

Poverty wages for day laborers recruited for inauguration

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The inauguration festivities for Barack Obama are estimated to cost as much as \$150 million. Just under a third of this tab will be covered by the influence-peddling donations of the wealthy. The bulk of the costs will fall on the general tax-paying population, which faces rapidly increasing unemployment and sharp declines in income.

In the non-stop coverage of the numerous celebrations taking place in Washington, the media has generally failed to note what makes them function—the huge temporary workforce hired for the meetings, brunches, concerts, nighttime galas, and mass outdoor events.

For those serving the wealthy and politically connected—chauffeurs, valets, banquet servers, bartenders—the need for high-quality service at a unique event often offers jobs paying \$20-30 an hour. Many part-time and full-time service workers will welcome bringing home several hundred dollars a night for a few days, an increasingly rare occurrence in these dismal economic times.

For those serving the general public, however, this author found that poverty-wage day labor is being used to clean up the massive outdoor events. The job description recruiting for this work, seen through the window of a Labor Ready temporary staffing office in Richmond, Virginia, is worth quoting in full:

Time to be in branch: Will know Friday (Probably 5 am)

How Long Job Lasts: With travel time—15 hours plus / Please be aware travel time is not paid

Pay: \$7.55 an hour

Job Duties: trash pickup / horse manure pickup (no joke!)

Dress Attire: Must dress

warm—gloves/hats/scarves/extra liners/jackets. You will not be able to go if you don't dress warm.

LONG HOURS / TEDIOUS WORK / OUTSIDE IN FREEZING WEATHER / HIGH SECURITY / NO BAGS ALLOWED / PLEASE BE AWARE

In summary, one will be paid \$7.55 an hour to tediously pick up trash and horse manure in freezing cold weather for long hours. Workers will not be paid for the five to seven hours of waiting and travel to the job site, and despite long travel time and one 15 hour-plus workday, no bags are allowed.

Providing an indication of the desperate situation facing many workers, a Labor Ready representative informed me that all the positions on the inauguration job had been filled. The Richmond area has been hit with major job losses in the past few months—400 jobs lost at Genworth Financial, 454 at Startek Inc., 40 from Luck-Stone Inc., and dozens at area hospitals. Electronics retailer Circuit City is headquartered in the Richmond area and had 2,689 Richmond employees in January 2008. It has since declared bankruptcy and is liquidating all stores, eliminating the jobs of its entire Richmond workforce as well as 34,000 nationwide.

In the US, temporary labor offices employ workers as needed by companies, leaving workers with no job security and few if any benefits. Many office and industrial jobs last for weeks or months, and temporary employees in turn are paid on the standard weekly basis. By contrast, Labor Ready's slogan is "Work Today Paid Today," as the agency offers the most insecure and back-breaking jobs, with particular focus on unskilled construction, industrial and service work.

Every day workers must show up at a Labor Ready office before dawn to compete for the day's selection of jobs. After sometimes hours of waiting, some don't even secure a job, while those who do must return to

the office when it's completed for their pay. Even if a job lasts several days or weeks, workers must still go to Labor Ready offices early each morning to maintain the assignment.

The day-labor system offers long hours of work and waiting, zero security, high travel expenses and low wages. For the employer, the benefits are enormous, as a worker can be ordered like raw material—and then tossed aside the very next day like a spent resource. Apparently those organizing the labor for the Obama inaugural celebration were quite keen on these benefits.



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