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An Apartheid of Dollars

Life in the New American Minimum-Wage Economy

BY PETER VAN BUREN

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There are many sides to whistleblowing. The one that most people don't know about is the very personal cost, **prison aside**, including the high cost of lawyers and the strain on family relations that follows the decision to risk it all in an act of conscience. Here's a part of my own story I've not talked about much before.

At age 53, everything changed. Following my whistleblowing first book, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*, I was **run out of the good job** I had held for more than 20 years with the U.S. Department of State. As one of its threats, State also took aim at the pension and benefits I'd earned, even as it forced me into retirement. Would my family and I lose everything I'd worked for as part of the **retaliation campaign** State was waging? I was worried. That pension was the thing I'd counted on to provide for us and it remained in jeopardy for many months. I was scared.

My skill set was pretty specific to my old job. The market was tough in the Washington, D.C. area for someone with a **suspended security clearance**. Nobody with a salaried job to offer seemed interested in an old guy, and I needed some money. All the signs pointed one way — toward the retail economy and a minimum-wage job.

And soon enough, I did indeed find myself working in exactly that economy and, worse yet, trying to live on the money I made. But it wasn't just the money. There's this American thing in which jobs define us, and those definitions tell us what our individual futures and the future of our society is likely to be. And believe me, rock bottom is a miserable base for any future.

Old World/New World

The last time I worked for minimum wage was in a small store in my hometown in northern Ohio. It was almost a rite of passage during high school, when I pulled in about four bucks an hour stocking shelves alongside my friends. Our girlfriends ran the cash registers and our moms and dads shopped in the store. A good story about a possible date could get you a night off from the sympathetic manager, who was probably the only adult in those days we called by his first name. When you graduated from high school, he would hire one of your friends and the cycle would continue.

At age 53, I expected to be quizzed about why I was looking for minimum-wage work in a big box retail store we'll call "Bullseye." I had prepared a story about wanting some fun part-time work and a new experience, but no one asked or cared. It felt like joining the French Foreign Legion, where you leave your past behind, assume a new name, and disappear anonymously into the organization in some distant land. The manager who hired me seemed focused only on whether I'd show up on time and not steal. My biggest marketable skill seemed to be speaking English better than some of his Hispanic employees. I was, that is, "well qualified."

Before I could start, however, I had to pass a background and credit check, along with a drug test. Any of the anonymous agencies processing the checks could have vetoed my employment and I would never have known why. You don't have any idea what might be in the reports the store receives, or what to feel about the fact that some stranger at a local store now knows your financial and criminal history, all for the chance to earn seven bucks an hour.

You also don't know whether the drug tests were conducted properly or, as an older guy, if your high blood pressure medicine could trigger a positive response. As I learned from my co-workers later, everybody always worries about "pissing hot." Most places that don't pay much seem especially concerned that their workers are drug-free. I'm not sure why this is, since you can trade bonds and get through the day higher than a bird on a cloud. Nonetheless, I did what I had to in front of another person, handing him the cup. He gave me one of those universal signs of the underemployed I now recognize, a we're-all-in-it, what're-ya-gonna-do look, just a little upward flick of his eyes.

Now a valued member of the Bullseye team, I was told to follow another employee who had been on the job for a few weeks, do what he did, and then start doing it by myself by the end of my first shift. The work was dull but not pointless: put stuff on shelves; tell customers where stuff was; sweep up spilled stuff; repeat.

Basic Training

It turned out that doing the work was easy compared to dealing with the job. I still had to be trained for that.

You had to pay attention, but not too much. Believe it or not, that turns out to be an acquired skill, even for a former pasty government bureaucrat like me. Spend enough time in the retail minimum-wage economy and it'll be trained into you for life, but for a newcomer, it proved a remarkably slow process. Take the initiative, get slapped down. Break a rule, be told you're paid to follow the rules. Don't forget who's the boss. (It's never you.) It all becomes who you are.

Diving straight from a salaried career back into the kiddie pool was tough. I still wanted to do a good job today, and maybe be a little better tomorrow. At first, I tried to think about how to do the simple tasks more efficiently, maybe just in a different order to save some walking back and forth. I knew I wasn't going to be paid more, but that work ethic was still inside of me. The problem was that none of us were supposed to be trying to be good, just good enough. If you didn't know that, you learned it fast. In the process, you felt yourself getting more and more tired each day.

Patient Zero in the New Economy

One co-worker got fired for stealing employee lunches out of the break room fridge. He apologized to us as security marched him out, saying he was just hungry and couldn't always afford three meals. I heard that when he missed his rent payments he'd been sleeping in his car in the store parking lot. He didn't shower much and now I knew why. Another guy, whose only task was to rodeo up stray carts in the parking lot, would entertain us after work by putting his cigarette out on his naked heel. The guys who came in to clean up the toilets got up each morning knowing that was what they would do with another of the days in their lives.

