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LB 554

SENATOR BEUTLER: Senator Cudaback, members of the Legislature, let me make a few preliminary, general kinds of comments about the bill, and then the committee amendment really contains the bill, the committee amendment and hopefully a related amendment, and Senator Cunningham will be explaining that, and then I'll pick up on the explanation after Senator Cunningham has indicated the work of the committee. Basically, though, the idea and concept that the committee came up with is what will be followed here on the floor. I'm not changing anything except, hopefully, to update it for one more year, since this was last year's bill and not this year's bill. But with respect to the minimum wage, let me just read to you what the declared policy of this state is. It's to establish a minimum wage for all workers at levels consistent with their health, efficiency, and general well-being, and secondly, to safeguard existing minimum wage compensation standards which are adequate to maintain the health, efficiency, and general well-being of workers against the unfair competition of wage and hour standards that do not provide adequate standards of living. That has been the policy of the state for a very, very long time and is still the policy of the state. Notwithstanding that general statement of policy, it has been characteristic of our state to follow the federal minimum wage. But as you all are aware, the federal minimum wage hasn't changed now for nine years. And I would simply say that that is an act of negligence on the part of the federal government. I think the only wage that hasn't changed since nine years ago is probably the wage for state senators, which hasn't changed for several years beyond that. Having said that, since the minimum wage was increased nine years ago, its purchasing power has dropped by more than 20 percent. That, when you're speaking of the people who are paid the very lowest in our society, is a devastating kind of fact. In terms of the purchasing power of the minimum wage, which is now \$5.15 an hour, it is the lowest that it has been in half a century, half a century. The minimum wage not only affects those who are at the very lowest point on the economic scale, but it also affects the middle class, because the anchor of the minimum wage affects the whole bottom part of the wage scale. And I am very concerned about the deterioration of the middle class in this country, and I'm hoping and thinking that you all have some