INTRODUCTION

As we drove down the long dirt road, the car jerked as it hit each bump. Cynthia Porter apologized for the road as if it were her fault. After more than thirty minutes, we finally passed her landlord's large house and pulled up in front of her small maroon-colored shack. It was miles from a main road. Cynthia looked embarrassed. "It's a mess," she said. The rickety wood stairs creaked as we walked up to the front door. The screen door was askew. Inside, the plywood floor was so thin that the ground could be seen below. In the next room, a toilet sank into the floor. There was no phone. A broken heater sat against the wall. The landlord refused to fix it.

Still, the few pieces of worn furniture were wiped clean and everything was in its place. On the tar paper walls were photographs of her three children and, in a minute, they came running inside from playing. Keeping their clothes clean, however, requires great effort, because Cynthia has no washing machine.

Instead, she fills her bathtub halfway and gets on her hands and knees to scrub their clothes. Then she hangs them out to dry.

Cynthia Porter is not on welfare. She works as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home in Marian, Alabama. When Cynthia comes on duty at 11:00 P.M., she makes rounds. She checks the residents for skin tears and helps them go to the toilet or use a bedpan. She has to make sure she turns the residents every two hours or they will get bedsores, and if bedsores are left unattended, they can get so bad that you can put your fist in them.

But there aren't enough people on her shift. Often there are only two nursing assistants for forty-five residents. In addition to responding to the needs of the residents, Cynthia must also wash the wheelchairs, clean up the dining rooms, mop the floors and scrub out the refrigerator, drawers, and closets during her shift. Before she leaves, she helps the residents get dressed for breakfast.

For all of this, Cynthia makes $350 every two weeks. She is separated from her husband, who gives her no child support. The first two weeks each month she pays her $150 rent. The next two weeks, she pays her water and her electric bills. It is difficult to afford Clorox or shampoo. Ensuring that her children are fed properly is a stretch, and she is still paying off the bicycles she bought for her children last Christmas.

She can't afford a car, so she ends up paying someone to drive her the twenty-five miles to work. And there have been a few days when she couldn't find a ride. "I walked at twelve o'clock at night," she said. "I'd rather walk and be a little late than call in. I'd rather make the effort. I couldn't just sit here. I don't want to

miss a day, otherwise, I might be fired." There is no public transportation that would take her to work.

I first met Cynthia at a union meeting. She had a quiet, dignified presence with her dark suit and her hair pulled back in a bun. She and twenty-five others from the nursing home—all eighty of her coworkers are African American women like her—gathered in the little brick Masonic building outside of Marian to talk about having a union. Like Cynthia, none had ever gotten a raise of more than 13 cents. Some who had been there ten years were still making $6.00 an hour. But it was the lack of respect from their employer that motivated these women. They would tell their supervisors something important about patients, but, they said, no one listened. There were no promotional opportunities either. As Cynthia said, "I knew it wouldn't improve without outside help."

And yet, despite the frustration and the difficult conditions, Cynthia beams when she talks about her job. "I like helping people," she says. "I like talking with them, and shampooing their hair. I like old people. If they are down, I can really make them feel better. The patients say nobody loves me or comes to see me. Sometimes I help the residents play dominos. Sometimes their hands shake but I hold them. It's a lot of fun for them. I tell them I love you and give them a hug. I like being a CNA. I'm doing what I want to be doing." *

*Because the workers I spoke with have very little power in their workplaces, they also take great risks when they simply talk about their jobs to outsiders. Therefore, I have changed their names and only identified their employers when there was no possibility of revealing their identities.

• • •

In 1960, Michael Harrington published a book that stirred the conscience of a nation. *The Other America* reminded a country basking in the glow of postwar prosperity that poverty was alive and well in its midst. Poverty, Harrington revealed, afflicted those invisible millions living in passed-over regions of the country and the economy—those marginalized in Appalachia, in the South, in rural America. They were caught in dying towns and industries, shunted off the main tracks of the economy into unemployment, and left to fester in idleness and despair. In a word, they were outlanders, watching as the rest of the country went to work and thrived. The nation spent the remainder of the century wrestling with this sort of poverty, expanding and then contracting the welfare state as it experimented with different ways of dealing with the problems of a population cut off from the economic mainstream. All that has changed.

