender on the \$15 minimum wage is nothing like its guns-blazing approach to getting union-buster Neera Tanden confirmed for a White House job. The contrast demonstrates Biden's lack of sincerity when he claims to be a working-class fighter.



US President Joe Biden in the State Dining Room of the White House, 2021. (Doug Mills-Pool / Getty Images)

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The following is a tale of two lost causes.

One is the \$15 minimum wage. A longtime priority of the labor movement and the broad Left, the measure was one of the few big-ticket items Joe Biden had agreed to adopt from Bernie Sanders's platform after vanquishing him in the Democratic primary. Though its impact would be seriously eroded by inflation compared to when it was first proposed, getting it passed would have still been transformational and life-changing for many, given that it would raise wages for 32 million workers, narrow the racial pay gap, and boost incomes for single-income parents, disproportionately mothers.

Always a tall order given the corporatist, conservative nature of US politicians, the idea took a big leap closer to reality after Democrats won the runoffs in Georgia, giving them fifty votes in the Senate and therefore total, albeit flimsy, control over the federal government. Pushing it through was clearly going to be a tough slog. But as a core promise of Biden's winning campaign, and one that has already been shown to be popular in Trump-loving Florida, where it won more votes than either presidential candidate, the measure has both public backing and some pretty big political benefits.

So how did they fight for it?

After promising to be "the most pro-union president you've ever seen," it took just over two weeks into the job for Biden to start giving up on the union-backed measure, telling CBS that he "put it in, but I don't think it's going to survive." The problem was not just opposition from right-wing senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, but a more arcane, technical issue. In order to qualify for budget reconciliation, the filibuster-bypassing method Democrats are using to pass the stimulus bill to which the wage hike was attached, a measure must have an impact on the federal budget that's not "merely incidental." And it was looking increasingly likely that the Senate parliamentarian — the official who rules on these kinds of technical points — would strike it down.

Of course, this was far from a fatal setback. Plenty of Congresses and presidents have ignored the Senate parliamentarian, and in early February, the party discussed having Vice President Kamala Harris, who serves as the presiding officer of the Senate, simply overrule her — only for the White House to nix the idea. Even after the Congressional Budget Office released a highly debatable analysis holding that a wage hike would raise the budget deficit — accidentally making a strong case that it *would*, in fact, impact the federal budget and so *could* be passed through reconciliation — Biden publicly told a group of mayors and governors that "it just doesn't look like we can do it because of reconciliation."

Naturally, activists and workers who have been fighting for the measure, and who were continuing to pressure senators to keep the measure in the package, grumbled that this kind of talk was undermining their efforts. As Washington waited for the parliamentarian's ruling, Biden's chief of staff, Ron Klain, denied knowing that she had been overruled in the past and insisted the White House would "honor the rules of the Senate and work within that system."

Yesterday, once the parliamentarian did finally strike down the wage hike as expected, Senate Democrats admitted they had no backup plan for what to do next. The White House quickly released a statement affirming that the president "respects the parliamentarian's decision and the Senate process." In other words, he was accepting defeat.

Now let's look at another losing battle the Biden administration's been fighting during this time: the nomination of Center for American Progress CEO Neera Tanden to be director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Unlike the \$15 minimum wage, which would immediately have a dramatic, positive impact on the lives of millions of families and frontline workers during this pandemic, Tanden's appointment has next to no relevance to the lives of almost anyone besides Neera Tanden. In fact, Tanden's record is one of hostility to the interests of working Americans: she's a union-buster, has advocated cuts to vital entitlement programs, voted against pro-worker policies in the 2016 Democratic party platform (including the \$15 minimum wage), and takes oodles of money from corporate America, funding that we know for a fact shapes her think tank's work.

Nor does Tanden hold any unique skills or qualifications that make her indispensable for the role. As a former senior administrator with the Federal Reserve board of governors has pointed out, she's served the lion's share of her career as a campaign and party operative, dubious experience for the role she's been nominated for. A former employee has described her as "a very bad organizational leader." But even if she *can* competently do the job — and if Ben Carson can run the Department of Housing and Urban Development, it's a safe bet she can — there's nothing in particular that makes her more vital for the role than the many other qualified, experienced candidates already waiting in the wings.

