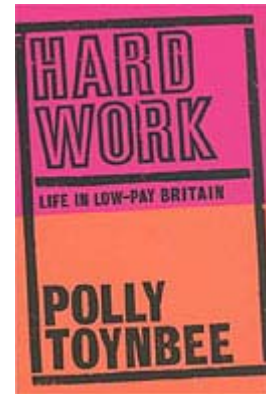


The other side of the tracks

Polly Toynbee

Thirty years ago, author and Guardian columnist, Polly Toynbee took a series of menial jobs to investigate life for Britain's lowest-paid workers. In 2002 – in response to Church Action on Poverty's challenge to live in the minimum wage for Lent - she repeated the experiment to find out if anything had changed. In this extract from her remarkable best-selling book she travels a few hundred yards from her comfortable home... and enters a different world



When the letter arrived, I thought briefly about it then dumped it in the cluttered tray of awkward ones where it lay unanswered on my desk for weeks. I would glance at it occasionally, then drop it back undecided. Church Action on Poverty were inviting me, among others, to live on the minimum wage for Lent.

It would be impossible. When New Labour finally introduced the minimum wage in April 1999, it did raise the wages of some 1.3 million people a little, but fewer than the government expected because it was set far too low. Introduced an ultra-cautious £3.60 an hour, it has barely risen in relation to other wages since, now standing at £4.10 an hour [since the book was written it been raised to £4.20]. How could I possibly live on £4.10 an hour?

That's £164 a week, twice what two of us paid the other night for one local restaurant meal in Clapham, nothing exceptional. Every time I thought about my own gold-plated life as a journalist - the taxis, the Guardian's car, my mobile phone, eating out, or the gifts for my family and what's called "discretionary spending" on pleasing non-necessities - it seemed undoable. I had to carry out my ordinary working life. How would I get from place to place in a hurry, to press conferences, seminars or interviews, with just a bus pass?

I thought about my Victorian house bought decades ago and, like most in London, now worth a fortune. I thought about how much comes in each month, never needing to count the cost. It couldn't be done. Or at least, nothing remotely resembling my life could be lived on that sum.

As a patron of the National Secular Society and profoundly anti-religious, I should have had no problem in scribbling Church Action a polite refusal. And yet the challenge chimed with something in my past: 30 years ago, when I was starting out in journalism, I wrote a book entitled *A Working Life*. It was a personal exploration of a world of manual work I knew nothing about. I had travelled the country taking jobs as they came, describing the lives of people, many just getting by, with hardship lurking around the corner.

I wanted to go back again and look at the world of work as it is now. How much social progress has there been since 1970 in these minimum-wage jobs? After all, the greatest single group of poor people are already in work. Three and a half million poor people live in working households. There are more working poor than there are unemployed. There are more working poor than there are poor pensioners. As growing numbers of single mothers, people with disabilities and anyone else who possibly can is urged into work, it becomes ever clearer that most poor people are not the feckless/hopeless/helpless, but people who work very hard for long hours and yet still fall below the official poverty line.

Let them pack cake

"Would you know an Eccles cake?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is it then?"

"Round, made of pastry, with currants inside."

"When can you start?"

It was a hard place to find. Hidden away in a network of streets in a dismal part of Bermondsey, the bakery was set in the service area at the back of a big council industrial block but it didn't seem to have a door or any sign. Eventually, a man in a grubby apron and old T-shirt stopped close by, and I asked for the boss. "Up there!" he said and hurried away.

These were not the kinds of cakes to be seen in any ordinary supermarket, let alone an upmarket coffee bar or restaurant. They were enormous, heavy, doughy things - a full crate felt like a load of lead. I had to keep asking what things were; it wasn't easy as the 20 or so other workers hurried about fulfilling their own orders. Sometimes there were not enough of a particular item to be found anywhere, creating an incomplete order.

But what really made the place impossible was the children. I wasn't sure whose they were, but there were now three or four of them aged between five and seven. They tore up and down between the racks, whizzing about on a broken office chair they had found. At one point, the children were perched on top of the doughnuts shredding a telephone book all over the place.

If I tried to keep up with Maria I got into trouble, twisting the cellophane roll, crushing the cakes or squashing the cream. She seemed so professional I thought she must have been there a long time. "No," she said, "only three weeks." She was in her mid-20s and came from Madeira.

I asked her about pay. "I get £3.95 an hour," she said. She was getting even less than me - and I was on the minimum wage. "But how can you be getting less than the minimum wage? It's against the law."

I asked her if she knew there was a minimum wage, and she said, "Yes, but what difference does it make?" She looked guarded, and I was in danger of getting too nosy so we worked on in silence: wrap, slam, wrap, slam, the rhythm of picking up a cake, pushing it under the paper and slamming down the hot welder.

The cake-wrapping was not finished until 8.30 that evening. Maria and I were both exhausted by the end of the shift. There was still sugar in my hair and under my fingernails as we left the building. It was silent outside in the cold, dark cul-de-sac now that the lorries had left with all their deliveries.

When I called back at the bakery to collect my wages a couple of days later, I was turned away by the owner's daughter with some excuse that her mother had the money and she wasn't there. On the third visit, with marked reluctance, the daughter sent me up to her mother upstairs who slowly reached for her handbag and counted out my money from her purse - no paperwork, no receipt.

When I looked at what she had given me it came to only £4 an hour. I thought I should complain but I hadn't the stomach for a fight so I took the money and gave her back her apron, nicely washed.

When I worked in the Lyons cake factory in West Kensington researching *A Working Life*, the book I wrote 30 years ago, I was paid £14.25 for a 40-hour week. It wasn't much; the other women on the production line were poor. I asked the Institute for Fiscal Studies to compare my pay then and now: they said £1 in 1970 should pay £16.80 today. My weekly wage in the cake factory now was at a rate of £164, but to keep pace with my pay back then, it should be £239.45. As I found time and again in the jobs I returned to for this book, in real terms I was being paid considerably less than I had been 30 years ago. That - the real meaning of growing inequality - was my most shocking discovery.

• *Hard Work* by Polly Toynbee was published in January 2003 by Bloomsbury. To order a copy for £6.99 plus p&p call the Guardian book service on 0870 066 7879.