

Work and Pay in Poland. The Minimum Wage's Impact on Labour and Economic Systems

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Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of minimum wage policies on labour markets and economic systems, focusing on the broader consequences for workers, employers, and national economies. The paper examines both theoretical perspectives and empirical studies to assess the effects of minimum wage adjustments on employment levels, income distribution, and economic performance. Drawing on a combination of theoretical frameworks and empirical data, this paper highlights the complex relationship between wage policies and broader societal issues, such as poverty reduction, social equity, and economic growth. An attempt has also been made to analyse changes in the minimum wage in Poland over the period 2010-2024, providing a case study to understand the real-world effects of these policy shifts in a transitioning economy. Ultimately, it offers insights into the role of minimum wage policies as tools for achieving social justice and economic stability, with recommendations for optimizing these policies to balance the needs of workers, employers, and national economies.

Keywords: labour economics, minimum wage, cost of work, income inequality.

JEL Classification: E24, J31.

Introduction

In contemporary economic systems, the minimum wage has long been a cornerstone of labour policy, designed to ensure a baseline standard of living for workers and to address income inequality. While the debate surrounding minimum wage laws is not new, its implications have gained renewed attention in recent years as governments, economists, and social justice advocates grapple with questions about the broader impact of wage policies on labour markets and national economies. The minimum wage represents more than just a fixed hourly rate; it is a fundamental issue of work, pay, and justice, with far-reaching consequences for both workers and employers, as well as for the stability and growth of the economy.

The primary objective of setting a minimum wage is to protect workers from exploitation by ensuring that they receive a fair wage for their labour, contributing to their well-being and providing economic mobility. However, the implementation of minimum wage laws often comes with unintended consequences, including shifts in employment patterns, business practices, and overall economic dynamics. Proponents argue that raising the minimum wage helps reduce poverty, stimulates consumer spending, and enhances social justice by narrowing income disparities. Critics, on the other hand, claim that it may lead to higher unemployment rates, inflationary pressures, and greater burdens on businesses, particularly small enterprises.

The aim of this article is to present a theoretical reflection on what work and pay are, taking into account the issue of minimum wages. The minimum wage is understood primarily as securing a fair wage for the least qualified workers.

1. Work and Pay: Theoretical Foundations

The concept of work is defined in a variety of ways in the literature, especially across a wide range of disciplines among the social sciences. This means that it is typically interdisciplinary in nature. Nevertheless, it is absolutely indisputable that work and its distribution are still of interest to people, and the first aspects, obviously positive, were already recognised by ancient thinkers.

Nowadays, human labour is being given more and more importance, and an appreciation of it in comparison to many other resources can be seen, but this is due to a completely new approach to the role of the human individual in the whole work process. Thus, the contemporary worker is not only a doer, but is also a decision-maker. The issue of labour was already addressed by Karl Marx in his work 'Capital'. He began his considerations by identifying the elementary factors of labour processes, i.e., labour itself or the objects of labour (here: the objects transformed by labour) or the instruments of labour (i.e., any means of production). This kind of account, however, is very similar to the classical account in that all the factors of labour are mentioned. Here, however, Karl Marx sees, especially in contrast to the classics, work actually performed from labour-power, which is primarily synonymous with the ability to work. At the same time, it turns out that labour power is mainly a resource with the capacity to produce a labour flow. Simultaneously, this division has also become the basis for critiques of capitalism as a whole, in which labour becomes primarily a commodity, while the entrepreneur uses labour as a so-called factor of production. One can sell their products at a surplus, for example, because labour remunerates below the value of both goods and services produced. Neoclassicism sought to describe labour in a similar way to any other factor of production. This involved an analysis of its demand and supply, especially from a marginal perspective. Here, at the same time, the price of labour is absolutely not a simple marginal function of the 'utility of the average human unit.' This is mainly due to the many constraints imposed by so-called marginal utility, in particular, by the fact that individuals are both less and sometimes much more willing to enter into contracts. In contrast, today's work is all about going beyond 'the routinely performed concrete task', as well as skilfully using and sharing knowledge" (Jagoda & Klimczak, 2011).

