

A Background Note on “Unskilled” Jobs in the United States – Past, Present, and Future

Amanda Silver, Sarah Kalloch, Zeynep Ton

With this note, we trace the history of categorization of work by skill level and ask ourselves what accounted for it. Was it (a) the nature of the work, (b) who did the work, or (c) the job’s low barrier-to-entry? Did the low wages of these jobs reflect their low marginal product or importance to the functioning of the economy? Something else?

“Unskilled” Job Definition and Evolution from the 19th to the 21st Centuries

In 1820, the United States Census Bureau began gathering occupational information on the number of persons (free and enslaved) engaged in three industry categories—agriculture, commerce, and manufactures—and later adding additional categories. When Alba Edwards took over the occupational statistics division in 1910, he expanded the categories used for analysis, noting that analysts already discussed workers in terms of their class or stratum. In 1917, he formalized this as a new occupational classification system, which he refined into six “Social Economic Groups” (**Exhibit 1**).

The first three groups were reserved for work of which “mental force” was considered the chief characteristic, including (a) professional persons (such as architects, dentists, and lawyers), (b) proprietors, managers, and officials (such as manufacturers, farm owners, and exporters), and (c) clerks and kindred workers (such as newsboys, typists, and insurance agents). “Skill” was not considered an appropriate term for these types of professions. They were distinguished, “not by a difference in skill but rather a difference in the possession of property, credit, and business and executive ability.”¹

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The word “skill” was only applied to work for which “muscular force” was the chief characteristic. The remaining three categories were designated as “skilled” (foremen and skilled tradespeople, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and machinists), “semi-skilled” (such as apprentices and machines tenders), or “unskilled” (laborers and servants). The majority of working people occupied the “unskilled” group. “Unskilled” referred to all occupations which, “require no special training, judgment, or manual dexterity, but supply mainly muscular strength for the performance of coarse, heavy work.”²

Worker identity also mattered for classification. As Edwards noted, “Certain occupations which, technically, are skilled occupations were classified as semiskilled because the enumerators returned so many children, young persons, and women as pursuing these occupations as to render the occupations semiskilled, even though each of them did contain some skilled workers.”³

In 1930, 14 million people (around 28% of the total workforce) were employed in four distinct “unskilled” occupational groups: farm labor, servant occupations, factory labor, and “other” laborers (**Exhibit 2**). The second largest category, semi-skilled occupations, contained only 7.9 million workers.⁴ African Americans were much more likely to work in “unskilled” occupations. Seventy-five percent of all employed African American men and women worked in unskilled occupations compared to 20% of native-born white and 30% of foreign-born white men and women (**Exhibit 3**). Farm labor was the most populous “unskilled” occupation, employing 3.7 million men and 646,000 women. 1.6 million women and about half as many men were classified in the “unskilled servant classes.”⁵ (See **Exhibit 4** for wages, population, and demographics of a selection of “unskilled” occupations in 1940 versus 2019.)

In the 21st century, “low-skill” and “unskilled” remained common terms. In 2020, the Social Security Administration defined “unskilled work” as “work which needs little or no judgment to do simple duties that can be learned on the job in a short period of time.”⁶ Economists and government agencies used two prevailing measurements to define skill level: (a) education and experience requirements and (b) job content analysis. (See **Exhibit 5** for a breakdown of methods and **Exhibit 6** for a sample of occupations by experience requirements.) Although the word “skill” was reserved for manual and trades occupations in the 20th century, by the 21st century, it was used to describe knowledge and managerial work. It was common shorthand to describe “skilled” jobs as those that required more than a high school degree.

New technology and automation in the early 21st century slowed the growth of some middle-paid occupations, such as sales, administrative and office work, and production work, but low-paid in-person service jobs rose as a share of employment, in what some economists referred to as, “job polarization.”⁷ In 2018, more than 50% of the U.S. labor force worked in jobs for which the typical entry-level education requirement was a high school degree or less, earning a median annual wage of \$33,473.⁸ This low-wage work paralleled the “unskilled” jobs of the 19th century, and was expected to keep growing. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics between 2019 and 2029, home

health/personal care aids and fast food and counter workers would be the two fastest growing occupations.⁹ The annual median pay rate for home health and personal care aids was \$25,280 and for fast food and counter workers it was \$22,740.¹⁰ (See **Exhibit 7** for 21st century occupational vignettes.)

“Unskilled” Occupational Groups in the 19th through 21st Centuries

Farm labor, factory labor, and other laborers remained the predominant source of “unskilled” jobs into the 21st century. The fourth category of “unskilled” labor—servant occupations—shrank and eventually came to be referred to as part of the service industry. Labor advocates, government regulations, and employer initiatives were able to influence the wages and conditions of these groups, which will be covered in a later section.

Farm Labor

The American economy was mainly agricultural through the early 20th century. Starting in the sixteenth century, the primary source of farm labor for cotton, sugar cane, and tobacco was African men, women, and children kidnapped and shipped to the U.S. through the transatlantic slave trade. Cotton grown and picked by slaves became the nation’s most valuable export. By 1831, almost half the world’s raw cotton came from the U.S.¹¹ The Mississippi Valley had more millionaires per capita than any other part of the nation. White landowning farmers who could not afford hired help or slaves tended to have many children who could work the land and care for the animals. In 1870, over 50% of employed persons worked in agriculture and, between 1870 and 1900, two-thirds of all child labor was done on farms.¹²

Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865,¹ African American labor continued to be exploited. Restricted from owning land and excluded from alternative sources of employment, many African Americans signed sharecropping agreements in which the landowner charged for supplies, housing, and interest and would take a portion of the crop yield, leaving the worker in a cycle of inescapable debt. Another form of forced labor was called convict leasing. African Americans were arrested for small crimes and rented out to plantation owners during harvest season. Convict leasing continued in Florida and Alabama until it was officially outlawed in 1923. A new form of exploitation took its place. Convicts who were charged high fines for crimes could pay them off by working in work camps or citrus groves.¹³

On the U.S. West Coast, large commercial producers began relying on low-wage immigrant labor, who tended to work for lower wages than native workers. Starting after the Mexican-American War in 1848, many Mexican migrants found employment as seasonal and migrant farmworkers in California. Chinese immigrants were responsible for transforming the swampland of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta into fertile farmland by constructing levees to control flooding. By 1882, they made up 50% of California’s agricultural workers.¹⁴ The ethnic composition of new arrivals fluctuated in response to

¹ The 2018 Global Slavery Index estimated 403,000 individuals were living in the conditions of modern slavery in the United States in 2016, defined as those experiencing forced labor, sexual servitude, or forced marriage. The Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution banned slavery, except, “as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”

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immigration policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1917, both of which imposed immigration quotas based on nationality and barred the arrival of immigrants from most Asian countries.ⁱⁱ

Farm labor was physically demanding work. In 1940, Science Research Associates published a manual called *Occupational Outlines on America's Major Occupations* to help Americans learn more about various job prospects. The authors noted that a farm laborer was expected to be an “all around man,” rising at dawn to complete daily tasks such as milking cows, feeding chickens, digging up weeds, and repairing fences.¹⁵ Harvesting crops required tremendous physical effort, spending full days bending over, often in harsh weather. In Southern cotton fields, the average worker picked 150 pounds of cotton per day and received less than \$15 (in 2020 dollars)ⁱⁱⁱ for that entire day’s work.¹⁶

Agricultural employment declined 43% between the late 19th century and the early 21st century.¹⁷ By 2019, 1.3% of the U.S. workforce worked in agriculture.¹⁸ Farms became increasingly productive as a result of consolidation and mechanization, with tractors replacing horses and mules and new technologies such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides improving crop yields. Although technology augmented some manual tasks, many crops—including cherries, tomatoes, peppers, asparagus, and apples—were still harvested by hand, relying on workers’ judgment and experience to identify signs of crop failure and to pick fruits at their optimal ripeness. In 2019, farm workers were paid an average of \$12.11 per hour.¹⁹ Many were only hired part-time without benefits and unable to afford the same produce they picked, and often had to move between states to find jobs at different harvesting periods.

