

POLLY TOYNBEE

ALWAYS
HAPPY.
NEVER
SAD

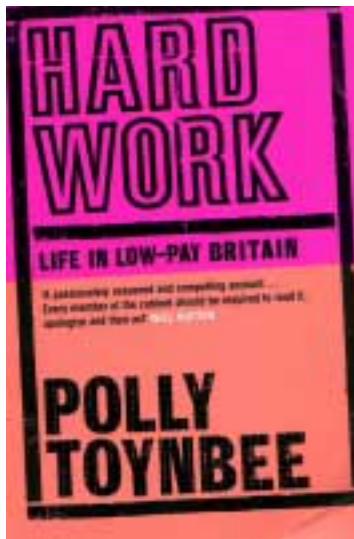
An excerpt from

**HARD
WORK**

Life In
Low-Pay Britain



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An excerpt from
HARD WORK:
LIFE IN LOW-PAY BRITAIN

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COULD YOU LIVE ON THE MINIMUM WAGE?

GUARDIAN JOURNALIST Polly Toynbee took up the challenge; living on one of the worst council housing estates in Britain and taking whatever was on offer at the job centre. What she discovered shocked her.

In telesales and cake factories, as a hospital porter and as a school dinner lady, she worked at a breakneck pace for cut-rate wages, alongside working mothers and struggling retirees. The service sector in Britain is now administered by seedy agencies, offering no prospects, no screening and no commitment. And, perhaps most damning of all, Toynbee found that, despite the optimism of Prime Minister Tony Blair's New Deal, the poorly paid effectively earn less than they did 30 years ago.

Britain has the lowest social spending and the highest poverty in Europe. As the income gap between top and bottom has widened, so social mobility has shuddered to a halt.

In ColdType's excerpt from *Hard Work*, the author takes a job working as a dinner lady, preparing and serving lunches to children in a school canteen . . .

N

OW HERE WAS A job that looked enticing, an easy one. When I found it on the Job Centre computer I rushed to apply, knowing anyone else who saw it would try to get there first: 'Room Attendant. £5 an hour. Permanent. Must have good customer care skills, cash handling experience and waiting experience. Will be delivering tea/coffee to rooms in the Town Hall.' I could put together a CV from long ago waitressing jobs – the Golden Egg, the Wimpy and the Pepper Mill coffee bar in Notting Hill plus a spurious one from a friend of my daughter's who has a bar. It would only take a little economy with the truth over the dates, but what's three decades when no one checks anyway?

I could imagine myself wheeling a tea trolley through the corridors of Lambeth's Town Hall; as a working environment it sounded like job heaven compared to many. I hoped that, at £5 an hour, it might even be a rare job in the direct employ of the council, instead of through an agency or a contractor. It would be interesting because I know some of the councillors, though they might not know me in an overall. I have known Lambeth's Chief Executive, Faith Boardman, ever since her tough time as head of the Child Support Agency. I had taken her out for a Chinese dinner near the Town Hall to find out what was going on in Lambeth shortly before embarking on this project and I liked the idea of startling her by serving her coffee at her desk. Though maybe as

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in other jobs I would turn out to be invisible here, too.

Yes, said a warm-sounding woman called Sally when the Employment Service put me through to her about the job. The post was certainly available; I sounded suitable, and would I come for an interview at the ServiceTeam offices on Thursday? So it was not a directly employed council Job after all but another privatised contractor. ServiceTeam is the company that runs all Lambeth services: rubbish, catering, gardening, security, cleaning and transport. So yet again this was a job working for the state at one remove, not technically a public-sector job. Most of Lambeth's manual staff are now employed by ServiceTeam, which runs Birmingham, Sheffield, Portsmouth, Greenwich and Camden, among others. Knowing how contractors underbid one another by squeezing wages and conditions, I kept searching for genuine civil service jobs at the Job Centre, but they always turned out to be agencies or contracting companies, never direct government employment.

It was raining hard and the wind was blowing up a gale. My umbrella had turned inside out so many times that day that three spokes had broken and the thing was a miserable crumpled joke. After a bus to Herne Hill it was a fifteen-minute walk to Shakespeare Road, where ServiceTeam has its Lambeth headquarters. I was a neat five minutes early, furling up what was left of my umbrella as I stepped into the security entrance beside a goods yard full of ServiceTeam trucks.

'Who you for?' asked a surly security guard.

'Sally Hampton,' I said.

'She don't work here.'

'Yes she does. She called me for an interview today.'

'I SAID, she don't work here no more.'

'But I talked to her only two days ago!'

'That was then. This is now. She has left the company and that's that.'

He went back to reading his paper. I stamped my foot and swore.

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'I've come miles to see her. I was told to see her. I want to see someone else. About a job that was advertised!' I don't usually talk this way, but I was tired and wet and very angry.

'Ain't nobody here. You mean a catering job?'

'Yes, in the Town Hall.'

'I don't know nothing about it. All I know is all yesterday and all today there were loads, I mean loads, of folks coming here asking for Sally Hampton and they all been sent away. She left, for good. No interviews today.'

'Is there anyone else?'