Labour is a market good, particularly in the so-called free market. Employers seek and buy it, employees sell it. There is a market game around the valuation of labour, and it becomes an exchange. However, it is not characterised in the language of market exchange. One does not usually say 'I sell my work'. If it was put that way, it would be to express distance, sarcasm or dissatisfaction. The aim would be to emphasise some opposition to being treated subjectively as an employee or in a situation of disappointed job expectations - so it is an expression of feeling exploited, undervalued. Employers are slightly more likely to say that they are buying the work of others, but this is more likely to happen when they are dismissing certain (in their view unjustified) claims of employees or to express dissatisfaction with their way of working. In everyday language, this exchange is expressed by the terms: 'I am looking for an employee', "I am hiring an employee", "I am firing an employee". The candidate, on the other hand, is 'looking for a job', 'looking for a full-time position', rather than trying to sell their work or even 'themselves in the product'. The fact that the language characteristic of pure economic exchange is not present here means that there is some very basic, implicit social norm recognising that labour is not a mere commodity. It is something more and something different from other market goods. Discussions point to some of the differences. First of all, the worker is not only selling a certain commodity for a certain price, but also an uncertain future use of that commodity. One has to take into account - which is fraught with uncertainty - how hard one will work, for whom and what will result in redundancy. Each of these issues has very different social references and is difficult to predict (Kozek, 2013).

Remuneration for work is 'first and foremost a financial benefit that one is entitled to and is paid periodically for work performed' (www.hrhelper.pl). Remuneration for work is further discussed in the Labour Code, more specifically in Article 13, where the 'right to fair remuneration is formulated, which is realised through the provisions of the labour law, but also through the state policy, mainly in the area of wages, and especially through the establishment of a minimum wage for the work performed'. Remuneration for work is, moreover, an essential element related to the employment relationship, which is included in Article 22 § 1 of the Labour Code. At the same time, the Labour Code stipulates the typically payable nature of the employment relationship, which simultaneously distinguishes employment relationships from typical civil law relationships (Labour Code).

It is important to note a certain evolution in the terminology of wages. In the pre-war period, there was a distinction in the Polish language between the terms 'wage' and 'salary'. The former referred to white-collar workers, while the latter referred to blue-collar workers. Currently, the two terms are used interchangeably, meaning the same thing, i.e., remuneration (Ziółkowski, 2010).

A remuneration system is a way of determining the components of remuneration and the amount of remuneration for work performed. In practice, there are many systems, forms of remuneration, but among the most well-known and traditional are time-based, bonus and piecework. More modern ones include cafeterias and remuneration packages (Pocztowski, 2013).

2. The Economic and Social Function of Minimum Wages

The minimum wage is defined as the lowest monthly amount of remuneration for a given employee who is employed on the basis of a full-time employment contract. It should therefore be noted that individuals employed under a contract of mandate or contract for specific work are not entitled to it. The minimum wage is granted and set by law by the respective state, and is therefore legislative in nature. Every person taking up a job subconsciously expects that the wage received will enable them to develop human capital. This is also the essence of the so-called 'fair remuneration' (Renkas, 2017).

The right of workers to an adequate level of remuneration (fair remuneration) is a social concept to ensure a decent standard of living for workers and their families. A minimum wage is one of the fundamental rights listed in the European Social Charter, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1961 in the form of an intergovernmental treaty that complements the European Convention on Human Rights. This right is specified in Article 4 of the Charter, while paragraph 1 requires the recognition of the right of workers to such remuneration as enables them to ensure a decent standard of living for their families. This change has proved to be significant in relation to previous views of wages - they were treated as the equivalent of work and the focus was on methods of measuring it, insightful evaluation and payment commensurate with the contribution and effect of work (Fic, 2010).

The first decisions to set a minimum wage level were made in New Zealand in 1894. The aim was to resolve a dispute over wage increases. This provision applied to workers who belonged only to trade unions. In 1899, non-unionised workers were also covered. The solution adopted in New Zealand led to a similar initiative being taken in several Australian states as well. In 1896, a system was set up for wages, which introduced this economic category in the form of legislation (Nyk, 2015).

Several ideas are known which indicate to what level the minimum wage should be raised. One proposal, most frequently raised in the European forum, is to raise the minimum wage to the subsistence level. At the same time, there is also a process of stiffening income ceilings from below, which slows down labour market adjustment processes and reduces the elasticity of labour demand and supply. In the light of economic theory, the minimum wage is not a guarantee of achieving the objectives set for it, due to the fact that, instead of optimising the income of the lowest paid workers, it may affect the decrease in employment and increase unemployment within this group (Greenlaw et al., 2022).