Workers harvested under all conditions, including extreme heat and haze from wildfires, and were repeatedly exposed to pesticides and put at high risk for certain cancers.^{iv} Farm jobs were often difficult to fill with native-born workers, illustrated by a 2010 United Farm Workers Union campaign called “Take Our Jobs.” This program, designed to fight criticism that immigrants were taking away employment opportunities from American citizens, posted two million open farming job positions. Although 9,000 workers applied, only seven stayed in their jobs for more than a few weeks.²⁰ Between 2014 and 2016, 73% of all crop farmworkers were foreign-born; 57% were born in Mexico and at least 48% were undocumented.²¹

Factory Labor

Before the 18th century, the production of goods was typically the occupation of artisans and craft workers. The invention of new technologies, such as the cotton gin and spinning jenny, and new

ⁱⁱ The 1917 Act barred immigration from the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” with an exception for Japan, which had voluntarily reduced immigration to the United States, and the Philippines, which was a US colony.

ⁱⁱⁱ All stated wage rates from before 1929 were converted to 2020 dollars using the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which may have resulted in slight overestimates. The Bureau of Economic Analysis’s (BEA) Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) index was used to adjust all wage rates to 2020 dollars for any wage rates recorded after 1929, when the PCE first became available.

^{iv} Many farm workers had limited recourse for injuries or diseases developed on the job. In 2018, only 14 states had laws mandating worker’s compensation for migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

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techniques, such as the use of interchangeable parts, prompted capitalists to organize large groups of untrained workers in an industrialized factory system. In exchange for their physical labor, workers were paid by the hour or piece. These manufacturing techniques increased overall productivity and attracted U.S.-born Americans and immigrants to concentrated urban areas. By 1910, one of every three non-farm jobs was in manufacturing.²²

The cotton that fueled export commerce in the South also fueled the U.S textile industry. New England, easily accessed by ports and newly built steam-powered railways, accounted for 75% of American textile production and 67% of non-exported cotton purchases.²³ As competing factories emerged, many built adjacent housing and schools to attract children and young women, including many immigrants, to live and work there. Children could be hired at lower wages than adults and were seen as ideal for tasks that required small hands, such as doffing, a job which required moving rapidly between noisy spinning frames to remove full spools of thread and replace them with empty ones. A report on New England textile factories in 1832 found that the 18,539 men employed received the 2020 equivalent of an average of \$151 per week, the 38,927 women received \$60 per week, and the 4,697 children received \$52 per week.²⁴

The Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914) brought electrification and internal combustion engines, leading to new manufacturing techniques. In December 1913, Henry Ford capitalized on these changes and pioneered the first moving assembly line, which reduced the time to assemble an automobile chassis from 12.5 hours to 93 minutes.²⁵ Automobiles became affordable for middle-income Americans and contributed to a transformation in the American economy, from growth in the oil and steel industries to new job creation in fast food and motels.²⁶ The Ford Motor Company attracted immigrant workers, with at least 50 nationalities and over 100 languages represented in the workforce.²⁷ Ford became the largest employer of African American workers in Detroit, many of whom migrated to the North to escape racial violence and oppression faced in the South. Nevertheless, they were still more likely to be employed in the most hazardous foundry jobs.²⁸

During the 20th century, jobs in auto factories were split into discrete tasks, requiring no human judgment, with training completed in a matter of hours. As described by a General Motors auto worker in the 1980s, “The one thing that was impossible to escape was the monotony of our new jobs. Every minute, every hour, every truck and every movement was a plodding replica of the one that had gone before.”²⁹ By 2016, the auto industry purchased 55% of all industrial robots.³⁰ Most “unskilled” jobs in that industry, such as painting, fastening, welding, and riveting, could be performed by a series of robotic arms and the remaining work tended to require more specialized training. The 998,000 workers in automobile manufacturing in 2019 earned an average wage of around \$23 per hour,³¹ with jobs including engineers, data analysts, and supply chain coordinators, all of which had high educational and experience requirements.

Between 1965 and 2020—driven by automation, offshoring, and changes in production systems—U.S. manufacturing employment declined 67%, employing only 8.51% of the workforce by 2020.³² Some manufacturing jobs that remained “unskilled” used the American prison system as their primary labor supply. A 2005 nationwide census of the prison system found that an estimated 600,000 prisoners worked in manufacturing through the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program—around 4% of all manufacturing jobs in the nation.³³ By 2020, this disproportionately African American workforce produced more than \$2 billion worth of products per year—including wire harnesses for electronic equipment, circuit boards, pet products, and sports apparel³⁴—while paid an hourly wage between \$0.23 and \$1.15 per hour.³⁵

In addition, sweatshop conditions persisted in Los Angeles garment factories. A 2016 investigation by the U.S. Department of Labor revealed that the largely Hispanic and female workforce in these factories, both documented and undocumented, were paid as little as \$4.00 per hour to sew clothing for retailers including Forever 21, TJ Maxx, and Fashion Nova.³⁶ Federal law protected brands from facing penalties if they claimed they were unaware of the conditions.

Servant and Service Occupations

Before the Civil War (1861–1865), wealthy white Americans could rely on a staff of indentured servants—typically poor or convicted persons from Europe serving a mandated term of unpaid service for several years, or house slaves—to fetch water, cook, clean, and care for children. After the abolition of slavery in 1865, African American women—facing many obstacles including segregated housing, transportation, and education—had few job opportunities other than being domestic servants, cooks, and washers. In 1870, more than half of all employed women were domestic servants, a figure which excluded the labor of housewives.^v By 1900, the majority of domestic service workers were either African American or foreign-born white.³⁷

Domestic servants’ work included ironing, cooking, cleaning, and laundry, working long hours under close supervision. They were hired by individual families, frequently without contracts, and had little recourse for low wages and poor working conditions. Even when workers had signed contracts, they could be accused of theft or of causing damage to belongings, resulting in docked pay or termination. To supplement their low wages, African American cooks and servants would often bring scraps of food home from the workplace, a practice referred to as pan-totting.³⁸ Some employers condoned the practice and used it to justify keeping wages low, while others declared the process reprehensible, admonishing the workers as untrustworthy.

In the 1860s, the Chicago industrialist George Pullman recruited thousands of formerly enslaved men as railroad sleeper-car attendants to provide an upscale experience for his wealthy passengers. These

^v According to the Census instructions from 1870, “The term ‘house-keeper’ will be reserved for such persons as receive distinct wages or salary for the service. Women keeping house for their own families or for themselves, without any other gainful occupation, will be entered as ‘keeping house.’ Grown daughters assisting them will be reported without occupation.”