'Nope, they've all gone home now.' When I insisted, he reluctantly gave me a name and number I could call the next day. But this is how it goes with these jobs. No employers bother to cancel interviews when jobs are gone or things change. Poor people travel miles they cannot afford chasing jobs that come and go on the unexplained whim of unseen people they never meet. All those people lining up in agencies, leaning against walls, waiting, waiting, filling forms and waiting again in grim and shabby lobbies all over the city are inured to it, unnaturally patient with no expectation of good treatment and no disappointment or surprise when things turn out badly. They are well-used to having their time and shoe leather wasted, employers so careless about them without even thinking about it. Cheap labour is treated as if it were water from a leaky tap. I was only angry because I was not used to it.

Next morning I called the name the security man had given me. The voice on the phone was brusque to the point of rudeness. 'Sally Hampton has left this company.'

'What about her interviews? I came yesterday. Is someone else doing them?'

'No. There will be no interviews. She reconfigured a lot of jobs and advertised them but we decided it was the wrong thing to do, so now

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she has gone.’ In my mind the disappeared Sally Hampton had become a heroine of the working class, trying to hire people at better rates for better jobs, but who knows?

‘What about the room attendant job in Lambeth Town Hall?’

‘That job is no longer happening.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘Catering assistants is all there is. You can come Monday morning 9a.m. for interviews and induction then.’ He slammed down the phone, and that was that. The dream permanent £5 an hour easy tea-trolley job had vanished, too good to be true.

So on Monday morning there was another trek back to ServiceTeam headquarters where Maria, one of the area catering managers handed out a wad of application forms to the seven women and one man who had turned up for catering jobs, half of us white, half black, all neat in interview wear. The single man was wearing the now-familiar universal polo shirt, in bright red with another company logo on it, plainly already working somewhere else.

The ServiceTeam jobs on offer turned out to be the most miserable I had found yet, £4.12 an hour as catering assistants in Lambeth school kitchens for only three hours a day – a lot of travelling for terrible pay for just fifteen hours a week. Maria, who sounded East European, said the pay rises to £4.50 after six months worked, but there was no pay during holidays. Our pay would be spread out thinly over the whole year to keep the cheques coming in evenly, she said kindly, as if that were for our benefit, though it also meant that ServiceTeam could hold back sizeable sums instead of paying it out directly. What’s more, we would only be paid at the end of the month: a four-week wait before we got a penny. Spread out across the year, this plunges far below the minimum wage to £3.75 an hour, but technically it is within the law.

Maria’s talk was all about the company and avoiding being sued. ‘You are out there as ambassadors for Team Lambeth’ (the name the compa-

ny gives itself in this borough). 'No one is to hear any sounds of any rows coming from the kitchen, ever.' We will, she says, fulfill the company's contracts, come what may so even if children never eat it, we will serve up two hot vegetables a day if that is what the client contract says. When there are inset days when schools are closed for teachers' staff training, we will not be employed or paid, nor on bank holidays. I sign a personal Colleague Commitment contract Promising 'Customer care is my responsibility'; 'Work quality is my responsibility'; and 'I'm dedicated to public service', though nothing much has been said about public service. We are not given copies of any of the forms we have signed, nor any evidence of our contract of employment. There is nothing in this contract about how responsible or dedicated my employer is or isn't to me. We sign that we have received this morning's induction and training in health, safety and food hygiene (though there has been no mention of children or nutrition); there will be a full day's food hygiene course in a few months' time we must also attend. Some mothers protested they couldn't manage that without a creche.

Maria took us through colour-coding rules in the kitchen, so that raw meat and fish never meet cooked food. I took notes that salad is green knives and cutting boards, cold meat is yellow, raw meat red, fish blue, veg brown, and dairy and bread is white. It sounded complicated. We were told that bacteria doubles every ten minutes in warm food. We were taught knife-handling and instructed that the only language ever to be used in the kitchen is English, and then we signed statements that we had been taught these things.

There was a low groan round the room when we were told that there were no dishwashing machines in any of the Lambeth school kitchens and that catering assistants would be doing it all by hand. There was to be no coughing or spitting, no jewellery, watches or nail varnish. There would be no sick pay in the first six months. She said no kitchen shoes would be issued either in the first six months. 'With our high

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turnover in the kitchens, we'd be out of shoes in no time!' she said as if this were a joke but no one laughed. The high turnover came as no surprise. Everywhere this is the excuse for treating people badly – why bother, they never stay? No management course seems to have considered that keeping people by paying and treating them better might even turn out to be profitable.

Maria drifted out of the room from time to time and we talked. Trisha, who was sitting next to me, was desperate. 'I need sixteen hours, not fifteen,' she says. 'If I do sixteen hours I qualify for WFTC and childcare tax credits, but I can't find any job that fits school hours yet takes me over fifteen hours. I'll have to take this for now.' Judy, whom I'd sat with to fill out forms earlier in reception, was about forty-five and worked evenings in a canteen. She needed another job she could combine with her children's school hours. Her husband had just been made redundant as a technical manager in Morden. But after a virus last year he had been left with serious heart trouble, keeping him off work frequently. 'He'll never get another job now,' she said. 'Today he's gone to the doctor to see if he can get invalidity, but I don't know if they'll give it to him. I need another job but this isn't much, is it?' Everyone was complaining about the pay but because of children no one here had any choice but to take it. That is why ServiceTeam gets away with paying this wage, despite London prices. The people who need it most are least likely to get any London weighting allowance. These employers know mothers are trapped in the low-pay cycle by their children. Because they are low-paid they can never afford any child care that might let them get a job or training to lift them out of poverty. Childcare tax credits are available to low-paid mothers, but at a maximum £70 a week they don't cover half the real cost nationwide, let alone in London. If there were no minimum wage, ServiceTeam could probably offer these jobs at even lower pay and still find women desperate enough to take them.