Motivating employees to work, i.e., directing them towards specific activities, requires the use of appropriate motivators. An essential one is remuneration, the upper limit of which is virtually unlimited. Remuneration should be set at a level that satisfies at least the basic material needs of employees. An increase in remuneration should result from an increase in the productivity of the human factor. Companies should therefore design their remuneration systems in such a way that, through a key selection of their components, they motivate employees to work more efficiently, identify with the organisation's tasks and derive satisfaction from their fulfilment. One of the important problems to be solved in each country is therefore the level of minimum wages and the maintenance of a rational ratio between average and minimum wages. The level of minimum wages which is too low may reduce their motivational character, while an excessive level may reduce the competitiveness of an enterprise and disrupt its development. Another possible consequence is the growth of the shadow economy, especially in regions characterised by high unemployment (Kulisa & Sierpińska, 2016).

The minimum wage category has two key functions: it influences the functioning of the labour market and provides legal protection for the wage levels of the lowest ranked workers. The minimum wage guarantee is part of a compromise between the principles of a functioning competitive market economy and the idea of distributive justice. However, this compromise is quite dynamic in nature, as the process involves parties with different views on the need, amount and principles of establishing a minimum wage (Rutkowski, 2013). The minimum wage has its advantages (levelling the playing field, guarantee of a decent wage for every working person, issue of social justice - these are aspects raised mainly by representatives of the left). The opposite arguments are put forward by economic liberals, according to whom the so-called 'invisible hand of the free market' is able to regulate everything, while raising the minimum wage is a disincentive for entrepreneurs to hire employees (Golec, 2020).

The minimum wage affects the average wage level in the national economy through three channels of influence. The first affects purely arithmetically - some employees receive a higher wage, which, due to their non-negligible share in total employment, increases the average wage in the economy. An increase in the minimum wage also increases the wages not only of those earning less than this amount, but also of other workers (so-called spill over effects). However, workers who are paid more than the minimum wage may be dissatisfied with the decrease in their wage level in relation to less skilled workers. Hence, the productivity of workers receiving relatively high wages may fall (Borowski & Jaworski, 2021).

3. An Analysis of the Current Level of the Minimum Wage in Poland

The concept of the minimum wage in Poland was first introduced in 1956. Over the years, its role within the wage system has undergone numerous transformations, but it has consistently served as the state-guaranteed minimum level of remuneration for work. Initially, until 1977, the minimum wage applied as the guaranteed total emoluments for all workers. However, between 1977 and 1981, the minimum wage was primarily used to create pay scales, setting the lowest rate of basic pay in the lowest rank category. From 1982 to 1986, the minimum wage and the lowest wage rate were placed in the lowest pay grade.

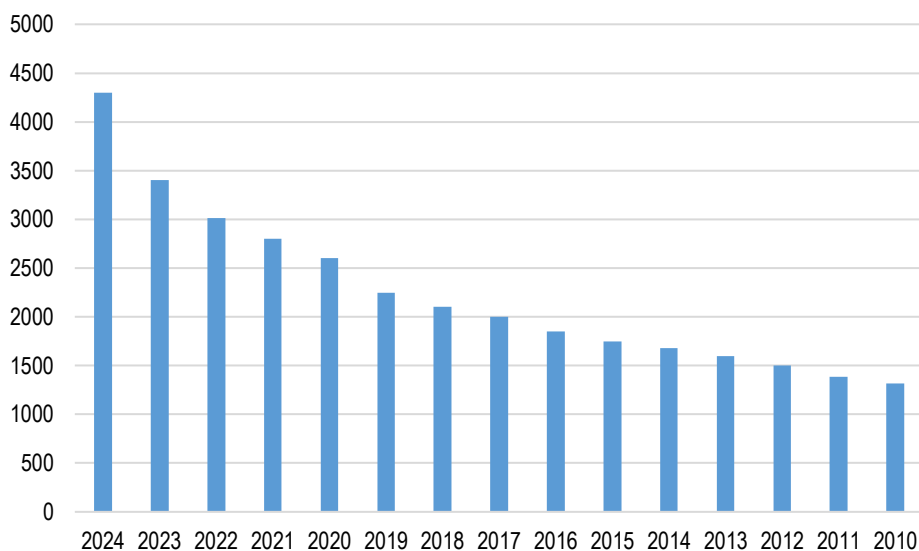
Following July 1986, the minimum wage continued to serve as the lowest basic salary rate in the lowest pay category until the end of the Polish People's Republic in 1989. With the emergence of the market economy in 1990, the minimum wage was defined as the full monthly salary guaranteed to employees regardless of their qualifications or the number and type of remuneration elements in their workplaces. Before 1990, the minimum wage level was determined by a resolution of the Council of Ministers, while from 1990 onwards, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy took responsibility for determining the minimum wage. In 2003, the passing of the Act on the Minimum Wage introduced a more structured approach to minimum wage determination, replacing previous resolutions and regulations (Oliwkiewicz, 2019).

