

- Newsroom
- News Releases
- News Photos
- Public Employee Press

Public Employee Press

Media beat

Book shatters myths on low-wage work

- ▶ PEP Jul/Aug 2001
- ▶ Table of Contents
- ▶ Archives

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, By Barbara Ehrenreich, 2001, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., New York, N.Y., 221 pages, \$23.00. Available at the DC 37 Library.

MOLLY CHARBONEAU

Every year, thousands of low-wage workers nationwide vote to better their lives by joining unions. Barbara Ehrenreich's book "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America" offers a personal glimpse into the terrible conditions that prompt many of these workers to organize: low pay, lack of benefits, unsafe jobs, double shifts, substandard housing and management harassment.

A progressive, investigative journalist, Ms. Ehrenreich took several low-wage service jobs in Florida, Maine and Minnesota to see if she could survive on the \$8 an hour or less earned by almost 30 percent of the work force. She also wondered how the roughly 4 million women removed from benefits by so-called "welfare reform" were going to make it on the \$6 to \$7 an hour they could make.

Describing herself as a divorced homemaker reentering the work force, Ms. Ehrenreich waited on tables, cleaned hotel rooms, scoured toilets for The Maids, served food in a nursing home and clocked in at Wal-Mart. Along the way she faced psychological exams, urine tests, mind-numbing training sessions, constant concern about affordable housing—which often meant paying by the week at run-down motels—and working two jobs while popping pain pills and eating at drive-throughs.

Ms. Ehrenreich's co-workers of every race, age and nationality form the living core of the book. She gives voice to their lives. Underpaid; forbidden to talk, eat or sit while at work; lacking health and dental care or paid leave; sometimes living in their cars—these workers still cared more about doing a good job than management did. From them she learned that "no job, no matter how lowly, is truly 'unskilled.'"

"Low-wage work is not a solution to poverty or even homelessness," Ms. Ehrenreich states.

She ends her investigative report with the upbeat image of a Wal-Mart co-worker waving her fist in the air after seeing news about a hotel strike on a break room TV, leaving readers to conclude that it is low-wage workers themselves who will write the final chapter.