

Essential Jobs, Disposable Workers

A decades-long surge in low-wage jobs has left millions of Americans struggling to make a living even as they hold the country together.



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J.C. Pan / April 17, 2020

For many conservatives, there's something bordering on romantic about the current minimum wage. It's not a lock into poverty, it's a *rite of passage*. "You can't just knock out the entry level of the economy," *Wall Street Journal* editor James Freeman said in July. "You don't want to disrupt that natural, healthy process of young people, unskilled people, coming into the workforce, gaining experience, moving up." In 2013, spooked by the rising momentum of the Fight for \$15, Fox Business host Charles

Payne put it more bluntly. “When we start talking about a minimum wage of \$15 an hour, what we’re trying to say is that mediocrity should be rewarded,” he said in response to a fast food worker walkout over wages.

This ugly disregard for minimum-wage workers is just one consequence of a vast and increasing divide between the two ends of the workforce, which has now been thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic. The coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. is an unexpected and catastrophic development, but the economic backdrop for it was an explosion of low-wage work, or the kind of work that used to be called “unskilled.” Of course, in our current time of crisis, much of that same work has been swiftly reclassified. “Jobs that people formerly considered not very valuable—grocery clerks, janitors, delivery people, and truck drivers—are now essential to our survival,” Arne Kalleberg, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of the book *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*, told *The New Republic*.

Kalleberg’s research has traced the troubling rise of job polarization—or the growth of both highly paid knowledge work and precarious, low-wage service sector jobs, with little in the middle—since the 1970s. Even as the official unemployment rate in the U.S. reached a historic low in the years following the Great Recession, a significant share of new jobs created were low-wage positions with few or no benefits and little job security. A Brookings Institution report released late last year found that 44 percent of all workers between the ages of 18 and 64, or more than 53 million people, were low-wage hourly workers. “They are not only students, people at the beginning of their careers, or people who need extra spending money,” Brookings researchers Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman wrote, a subtle rebuttal to conservative claims about how these jobs are held by teenagers looking for a little extra cash. “A majority are adults in their prime working years, and low-wage work is the primary way they support themselves and their families.”

Much of that labor force has now been tasked during the pandemic with keeping stores open and stocked, delivering food and mail, and caring for the sick and vulnerable, and is, as a result, at heightened risk for contracting the coronavirus. Earlier this week, *The Washington Post* reported that at least 41 grocery store workers had died of the virus. Worse still is that workers in these and other low-wage jobs often lack access to benefits like paid leave and health insurance, and many have

reported that their employers aren't providing sufficient protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, as they work during the pandemic.

The response from the rest of society to this predicament has ranged from callous to ineffectual. The worst behaviors have included "tip-baiting"—the ghoulish practice of enticing Instacart workers to fill shopping orders with the promise of large tips, then changing the tip to zero once the delivery is complete—and the needless policing of workers and strangers over their perceived noncompliance with social distancing rules. But the flipside of that hostility has been an outpouring of emotional appreciation, perhaps best embodied by New York's daily clapping ritual, that's almost certain to dwindle as soon as the threat of the virus does.

Commentators and politicians, including the president, have called front-line workers from nurses and doctors to grocery workers "heroes" and have suggested instituting pandemic-time "hazard pay" bonuses for essential workers. Last Saturday, the Air Force Thunderbirds arranged for a fighter jet squadron to fly over Las Vegas hospitals as a "salute to the first responders, health providers & the entire Nation," as a Thunderbirds commander put it. But the glut of low-wage jobs predated the coronavirus and will continue long after without a fundamental shift in the way that work is organized in the U.S.

In the end, what would be more meaningful than treating essential workers like heroes during a disaster is treating low-wage workers like they're essential even once the crisis is over, not simply through displays of gratitude or charity, but through raising wages, defending and expanding their right to unionize, and improving their daily working conditions. These aren't flashy points. They were true before the pandemic and will be true once it's subsided. Most of all, says Kalleberg, the government has to establish a robust social safety net, not simply ask low-wage workers to seek more education or job training. "The belief that these workers will be able to obtain good jobs if they simply acquire more skills isn't really true—there are almost no good jobs to be had," he said. "This is a time when the idea of precarious work is illustrated very vividly in everyday life."

Essential workers have also continued to fight for themselves, even throughout the pandemic and with unemployment now at an unprecedented level. Over the last few weeks, workers at Instacart, Whole Foods, fast food chains, assisted living facilities, and elsewhere have organized strikes and walkouts over their hazardous conditions and still-insufficient paychecks. "Workers feel a sense of empowerment in their new,

essential roles—which makes them even more outraged when their employers don't live up to the moment and take steps to protect and compensate them adequately," journalist Bryce Covert wrote on Thursday. Regardless of how quickly the coronavirus curve is flattened or how much of the economy rebounds in the coming weeks, it's becoming increasingly clear that, in terms of how we conceive of work, we can't go back to where we were before. The danger, though, is that we still might anyway.

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