In Poland, the Tripartite Commission, consisting of government representatives, trade unions, and employer confederations, sets the minimum wage for the entire country. Typically, this wage applies to simple, non-strenuous jobs performed under normal conditions. It's important to note that methods of establishing minimum wages vary significantly between countries, and the extent of their application differs as well (Nyk, 2015).

From 1977 to 1981, the minimum wage primarily functioned in the context of wage rate tables, but after 1986, it continued to reflect the lowest basic salary in the lowest pay grade (Oliwkiewicz, 2019).

The graph below illustrates the changes in the level of the minimum wage in Poland from 2010 to 2024. Over this period, the minimum wage experienced consistent, year-on-year increases. Initially, these increases were relatively modest, typically less than 10% annually. However, starting in 2020, the rate of increase began to accelerate, surpassing 10% in each of the subsequent years. This trend culminated in 2024, when the minimum wage saw a significant rise of more than 25%, marking the highest increase in the observed period. This substantial jump reflects the broader economic changes and adjustments in the wage policy aimed at improving the purchasing power of workers with low incomes.

Figure 1. Minimum wage in Poland 2010-2024 (PLN)



Source: CSO data, stat.gov.pl

Using 2010 as the reference point, the trend in minimum wage growth becomes clearly observable over the analysed period (see Table 1). By 2017, the minimum wage had risen by over 50% relative to its 2010 level, marking significant early growth. This upward trend continued, and by 2020, the minimum wage had nearly doubled, reflecting both the economic and policy shifts favouring wage increases. By 2024, the minimum wage had escalated to more than three times its original 2010 level, highlighting substantial cumulative growth over the 14-year period and underscoring recent government initiatives that resulted in more significant wage adjustments in recent years.

Table 1. Changes minimum wage-levels in Poland, 2010 – 2024, in %

Year	Dynamics (y/y)	Dynamics
2024	126,4706	326,4996
2023	112,9568	258,1625
2022	107,5	228,5497
2021	107,6923	212,6044
2020	115,5556	197,4184
2019	107,1429	170,8428
2018	105	159,4533
2017	108,1081	151,8603
2016	105,7143	140,4708
2015	104,1667	132,8778
2014	105	127,5626
2013	106,6667	121,4882
2012	108,2251	113,8952
2011	105,2392	105,2392

Source: CSO data, stat.gov.pl

The issue of the minimum wage frequently generates public debate, with political parties often weighing in. Minister of Labour and Social Policy Marlena Maląg spoke on the minimum wage in 2022 as follows: 'This solution, a concern for those who earn the least, will result in more than 4.5 billion additional funds in the wallets of Poles earning the least.' She also cited figures that when PiS took over the government in 2015, the minimum wage was PLN 1,750 gross. 'There is therefore an increase of 72%', she reported. The head of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy informed that the minimum wage is paid to nearly 2 million 400 thousand people. The question of whether a nationally uniform minimum wage is not too high in less developed regions (with lower levels of labour productivity) is increasingly being asked. Relatively high labour costs then act as a disincentive to business, which translates into low economic growth, low employment rates and high unemployment. The fact that such a situation may occur is evidenced by the persistence of significant differences in the level of economic development between Polish regions (<https://forsal.pl>).

An important argument for regional variations in minimum wages seems to be differences in the cost of living. Statistical data shows that the prices of goods and services are clearly different across regions. This is also confirmed by estimates of the subsistence minimum. Differentiating the minimum wage rate according to the cost of living is intended to ensure equal pay for equal work. With differences in the cost of living, however, this is impossible. Differentiating the minimum wage according to the local level of unemployment or the level of GDP per capita does not seem appropriate, as these variables are the result of economic processes in local labour markets rather than their cause. Moreover, given the strong heterogeneity of voivodeships (Mazowieckie voivodeship in particular), it is worth considering differentiation of minimum wages at a lower level - sub-regions or even districts (Broniatowska & Majchrowska, 2013).

Optimised wage levels and wage differentials are considered one of the conditions for stable economic growth. Spatial differences in wage levels induce entrepreneurs to relocate their investments, but they can also cause demographic movements and influence the creation of demographic imbalances. An increase in the minimum wage also affects employers' costs. In the longer term, this may result in a reduction in the development potential of businesses and lead to a slowdown in economic growth (Przekota, 2016).

