



Editorial: Scheduling laws have unintended consequences

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Seattle last week joined San Francisco in requiring some employers to schedule shifts 14 days in advance and pay workers extra for certain last-minute scheduling changes, the Associated Press reports. This idea also has come up in Oregon. It is a kind-hearted step that comes with unintended consequences.

Initially applying to retail and fast-food companies with 500 employees globally and to full-service restaurants with 500 employees and 40 establishments, the Seattle law is the latest effort to improve the lives of workers. Others include phasing in a \$15 an hour minimum wage and requiring many firms to provide paid sick leave.

Each of these ideas has some merit. It is argued that they fall within the spectrum of much older reforms, such as ending child labor and requiring overtime pay when regular employees work more than 40 hours a week.

Irresponsible managers can make their workers' lives unnecessarily difficult, for example by shifting schedules in ways that make it hard to find childcare or by disrupting natural human rhythms in unhealthy ways. A study of irregular shift scheduling found about half of such workers report "serious psychological distress," Bloomberg reported on Sept. 19. Too much disruption also leads to constant uncertainty about income.

But laws like the new one in Seattle reach deeply into the sphere of internal business management. Faced with additional burdensome bookkeeping and fines for changing schedules, businesses confront a real prospect of having too many or too few workers on hand to deal with customers.

Employers don't make schedule changes for their own amusement, but because it is in the nature of economics that short-term fluctuations in supply and demand are unpredictable.

This month the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 3.5 million Americans were able to rise above the poverty line last year, an historic indication that the hangover from the Great Recession is really fading. "More than seven years after the recession ended, employers are finally being compelled to reach deeper into the pools of untapped labor, creating more jobs, especially among retailers, restaurants and hotels, and paying higher wages to attract workers and meet new minimum wage requirements," The New York Times said Sunday.

This news tells us that capitalism is working, and that employers who unfairly jerk their workers around will suffer as employees jump ship to take up better positions elsewhere.

Just as minimum-wage increases have extended farther into rural areas and into smaller business enterprises, there is a risk that scheduling requirements that start in big cities will migrate into our region's small-business sector.

It's important to let lawmakers know about the risks of doing so. At the same time, citizens need to bear all these factors in mind if they are asked to support ballot initiatives that may sound good, but burden ma-and-pa businesses with big-business obligations.

There is an old saying in the legal profession that "tough cases make for bad law." Mandatory scheduling laws are rooted in humanitarianism, but threaten to make life worse instead of better for workers.