True, old forms of poverty continue, and even now the country is arguing about what to do with its welfare recipients. But the great secret of America is that a vast new impoverished population has grown up in our midst. Yet these are not Americans who have been excluded from the world of work; in fact, they make up the core of much of the new economy. Indeed, our recent prosperity rests, in part, on their misery. Their poverty is not incidental to their role as workers, but derives directly from it.

They are America's super-exploited. And this is both a shame and a challenge of historic proportions. A shame because America has always honored work, yet now finds itself in the position of degrading it. A challenge because whatever one thought of

America's welfare poor, few people were making money off them. The same cannot be said of our new working poor. Corporations, corporate executives, shareholders, and American consumers are making a lot of money off of them. Thirty million Americans, one out of every four workers, makes less than $8.70 an hour. And these low-wage, no-benefit jobs translate into billions of dollars of profits, executive pay, high stock prices, and low consumer prices.

The question of poverty today is a question of both reexamining the balance of power in our society and challenging a society that eviscerates its low-wage workers. This is always a difficult prospect, but unavoidable if we are to uphold the national commitment to work and its just rewards. This is a book devoted not only to describing the dimension of poverty in the American workplace, but to exploring its roots in the imbalances of social, political, and economic power and to offering solutions to these injustices.

For several years, I have traveled the country talking with workers like Cynthia Porter. They are hardworking Americans who can't make it on their jobs. Cynthia is not unique. While the details vary, the story is repeated again and again. It is a story about workers who are the embodiment of the work ethic. It is about workers who perform tasks essential to Americans' lives, yet seem hidden from their view. It is about workers who pay their taxes and do their jobs with great dedication and care, yet get little in return. They are workers on the margin. They are America's invisible working poor.

They are nursing home workers and home health-care workers who care for our mothers and fathers, yet make so little in-

come that many qualify for food stamps. They are poultry processing workers who bone and package the chicken we eat for our dinner, yet are not allowed to leave the line to go to the bathroom. They are retail store workers who help us in department stores, grocery stores and convenience stores, but can't get enough hours or benefits to support themselves without working at least two jobs. They are hotel workers who ensure that the rooms we sleep in on our business trips and family vacations are clean, but who have no sick days or funeral leave or vacation time. They are janitorial workers who empty our wastebaskets after dark but who have no child care. They are catfish workers who process the fish we enjoy, but must work with injured wrists from continuous motion on the line. They are 1-800 call-center workers who answer our requests and take our orders while under constant management surveillance. And they are child-care workers who educate and care for our children while their own live in poverty.

The United States has built its recent prosperity on the strain and stress of these people. We saw in the late nineties, after nearly a decade of economic growth, that wages increased for these workers in areas where there was very low unemployment. These markets had forced employers to compete for workers, giving workers some ability to win improvements. But even during the best of economic times, these workers were barely scraping by. These record conditions have not continued. Low-wage service workers have borne the brunt of the cutbacks in our economy in the form of lost jobs and reductions in hours and pay.

Much public attention is focused on moving Americans off of

welfare, and almost everywhere, it seems, there have been calls to ensure that those who receive government welfare assistance perform work. But little outrage is reserved for the over thirty million Americans who work hard every day, and yet struggle to take care of their families. Who these workers are contributes to this public indifference. A majority are female and many are minorities and immigrants. These groups historically have been forgotten, viewed as somehow less deserving or less in need of support. It is only with the plunging wages of working-class white males that some attention has been paid. The realization that those previously on welfare cannot support themselves and their families in low-wage jobs has also brought a recent awareness of the inadequacies of these jobs. Barbara Ehrenreich's excellent book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in which she tries and fails to live on the wages from these low-end jobs, generated some passing sympathy.

However, the reigning American mythology that being in a low-wage job is a temporary situation, that mobility will solve the problem, undermines such concern. But the evidence belies the myth. While some lower-wage workers will move up the ladder, most will never move into the middle class. Their children will suffer the same fate. Ignoring this reality leaves in place what Harvard economist Richard Freeman calls an "apartheid economy."

