

Fastest Growing Jobs of '06: Are You Handy with Bedpans and Brooms?

By Barbara Ehrenreich

Urgent breaking news for all job-seekers: The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has released a list of the fastest growing jobs for 2006, and you might want to revise your resume accordingly. I quickly scanned it to see if “dissident freelance blogger” was on the list, but alas, no. Nor were several other job categories that I would like to see on the increase, like primary care physician and particle physicist. I’m sorry, but we’re never going to get out of this nightmarish tangle of string theory and dark matter until we start generating huge cohorts of baby physicists.

Worse news—only 10 of the 25 jobs listed pay over \$30,000 a year, and four of them pay less than \$20,000 a year, which is just about the poverty level for a family of four. These are waiter/waitress, food preparation worker, home health aide, and “personal and home care aide.” Hovering just a little bit above \$20,000 are janitor, hand laborer, receptionist, nursing aide, landscaping worker, and teacher assistant. And topping the list as the fastest growing job of all is retail salesperson, at \$22,880.

You see a pattern here? That’s right, these are not the kinds of jobs you are hoping your brilliant, or at least above average, children will aspire to. In fact, the most shocking feature of the BLS list is that only five of these fastest-growing jobs require a college degree—or exactly 20 percent. OK, the third fastest growing job is “postsecondary teacher,” but in a job market dominated by janitors, truck drivers and customer service reps, what are these professors going to be teaching—“combination food preparation and serving”?

Of course, the fastest growing jobs aren’t the only jobs available. There’s still a need for a few elevator operators, blacksmiths, and dissident freelance bloggers. But the list does give us a clue as to where our economy is headed, and it’s not in the direction we were promised.

For at least 20 years now, the mantra has been, “get an education and you’ll be OK.” In some ways it made sense: Over those 20 years, the earnings gap between college-educated and non-college-educated workers widened to the point where the educated had a 70 percent advantage. That gap has begun to shrink a bit,

although a B.A. on your resume remains almost as essential as an email address.

In fact, at a certain point in the late '90s and early '00s, higher education was beginning to look like the solution to all our problems. Robert Reich touted it when he was Clinton’s secretary of labor and, on the more conservative end of the spectrum, dozens of readers of *Nickel and Dimed* wrote to inform me that the problem with the working poor is that they just hadn’t bothered to go to college. Outsourcing was no threat, according to this line of reasoning, since the United States would send the dumb, routine, jobs abroad and keep the creative ones here. We would be a nation of thinkers and innovators, and the world would be our assembly line.

But that’s not how it’s turning out. Some companies have begun outsourcing their R&D to places like India—i.e., their creativity and innovation. And when we study the list of fastest growing jobs left here in the United States, we see a future filled with mops and trays, shovels and bedpans, and cash registers.

Don’t let this stop you from going to college if you haven’t already and you’re lucky enough to have the money to do so. After all, we, or the science nuts among us anyway, need those particle physicists.

But you should consider revising your resume to suit the demands of our new “new economy.” Did you ever make lattes, rake leaves, or change diapers? Good, pump that up! And you might want to lose that M.F.A. or Ph.D., because it would be a mistake to look “overqualified” for life in 21st century America. ■

Barbara Ehrenreich is a political essayist and social critic whose work appears in magazines and newspapers across the country. She is the author of many books, including Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, and Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class.

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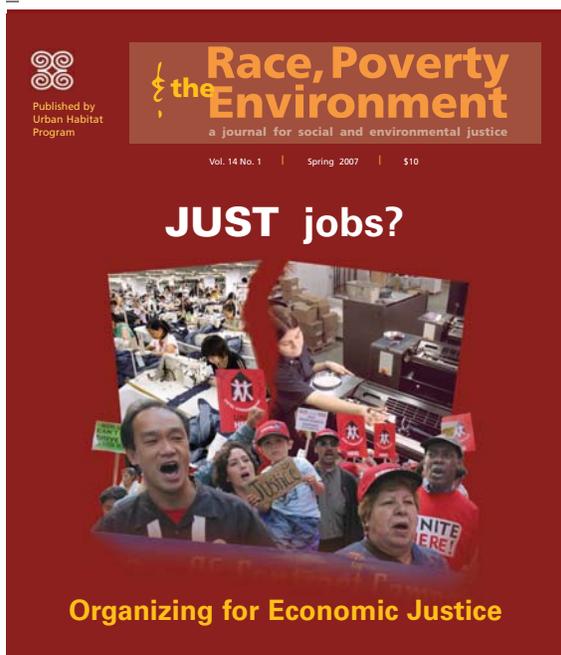
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