Schools were handed out to us according to postcode, but none was close to my flat. Clement Atlee Primary was to be my school, two bus rides away. One bus and the tube would have been twice as quick, but the two stops on the tube would have cost me £2 a day off my precious slender £12.50 a day pay. My allotted hours were not good either: 11 a.m.-2.30 p.m., with a half-hour lunch break that would not be paid. I asked if I had to take a lunch break when I would be working such short hours? Yes, Maria said, that is the way the job goes at that school because there is a natural break in the work between finishing the school meal and other tasks (as yet unspecified).

It did not sound good but I balanced that against the general image of dinner ladies we all have from schooldays. As seen by schoolchildren, they seem to lounge around at the school hatch, doling out dollops of sludgy food while chatting cheerily. It didn't look too bad, the sort of job cosy mums did for a bit of extra pin money. Dinner ladies are a national joke: there was even a group named The Dinner Ladies not long ago and the recent television sitcom of the same name showed them having fun, sitting about telling jokes and gossiping all day in a friendly school atmosphere doing very little work, certainly nothing gruelling.

Clement Atlee Primary is in the middle of a sea of old housing estates, a single-floor school complex with a big playground. The children are of a multitude of ethnic origins. In the league tables the school scores only a little below the national average and, like other Lambeth primaries, it has been improving each year. Walking down to it on the first day, I considered the school's namesake. How would the members of that 1945 government view the working conditions of 2002? Considering the futuristic optimism of the Festival of Britain with its Skylon, I imagine they would be disappointed to find that fifty years later a third of the British workforce is still paid below the EU decency threshold.

I pressed the bell at the school gates, said 'catering assistant' into the

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entry phone and was let in by an unseen voice. Once I was inside, someone pointed me to the kitchens through a door behind three shut hatches in a corridor and I entered anxiously. This is the worst part of new jobs: arriving, knowing nothing and feeling a useless fool. This is another reason why workers don't shop around for new jobs as much as they should to seek out better pay and conditions. Finding the Job is bad enough – going through the interviews, inductions and generally alarming humiliations – but arriving at a new job clueless about what to do is a real deterrent to job mobility. People tend to stick with the friends, routines and procedures they are familiar with because there might be worse out there. Economists' models for the mobility of labour suggest people will move around following the wages market as easily as capital flashes around the world from a City dealer's desk. But then economists have never had to walk into an unknown kitchen to announce themselves to a group of workers probably less than thrilled at the arrival of yet another inexperienced gormless-looking temporary catering assistant.

As I entered the kitchen, a small, round, wrinkled cook in a less than immaculate white overall and a blue hairnet peered at me from behind a rack of baking tins. 'You the new one?' she asked, looking me up and down. At least she was expecting me and knew my name. Then she beamed out of her big bright pink face and I felt better. She was about fifty but looked much older, wrinkled and plump, with sleeves rolled up exposing ruddy arms roughened by years of hard work. 'Now,' she said, bustling up to me, 'I'm Maggie and this is Wilma. She's my right arm, my big support and I couldn't do without her!' She flung an arm round Wilma, a solid Ghanaian woman who smiled at me too. There were five of us to do the work of ten men, Maggie said with a kind of laugh, as she introduced me to the other two kitchen workers, both

young black men – Morris who was permanent and had been there a while, and Eddie who was another temporary newcomer employed by the Blue Arrow agency, though he wore a different agency identity tag on a chain round his neck reading The Work Exchange.

‘Got a uniform,’ Maggie asked. ‘No, of course they wouldn’t think to give you one, would they?’ She took me into the small changing-room with lockers where a radio was left on all day pumping out mega-loud music. After rummaging about she found an outfit discarded by a succession of other temps. There was an old ServiceTeam orange polo shirt, the universal company uniform with its big blue T. There was a blue tabard-shaped overall with an orange ServiceTeam logo on the front, a plastic apron and a baseball cap, also with a big orange T. It was a rough approximation of a McDonald’s uniform. She couldn’t find any company trousers so I wore my own. Later she found a blue hairnet somewhere and gave me that, too. Does anything look worse than a blue hairnet and a baseball cap? Looking your worst in company uniforms is another dispiriting part of these jobs. I try to imagine the Guardian office if we all had to wear luminous Guardian polo shirts and baseball caps.

The running of this kitchen was fast and furious, efficient but, to a newcomer, dauntingly incomprehensible. It bore no recognisable relation to the induction we had been given but presumably the company covered itself legally by telling us how it should be done, making us sign to say we knew the rules and then turning a blind eye when every cook ran their kitchen in their own way. That way if anything went wrong it would always be the employees’ fault: our signatures would prove it. For example, we were told that if ever there was a wet patch or a mopped patch on the kitchen floor, we must immediately put up a big yellow Danger sign, then if anyone slipped the company could not be sued. But if I had followed that rule the entire kitchen would have been an impassable sea of yellow signs as the floor was wet and

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slippery most of the time – not dirty, but always awash and constantly mopped.