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men, called porters, often worked 400 hours per month shining shoes, serving meals, cleaning the cars, and attending to the needs of the passengers at all hours of the day and night.³⁹ Wages for porters were among the lowest of all railroad workers. In 1926, nearly half of a porter’s annual income of around \$9,700 (in 2020 dollars) came from direct tipping⁴⁰—a practice perceived as demeaning for a white person, but appropriate for African Americans and “a token of their inferiority.”⁴¹

The American household underwent significant changes in the 20th century. Household tasks became less labor-intensive with the invention of mechanical appliances like the refrigerator and washing machine, the availability of running water, and a supply of affordable clothing and dining options. Between 1910 and 1990, private household workers declined by 92% as a proportion of total employment,⁴² but more specialized service occupations like nannies, childcare workers, and home health aides still performed these functions. In the same period between 1910 to 1990, the number of service workers increased from 3.5% to 13% of total employment⁴³—growth which continued into the 21st century. This change was driven by growth in sectors like the restaurant industry; American consumers began spending more of their budgets at meals at roadside restaurants, fast food franchises, and other dining options, with away-from-home food spending finally surpassing spending on groceries in 2010.⁴⁴ The restaurant industry employed the majority of America’s tipped workers, who were subject to income volatility, customer discrimination, sexual harassment and had less access to benefits and labor protection.

In 2019, the largest service occupations were in retail and fast food; around 4.6 million retail sales workers and 3.9 million fast food workers earned a median hourly wage of \$12.29 and \$11.18 respectively.⁴⁵ They often performed highly repetitive tasks such as unloading inventory, stocking shelves, preparing food, and working at the cash register. Large companies often designed the jobs to remove as much judgment as possible. Many retail and fast food employers introduced “just-in-time” scheduling practices, which meant that workers received shifts with little advanced notice and experienced instability in their sleep schedules, home life, and week-to-week wages.

In the 21st century, service occupations such as retail, fast food, hospitality, and personal care aides were the dominant source of employment for non-college-educated workers. In 2020, they accounted for 66% of minimum wage earners in the country.⁴⁶ People of color were overrepresented in the lowest-paying service jobs; for example, making up 41% of cashiers but only 29% of first-line supervisors in retail.⁴⁷

The retirement of the “baby boom” generation created a need for direct-care workers, including certified nursing assistants (CNAs), personal care aides, and home health aides—all occupations that typically required no more than a high school degree and a brief certification course. The work was physically demanding and cognitively difficult, requiring workers to manage relationships with clients and their families while handling a variety of complex health conditions.⁴⁸ Home healthcare workers, who care for the elderly or individuals with chronic illnesses, were 87% female, 53% non-white, and

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23% foreign-born,⁴⁹ earning a median annual wage of \$25,280.⁵⁰ In 2018, the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute found that nursing assistants were three times more likely to be injured on the job than a typical U.S. worker, with most injuries resulting from back strain caused by lifting clients repeatedly throughout the day.⁵¹

Childcare workers—94% women in 2019⁵²—were responsible for a variety of tasks including record keeping, meal preparation and supervision, changing diapers, and engaging children in stimulating activities. In 2019, around 1.2 million childcare workers earned a median hourly rate of \$11.65—an annualized income of \$24,230—with many needing multiple jobs to fill the gap.⁵³ Even with such low wages, childcare in the U.S. cost working parents between \$9,000 and \$9,600 per year on average in 2016, forcing an estimated two million mostly female workers to leave their jobs or turn down job offers to prioritize childcare responsibilities.⁵⁴

The proliferation of the Internet and digital technology were defining characteristics of the 2000s, leading to changes in consumer preferences, such as online shopping, and to new methods of organizing the workforce, such as connecting workers classified as independent contractors to on-demand gig jobs. This new technology was often used to lower the barrier-to-entry for jobs previously requiring specialized training and involved algorithmic management to monitor worker performance, such as the rideshare rating system. In the “unskilled” category, some of the largest gig work occupations were transportation (such as the approximately one million U.S. Uber drivers and one million Lyft drivers), delivery (such as the approximately 750,000 Instacart shoppers and 200,000 DoorDash drivers), and other services (such as the approximately 50,000 TaskRabbit taskers and 10,000 Handy cleaners).⁵⁵ New companies, such as Wonolo, Snag Work, Intelycare, and Coople, emerged to substitute retail and elder care employees with interchangeable on-demand shift workers.⁵⁶ Several companies later folded after hearing from customers that they did not want someone different cleaning their house or caring for their loved one every week. Still, new companies continued to be founded using this model.

Other Labor in the “Unskilled” Category

“Other labor” included construction, sanitation work, mining, fishermen and oystermen, carriage drivers, and many others. In 1863, construction officially began on the Transcontinental Railroad, a six-year endeavor to build 900 miles of continuous railroad connecting the West Coast and the Midwest. Two years into the project, the Union Pacific rail company, concerned about the slow pace of construction, began recruiting Chinese immigrants from mining camps. They were paid less than the white laborers, earning \$15 per day in 2020 dollars, and, by the peak of construction, made up 78% of the construction workers.⁵⁷ The work was dangerous, involving dangling on ropes from cliffs and blasting away rock to lay track and build tunnels. Hundreds died from explosions, landslides, and other accidents.⁵⁸

Coal reserves in the United States prompted heavy investment in the industry. In 1920, the country produced over 568 million tons of bituminous coal and employed over 630,000 workers in 1920.⁵⁹ Coal

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mining was also one of the most dangerous occupations, with miners’ safety threatened by cave-ins, explosions, and lung disease. Some of the work was performed by young boys, working 10- to 12-hour shifts in dark, dirty and hazardous conditions. They would be hired as “trappers,” responsible for opening and closing the trap doors to let air into the mine, and as “breaker boys,” breaking coal into pieces, sorting it by hand, and removing impurities. In the late 19th century, boys could earn the 2020 equivalent of \$21 to \$35 for a full day of labor, about half the rate of adult men.⁶⁰ Investments in alternative energy sources (including natural gas and renewables), environmental regulations, and the mechanization of coal mining tasks all contributed to the decline in coal mining employment throughout the second half of the 20th century. By 2020, fewer than 50,000 workers were still employed in coal mining.⁶¹

In 2011, e-commerce sales accounted for around 5% of total retail sales but grew to around 15% in 2020.⁶² To accommodate the demand, employment in warehousing rose by 90% between 2000 and 2017, creating labor-intensive jobs for workers with no prior experience.⁶³ They were often required to hit strict quotas by repetitively filling merchandise racks, scanning and packing items, and lifting heavy boxes. At e-commerce giant Amazon, 9.6 workers per 100 full-time workers suffered a serious injury in 2018, more than double the warehousing industry average.⁶⁴ In 2018, warehouse laborers and material movers across the industry earned an average of \$28,235 annually and were disproportionately African American and Hispanic.⁶⁵

Technology also changed knowledge work. In November 2005, Amazon launched Mechanical Turk, a software tool that would allow companies around the world to assign discrete micro-tasks to a waiting pool of hundreds of thousands of digital laborers. Those workers, located predominately in the United States and India, could select HITs (human intelligence tasks) for jobs including identifying hate speech, labeling images, verifying a person’s identity, and transcribing audio.⁶⁶ A World Bank report from 2015 estimated that typical wages for Mechanical Turk workers, 38% of whom had a bachelor’s degree, were between \$2 and \$3 per hour, with more-experienced workers earning between \$6 and \$8.⁶⁷ Workers needed to constantly monitor the website in order to quickly accept more-lucrative tasks, but were only paid after completing the job. If the requester found the work unsatisfactory, then the worker would not be paid and had limited channels by which to request an explanation or feedback to allow them to improve.

