

Washington's Changing Economy

Wages of Domestic Workers Have Risen Least

'8:30 Through 6:30 Dinner' Is Typical Demand; Means 12-Hour Working Day

By Philip Stoddard Brown

Last Tuesday, at the District office of the United States Employment Services about 50 women crowded the waiting room of the Director of the Service Division, hoping to be sent out on jobs for the day. Only 10 or 12 got jobs. The rest returned home, out the cost of carfare.

Later in the week, especially on a Friday, the demand for day-workers is usually better. But an excess of workers over jobs is the rule, even though employers' specifications are often exacting and wages minimal.

Domestic work isn't "skilled" in the usual vocational sense, but in some respects the qualifications are higher than those



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for many industrial and office jobs. Honesty is important because many domestics work without supervision; in fact, some employers leave the door key in the mailbox to be picked up by

an applicant whom they haven't seen. Responsibility, too, is expected. Many a housewife takes advantage of the day-worker's presence to go shopping, leaving young children in her care. Usually the day-worker is expected to do the week's cleaning and ironing, or whatever is possible. It's hard work, without the leisurely coffee-breaks that so many office workers enjoy. . . . And generally the pay is only \$6 plus carfare and lunch for an 8-hour day—without unemployment benefits, sick leave and vacation pay. Some employers pay \$7; a few, \$8. Generally such employers live in the suburbs and the traveling time of the worker is longer.

Hours Are Longer

The prevailing weekly wage for full-time maids is \$30 to \$35 a week. Those that "live out" many get carfare. The work is usually lighter than that of day-workers and may provide additional meals. But the hours are longer.

Typically the employer will specify "8:30 through a 6:30 dinner," which means at least a 12-hour day. Because of this, many applicants state they can't cook, or won't cook, even though their employment records show they are experienced cooks. Then, too, employers generally want maids to work on Saturday or Sunday, or both days.

About 70 per cent of openings for full-time maids received in the Household Section of the United States Employment Office at 1724 F st. n.w. are for "live-ins," or at least persons that will stay one or two nights a week. Here there is a shortage of applicants, and has been for a long time, to fill openings on the employers' terms.

Most employers fail to understand the difficulty they experience in getting a maid to "live in," in view of the chronic oversupply of day-workers. They fail also to understand why they need pay as much for a maid to "live in" as for one who "lives out."

'Lovely' Home

Scarcely a day passes that a busy agency does not get a call from a housewife that starts off with "We have a perfectly lovely home" and ends by offering to pay \$20 or \$25 for a "live-in" maid that is "an experienced cook, a good ironer, dependable and fond of children."

The reason, of course, for the "shortage" of "live-in" maids is that few workers want to be on call 12 or 15 hours a day. Many have families of their own; others want time off in the evenings and weekends when their friends are also free.

Even many "live-out" jobs, 78 weeks, gives them vacation

provide workers with precious little free time. At one employment agency, cards on three job openings for full-time maids were pulled at random. One offered \$20 for a 6-day week, 8:30 a. m. through a 6 o'clock dinner; this was simply too far below the prevailing wage and no applicant had shown any interest.

Another offered \$35 (but not carfare) for a 5½-day week, 7:30 a. m. through a 6:30 or 7 o'clock dinner. This job was in the suburbs and probably involved a 45-minute bus ride for most workers. One applicant had refused, but the agency expected to fill the job eventually, even though it involved a 75-hour work-week, including travel time. Another opening offered \$40 for a 6-day week with 2 weeks' vacation pay, which is unusual, but again the hours were 8 through a 6:30 dinner. This job specified that the applicant must be "white," and for this reason it had no taker even though it had been on file for several weeks.

No Minimum Wage

The District minimum-wage and maximum-hour laws do not apply to domestic workers, but they do have some bearing on their wages.

For cleaners in building service occupations, manufacturing and wholesale establishments and beauty parlors, the minimum wage is 75 cents an hour and, if there were jobs enough in these industries, presumably all domestic workers would get this much or more, because the hours and conditions of commercial work are generally preferred to those of private households. Also, workers in such jobs are insured against unemployment.

Actually wages of good, dependable cleaning women in office and apartment buildings, hotels, hospitals and department stores average about \$1 an hour and there is a steady movement of good domestic workers to these jobs. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary for housewives to pay \$7, or even \$8, a day to keep a good day-worker.

The Government now starts cleaning women at \$1.05 an hour, boosts them to \$1.10 after 26 weeks and to \$1.16 after 78 weeks, gives them vacation

pay, sick leave and other benefits. . . . Actually, most cleaning women working for the Government agencies in this area get \$1.25 to \$1.50. The reason for this is that Congress specified that those persons covered under the Classification Act should continue to be paid under the wage-scale of that Act, even though charwomen employed after August, 1955 were to be paid at rates set by the Wage Board. Consequently, 1500 or so of the 2200 Grade 1 charwomen that work for the Government get wages far out of line with those prevailing elsewhere in the area.

Wages Low in D. C.

Two facts stand out about the wages of domestic servants in Washington: one, that they are so low—lower than in most other cities—and two, that they have risen so little in the past decade, compared with the rise in wages in other occupations.

It is remarkable that in the Washington labor market, otherwise so fully employed, this category of workers has not fared better. In part, it may be because the supply of unskilled female workers in the

Excess of Workers Over Jobs Is Rule; Causes Exploiting

local labor force is so large that there is little factory work to provide alternative employment, that there are no union to bargain for these worker and that job opportunities are limited by racial discrimination.