Maggie took me over to a notice on the inside of a door where complicated rota with several charts had been written out in pencil by some manager. It listed the series of jobs for each of five staff performed in rotation on a weekly basis. I was to take the jobs assigned on the list to 'Sharon' for week four on the rotation. Sharon was some long-departed catering assistant the others remembered vaguely as talking too much. Maggie couldn't read the rota – wrong glasses, small writing – so I read it out for her. The first job was Clean Brown Cupboard. 'Oh yes,' she said vaguely. 'You'd better do that then.' The brown cupboard was filled with dusty herbs, spices, half-empty sugar packets, cake cases, chocolate sprinkles, odds and ends that hadn't been touched for a while. New and anxious to please, I carefully took everything out and scoured each shelf, replacing it all in neat lines, taking much too long.

Wilma looked at me, shrugged and then mercifully took me under her wing. She had a stern aspect that suddenly burst into reassuring smiles. She was the one who organised the rest of us, leaving Maggie the cook to do the cooking while we did everything else under Wilma's command. First she told me to clean the two giant stoves and I hunted about for scouring pads, bucket and detergent. I set to work scraping and scrubbing, carefully lifting off every metal plate and crumb-catcher, chipping away at what might or might not have been age-old burned-on indelible marks. The cookers looked 1950s or earlier to me, as did some of the burnmarks, Clement Atlee's date, maybe. But as I hadn't seen the stoves before they were used that day, I had no idea how clean they were supposed to be. Eventually Maggie and Wilma stopped and stared at my excavations with their hands on their hips and told me to just give the cookers a wipe down, which was a relief.

Next came the washing of the giant pans and utensils Maggie had used to cook the dinners, including the vast heavy mixing bowl of the

Horton mixer and its whisk, still half-filled with glued-on mashed potato. This was hard work but, compared with what was to come, it was the calmest period of the day, a deceptive start to what turned into a punishing finish. With only fifteen minutes before lunch, we hurried into the school hall as soon as it was empty and at a run hoisted great stacks of small but heavy tables and chairs out of a cupboard on to trolleys, wheeled them into place and set them out in neat lines, six to a table, laying them with cutlery and plastic beakers.

Then it was lunchtime and the big hatch doors were lifted open as we took the tins of food out of the ovens and laid them on the hot-plates. Morris took out an electronic thermometer to test the heat of the meat dishes and record them on a chart, collecting a tiny sample from each dish to keep in case of any legal action for food poisoning. There was a salad bar with bread and butter alongside a good array of hot food – chilli mince which virtually no children chose, baked potatoes with melted cheese, lamb burgers, and a vegetarian bake. I was on the vegetables, with a scooper for mashed potato and two big tins of peas and sweetcorn. Suddenly the stream of children arrived, keen-eyed, bouncing, jostling, chatting, some polite, some intensely anxious about what might or might not be put on their plate: this was the best part of the job, but it didn't last long.

I was not told the rule that every child must have at least a small portion of one vegetable and some were sent back to me for a dollop. 'Fussy, they are so fussy!' Wilma said. She was serving the steamed currant pudding and custard, with a bowl of yoghurt poured out of a mammoth plastic bag as the second option. Most of the children's utter horror at even a shred of green veg on their plate suggested that maybe nature has not designed children to eat cabbage or peas, the dislike is so intense and almost universal. They screwed up their small faces and said it made them sick, even the thoughtfully minuscule portions I gave them. Wilma and Morris knew many of the children's names and their indi-

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vidual fads and habits. Some were so shy they could hardly speak to say what they wanted, others were bustling and demanding. Watching them pass by it was hard to know whether to be worried by the ones who piled their plates as high as possible with everything (were they too hungry?) or those who reluctantly accepted the absolute minimum on their plates and were left in the dining-hall with a stern classroom assistant until they ate at least something. There was one tiny frail girl who looked perhaps Ethiopian, who would not even murmur what she wanted though Wilma got her to use a few whispered words. She would not eat anything, sitting all alone long after the other children had left. She looked as if she really needed to eat, but she wouldn't.

When the children were gone, a mountain of food was left and Maggie gave the signal for us all to take a plateful and push it into the hotplate for later. The others piled their plates to overflowing as this was their main meal of the day and an important perk of the job. Wilma brought out two big take-away tinfoil containers with lids and filled them with chilli mince to take home for her children's supper, which suggested real need: how many children would be thrilled by their mother bringing home a dish of old school dinner in the evening? She urged me to do the same or it would all just go to waste. Indeed, next we scraped away vast trays of food into the bins, some hardly touched, waste on a scale that took some getting used to.

While we were emptying out the serving-tins, Eddie and Wilma began talking about the imminent Zimbabwe elections and the wickedness of Robert Mugabe. Neither of them came from Zimbabwe but they followed African politics with keen interest. Eddie was a part-time student at a scheme in Brixton called The Biz. He took classes in computer graphic design, hoping to become a designer of video covers some day. But he said it wasn't going too well, partly because of his patchwork days of agency jobs, and he was starting to lose heart.