Other companies changed their employment structure to decouple “unskilled” work from internal operations. Between 2010 and 2014, around 30% of all new jobs were for independent contractors.⁶⁸ In 2020, the social media site Facebook used third-party agencies to contract over 15,000 content moderators—a group 30% the size of its full-time workforce—who were paid around \$15 per hour.⁶⁹ The job required reviewing a stream of posts and videos, which typically contained graphic content ranging from suicides to animal abuse. Turnover was high and some employees took legal action to demand compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder, winning a \$53 million lawsuit in 2020.⁷⁰

Improvements to Pay and Working Conditions for “Unskilled” Jobs

Although there were concerted efforts in the 20th century to move workers out of “unskilled” jobs through education and training initiatives, education alone did not improve employment conditions. The 1944 G.I. Bill provided over eight million World War II veterans with stipends for college and trade school tuition, supplies, and cost of living, but African American and female veterans were systematically shut out of these benefits—unable to enroll in colleges that excluded African Americans and female students or facing hostility when they exercised their benefits. Overall education levels rose throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, yet the effect on employment was not commensurate; in 2012, 45.7% of low-wage workers had attended some college or had a college degree.⁷¹ Some new specialized training programs emerged focused on “upskilling” workers to support their transition into in-demand careers, but job placement was highly variable and students were still responsible for the costs of most programs.

Three major institutional stakeholders—government, labor and worker advocates, and employers—worked both separately and together to improve pay and working conditions for workers in “unskilled” jobs. Refer to **Exhibit 8** for a timeline of major worker organizing events and government regulatory activities.

Throughout the 20th century, during a period of strong government regulation and labor activity, median hourly compensation and net labor productivity grew in tandem for all workers. Starting in the 1970s, however, net labor productivity continued to increase but median hourly compensation stagnated.⁷²

Government Regulations

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was part of the first comprehensive federal labor regulation efforts that took place as part of the New Deal legislation in the 1930s. Under the purview of Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, the FLSA banned child labor, created a 40-hour workweek, and set the first federal minimum wage. (See **Exhibit 9** for the federal minimum wage rates over time.) Senator Robert Wagner championed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which guaranteed workers the right to unionize. Agriculture and domestic work, both largely African American occupations at the time, tipped workers, and independent contract workers were exempt from federal labor protections. They were prohibited from unionizing and were not guaranteed a minimum wage. In 1966, tipped workers were guaranteed a minimum wage of \$2.13 an hour, 50% less than the official minimum wage at the time. In 2020, the minimum wage for tipped workers was still at \$2.13 an hour.⁷³

At the 2020 federal minimum wage rate of \$7.25 per hour, a family of four with two working adults would need to work four full-time jobs (a 75-hour week per adult) to earn a living wage for their family, deemed to be \$68,808.⁷⁴ As of 2021, 9 states and the District of Columbia, plus 27 cities and counties including Seattle and Flagstaff, Arizona, had passed legislation to gradually raise their minimum wage to \$15 per hour and President Biden had signed an executive order raising the minimum wage for federal employees and contractors to \$15 per hour.⁷⁵

In 2019, voters in California passed AB5, a landmark bill that required some employers to reclassify independent contractors as employees, thereby expanding their rights and protections. In response, app-based platform companies that relied on gig workers such as Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash wrote Proposition 22, which would allow them to continue classifying drivers and delivery workers as independent contractors. The companies spent around \$200 million to support the measure, which was passed by voters in November 2020.⁷⁶

Labor and Worker Advocates

Strikes by Pullman Palace Car Company workers in 1894, Massachusetts textile workers in 1912, Michigan automobile assembly workers in 1936, Kentucky coal miners in the 1930s, 1973, and 2019, California farmworkers in 1965, Memphis sanitation workers in 1968, and New York City fast food workers in 2012, among others (refer back to **Exhibit 8**), pressured companies to raise wages and improve working conditions. Coordinated strikes were also used as a tactic to demand union recognition.

In the 1960s, the majority of urban sanitation workers were African American. They earned so little that they qualified for welfare benefits after a 40-hour week.⁷⁷ In February 1968, Memphis sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death by a garbage compactor. For years, labor organizers had been advocating for better safety precautions, higher wages, and overtime pay, but this event brought urgency to the movement. Over 1,000 workers walked off the job.⁷⁸ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Memphis to support the strikers, delivering a speech in a crowded church. He proclaimed, “Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? And they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation. These are facts which must be seen, and it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.”⁷⁹ The strike lasted 65 days, with the workers eventually winning union recognition and wage increases.

Unions enabled workers to bargain collectively, often gaining contractual obligations for cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) for all members. Unions helped raise wages for non-unionized workers, too. After one firm agreed to a contract, it set a precedent for other workers to make similar demands, in a process known as pattern bargaining. Union membership peaked at around 34.8% of the workforce in 1954 and dropped to just 6.2% by 2020, explained in part by globalization, the proliferation of right-to-work laws,^{vi} and the difficulty of organizing workers in more distributed workplaces in the service industry.⁸⁰

The decline of unions and industry consolidation worsened pay and working conditions for “unskilled” workers. One example was the meatpacking industry. In the 1960s, the majority of meatpacking workers were unionized and were paid \$20 per hour (2020 equivalent).⁸¹ In the 1990s and 2000s, companies began recruiting immigrants, both documented and undocumented, who were willing to

^{vi} Right-to-work laws, passed to combat the growing strength of unions in the 20th century, prohibit unions from requiring all members to pay union dues, making them challenging to fund. As of 2020, they are in place in 27 US states, mostly in the South and Midwest.

work for less and were less willing to join union activity. In 2019, meatpacking employees in the U.S. made a median hourly wage of \$14.05, which was \$29,224 annualized.⁸² In 2015, Oxfam America found that chicken plant workers wore diapers to work because they could not get bathroom breaks during shifts.⁸³ Even though injuries were underreported—due to a mix of contract workers who were not counted as workers, plant medical staff discouraging doctor visits, and a large immigrant population who were more hesitant to report—meatpacking still had the highest reported injury rate in manufacturing in 2015.⁸⁴

In the 21st century, new forms of worker organization emerged. The Coalition for Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farm-worker-led human rights organization, led a four-year boycott of Taco Bell. The boycott ended when distributors agreed to pay an extra penny per pound of tomatoes picked. These efforts secured a 20–30-% wage increase, with workers averaging \$8.75 per hour in 2005.⁸⁵ In 2007, Ai-Jen Poo co-founded the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), an advocacy group that promoted the rights of domestic workers, nannies, and caretakers, the majority of whom were people of color and more likely than the typical U.S. worker to have been born outside the United States.⁸⁶ By 2020, the NDWA succeeded in passing a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in nine states and one municipality, mandating overtime pay and sick days and creating wage and standards boards.

Employers

In the early 20th century, Henry Ford faced high employee turnover (380%), which caused quality and efficiency problems in the automobile production process. In 1914, Ford famously decided to raise wages for his assembly line workers to \$5 per day—more than double the average rate of \$2.04—the 2020 equivalent of raising daily wages from \$53 to \$130.⁸⁷

The Japanese automobile manufacturer Toyota not only paid workers well but also went further to design work to increase worker contribution and productivity. Integral to the Toyota Production System was empowering assembly line workers to identify problems and be involved in continuous improvement. When Toyota entered a joint venture with General Motors in 1983, known as New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI), GM’s poorly performing auto production plant in Fremont, California soon became the company’s most productive automotive plant in the U.S.—using the same people and technology and keeping the same union. The difference in the work, the respect for people, and the commitment to continuous improvement also improved job quality and reduced absenteeism from 20 to 2% after several years of operations.⁸⁸

In the 21st century, a number of service companies, such as Costco (one of the world’s largest retailers), QuikTrip (a large convenience store chain with gas stations), and In-N-Out Burger (a fast food chain), were paying their workers higher-than-market wages and designing the work to improve job quality, reduce costly waste, increase sales, and increase labor productivity. In what was referred to as the “Good Jobs Strategy,” companies made disciplined tradeoffs that reduced operational complexity, developed standards for repeated tasks but involved employees in making decisions best for local

customers, developed cross-trained teams, and operated with slack.⁸⁹ The system enabled and relied on the contribution of highly tenured, internally promoted employees.

