



ATD FOURTH WORLD

Work: Let's think again

SUMMER 2022 NEWSLETTER

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Rahnell Texsara working at WALTER in Brooklyn, NY.



Dear Friends,

“GMTO” (Get Money. Take Over.) is Damien’s new tattoo. Damien, 18 years old, works at WALTER, the eco-social business recently launched by ATD Fourth World USA in Brownsville, New York. He told me, “Money is freedom. That’s how you can eat and go to the movies. ‘Take over’ is to have control over your life. You need money for that.”

“Jobs are few and far apart,” Jarvis told me when I was visiting him and other ATD Fourth World friends in Virginia. People living in underserved communities and neighborhoods try to get a job but too often land nowhere or in a disposable position, with no positive impact on their life journey. Jobs just keep them in a cycle of poverty and exploitation.

Jobs are *the* way to emancipate yourself from poverty, but can *also* be a trap of oppression that keeps people in poverty despite all their efforts[1]. ATD Fourth World sees this over and over when partnering with individuals and families in communities facing challenges of work access. Workers who experience this contradiction in their daily lives can teach our whole society a new way to think about work.

People who face this challenge know how a job can truly lift them out of poverty. For example:

1. The energy that they put in their work needs to have a positive impact, to make a difference and give them a sense of purpose.
2. Their jobs have to connect them with others and develop a sense of belonging.
3. Their jobs should allow them to develop a positive identity for themselves and people around them.
4. Their jobs should be a door to a better future.

These workers present an opportunity to rethink what it is to work and to have a job. With them, we can learn what it means to work and to feel useful, what it means to be independent and to have a job that fulfills the conditions above. **The experience of people who are excluded from these opportunities offers our society a compass to design the type of jobs *all* people need.**

If we take this opportunity to think again about what “work” is, we can transform our society into a place where work, for every individual, is not simply about survival but an opportunity to grow into the best of ourselves, to contribute meaningfully to our communities and to be recognized for our contributions.

As ever,

Guillaume Charvon
National Director

Since 2018 when we published “Poverty Myths” reporting on the high numbers of working poor in this country, earning a “living wage” has become even more of a challenge:

The pandemic decreased the availability of full-time **low-wage** jobs:

There were
**13.7 MILLION FEWER
FULL-TIME, YEAR-ROUND
JOBS IN 2020**
than in 2019.

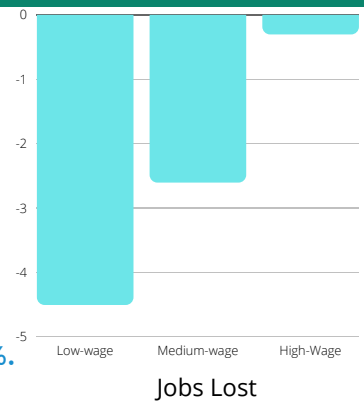
84% OF THIS JOB LOSS
was among workers
earning less than
\$52,000 per year.

[2]

Low-wage unemployment and hardship continues:

The trend of the lowest paying jobs being the most jobs lost has continued through the pandemic:

Between February 2020 and October 2021, low-paying jobs were down 4.5%.
Medium-wage jobs were down 2.6%.
High-wage industries lost only 0.3% of jobs.



& hardship continues into 2022:

Considerable need remained near the end of 2021 with
20 million households reporting having too little to eat and
10 million households reporting being behind on rent.

In early 2022, **3 million fewer people** were employed than before the pandemic.



[3]

Now we *all* know what work is “Essential,” but it’s still not valued with wages:

The Covid pandemic showed us that low-wage workers are essential to our society and our economy - people on the front lines of our food-supply chain, retail services, health care support, public transportation, education support, delivery services, caregiving, etc. Data shows that these essential workers continue to live in hardship creating a growing class of working people living in poverty.

In 2022, more than **31.9 % of the US labor force** (51.9 million workers) make less than \$15 per hour. Many earn the federal minimum wage of only \$7.25.