Very quickly, Tanden's nomination became a political liability for the White House. Over years of tweeting, Tanden had racked up a prolific list of both Republican senators and progressives she had insulted, alienating an impressively broad spectrum of people whose support she needed to be confirmed. Her nomination not only undermined Biden's appeals to "unity" and bipartisanship, but the image he has tried to project of an FDR-style presidency for the common man. Long before her confirmation hearing, Republicans vowed they would block her, and her nomination seemed to be put into fatal jeopardy over the past week, when she not only lost the support of the same Joe Manchin who helped sink the \$15 minimum wage but several key Republicans.

Looking at the White House's treatment of the wage hike, one would expect the administration to start publicly tamping down expectations about Tanden's confirmation and backing away, or even cutting the cord and quickly moving on — particularly given the sizable political downsides attached.

Instead, they've decided to fight for her. As soon as Manchin came out against her, both Biden and press secretary Jennifer Psaki quickly gave her their public support. "I think we're going to find the votes to get her confirmed," the president told the press last Friday. On Monday, Psaki revealed the White House had spent the weekend "working the phones" on her behalf, calling Republican and Democrat senators to change their minds.

Since then, the White House has repeatedly spoken publicly in defense of Tanden, even as more Republicans have come out against her or are on the brink of doing so. The issue has become more of a public headache, as Bernie Sanders postponed the budget committee vote on her confirmation because "it didn't look like she had the votes." In the very same interview where Klain made clear Biden would accept defeat for the \$15

minimum wage, he told viewers that the White House was “fighting our guts out” for Tanden, talked up her qualifications and expertise, and disclosed that they were still talking to Republicans to turn them around.

“We know that getting someone confirmed in a 50-50 Senate is hard,” Klain acknowledged, insisting they’d find a place for her in the administration no matter what, in a position that didn’t need Senate confirmation, if necessary. “But let me be clear: We’re gonna get Neera Tanden confirmed.”

“We’re continuing to fight for her confirmation,” Psaki said similarly yesterday.

As part of this, the White House has been encouraging Asian American advocacy groups who are waging social media campaigns, calling and sending letters to Senate offices, and generally using their considerable resources to pressure the White House itself to stick with her. In a clearly coordinated messaging campaign, elected Democrats and party establishment loyalists have been attacking Manchin for his opposition to Tanden, publicly accusing him of being driven by racism and sexism, and dialing up the pressure on him.

Whether or not Tanden gets confirmed probably isn’t going to change a whole lot. But the episode is instructive, particularly for those who are already tempted to shrug their shoulders at the news of the \$15 minimum wage’s defeat, assert that the president’s hands are tied, and defend his administration’s obvious apathy toward the measure.

Tanden’s confirmation is what it looks like when the president, his party, and the people around him actually care about doing something: they maintain public confidence in it, make an affirmative case to voters, put public and behind-the-scenes pressure on congressional holdouts, and coordinate with outside groups to build momentum for it. And they do it despite the perceived political liabilities, and even when it seems like the odds are squarely against victory.

To find that kind of leadership on the wage issue, you’d have to look to Bernie Sanders. While the White House was casting doubt about the measure passing and Senate Democrats were at a loss for what to do afterward, Sanders has incessantly made the case for its importance, maintained confidence that it qualifies for reconciliation, worked to gather legal arguments to persuade the parliamentarian, and immediately pivoted to passing an amendment to take away tax deductions from corporations that don’t pay workers \$15 an hour when the parliamentarian ruled against it.

Just as with Barack Obama and his Senate supermajority, the Democratic Party and its institutional backers will do everything they can in the coming weeks to convince people that the president and his party were powerless to make a \$15 minimum wage happen — that it was simply impossible. Don’t let them. As the fight over Neera Tanden shows, failure was a choice.