A growing number of companies in industries ranging from financial services to hospitality also made a public commitment to raise wages to at least \$15 per hour.⁹⁰ Some companies, including Quest Diagnostics and Sam’s Club, saw gains in service quality, productivity, and employee turnover after making changes to their operations along with investing in workers by increasing wages and training, providing paths for mobility, and committing to stable scheduling.

“Unskilled” Workers Are Essential Workers

When U.S. states issued lockdown orders in 2020 to control the spread of the highly contagious Covid-19 virus, they included specific provisions to exempt workers who were needed to perform essential services, popularizing the term “essential workers.”^{vii} Nearly 70% of essential workers were in “unskilled” jobs, working on the frontlines in the healthcare, transportation, agriculture, warehousing, and service industries.⁹¹

Around 30% of essential workers worked in healthcare and 80% worked in low-wage occupations—including home health aides, orderlies, nursing home cooks, and hospital housekeepers. The median hourly wage was \$13.48.⁹² 76% of healthcare workers were women. Food and agriculture was the second largest group, accounting for 20% of essential workers, 50% of whom were people of color. This group made the lowest median hourly wage of essential workers at \$13.12.⁹³ There was no federal mandate to provide essential workers with hazard pay, but some companies temporarily raised pay by several dollars per hour and provided paid time off for anyone with a proven diagnosis of the virus. According to some economists, the low wages could be explained by the low bargaining power of non-unionized workers, the fact that frontline roles implied a constraint on how many customers could be served at a time, and the high supply of qualified workers relative to demand.⁹⁴

Without the option to work remotely, these essential workers continued to work, sometimes without adequate personal protective equipment. One such worker was Achut Deng, a former Sudanese refugee who was working as the shift lead at a meat processing facility in South Dakota which became the site of 44% of the Covid-19 cases in the state. In an interview, Deng reflected: “I came to America thinking I can never go through hell... If people need food and I’m able to do that for them, then I’m just going to put my life to God to protect me and not get sick.”⁹⁵ Insufficient testing, crowded living spaces, and lack of protective equipment made farmworkers particularly vulnerable, with one study estimating that around 486,000 agricultural workers had contracted the virus as of January 2021, around 20% of all

^{vii} “Essential” services during Covid-19 were defined by the Department of Homeland Security and on a state-by-state basis. They were typically classified as industries that maintain critical infrastructure and services for which remote work is not practical, including food and agriculture, healthcare, and public transportation. While Covid made the term ubiquitous, states have always had lists of essential workers; for example, those who need to keep working during snowstorms.

workers employed directly on farms.⁹⁶ The virus swept across all industries, including warehouses, healthcare, and transit workers, with devastating consequences.

People over the age of 60 and with preexisting health conditions were at the highest risk of dying from the virus. There were many fatal outbreaks at nursing homes and assisted living residences. In October 2020, it was reported that 38% of all Covid-19 deaths in the United States were linked to long-term care facilities.⁹⁷ Although many facilities temporarily banned visits from family members to reduce the risk of transmission, little was done to stop the spread from staff. Nursing assistants and other staff were commonly contracted by staffing agencies to work at multiple facilities or had other part-time jobs to supplement their low wages. A 2020 working paper estimated that eliminating these staff linkages could have reduced the infection rate by 44%.⁹⁸

The Future of Work, Workers, and Pay

Many “future of work” conversations over the past decade have focused on job loss driven by automation and technology. But MIT’s Task Force on the Future of Work Commission found that job loss is not the biggest challenge facing workers; innovation destroys some jobs but creates new ones. The primary issue was job quality, especially for lower-wage workers.⁹⁹ California’s Future of Work Commission came out with a similar finding in its 2021 report, which focused not on skills gaps or on job losses due to automation, but on creating more quality jobs for Californians, less than half of whom reported holding a quality job in a 2019 Gallup poll.¹⁰⁰

Thought leaders and researchers have long reflected on how some occupations acquired social value, while others were considered low-status (**Exhibit 10**). The global pandemic made it clear that those who supply the nation’s food, deliver its products, and take care of children and the elderly were essential to the functioning of the economy. Yet, from the very beginnings of industry in the United States, these workers—often immigrants, people of color, women, and even children—made below-subsistence wages, worked under poor conditions, and were looked down upon as low-status and “unskilled.”

If “unskilled” work is also “essential” work, how should we think about work, workers, and pay for jobs that have historically been categorized as “unskilled”?

Exhibit 1 Social Economic Groupings of Gainfully Employed Workers of the United States, 1938

1. Professional persons
2. Proprietors, managers, and officials:
 - a. Farmers (owners and tenants).
 - b. Wholesale and retail dealers.
 - c. Other proprietors, managers, and officials.
3. Clerks and kindred workers.
4. Skilled workers and foremen.
5. Semiskilled workers:
 - a. Semiskilled workers in manufacturing.
 - b. Other semiskilled workers.
6. Unskilled workers:
 - a. Farm laborers.
 - b. Factory and building construction laborers.
 - c. Other laborers.
 - d. Servant classes.

Source: Adapted from Alba M. Edwards, "A Social-Economic Grouping of the Gainful Workers of the United States," 1938, retrieved from U.S. Census website, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/workers/workers-national.pdf>, pdf page 8.

Exhibit 2 Occupations Labeled as "Unskilled," According to Social-Economic Groupings, 1938

6. Unskilled workers
 - 6a. Farm laborers
 - 6b. Factory and building construction laborers
 - Firemen (except locomotive and fire department)
 - Furnace men, smelter men, and pourers
 - Heaters (metal)
 - Laborers - manufacturing
 - 6c. Other laborers
 - Fishermen and oystermen
 - Teamsters and haulers-log and timber camps
 - Other lumbermen, raftsmen, and woodchoppers
 - Coal mine operatives
 - Other operatives in extraction of minerals
 - Longshoremen and stevedores
 - Draymen, teamsters, and carriage drivers
 - Garbage laborers
 - Hostlers and stable hands
 - Laborers - truck, transfer and cab companies
 - Laborers- road and transfer
 - Laborers, including construction laborers- steam and street railroads

