



Hand to Mouth: The truth about being poor in a wealthy world

Linda Tirado

This book is part of a small subgenre of firsthand accounts of what it's like to work in a series of low-paid,

low-skilled jobs in the developed world. George Orwell probably kicked it off in 1933 when he published *Down and Out in Paris and London*, but in recent times American author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich resuscitated the tradition with her 2001 book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America*. Ehrenreich recounted her experience of working for three months as a hotel maid, house cleaner, waitress and supermarket assistant. Australian journalist Elizabeth Wynhausen wrote a similar account in her 2001 book, *Dirt Cheap: Life at the wrong end of the job market*.

What distinguishes the author of this book, **Hand to Mouth**, from her predecessors is that working in menial jobs was no social experiment for Linda Tirado. Unlike Orwell and Ehrenreich, Tirado never had the option of bailing out and retreating to the comforts of a middle-class life when the work became too demanding. Although clearly intelligent, she was forced by various circumstances to discontinue her tertiary education and take whatever work she could find, which included serving time as a bartender, shop assistant and food service worker.

The countless number of times that the f-word appears in the book is also a reliable indicator that this account is far from a dispassionate and detached sociological analysis. Swearing can be used casually and without rancour, but here every deployment of the f-bomb conveys the intensity of Tirado's anger at the injustices perpetrated towards her and other people forced into low-wage work.

The scant amount of money that she and millions of others in America are paid for their labour is only the start of their suffering. Tirado outlines how she could almost endure the low wages, but it's the pointless humiliation and indignities that the working poor are routinely subjected to that rankles the most.

She outlines how staff at Wal-Mart are made to participate in mandatory cheerleading sessions. If the staff don't shake their backsides with sufficient vigour then they find themselves on the wrong side of management and suffer the consequences.

Low-paid staff are also often required to enter into agreements stating that they won't work for any other employer – thereby enhancing their on-call availability for work – despite not being given enough hours of work to survive on. In many instances they have no right to privacy at work, where their employer is legally entitled to search their belongings for stolen items.

Being poor also means that the normal, small-scale disruptions to life – such as being involved in a minor car accident or needing to get your teeth fixed – become huge problems that can affect your ability to earn money – as if that isn't already severely affected. The author was in a car accident (not her fault) that wrecked her vehicle, leaving her without a means of getting to work. She also sustained significant damage to her teeth in the accident. Unable to afford dental repairs and looking unsightly when she smiled, she was relegated to even lower-paying work out of the public eye. The lower-paying work made it difficult for her to save the money to have her teeth fixed, thereby consigning her to an impasse from which she found it impossible to escape.

Most of us think we know what makes the lives of the poor so wretched, but Tirado exposes most of the negative beliefs of middle-class people about the poor as misconceptions and prejudices based on ignorance. **Hand to Mouth** is a fascinating insight into how one-third of Americans live.

★★★★★ Virago \$32.99

Reviewed by Tim Graham