Other workers were amazingly educated. One painted in oils. One was a recent college grad who couldn't find work and liked to argue with me about the deeper meanings in the modern fiction we'd both read.

At age 53, I was the third-oldest minimum-wage worker in the store. A number of the others were single moms. (**Sixty-four percent** of minimum-wage employees are women. About half of all single-parent families live in **poverty**.) There was at least one veteran. ("The Army taught me to drive a Humvee, which turns out not to be a marketable skill.") There were a couple of students who were alternating semesters at work with semesters at community college, and a small handful of recent immigrants. One guy said that because another big box store had driven his small shop out of business, he had to take a minimum-wage job. He was Patient Zero in our New Economy.

State law only required a company to give you a break if you worked six hours or more under certain conditions. Even then, it was only 30 minutes — and unpaid. You won't be surprised to discover that, at Bullseye, most non-holiday shifts were five-and-a-half hours or less. Somebody said it might be illegal not to give us more breaks, but what can you do? Call 911 like it was a real crime?

Some good news, though. It turned out that I had another marketable skill in addition to speaking decent English: being old. One day as a customer was bawling out a younger worker over some imagined slight, I happened to wander by. The customer assumed I was the manager, given my age, and began directing her complaints at me. I played along, even steepling my fingers to show my sincere concern just as I had seen actual managers do. The younger worker didn't get in

trouble, and for a while I was quite popular among the kids whenever I pulled the manager routine to cover them.

Hours were our currency. You could trade them with other employees if they needed a day off to visit their kid's school. You could grab a few extra on holidays. If you could afford it, you could swap five bad-shift hours for three good-shift hours. The store really didn't care who showed up as long as someone showed up. Most minimum-wage places cap workers at under 40 hours a week to avoid letting them become "full time" and so possibly qualify for any kind of benefits. In my case, as work expanded and contracted, I was scheduled for as few as seven hours a week and I never got notice until the last moment if my hours were going to be cut.

Living on a small paycheck was hard enough. Trying to budget around wildly varying hours, and so paychecks, from week to week was next to impossible. Seven hours a week at minimum wage was less than fifty bucks. A good week around the Christmas rush was 39 hours, or more than \$270. At the end of 2013, after I had stopped working at Bullseye, the minimum wage did go up from a little more than \$7 to \$8 an hour, which was next to no improvement at all. Doesn't every little bit help? Maybe, but what are a few more crumbs of bread worth when you need a whole loaf not to be hungry?

Working to Be Poor

So how do you live on \$50 a week, or for that matter, \$270 a week? Cut back? Recycle cans?

One answer is: you don't live on those wages alone. You can't. Luckily I had some savings, no kids left in the house to feed, and my wife was still at her "good" job. Many of my co-workers, however, dealt with the situation by holding down two or three minimum-wage jobs. Six hours on your feet is tough, but what about 12 or 14? And remember, there are no weekends or holidays in most minimum-wage jobs. Bullseye had even begun opening on Thanksgiving and Christmas afternoons.

The smart workers found their other jobs in the same strip mall as our Bullseye, so they could run from one to the next, cram in as many hours as they could, and save the bus fare. It mattered: at seven bucks an hour, that round trip fare meant you worked your first 45 minutes not for Bullseye but for the bus company. (The next 45 minutes you worked to pay taxes.)

Poverty as a Profit Center

Many low-wage workers have to take some form of public assistance. Food stamps — now called the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**, or SNAP — were a regular topic of conversation among my colleagues. Despite holding two or three jobs, there were still never enough hours to earn enough to eat enough. SNAP was on a lot of other American's minds as well — the number of people using food stamps increased by **13% a year** from 2008 to 2012. About **1 in 7 Americans** get some of their food through SNAP. About 45% of food stamp benefits go to **children**.

Enjoying that Big Mac? Here's one reason it's pretty cheap and that the junk sold at "Bullseye" and the other big box stores is, too: those businesses get away with paying below a living wage and instead you, the taxpayer, help subsidize those lousy wages with SNAP. (And of course

since minimum-wage workers have taxes deducted, too, they are — imagine the irony — essentially forced to subsidize themselves.)

That subsidy does not come cheap, either. The cost of public assistance to families of workers in the fast-food industry alone is nearly **\$7 billion per year**. McDonald's workers alone account for **\$1.2 billion** in federal assistance annually.

All that SNAP money is needed to bridge the gap between what the majority of employed people earn through the minimum wage, and what they need to live a minimum life. Nearly three-quarters of enrollments in America's major public benefits programs involve working families stuck in jobs like I had. There are a lot of those jobs, too. The positions that account for the **most workers** in the U.S. right now are retail salespeople, cashiers, restaurant workers, and janitors. All of those positions pay minimum wage or nearly so. Employers are actually allowed to pay below minimum wage to food workers who might **receive tips**.