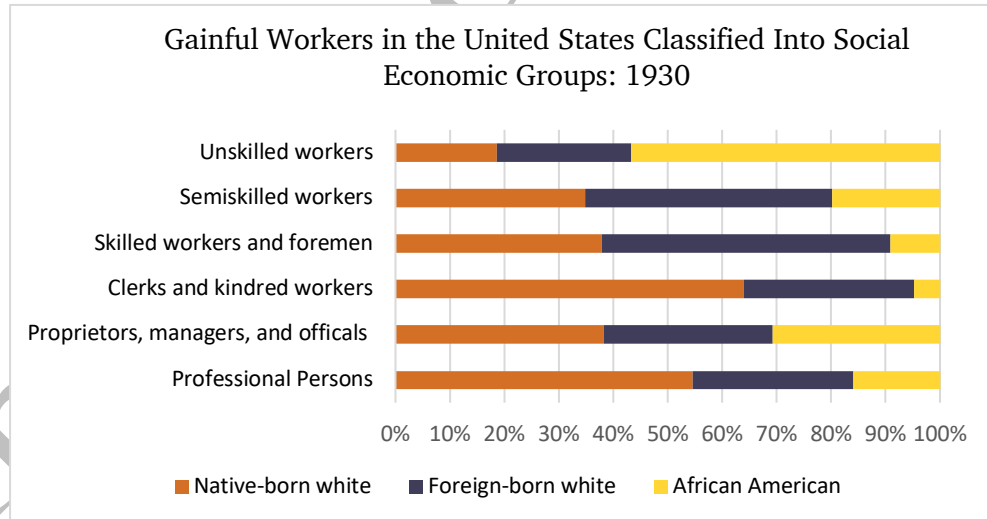
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- Laborers - transportation
- Laborers in coal and lumber yards, warehouses, etc.
- Laborers - public service
- Laborers - recreation and amusement
- Stagehands and circus helpers
- Laborers - cleaning, dyeing, and pressing shops
- Laborers - domestic and personal service
- Laborers - laundries
- 6d. Servant classes
 - Bootblacks
 - Charwomen and cleaners
 - Elevator tenders
 - Janitors and sextons
 - Launderers and laundresses (not in laundry)
 - Porters (except in stores)
 - Waiters

Source: Adapted from Alba M. Edwards, “A Social-Economic Grouping of the Gainful Workers of the United States,” 1938, retrieved from U.S. Census website, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/workers/workers-national.pdf>, pdf page 11.

Exhibit 3 Demographics of Social Economic Group Categories from 1930 Census Data



*Note: White often times included Hispanic/LatinX and was not reported separately in these data.

Source: Alba M. Edwards, “A Social-Economic Grouping of the Gainful Workers of the United States,” 1938, retrieved from U.S. Census website, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/workers/workers-national.pdf>, pdf page 18.

Exhibit 4 Wages and Demographics of Selected Skilled and “Unskilled” Occupations in 1940 and 2019

OCCUPATION	ESTIMATED ANNUAL WAGE, IN 2020 DOLLARS**	# EMPLOYED	WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHICS
1940			
FARM LABORERS	\$6,200	3,291,800	10% female; 25% nonwhite
DOMESTIC SERVICE WORKERS	\$8,440	2,107,200	93% female; 48% nonwhite
CHARWOMEN, JANITORS, AND PORTERS	\$20,300	583,240	13% female; 36% nonwhite
PRACTICAL NURSES AND MIDWIVES	\$21,510	88,200	95% female; 13% nonwhite
MANUFACTURING LABORERS	\$25,390	1,305,660	6% female; 20% nonwhite
BOOKKEEPERS, CASHIERS, ACCOUNTANTS, AND TICKET AGENTS*	\$45,720	900,380	50% female; 0.46% nonwhite
LAWYERS AND JUDGES*	\$69,220	180,220	2.6% female; 0.55% nonwhite
2019			
AGRICULTURAL WORKERS	\$25,840	902,900	24% female; 2.6% Black, 1.2% Asian, 54% Hispanic
CASHIERS	\$26,030	3,633,500	71% female; 17.9% Black, 7.3% Asian, 24% Hispanic
PERSONAL CARE AIDES	\$26,440	3,161,500	86% female; 25% Black, 8% Asian, 22% Hispanic
MAIDS/HOUSEKEEPERS	\$26,810	926,960	89% female; 17% Black, 4.1% Asian, 49% Hispanic
RETAIL SALESPERSONS	\$27,600	8,603,590	49% female; 12% Black, 4.5% Asian, 19% Hispanic
MEATPACKING WORKERS	\$29,320	832,800	27% female; 17% Black, 6.2% Asian, 37% Hispanic
HAND LABORERS AND FREIGHT, STOCK, AND MATERIAL MOVERS	\$29,510	2,986,000	22% female; 20% Black, 2.7% Asian, 23% Hispanic

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JANITORS AND CLEANERS (WHO ARE NOT MAIDS/HOUSEKEEPERS)	\$30,010	2,145,450	37% female; 18% Black, 3.4% Asian, 32% Hispanic
CONSTRUCTION LABORERS	\$36,000	1,902,000	3.8% female; 8% Black, 1.4% Asian, 46% Hispanic
FACTORY LABOR (ASSEMBLERS AND FABRICATORS)	\$36,310	1,856,870	36% female; 20% Black, 9.6% Asian, 22% Hispanic
ACCOUNTANTS*	\$71,550	1,436,100	62% female; 8.5% Black, 12% Asian, 8.9% Hispanic
LAWYERS*	\$122,960	1,183,000	37% female; 6.8% Black, 5.2% Asian, 5.8% Hispanic

*Considered "skilled" occupations with educational prerequisites

**1940 wages are based on reported averages. Converted to 2020 dollars using Price Index for Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE).
2019 wages are based on reported medians.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, “Occupational Characteristics, 1940 United States Census”, retrieved from https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1940/population-labor-force-sample/41236810p2_ch3.pdf.

U.S. Department of Labor, “Occupational Outlook Handbook: Employment Information on Major Occupations for Use in Guidance” (1949), digitized by Google, original from The Ohio State University, retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32435051428019&view=1up&seq=157>.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Annual Averages, 2020 Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity,” <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>, accessed December 2021.

Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Handbook, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/>, accessed September 2020.

Exhibit 5 **Late-20th and early-21st Century Classification of "Unskilled" and "Low-skilled" by Economists and Government Agencies**

	<i>Education and Experience</i>	<i>Job Content</i>
<i>Economists</i>	Canonical model - first introduced by Katz and Murphy (1992), uses high-school education as proxy for "low skill" and college education as proxy for "high skill"	ALM model - first introduced by Autor, Levy, and Murnane (2003), classifies jobs along 4 task dimensions: routine, nonroutine, analytic and interactive, and manual; "low skill" used to describe highly routine occupations
<i>Government Institutions</i>	O*NET - occupational database from the Department of Labor first released in 1988, sorts jobs into 5 "job zones" from 'little to no preparation required' to 'extensive preparation needed'	Bureau of Labor Statistics Point Level System - used as part of the National Compensation Survey, evaluates jobs along 4 dimensions: knowledge, job controls and complexity, contacts (nature and purpose) and physical environment, and assigns to one of 15 levels based on point allocation.

Sources: Lawrence Katz and Kevin Murphy, "Changes in Relative Wages, 1963-1987: Supply and Demand Factors," February 1992, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/lkatz/files/changes_in_relative_wages_1963-1987_supply_and_demand_factors.pdf, accessed August 2020.

David Autor, Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane, "The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration, November 2003, <https://economics.mit.edu/files/11574>, accessed August 2020.

"O*NET OnLine Help: Job Zones", retrieved at <https://www.onetonline.org/find/zone>, accessed August 2020.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: Guide for Evaluating Your Firm's Jobs and Pay", May 2013, <https://www.bls.gov/ncs/ocs/sp/ncbr0004.pdf>, retrieved August 2020.