[4]



[1] Pushed to the Bottom: The Experience of Poverty in the United States, ATD Fourth World USA, 2019
[2] Fewer Low-Wage Full-Time, Year-Round Workers During COVID-19 Causes Increase in Median Earnings Among Those Still Employed, U.S. Census Bureau, September 14, 2021
[3] Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, February 10, 2022
[4] The Crisis of Low Wages in the US, Oxfam, 2022

THOUGHTS ABOUT WORK



Shawn Ashley lives in New Mexico and currently works in food service and plays bass in the rock 'n' roll band S*** Outta Luck. He has also "worked" (not always for pay) as a teacher, tutor, artist, writer and father. He's "just a hard-working guy."

SHAWN: Working in food service during the pandemic really shaped us. It made us think about how serious this job is, how serious any job is, like how grateful we were to have it, you know, and what we were willing to do for it. Because not everybody had a job. We had to pass through checkpoints with our papers just to get to work.



Some people we served in the store got to work from home. The rest of us went out, you know. Shoot, we were thin. One month everyone was out sick with COVID. People were dying. It was scary, man. And we had to keep the store rolling and it was just like, there was a part of me, like, this is insane. There's army here, there's military here, there's family members dying. This is how f'ing crazy this is. And we'd go to work every day. Any other time, it was just a job, right? But this time it was an experience, man. We just gathered so much. It really changed people, physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually.

JARVIS: My son put in close to 200 applications looking for a job. I think out of those 200, he got an email follow up and a phone call and none of that panned out. He said that he had to do something, because he had a truck payment that he had to make. And just an email follow-up and a phone call follow-up wasn't going to cut it. He needed a job. So he woke up one morning and he went and signed up for the Air Force. He's doing great. He's at Dover Air Force Base. He said, "Dad, I had to make a move. I couldn't sit back and let something happen to me, lose my truck and everything just because nobody was willing to call me back."



ALVENIA: Growing up in a single parent home, I learned a lot from my mom. I watched her work hard to provide food, clothing, and shelter for me, my siblings, and herself. She did what she had to do to make sure we all were good. She maintained a positive and determined work ethic that I admired. I don't recall a time that she didn't work. My mom was also very active in our community, especially engaging and encouraging the young people. That's one of the things I learned from her. Once I was old enough to get a real job, part of my motivation was having money, but I was also excited to have the experience.

I started working at 14 for Summer Youth. Once the program ended I didn't want the experience or earning my own income to end. As long as my grades remained good, my mom allowed me to continue working. For me it's a part of life, you have to have some measure of income to take care of yourself. I love working, growing, and learning. Even when I'm not earning an income, I find that I'm constantly engaging in activities that allow me to learn and grow on a holistic level. That's me - keep developing self! In every position that I have had, and have, with constant self reflection, I always learn something more about myself.

WHAT IS WORK?

JARVIS: When I was able to, I'd mow a couple of neighbors' lawns, to help them out because they weren't able to get it done. And, I didn't really consider that work, you know, I just considered that doing something nice for somebody.

SHAWN: "Work" is something that you apply your whole person to, your whole being to. I guess it's something intangible.

A lot of people try to put a physical aspect to work. You know, it's a little bit too hard: shoveling dirt or fixing a house or working with people, serving people or reading a lot of paperwork and getting bills passed or you know, being the head of a company. I guess all those can be defined as work.

But for me, personally, it's something that gets me out of bed every morning and puts me to bed at night super exhausted. Or something I can apply my body to, or mind, or spirit. Something I could get lost in for a little bit. Sometimes I get paid for it, but I know the best work you don't get paid for it. I guess making things better just for yourself. It's not always going to be easy. It should be challenging. It should test you physically, mentally, spiritually.

ALVENIA: For me, work is anything that requires attention, energy, time, and effort. In light of that, I work every day. As a mother there's work. I just spent last week getting my daughter ready for prom and now this week's graduation - that's work. Engaging with your community, trying to be involved in building and uplifting it - that is work. Ministry and service is work. Meeting with young people while helping to uplift and encourage is work.