It was now that the tempo of the shift moved from hard and fast

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work to a controlled frenzy of washing up. Conversation came to an end. We were, I suppose, cheaper than industrial dishwashing machines but we imitated them quite well. First we put all the cutlery into great wire trays and lowered them into a large sink of piping-hot detergent and water, then with a big old wooden brush with mangled bristles we reached in and scrubbed them all in a general sort of way. Next we shook and joggled the steaming heavy trays, swooshing them up and down, before lifting them into an even hotter sink of clean water with more swooshing and joggling. There was no time to leave them to dry, so they had to be wiped down fast and put back on to the cutlery trolley, all facing the same way. After that came mountains of plastic plates and the plastic trays used by the youngest children: trays like airline dishes with indentations for different kinds of foods. All these were also dunked and scrubbed and stacked at high speed. The steam from the sinks billowed up; the water was lobster-boiling hot if you dropped anything in. Rubber gloves were available but no one used them as it slowed up the work. Last came dozens of big serving-tins, pans and lids to scrub at an electrifying speed I found hard to keep up with. Putting them all away on precisely the night racks, doing it on the run while trying to match up remarkably similar but subtly different shapes which didn't fit together if you matched them wrongly, was heavy work done with incredible speed and dexterity that took me time to learn.

I was puzzled by the way they worked. Why so hard and fast, non-stop, harder than seemed necessary with time to spare and no obvious supervisory whips at our back? It was Wilma who set the frenetic pace and everyone had to keep up with her. It was she who directed who should do what job. Finally it was done and the kitchen was suddenly calm, the floors mopped, every tin, bowl, pan, whisk and ladle in its right place. The cloths were hung up and there was a moment of peace while everyone stretched their backs and sighed. We were all tired.

Maggie said we could take our lunch now, so we retrieved our plates

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of food from the hotplate and hurried into the locker room, where there were a few chairs. Everyone ate very fast. Ceremonially we each praised and thanked Maggie for her cooking because it was the only recognition she ever got. I still hadn't understood why we were in such a rush, why we were all bolting down our food when the kitchen was now clear and clean, all the pans done, the fryer and stoves wiped down. Maggie and Wilma were used to so many new catering assistants passing through this kitchen that they didn't bother to explain anything to me except as it happened, tired of giving elaborate explanations, too tired altogether. So I just took instructions one by one and picked it up as best I could.

After about four minutes Wilma glanced out of the window. 'Here they come,' she said with a deep sigh. Everyone got up at once, scraped their plates and hurried back into the kitchen. Drivers dressed in fluorescent ambulancemen's jackets were unloading about fifty huge yellow plastic containers on to trolleys and wheeling them into the kitchen through the back door. I didn't know what they were but we heaved them off the trolleys and stacked them high on to the counters. Inside were rows of large half-full tins of congealed food, mountains of them. Again, Wilma set the pace, scraping all the food out of these new tins into the bins. Copying her, we did it with our bare hands because spoons would take too long, so we were soon wrist-deep in mash and Angel Delight. Morris cleaned out each plastic box as Wilma and I emptied tins while Eddie filled the sinks.

Once all the food was scraped out, we washed and scrubbed again, piling up the steel trolleys with tins, hurtling to and fro, wiping as we shuttled and skidded back and forth to the racks to put them all away.

Why so fast and frantic? Because there were now only thirty-five paid minutes left to get it done. After that, it would be in our own time and

Wilma was rightly determined that we would all be out of there every day by 2.10 at the latest – and we always were. In theory our shift ended at 2.30, but that was only if we took the full half hour unpaid for lunch, a waste of time for everyone. As it was we took under five minutes' unpaid for lunch and worked flat out instead. We usually managed to get the work done in our paid three hours, plus five or sometimes ten minutes' unpaid. But it could only be done in that time by working at this maniacal rate. It meant heaving very heavy things very fast. I don't know what those yellow containers weighed, each one holding three large serving-tins still half-filled with food, but it felt like a lot more than the legal limit for women – sixteen kilos. Certainly lifting them off high trolleys and stacking them high on the counters, prising off the container lids and lifting out the tins was hard on the backs even of the young men. Wilma's ferocious determination was the only thing that made the task possible in the time. That television sitcom about dinner ladies never had scenes that even remotely resembled our work in this school kitchen. I had imagined scenes like these done by catering workers in some large restaurants and hotel kitchens, but not in a primary school. This was not the light work for mothers I had expected.

Where had these horrible loads of yellow boxes come from?

Once they had time, Wilma and Maggie explained that these were mobile meals that Maggie cooked early in the morning to be sent out to local schools, colleges and nurseries with no kitchens. Why did they have no kitchens of their own? Over the last year ServiceTeam had closed many local school kitchens to save money and Clement Atlee had been assigned the extra work, both the cooking and the tin-washing for hundreds more meals. 'This job was OK before,' Maggie said. 'I used to like it when it was just this school. Now it is too hard, really too hard.'

When she was assigned this enormous task, Maggie had been given only an extra pound an hour and only one extra hour to cover all the new work, but it didn't begin to compensate. As a fully trained head

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cook with no assistant cook, Maggie was paid £7.21 an hour, not much for the ordering, planning, organising and running of the whole kitchen, the paperwork and time-sheets, as well as cooking three main courses, plus salads, plus three vegetables and two puddings every day for hundreds of people. She was exhausted most of the time and worked at high speed, though her rhythm of work was different from ours. She started at 7.30 in the morning and had to rush early on to get the cooking done for the van to take away to the other schools. By the time we came in she had time to do her paperwork and some cooking for the next day.

