

# On MLK Day, expect plea for fair pay

## Sen. Kennedy to speak at Quincy church, call for minimum-wage hike

By LANE LAMBERT

The Patriot Ledger

QUINCY – When the nation honors the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday, a gathering at United First Parish Unitarian Church will be sounding a political call – to raise the federal minimum wage for the first time in a decade.

One of the keynote events of a national “Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign,” the 2:30 p.m. program will feature a speech by U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, music by a gospel choir and testimonials from low-paid, local workers.

Kennedy will be joined by clergy, union and elected leaders, including the Rev. Robert

Edgar, who is general secretary of the National Council of Churches, and Rocio Saenz, president of Service Employees International Union Local 615.

“It’s wrong that our productivity soars but hardworking people cannot afford to put food on the table or heat their homes,” Kennedy said in a prepared statement about the Monday event. “It is immoral (for Congress) to give tax cuts to the wealthy while ignoring working families who are living in poverty.”

“America can do better,” he said.

The Rev. Edgar agreed.

“A job should keep you out of poverty, not in it,” he said.

Massachusetts and a dozen other states have raised their minimum wages in recent years. Meanwhile, the federal wage has been stuck at \$5.15 an hour since 1997.

The Massachusetts minimum wage is \$6.75 per hour.

Kennedy has led perennial efforts since then to

increase the federal minimum – most recently in October, when the Senate narrowly defeated his proposal to gradually raise it to \$6.25.

Meanwhile, Congress has voted to raise its own members’ salaries seven times in the past decade, by a total of \$28,700. At \$5.15 an hour, full-time workers earning minimum wage would make about \$10,700 a year.

Opponents say a higher minimum wage would hurt low-paid workers, arguing that the added cost would force small businesses to hire fewer people.

Kennedy and other advocates dispute that claim. They say a higher minimum wage is needed to lift millions of the nation’s lowest-paid workers above the poverty line, after decades of inflation have eroded the minimum wage’s purchasing power.

According to the Cleveland-based Let Justice Roll campaign, the minimum wage would now have to be \$9.05 an hour to have the same purchasing power that the \$1.60 an hour wage had

in 1968, the year the Rev. King was assassinated.

The campaign says wage erosion has left twice as many full-time workers in poverty – 2.6 million, compared to 1.3 million in the 1970s.

The federal poverty line is \$9,570 for a single person, \$12,830 for a family of two and \$19,350 for a family of four.

Kennedy and other advocates also say the Let Justice Roll campaign is in keeping with the Rev. King’s vision of economic equity.

They note that a fair minimum wage was one of the demands of the 1963 March On Washington, and that the Rev. King died in Memphis while he was there to support a strike by poorly paid sanitation workers.

“His message was not only freedom, it was justice,” said the Rev. Sheldon Bennett, United First Parish’s pastor.

The Rev. Bennett said he and his congregation are honored and excited to host Monday’s

event, which is co-sponsored by the Boston-based Unitarian Universalist Association and several other organizations.

It started with a phone call from Kennedy to Let Justice Roll.

Susan Leslie, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s congregational advocacy director, said Kennedy told the campaign he would be in Massachusetts on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and wanted to speak on the minimum wage issue to a congregation.

When Let Justice Roll called the UUA, United First Parish was an early choice, in large part because the “Church of the Presidents” has been active for years in similar campaigns.

“They’ve always lived out our faith of economic justice,” Leslie said.

United First Parish Church is at 1306 Hancock St. in Quincy Center. For information, call 617-773-1290.

Lane Lambert may be reached at [llambert@ledger.com](mailto:llambert@ledger.com).