

Job seekers camp out for applications in New York

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A tent city sprang up in the New York City borough of Queens last week as hundreds camped out in order to secure an application for elevator apprenticeships. The job seekers waited as long as six days for IBEW Local 3 to distribute the 750 applications, with just 75 openings guaranteed. Hundreds of late arrivals left empty-handed.

The elevator service and repair apprenticeships offer an increasingly rare opportunity for young workers to get jobs at decent pay. Wages start at \$17 an hour, but upon completing the four-year training program, workers can earn between \$35 and \$40 an hour plus benefits, as a journeyman.

No special qualifications were required to apply, only a high school diploma and the ability to lift 50 pounds. A written test and physical exam will follow for successful applicants.

The scene last week was nearly identical to one in April 2010, the last time applications were handed out. Then as now hundreds of workers set up makeshift residences on the sidewalk in hopes of landing a job. The union brought in half a dozen portable toilets and hired a security guard to keep watch 24 hours a day.

An IBEW official explained to the *New York Times* the reasoning behind this method of first-come, first-served in-person distribution of applications for apprenticeships. "If we did it online or we did it like a mail-in," he said, "we'd have to go through 10,000 applications."

This is by no means an exaggeration. Unemployment remains at crisis levels throughout the country, and particularly in New York City. The latest data peg the official rate at 8.4 percent, nearly one point above the national average, but these figures do not include millions who have given up looking for work or who are working part-time or at low-wage jobs and are

desperate to secure work that pays enough to support a family.

While the official unemployment statistics have improved recently, the real conditions have not. Over the past year roughly half of the drop in New York is due to a shrinking labor pool, i.e., workers giving up on finding jobs. Long-term unemployment has become so endemic that nearly 60 percent of unemployed New Yorkers no longer receive jobless benefits.

To the extent that new jobs have been created, the vast majority have been at or near poverty-level wages. The latest report from the Center for an Urban Future reveals a tremendous increase since the start of the economic crisis. In New York City as a whole, the number of workers in low-wage jobs climbed to 35 percent last year, up from an already shocking 31 percent.

In Brooklyn, where rents are now almost as exorbitant as in Manhattan, approximately 40 percent of workers have low-wage jobs, an 8 percent increase since 2008. In the Bronx, the city's poorest borough, the percentage of such jobs is even higher, at just under half.

This situation is replicated in city after city around the US, where low wages have become the norm for a huge section of the workforce.

Charles Keen, a 25-year-old from Maryland, traveled for hours to wait in line for an elevator apprenticeship application. "This is my first time in New York," he explained. "I am trying to get ahead in life. There are no jobs, no work and no money to be made. I make \$9.50 per hour with no benefits as a chef. My job is seasonal and I have to go on unemployment from about Halloween until April 1st. This whole economy is going to shit, with so many jobs having been lost and so much unemployment."

“I don’t pay any attention to the politicians,” he continued. “I don’t like what they are doing. They keep passing tax increases on the ordinary people while the prices for everything you need keeps going up. It seems like the politicians want to help the rich people and not the middle and lower classes.



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