Exhibit 6 **Selection of Occupations by O*NET Job Zone, 2020**

Job Zone One: Little or No Preparation Needed	Job Zone Two: Some Preparation Needed	Job Zone Three: Medium Preparation Needed	Job Zone Four: Considerable Preparation Needed	Job Zone Five: Extensive Preparation Needed
Models	Actors	Singers	Musicians, Instrumental	Set and Exhibit Designers
Cement Masons and Concrete Finishers	Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	Maintenance Workers, Machinery	Manufacturing Engineers	Human Factors Engineers and Ergonomists
-	Athletes and Sports Competitors	Fitness Trainers and Aerobics Instructors	Fitness and Wellness Coordinators	Athletic Trainers
-	Home Health Aides	Nursing Assistants	Midwives	Nurse Anesthetists
Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop	Farm Labor Contractors	First-Line Supervisors of Agricultural Crop and Horticultural Workers	Agricultural Engineers	Soil and Plant Scientists
Cooks, Fast Food	Food Cooking Machine Operators and Tenders	Chefs and Head Cooks	Food Scientists and Technologists	Dietitians and Nutritionists
Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	Hazardous Materials Removal Workers	Sustainability Specialists	-
Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers	Slaughterers and Meat Packers	First-Line Supervisors of Animal Husbandry and Animal Care Workers	Farm and Ranch Managers	Animal Scientists

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*Source: O*NET OnLine, retrieved at <https://www.onetonline.org/find/zone>, accessed August 2020.*

Inspection Copy

Exhibit 7 *Worker Vignettes in Agriculture, Call Centers, Retail, Elder Care, and Warehousing*

Miguel has been picking grapes in Oregon for 10 years. The days are long, starting at 6 am and working until 4 pm, with just two 15-minute breaks and a 30-minute lunch, all unpaid. Part of the job is sheer endurance to make it through the very physical day, but Miguel also brings a lot of knowledge to his work. He knows when eight varieties are ripe and can measure grape weights with his hands to ensure he picks at the right time, when the grapes are most robust but before they burst or rot. (If he doesn't, he can get fired.) He knows grape diseases and various insects/pests, always monitoring the crop for problems before they spread. He knows how and where to cut grapes on the vine and how to pack them in the field so they are not broken. Miguel and his co-workers pick through rain, heat, and cold. As wildfires ripped across Oregon in September 2020, Miguel kept working. His eyes and throat hurt and he had a headache all day and night. His employer said he could take time off, but he was already behind on bills and could not afford it. They did offer to pay \$1 more for hazard pay. Miguel took it.

Susan has been a customer service representative for a telecom company for six years. The job is fast-paced and often stressful. She loves talking to people and solving their problems, but she is required to follow a strict script and go through a list of boilerplate questions, which can hinder her ability to get to know the customers and their needs. Security protocols have been ramping up recently, so she now spends the first 40–50 seconds just authenticating the caller, even if they were transferred to her from another rep in the company who had already gone through the same protocols. The company has been around for 50 years, which is reflected in its technology; she must toggle between three programs to complete a call and there are often glitches that cause her to start over again. She is measured on call time, so the more quickly she can finish with a customer, the better it looks for her employee metrics. Her supervisor has been pushing her to do more cross-selling, but why would she try that when she is measured on call time and gets no bonus for sales? Susan makes \$18 an hour. She has hit the pay maximum for her position. She is considering applying for a job at another call center in the area that pays \$0.50 more an hour, but is worried about losing the security from layoffs that she has here as a senior employee.

Angel works part-time in the home section of a national retailer. Her job is to stock shelves, neatening the area, process returns and damaged goods, and help customers. She injured her knee during her first week on the job and is now going more slowly, both so she doesn't hurt herself and because no one else seems to be in a hurry. She follows the restocking rules laid out in the training video, but more often than not, when she comes in for a 7am shift, the overnight team has just dumped merchandise in an area and she has to try to get it to the right shelves, which can take more than an hour. She has no idea whom she should talk to about this—she has only seen her manager twice because he works a different shift. Managers sometimes ask her to neatening their departments and she doesn't feel she can say no. This once got her behind in returns in her own department and she was yelled at by yet another

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manager she had never interacted with, which really upset her. She heard you could build a career here, but given how it is going so far, she is not even sure she is going to make it to 90 days.

Mary, a certified nursing assistant (CNA), works five days a week at one nursing home and part-time three nights per week at another. She starts her day at 7am and is on her feet for the next eight hours, getting eight to ten elders dressed, weighing them, helping them use the bathroom, feeding them, and taking them to activities. When Mary bathes and dresses her residents, she also checks their skin integrity to prevent painful injuries such as pressure ulcers. When she helps them to the bathroom, she records bowel movements to identify constipation, which can cause pain, hemorrhoids, incontinence, and delirium and which may require changes in medication. When she helps residents with lunch, she accounts for allergies and special needs and tracks food intake to ensure they are maintaining weight. If a resident needs to use the bathroom and Mary can't get there quickly enough, they might try to go on their own and fall, which can lead to injury or death. Beyond her daily responsibilities, Mary cares about the little human touches that make all the difference—the way her residents like to have their hair done, what shirt makes them feel special—all of which became critical to keep their spirits up when their families were not allowed to visit during the pandemic. Mary helped loved ones try to communicate by iPad, but she was the only actual human contact her residents had for months.

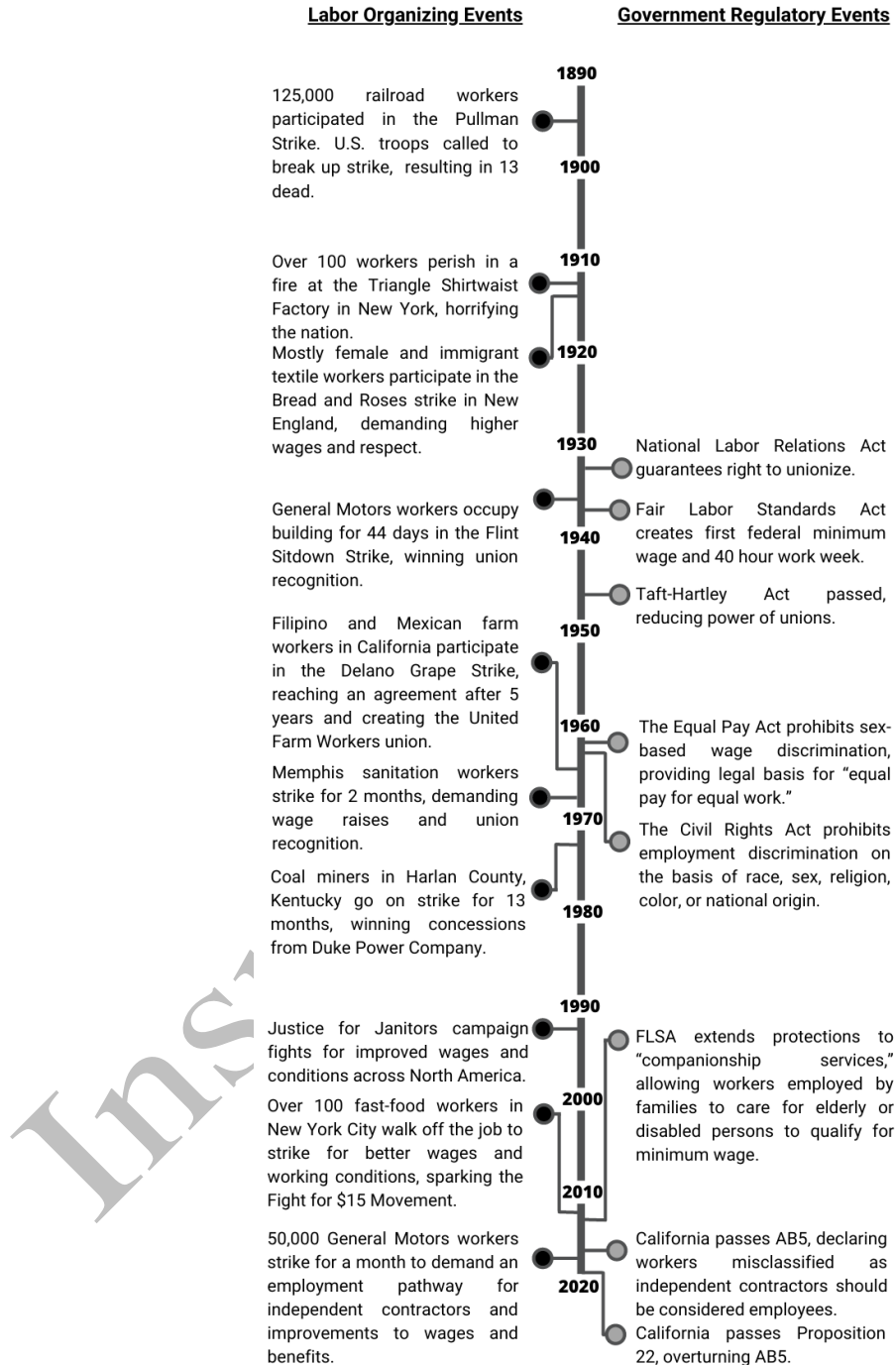
The summer after his freshman year in college, Dan got a job at an Amazon warehouse in the returns department. When he showed up on his first day, a manager walked him over to his station, gave him an overview of the basics, and set him loose. He started with a group of 10 other new workers, most of whom were gone within two weeks. He worked four 10-hour days and was on his feet the whole time, lifting boxes, opening them, and reviewing returned items to see if they could be re-sold at discount. Amazon provided a digital checklist to test for quality, but within two weeks, he had figured out that if an item had a visible flaw that would prevent resale, he could skip most of the questions and save time—a workaround that was not included in his training. He shared some of his suggestions with his supervisor, who said he liked the ideas. But the suggestions were never implemented. His supervisor told him they wanted to promote him to a “problem solver” role. He kept asking about the training for it. They said it was not worth training one person at a time, so they had to wait for several people to be ready. By the time that happened—if it ever did—Dan had quit.

