

New York City: thousands line up for a handful of jobs

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On a rainy weekend, an estimated two thousand workers lined up, many of them overnight, for about 100 elevator mechanics' apprentice jobs at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 union hall in Astoria in the New York borough of Queens.

Many workers had pitched tents and spent the night in line to be sure to get one of the 750 applications the union was handing out. Some spent as many as four days in line, having their families bring them their meals. The IBEW set up several port-a-potties for sanitary needs. By the time applications were handed out on Monday morning the line stretched three blocks.

These jobs are some of the few available to workers that pay anything resembling a living wage. The apprenticeships can pay between \$14 and \$16 an hour, and experienced mechanics can earn over \$40 an hour.

The apprenticeships required no prior experience. The only requirement was that applicants pass a 10th grade level math and reading exam.

Even after the line had dispersed and the tents had been disassembled, other workers who had heard about the jobs on television or read about the lineup in the morning newspapers continued to arrive.

The official unemployment rate in the city as of March was 10 percent, but real unemployment is much higher. According to a report issued by the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) in mid-March, the broader unemployment figure, which includes workers who have part-time jobs but want to work full-time and workers who have given up looking for work, is over 14 percent. For African-American workers, the figure is approximately 21 percent. For Hispanic workers, it is 23 percent.

The official unemployment rate in the city has declined slightly over the last few months, but this is

widely believed to be because more and more workers have left the labor force as they run out of unemployment benefits or simply stop looking for work.

According to the FPI report, the decline of 0.1 percent in the unemployment rate from 10.5 to 10.4 in January was accounted for by the fact that 6,000 people left the labor force.

The FPI report noted that in mid-January, nearly 11,000 people filed new unemployment claims each week in the city. Of the unemployed, 46 percent of city workers have been out of work for over six months, and 17 percent for a year.

As the Democratic Governor, David Paterson, implements massive cuts in the state budget, including in education, new rounds of layoffs threaten city employees, including teachers and other school workers. As many as 8,500 teachers may lose their jobs.

Millions more in the city subsist on poverty-level wages. In December 2009, the Center for an Urban Future's "New York by the Numbers" report determined that 31 percent of all jobs were categorized as "low-wage"—that is, less than \$11.45.

The Center for Economic Opportunity noted in March that the poverty rate in New York City rose before the recession from 20.6 percent in 2005 to 22.0 percent in 2008.

Low wages and mass unemployment have created a sense of desperation for the relatively well-paying jobs like the ones offered on Monday. Radio news site 1010WINS.com quoted Alberto Cortes, whose last job was as a security guard two years ago, as saying, that the apprenticeships were "an opportunity of a lifetime."

Another worker who waited in line told the *Daily News*, "I don't care if I have to wait three days in

snow, in rain. I'll do anything for my family”.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Victor Nieves, a 49 year-old worker who has been unemployed for a year. “I’ve been living without public services,” he said. “If my cousin didn’t own the building I live in, I’d be out on the street.”

When asked why there was an economic crisis to begin with, Victor told the WSWS: “You’ve basically got 100 families that run the economy. What do you expect? They’ve been driving down wages and working conditions for years. Now they’ve caused this *depression*. Unfortunately, our leaders, no matter what race, what nationality, what party, are working with them. It’s not about black, white or yellow, it’s about green. If you try to fight them, someone says, ‘No, you can’t do that.’ Our unions are tied up with this, too. Whether you follow the socialist doctrine or not,” Nieves said, “this is a fact. We need to control the money.”



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