When the kitchen had all this extra work forced on them, Wilma had also been given an extra pound an hour and one extra hour a day, taking her now to over £5 an hour. As senior catering assistant, running everything but the cooking, that was pitiful pay for the rate at which she had to work to keep within her paid hours. The closure of all those other kitchens must have saved the company huge sums while the extra pay for Wilma and Maggie came to no more than about £11 a day. The rest of us were on the same £4.12. This job should not have been done within the three-hour span we were paid. If it had been paid for an extra two hours, it could have been done at a civilised rate. This is the kind of 'efficiency' the state buys when it privatises its ancillary services: private companies can get away with doing things to the workers the state would never dare. It was hardly surprising so many catering assistants came and went from this kitchen.

Maggie and Wilma had both been there together for six years; Maggie had done thirteen years in other school kitchens before. They worked together in perfect harmony, understood one another's every move, mood and gesture and they were fond of each other. They both said the work was impossible, unbearable, grossly undertimed and

underpaid. They both said they ought to give it up, but there they stayed together, slaving away at work that was visibly exhausting them. So why did Maggie and Wilma stay? They liked the school, the staff, the head and one another. More than that, it was as if the very harshness of the work bound them together in a daily challenge to keep going. In a way they were proud of being able to do it, proud of not going under.

Also, Wilma lived within walking distance of the school, had young children and said she couldn't manage other hours or difficult travel. Maggie seemed defeated by tiredness. She had lost the initiative to complain or get up and leave, though she talked of it often. Work can become a compulsive activity, even when you hate your employer. The familiar if harsh rhythms of sheer physical labour, the perfectionism of keeping that kitchen running clean, tidy and well-organised, the sheer difficulty of the daily task seemed perversely to tie them to the place. Changing jobs and starting again somewhere else with new people and new routines was an effort too far in their already overstretched lives. Besides, the friendship and understanding between them kept them together.

These are sentiments on which companies trade relentlessly. Often they don't even know why their workers stay in jobs they should leave. I have sometimes heard managers talk as if their workers' immobility is a sign, a proof, of their stupidity and lack of initiative, rather than a prompt to consider training and promoting them. They sometimes respect the ones who leave more than those who stay. Whatever the complex reasons for Maggie and Wilma staying in that kitchen, it certainly had nothing to do with loyalty to ServiceTeam whom they detested, along with the catering managers' insufferable exhortatory messages pencilled at the bottom of our rota about being cheerful and representing the company at all times. Some manager had even marked the rota with a hand-drawn smiley face and a sad face, with the words,

Always Happy, Never Sad

‘Always Happy, Never Sad!’

Work is only a part of people’s lives and sometimes, however hard, it is a haven from far worse troubles at home. Maggie was having a personal crisis of her own. One morning she had a phone call from her wayward seventeen-year-old daughter screaming at her to get down to Richmond to pick her up: she’d quarreled with her sister and her father and had climbed out of their van with no money. Maggie’s husband was, she said, in the second-hand trade and the girls had gone along to give him a hand. Wilma and Maggie had been grumbling all morning about trouble with teenagers. ‘I said no. How can I go down and pick her up?’ Maggie said, but she was worried. There had been trouble for years, she told me, trouble with social workers who took her younger daughter into care for a while, but then the girl would come thumping on the front door in the early hours and they would take her back again. Maggie shook her head miserably. ‘What can you do?’ Before long the girl suddenly turned up at the kitchen back door, a pale, thin waif, and Maggie disappeared with her into her minute office and we could all hear much crying behind the door. ‘Go and help her!’ Morris said to Wilma, but she knew all about this long-running story and shook her head saying it was better to leave them to it. In any case, although it was a quiet moment for Maggie, we were still working at top speed, slithering up and down the room, clashing and banging pans, mopping as we went.

By 2.10 p.m. everything was done. The kitchen was always spotless for Maggie’s seven-thirty start the next morning. She had still not emerged from the office with her daughter and Wilma said we had better go. ‘We work so hard to get done early and when it’s done, we go. There’s nothing we can do for Maggie now.’ As I walked down the road with Wilma, she shook her head and complained about children. ‘Before you have babies, no one ever tells you the heartache, do they?’ We grumbled together about teenagers and the worries. She said she’d

had her own trouble this morning before I arrived. Her thirteen-year-old son's school had called her to say he hadn't turned up that morning. However, he did eventually arrive there, saying his bus had been stuck in traffic. 'You just worry, worry, worry all the time. There's so much bad stuff around here, you don't know how to protect them. And there's the drugs and all that.' She talked bitterly about hardworking families trying to make ends meet for their children, only to have their kids so easily go to the bad in a bad area like this. But how could they ever afford to move?

For herself, she would like to have trained as a cook, but since cooks start so early she couldn't as she needed to be there to see her children off to school in the mornings in case they didn't go. Here was an intelligent, hard-working woman who should have had the chance to do something better, but no other chances had come her way. How could she have worked so long and so well for the company without anyone recognising her potential for promotion? She didn't expect it; she didn't expect much except to hold on to her own strong personal sense of dignity in a hard world. Part of that dignity came from the knowledge she did a very tough job very well and maybe no one else could do it as well as she did in the allotted time.