As a review of the empirical results conducted by Borowski & Jaworski (2021) showed, the negative impact of the minimum wage on employment in general is usually assessed as low, with quite a few effects emerging for young and low-skilled workers. Secondly, it is deduced that even significant increases in the minimum wage can have a low negative impact on employment if their announcement is preceded by a sufficiently long period of time, making them gradual. Moreover, the impact of minimum wage increases on the consumer goods and services index is not significant.

On the other hand, a fairly strong impact on prices can be expected in those branches of the service sector that are characterised by a significant share of minimum wage earners in total employment. It should be noted that the empirical works cited are *ex post* analyses, i.e., they are devoted to estimating the effects of already implemented increases of the minimum wage. *Ex-ante* analyses, which attempt to predict the effects of planned increases in the minimum wage, are also very important. The application of the minimum wage is mainly found in the demands of welfare economics, pointing out the widespread frailty of markets. It therefore becomes an appropriate action to intervene to bring the economy closer to an optimal state. Assuming that markets tend to operate inefficiently or inequitably, regulation in the form of the introduction of a minimum wage can be described as the government's response to social demands to correct the inefficient operation of the free market (Borowski & Jaworski, 2021).

The state's social policy on the minimum wage can therefore have a good effect. Its increase raises the purchasing power of people with low incomes. According to Kulisa & Sierpińska (2016), an increase in the consumption of people with low incomes in Poland will raise market activity much more than the savings of people with high salaries. According to the authors, the theses about the need to keep wages low in order to ensure employment for as many people as possible are not supported by economic practice in Poland. Although high wages reduce company profits, they do not usually affect employment levels. This is because companies have to ensure that process lines are drained in accordance with the required standards. High wages must result from an increase in labour productivity. Otherwise, the company will lose competitiveness on the market.

In Poland, the minimum wage is of a statutory nature. This type of solution is currently in place in more than a hundred countries around the world, which is not surprising, as in most countries the exploitation of the lowest paid workers is not a desirable phenomenon. In September 2022, the European Parliament passed the EU Minimum Wage Directive. It will apply to all workers in the EU, bound by an employment contract or in an employment relationship. The EU Adequate Minimum Wage Directive was adopted on 14 September 2022 by 505 votes to 92 (44 MEPs abstained). It is intended to improve working and living conditions for all workers in the Union and to promote socio-economic progress. It sets out minimum adequacy requirements for minimum wages that are provided for by national law or established through collective bargaining. Minimum wages will be set by the Member States. There will therefore not be a single minimum wage across the Union. However, the states will have to ensure that the prevailing national minimum wage provides workers with a decent living, taking into account the cost of living and general wage levels (<http://stats.oecd.org>).

Conclusion

The minimum wage serves not only as a protective measure for the lowest-paid workers but also as an economic tool that has far-reaching implications for consumer demand, business competitiveness, and income distribution. As demonstrated in this study, the evolution of minimum wage policy reflects broader economic and social trends, with significant adjustments in recent years aimed at ensuring that wages keep pace with living costs and economic development.

While the minimum wage has been shown to elevate the income levels of low-paid workers, contributing to improved standards of living and increased purchasing power, it also raises certain challenges. For businesses, particularly in regions with lower productivity, higher minimum wages can lead to increased operational costs, which may hinder growth or lead to price adjustments that affect overall inflation. Additionally, in regions with diverse economic realities, a uniform national minimum wage can create disparities that influence regional employment rates and economic dynamics.

The empirical analysis of Poland's minimum wage policy highlights both its potential benefits and drawbacks. For instance, although higher minimum wages can stimulate economic activity by boosting consumer spending, they may also impose constraints on small and medium enterprises, potentially impacting employment levels and regional economic balance. This dual effect underscores the need for nuanced policies that consider local economic conditions, cost of living variations, and sector-specific productivity.

Future research and policy adjustments should continue to explore adaptive strategies, such as regional differentiation or phased wage increases, to better align wage policies with local and national economic goals. As economic theory and real-world outcomes demonstrate, the effects of minimum wage policies are complex and context-dependent, necessitating a dynamic approach to ensure that the benefits to workers are maximized while minimizing potential adverse effects on the broader economy.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Słowik, D. as the sole author, was responsible for all aspects of the study, including conceptualization, data collection and analysis, writing, and final revisions of the paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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