And by the way, if somehow at this point you're feeling bad for Walmart, don't. In addition to having its workforce partially paid for by the government, Walmart also makes a significant portion of its profits by selling to people receiving federal food assistance. Though the Walton family is a little too shy to release absolute numbers, a **researcher** found that in one year, nine Walmart Supercenters in Massachusetts together received more than \$33 million in SNAP dollars. One Walmart Supercenter in Tulsa, Oklahoma, received \$15.2 million, while another (also in Tulsa) took in close to \$9 million in SNAP spending.

You could say that taxpayers are basically moneylenders to a government that is far more interested in subsidizing business than in caring for their workers, but would anyone believe you?

Back in the Crosshairs

Some employees at Bullseye had been yelled at too many times or were too afraid of losing their jobs. They were not only broke, but broken. People — like dogs — don't get that way quickly, only by a process of erosion eating away at whatever self-esteem they may still possess. Then one day, if a supervisor tells them by mistake to hang a sign upside down, they'll be too afraid of contradicting the boss not to do it.

I'd see employees rushing in early, terrified, to stand by the time clock so as not to be late. One of my fellow workers broke down in tears when she accidentally dropped something, afraid she'd be fired on the spot. And what a lousy way to live that is, your only incentive for doing good work being the desperate need to hang onto a job guaranteed to make you hate yourself for another day. Nobody cared about the work, only keeping the job. That was how management set things up.

About 30 million Americans work this way, live this way, at McJobs. These situations are not unique to any one place or region. After all, Walmart has more than **two million** employees. If that company were an army, it would be the second largest military on the planet, just behind **China**. It is, in fact, the largest overall employer in the country and the biggest employer in **25 states**. When Walmart won't pay more than minimum, it hurts. When it rains like that, we all get wet. This is who we are now.

I Was Minimum

It's time to forget the up-by-the-bootstraps fantasies of conservative economists bleating on Fox. If any of it was ever true, it's certainly not true anymore. There is no ladder up, no promotion path in the minimum-wage world. You can't work "harder" because your hours are capped, and all the jobs are broken into little pieces anyone could do anyway. Minimum wage is what you get; there are no real raises. I don't know where all the assistant managers came from, but not from among us.

I worked in retail for minimum wage at age 16 and again at 53. In that span, the minimum wage itself rose only by a few bucks. What changed, however, is the cast of characters. Once upon a time, minimum-wage jobs were filled with high school kids earning pocket money. In 2014, it's mainly adults struggling to get by. Something is obviously wrong.

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama urged that the federal minimum wage be raised to \$9 an hour. He also **said** that a person holding down a full-time job should not have to live in poverty in a country like America.

To the president I say, yes, please, do raise the minimum wage. But how far is nine bucks an hour going to go? Are so many of us destined to do five hours of labor for the cell phone bill, another 12 for the groceries each week, and 20 or 30 for a car payment? How many hours are we going to work? How many can we work?

Nobody can make a real living doing these jobs. You can't raise a family on minimum wage, not in the way Americans once defined raising a family when our country emerged from World War II so fat and happy. And you can't build a nation on vast armies of working poor with nowhere to go. The president is right that it's time for a change, but what's needed is far more than a minimalist nudge to the minimum wage. Maybe what we need is to spend more on education and less on war, even out the tax laws and rules just a bit, require a standard living wage instead of a minimum one. Some sort of rebalancing. Those aren't answers to everything, but they might be a start.

People who work deserve to be paid, but McDonald's CEO Donald Thompson last year took home \$13.7 million in salary, with perks to go. If one of his fry cooks put in 30 hours a week, she'd take in a bit more than \$10,000 a year — before taxes of course. There is indeed a redistribution of wealth taking place in America, and it's all moving upstream.

I got lucky. I won my pension fight with my "career" employer, the State Department, and was able to crawl out of the minimum-wage economy after less than a year and properly retire. I quit Bullseye because I could, one gray day when a customer about half my age cursed me out for something unimportant she didn't like, ending with "I guess there's a reason why people like you work at places like this." I agreed with her: there is a reason. We just wouldn't agree on what it was.

I'm different now for the experience. I think more about where I shop, and try to avoid big places that pay low wages if I can. I treat minimum-wage workers a little better, too. If I have to complain about something in a store, I keep the worker out of it and focus on solving the problem. I take a bit more care in the restroom not to leave a mess. I don't get angry anymore

when a worker says to me, “I really can’t do anything about it.” Now I know from personal experience that, in most cases, they really can’t.

Above all, I carry with me the knowledge that economics isn’t about numbers, it’s about people. I know now that it’s up to us to decide whether the way we pay people, the work we offer them, and how we treat them on the job is just about money or if it’s about society, about how we live, who we are, the nature of America. The real target now should be to look deeply into the apartheid of dollars our country has created and decide it needs to change. We — the 99% anyway — can’t afford not to.