This instinctive sense of pride in hard labour has always been traded on by employers. I saw it among the coal miners thirty years before, watching them underground on their knees, bent double as they hacked out coal with dangerous power tools in seams three foot high. Among the miners there was less indignation at being required to do it than pride that they could and did do what to outsiders looked impossible. The danger and the hardness of it bred a solidarity between them that bound them together and bound them to the work. But it never seemed noble to me, just a psychological way of holding on to some pride while doing a terrible job there was no avoiding. The big difference for them was that at least they knew they were kings among manual workers,

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the highest paid, the strongest organised, and the country was obliged to acknowledge that its economic survival depended on the energy they mined. But a primary school kitchen? It lacks all that heroic glamour, especially the money and the respect. It is just mothers' work at mothers' pay.

One morning Ali the repairman arrived with a big step ladder to mend broken strip lights over the hotplate. He was a short, jolly, foul-mouthed old Turk, a familiar friend to Maggie and Wilma, but today he was spitting with anger. 'They redunding me!' he exploded. 'I only got a year and half to go to my pension. I never get another job now! I'm sixty-three and they now say they redund me because I cost too much. Because I am long-time, many years Lambeth council worker from before this ServiceTeam shit. That means I get more pay than the others, the most out of all the workers, they say. So that's it. They don't want me no more. They say they reorganize my job so it don't exist no more, which is a fucking lie. Fucking, fucking lie! I know the man they give my job to, this work still must get done. My job is no redunding, they give it to someone they pay a lot less!' He was going to fight it all the way, he said.

'You been to the union?' Maggie asked. He said he had: 'You have to give the union guys a big kicking or they do nothing for you. But now they take my case. Maybe I get early retirement, a bit better, but I no get my job back.' It was getting close to serving-time but Ali lingered, fuming, watching us lift out the dinner tins on to the hotplates. He began a long political diatribe while we prepared to serve. 'Unions once were strong. I am old and I remember the miners see off Ted Heath government good and strong, but then Margaret Thatcher, she destroy the miners and all the unions. Now the bosses do what they like to us! They privatise everything, no unions much now, everything fucked for

us workers!' Wilma, Maggie and Eddie agreed heartily, but the children were lining up and Ali stamped off with his ladder.

On Friday Eddie didn't turn up which left three of us to do the early work without him. Wilma fumed that he was always late on Fridays with some excuse or other. Maggie said this time she was marking it on his time-sheet, losing him an hour and a half's money. Then he arrived just in time for serving the children, saying something about being burgled, to which Wilma just harrumphed. Later, Eddie and I had a brief dust-up over the tin-washing at the sinks. I was talking about agencies and he misunderstood what I said. I was complaining about the way agencies charge employers £7 or £8 an hour while only paying workers the minimum wage. He was edgy because he knew he was in the wrong about being late and he thought I had said something rude about agency workers. It took a while to soothe him and explain that, although I wasn't agency on this job but working direct for Service-Team, I had worked for an agency before and I was not complaining about the quality of agency workers. He was mollified; he smiled. But later Wilma grumbled quietly to me about agency staff, saying they were never reliable, never helped out when they had done their particular job, never pulled their weight. Eddie was touchy because wherever he went agency workers were resented by the permanents. Everyone needs someone to look down on and he didn't like being that someone.

Leaving the kitchen was difficult. I felt so bad about it that I didn't tell Wilma and Maggie I was going at the end of the Friday shift. I had said goodbye at the hospital when I left, but here, shamefully, I farked it. They had both said kindly that they really hoped I would be a rare one who stayed, which was gratifying: the only praise anyone got in this place was praise we gave one another. But I said nothing and bit my lip, ashamed to tell

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them I too was going. Temps leaving all the time created extra work for them, training up new staff time and again. More than that, though, the high turnover of temps departing every week was deeply unsettling for those who stayed behind and I found this everywhere I went. When people quit they were rejecting the jobs Maggie and Wilma chose to stay in. The implication was that the jobs were rubbish and even that their offered friendship was rubbish, too. By walking away, temps were rejecting Maggie and Wilma's hard labour and rejecting them as people. It made their conscientiousness, their expertise and their dedication feel worthless.

I did call the catering manager to warn her I wouldn't be going back, to make sure they got a replacement for Monday, and I went out of my way to tell her forcefully why everyone left that job grossly overworked and grossly underpaid. 'I'm sorry, my dear, but that IS scheduled as a three hour job and that means the work CAN be done in three hours!' she said crossly. Clearly she had never tried it herself. I felt ashamed at going and even more sorry at not explaining to Maggie and Wilma why it was time for me to move on. I missed their warmth and comradeship as soon as I walked out of the door. It shows how even a truly bad job can hold on to you, and I felt like a rat.



Reviews for *Hard Work*

IN job after job, Toynbee draws wages so low that she is in debt from day one. Occasionally, she gets less than the minimum wage. She does not qualify for bank loans and faces the prospect of the loan shark as her financial adviser. The jobs are excruciatingly hard, dirty or boring. Job security? Forget it. Training? A joke. The learning society? A farce for these people. – *The Observer, London*

TOYNBEE is fiercely intelligent, scrupulous with academic research. Her accounts are sensitive and dignified. The sole reviewer who has attacked her as 'patronising', in a mean-spirited hatchet job in the *New Statesman*, must have read a different book. Toynbee is the most skilled writer in Britain today at mixing an analysis of public policy with the human stories behind the statistics. *Hard Work* is genuinely extraordinary, with the reportorial eye of an Orwell (yes, I know how high this praise is, but it is deserved) and the political urgency and clarity of the very best political thinkers. Not only should everybody with any conscience read it; it should be the manifesto for a third Labour term.