Inadequate wages are only one part of the problem. Most of these workers lack basic job benefits such as health care, sick pay, disability pay, paid vacation, and retirement. Their jobs leave little flexibility to care for a sick child or deal with an emergency at school—let alone the normal appointments and needs of

everyday life. Quality child care is unaffordable for most and many nighttime shifts, forced overtime, and employer changes in schedules make it even harder to find and more expensive to obtain.

Low-wage workplaces are often physically damaging and emotionally degrading. High injury rates plague these workers. Constant surveillance, time clocks, drug testing, and rigid rules reinforce the pervasive sense that employers view them as untrustworthy. Fear is the chief motivator in these workplaces. Being five minutes late can mean the difference between having a job and not. A few minutes too long in the bathroom could mean discipline or a dock in pay. It is not surprising that with so little employer respect, these workers receive minimal training and few opportunities for input into their jobs. In fact, in most low-wage workplaces voicing one's opinion is discouraged.

Yet some argue that all of this is the inextricable consequence of "low-skill" jobs, that workers in low-wage jobs must obviously have low skills. Most economists, politicians, and the media marry the two terms as if they were inseparable. Stockbrokers who earn $150,000 a year are deemed skilled, whereas child-care workers who earn $15,000 a year are called low-skilled regardless of the difficulty or worth of what they're doing.

Low skills are also used as a synonym for less formal education. This equation is not surprising. Those who determine the dialogue of the debate are generally well-educated. They have not really looked at the skills required of these lower-wage jobs or the skills possessed by those who do these jobs. They rely instead on stereotypes.

This "low-skilled" label is a distancing device. It allows us to dismiss these workers as undeserving, somehow flawed. It allows us to justify how poorly their employers treat them. It makes it easier to blame them for their own economic plight. Undervaluing low-wage job skills, most of which involve working with people, is especially ironic in our consumer-driven, service economy. But denigration is no accident. Many low-wage jobs have historically been "women's jobs." These jobs involve nurturing, caring, and communicating with people, skills that have been historically trivialized.

Declaring these jobs "low-skilled" also warps public policy. Across the political spectrum, improving workers' skills has become the panacea for improving the living standards of these workers. In a society in awe of new computer technologies, this focus is understandable. It is easy to explain away problems by referring to a lack of technological proficiency. But this "skills" solution avoids the profoundly political question of how profits should be shared with workers. It gets employers off the hook. It also relieves the rest of us from thinking about the inequity of the rules governing relations between these workers, their employers, and our society.

Skills are not the problem, however much we might like to believe otherwise. These workers have the requisite know-how for their jobs as child-care workers, nursing home workers, poultry processors, and janitors. Of course, better education and fluency in new technologies are essential to improve job options for this and the next generation of workers. Workers should also receive training throughout their careers to have opportunities for job and social mobility. Yet, these labor-intensive industries will

continue to demand large numbers of workers regardless of individual mobility, and these are the growing sectors of our economy. It is the rewards of the jobs that must be improved.

It is time we discarded the ahistorical premise that there is something about these jobs themselves that makes them "bad jobs," unchanging in what they provide to workers. Jobs are defined by institutional arrangements: labor power, market power, political power, ideology, and values. It is not the particular activities one does while on the job that determines whether a job is "good" or "bad," but rather the power to influence employers to change work conditions. As the power relationships change, the nature of jobs change.

Today's "good jobs" in large-scale manufacturing were not always good. Working in a factory is hard work. It can be dirty and unsafe. At one time, it paid poor wages and had few benefits. But factory jobs became "good" jobs in this country when employers were forced to make them so through worker power in unions. This success also forced nonunion employers to change their wage and benefit packages to compete for workers. This power, combined with earlier New Deal labor legislation, set a floor on employment standards on issues such as minimum wages, maximum hours of work, and overtime requirements. Social legislation of the late sixties and early seventies regulated workplace safety and health, equal employment opportunity, and a range of other employment conditions.