There are probably 25,000 to 30,000 domestic workers in the area. At the time of the 1950 census, 25,500 were counted and of these about 1200 were unemployed. (About 3600 "lived in"; the remainder commuted to work.) The number is certainly higher, relative to the over-all population, than in most cities.

Usually the number of domestic workers is greatest in places where the percentage of income going to the top 2 or 3 per cent of families is very high. (This partly explains why there are so many servants in poor countries.) But, in Washington, this percentage is low—perhaps lower than in any other large city in the United States.

The large number of employed housewives in Washington probably accounts for much of the demand for domestic workers. The presence of so many foreign embassies may be a factor, the large number of unskilled women seeking work in this field and the low level of domestic-worker wages, another.

In the United States as a whole, there were only 34 servants per 1000 families in 1950, compared with 94 in 1910. This striking decline is often attributed to the rise in wages of servants, but family incomes generally have risen as much, in percentage terms. A more plausible reason is the change in the distribution of incomes. The income tax has certainly reduced the percentage of after-tax income in the hands of the upper-income families, which are the chief employers of servants.

School for Domestics

Another reason for the decline in domestic servants relative to total population may be that the cost of having many services performed by a worker in the home has risen, compared with the cost of having it done outside the home. Also, families are smaller. There is less preparation of food in the home and more electrical aids. . . . But still, there is a lot of house-cleaning, bed-making and baby-tending.

It has been proposed that classes be organized for domestic servants—especially job applicants—to give them tips on personal cleanliness, appearance, general behavior, how to answer the telephone and to explain the importance of notifying employers when they can't come to work.

Also, some of the time-saving techniques of cleaning, polishing, ironing and bed-making could be demonstrated. The proper use of electric appliances might be explained—the reason for not putting knives, pewter and plastic articles in dishwashers, and so on.

Why not? A little schooling and guidance would help many women now on relief to get jobs and would enable others in this lowest-income group to get better wages. . . . It is remarkable that in our educational system that offers children 12 years of free education and provides classes for adults in almost every conceivable subject that no provision is made for a few hours of schooling for domestic workers.

And maybe it would be well if someone got together a leaflet with a few tips for employers. Employment agency people stress the importance of good will, of offering the day-worker a cup of coffee on arrival, of letting them use the radio or TV while ironing, of making instructions simple and clear, explaining how much soap to put in the dishwasher and how to empty the vacuum cleaner, of commending workers for work properly done and not lagging. In the case of full-time maids, employers are urged to recognize that domestics need time to shop and have their hair done, and should also be given more free evenings and weekends.

Most of all, employers should

be fair. Agency people report that time and time again, employers offer to pay one wage for so many hours of work and then when the applicant arrives they offer something different.

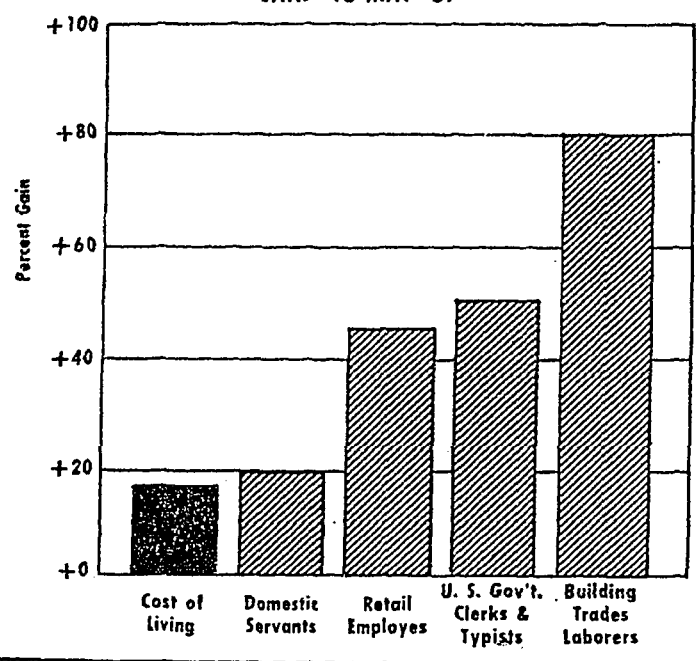
Who Pays Tax?

A great many employers who file Social Security tax returns for domestic servants simply pay the employee's share (2½ per cent) without deduction from the agreed wage. How many isn't known but, if one were to guess, perhaps 90%. The government doesn't object to this practice in the case of domestic servants, though technically this is an addition to the employee's wages and should be reported.

"Compliance by employers is excellent," one tax official states, but a great many employees simply won't register with Social Security. It may be that they fear having to pay an income tax; or, if their husbands work, additional tax. The continued evasion of Social Security by a great many domestic workers is puzzling, because there is probably no group of workers that stands to gain so much at so little expense, by compliance. Domestic work is hard, and also it's not easy for a woman over 60 to get a job. Yet few have any savings or other financial protection against old age. Perhaps the need for education about the role of Social Security is another reason why classes for domestics should be arranged.

Selected Pay Increases in D. C. Area Compared with Living Costs

JAN. '48-MAY '57



COST OF LIVING TRENDS IN WASHINGTON, D. C.