— *Independent on Sunday, London*

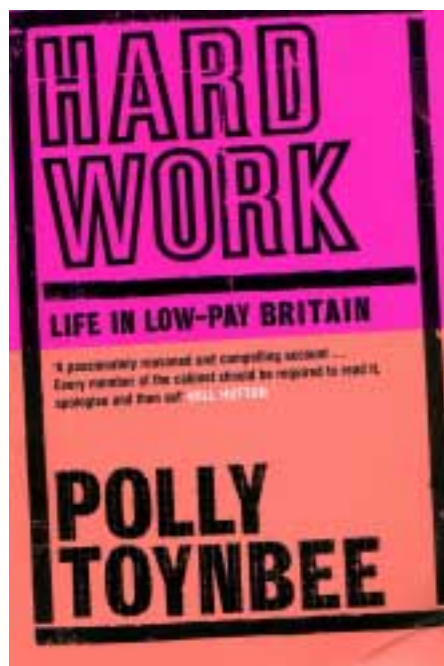
IT is a powerful book, a relevant book, a book that should touch the conscience of even the most shameless exploiter driven by the goads of market forces.

—*The Times, London*

AN excellent piece of writing, emotionally honest, racily readable and politically astute, revealing wilful government and private-sector blindness to the conditions of the lowest paid — *The Herald, Glasgow*

HARD Work – Life in Low-Pay Britain is journalist Polly Toynbee's account of moving into a ghastly council estate flat and working in telesales, a cake factory, as a hospital porter and as a child minder. Toynbee's co-workers are also doing it very tough. But their struggle is taking place against the background of the remnants of a welfare state. Inefficiencies and absurdities abound as Toynbee makes her way through the Department of Work and Pensions. – *The Age, Australia*

TOYNBEE has done an excellent job in bringing together many of the arguments for a living wage. She effectively exposes the desperate poverty of some 30 per cent plus of the population by virtue of experiencing the condition for herself. It is an essential read, especially for those in government. — *Morning Star, London*



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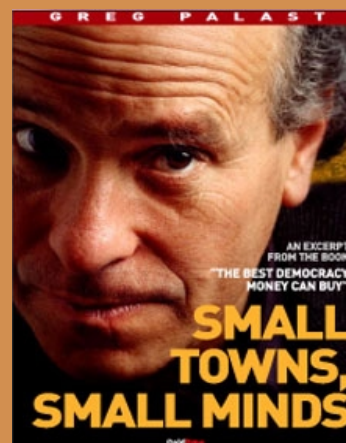
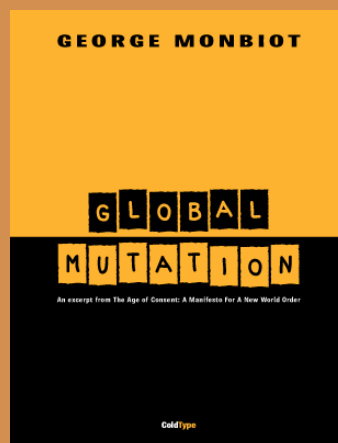
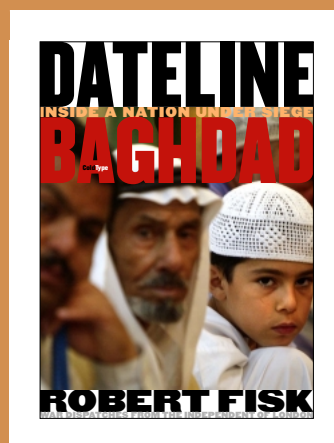
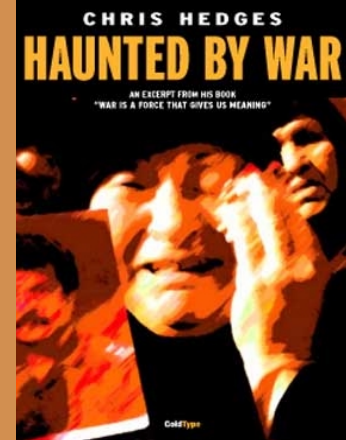
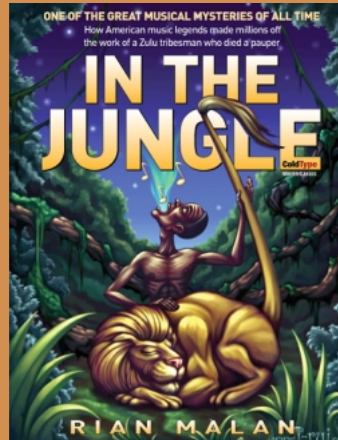
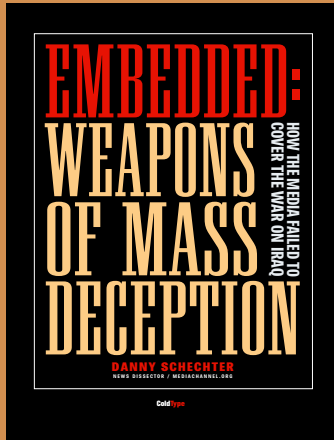
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