Through these two processes of collective bargaining and government regulation, wages and working conditions were significantly improved and norms were established. A uniquely private arrangement of employer-provided benefits was devel-

oped. Of course, these were not halcyon days for all American workers. The manufacturing industries that labor unions organized were predominantly made up of white males. Unions largely bypassed the service sector, except for notable exceptions in the telecommunications and the retail food industries. As a result, the social contract for hourly workers did not take root outside the large-scale manufacturing industries.

Today's low-wage workers have little labor, market, or political power. This imbalance comes from societal decisions: monetary policy that stresses fighting inflation over job creation; trade policies that fail to take into account the impact on lower-end jobs; corporate policies that have allowed CEOs nearly unfettered discretion to determine their own rewards and those of their workers; wage policies such as a minimum-wage law that has failed to keep up with inflation; labor laws that make it difficult for workers to collectively organize; and still other employment and labor laws that exclude many of the most vulnerable workers. This leaves these workers virtually powerless to change their situations. They can't give large political donations, so little attention is focused on their needs in the political realm. Even liberals who would normally champion their cause are largely silent. And in the workplace, they are without unions or associations to represent their interests.

Still, the rules of the game governing work and its rewards are up to us. It is our values that we bring to these choices. Whether we give basic rights to these workers and give them more power to change their conditions is our choice. Whether we ensure that workers have "family-supporting" wages and benefits says a great deal about what kind of society and com-

munities we want to live in. So far we have given these workers few tools to improve their lives. In fact, in most cases, we have blocked the road to change.

Without change, a growing gap between the haves and have-nots will continue to challenge our national solidarity and stability and will strain an already divisive America. But just as important, if work does not work for millions of Americans it undermines our country's most fundamental ideals. We are permitting a caste system to grow up around us, consigning millions of Americans to a social dead-end. The notion of equal opportunity becomes a farce in the face of these harsh class divisions. It is a sentence passed onto not only those now toiling in the poverty wage economy, but onto many of their children who lack the support they need to succeed.

On a practical level, the quality of our services depends on improving these workers' conditions. One of the things we learned after the murderous attacks of September 11 is that we had left the safety of the skies in the hands of the marketplace. Policy makers allowed individual airlines to watch after our security at the airport gates. These corporations opted for the cheapest solution and outsourced the work to private contractors. Winning contractors made the lowest bids by providing their employees with some of the most miserably paid, poorly benefited jobs in the United States, which led to high turnover and untrained workers. They won the contracts, and the American people lost their security.

As a result of the terrorist assault, there was a move to improve airport security by bettering the wages and working conditions for the women and men who would staff these jobs. This

is a lesson we can apply much more broadly. Home health-care aides and child-care workers, janitors and hotel workers may not provide the immediacy of airline safety, but they do supply our most essential needs. And quality of service naturally suffers when workers feel cheated and demeaned. Do we really want an angry, resentful, and untrained workforce handling the chicken we eat, cleaning our hotels and offices, let alone taking care of our children or our parents?

If we honor work, we must reward it. For generations, Americans shared a tacit understanding that if you worked hard, a livable income and basic securities were to be yours. That promise has been broken and as a nation we are living a lie.

Some maintain that it would take too much effort and too much money to make these "bad" jobs into "good" ones. But incremental improvements make fundamental changes in workers' lives—a family-supporting wage, affordable health insurance, an ability to have a few days off for sickness or family needs, predictability in a work schedule, and more control over one's life. These changes can be the difference between workers seeing a future and seeing only despair.

This book offers ways to level the playing field for employers who are "doing the right thing" in providing their workers with livable wages, basic benefits, and respect. It presents an agenda that helps block the low road of degradation and moves to rebalance the power between employers and their workers. It proposes a Compact with Working Americans that will ensure the basics of a decent life for all working Americans and their families. This is not a radical proposal. In the past, we have established standards and rights to ensure that older Americans

would not be impoverished or go without health care, to prevent children from working, to keep our environment clean, and to guarantee that workers have equal opportunity regardless of their race, religion, national origin, sex, or age. Now we must do so to protect the well-being of all working families and the moral integrity of the nation.