Source: Written by the authors, based on field research conducted between 2018 and 2020.

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Exhibit 8 Timeline of Major Worker Organizing Events and Government Regulatory Actions

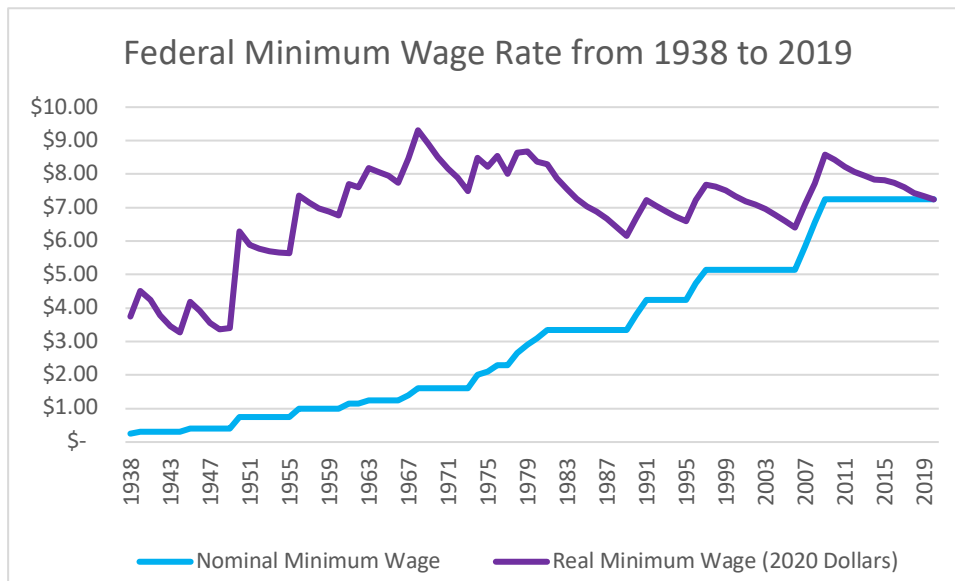


Source: Compiled by the authors.

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Exhibit 9 Federal Minimum Wage by Rate and Purchasing Power Over Time



Source: “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009,” retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history/chart>, accessed August 2020.

Exhibit 10 Selected Reflections on Occupational Value, Over Time

Adam Smith, 1723-1790. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. When they came in to the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were, perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor play-fellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance.

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Penguin Books, 1906).

The managers and superintendents and clerks of Packingtown were all recruited from another class, and never from the workers; they scorned the workers, the very meanest of them. A poor devil of a bookkeeper who had been working in Durham's for twenty years at a salary of six dollars a week, and might work there for twenty more and do no better, would yet consider himself a gentleman, as far removed as the poles from the most skilled worker on the killing beds; he would dress differently, and live in another part of the town, and come to work at a different hour of the day, and in every way make sure that he never rubbed elbows with a laboring man. Perhaps this was due to the repulsiveness of the work; at any rate, the people who worked with their hands were a class apart, and were made to feel it.

Louis Eisman, *Occupational Outlines on America's Major Occupations* (Science Research Associates, 1940).

Snobbishness makes some people think servants are inferior. The servant's skill and intelligence are forgotten and she is often looked down upon as a menial worker... In some of these jobs, strength alone is sufficient. In others, the worker must be quick on his feet, or agile with his hands. Often the work calls for considerable intelligence, as well as brawn. In fact, many highly-skilled workers cannot meet the stiff qualifications required of most unskilled laborers—adaptability, strength, endurance, and alertness.

National Research Council, *Work, Jobs, and Occupations: A Critical Review of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (The National Academies Press, 1980).

Typist, a job held mainly by women, was coded as having no significant relationship to things, whereas Typesetting-Machine Tender, a job held mainly by men, was coded at a higher level of complexity. Such jobs as Nursery School Teacher and Practical Nurse were coded as having minimal or no significant relationship to data, people, and things, while such jobs as Dog Pound Attendant were rated as functioning at a higher level of complexity.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “All Labor Has Dignity” speech (1968).

So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.

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Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

Contingent work was further devalued by culturally loaded notions about what counted as a learned profession or 'skillful' work, and which workers deserved or needed full-time jobs. Farm wives sewing, young black women tallying numbers by longhand, a continent of 'others' doing data entry offshore, a contract worker helping with a speculative educational software package that may or may not ship could be written off, in part, because of their gender, skin color, nationality, professional training, physical location, or all of the above.

Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Allen Lane, 2020).

Learning to become a plumber or electrician or dental hygienist should be respected as a valuable contribution to the common good, not regarded as a consolation prize for those who lack the SAT scores or financial means to make it to the Ivy League.

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Endnotes

¹ Alba M. Edwards, “Social-Economic Groups of the United States,” 1917, retrieved from Publications of the American Statistical Association, Volume 15, <https://books.google.com/books?id=VUNRAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA643&lpg=PA643&dq#v=onepage&q&f=false>, p. 653, accessed July 2020.

² Alba M. Edwards, “A Social-Economic Grouping of the Gainful Workers of the United States,” 1938, retrieved from U.S. Census website, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/workers/workers-national.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

³ See note 1.

⁴ See note 2. p 11.

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