

# **Why Do Working Youth Work Where They Do?**

## ***A Report from the Young Worker Project<sup>1</sup>***

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### **Introduction**

Youth in the United States work predominantly in low-end jobs in the service sector – often in “dead end jobs” or “McJobs” located in restaurants, malls, retail outlets, warehouses, offices, movie theaters, theme parks and so on. Working minors are especially concentrated in low-end service work, with over a third finding employment in restaurants and grocery stores alone (National Research Council 1998). Many youth in their late teens and twenties likewise find themselves continuing in jobs much the same as those they had while in high school. Indeed, low-end service work has become naturalized as an extended rite of passage for American youth. Whole segments of service sector employment are widely stereotyped and easily identifiable as being appropriately “youth” forms of work.

Why do working youth work where they do? How did youth employment in America come to look the way it does today? In this paper, I point to four key factors. Contemporary youth work in low-end service jobs because: (1) this is where youth have always worked; (2) there has been a broad shift in our society from an industrial to a post-industrial economy; (3) structural transformations within the low-end service sector have favored the employment of youth; and (4) the rise of consumerism and commodification of youth via mass advertising have increased both the supply and

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<sup>1</sup> The Young Worker Project is an effort to bring together academic researchers, labor and community organizers, students, youth and educators who are concerned with improving youth work conditions in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Project is housed at the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California, Berkeley, and is coordinated by Sara Flocks, Nato Green, Warren Mar and Stuart Tannock. Sara Flocks, Warren Mar, Nato Green and Robin Gryczman all provided invaluable assistance on the writing of this paper. For more information about the Young Worker Project, contact Sara Flocks at [flocks@uclink.berkeley.edu](mailto:flocks@uclink.berkeley.edu).

demand for young service sector workers. Consideration of all four of these factors is critical for those who would wish to transform and improve what are all too often marginalized and exploitative youth working conditions.

### **A Long History of Youth in Service**

One simple answer to the question of why youth today work in low-end service jobs is that young people have always performed such work. Standard histories of children, youth and work typically construct narratives of radical transformations over the past two centuries. An initially agrarian society – in which children and youth worked within household-based production and farming, and young men took on apprenticeships to learn skilled trades – was fundamentally reshaped by the ravages of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. Youth were pulled into waged employment; craft-based apprenticeships gave way to the mass and brutal reality of unskilled child factory labor. Subsequent technological, economic, social and political shifts gradually led to the end of the era of children working in factories. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the spread of child labor laws and compulsory education removed more and more youth from the full-time wage labor market altogether. During the second half of the twentieth century, youth increasingly returned to the wage labor market, only now as part-time student workers, who combined formal studies with temporary and seasonal stints in low-end service work.

Such stories of sweeping change belie an enduring continuity. For even at the height of concern with child factory labor at the end of the nineteenth century, only a minority of working children were ever employed in manufacturing and mining (Nardinelli 1990). The large majority of working children worked, as they long had, in agriculture and in the service and distributive industries (Kett 1977). Nineteenth and early twentieth-century cities, according to historian David Nasaw (1985: 48), provided an over-abundance of low-end service jobs for child workers:

[Children] provided city workers and residents with their afternoon and Sunday papers, their gum, candy, pencils, and shiny shoes. They helped out at home with the cooking, cleaning and laundry. They ran errands and made deliveries

for neighborhood tradesmen, carried messages for downtown businessmen who could not yet rely on their customers to have telephones, and did odd jobs for shopkeepers and local manufacturers.

In the grand department stores that were born in this era – such as Macy’s and Marshall Fields – fully “one-third of the labor force was composed of cash girls and cash boys, young children busily involved in transporting money and goods between sales clerks, the wrapping desk, and the cashier” (Zelizer 1985: 63). Moreover, many of the children who worked in manufacturing and mining were in actuality employed there in order to perform service tasks in support of adult production workers. For example, in one typical glass factory at the end of the nineteenth century, over 40% of the workforce were boys. The tasks for which these boys were responsible, however, consisted of much the same sort of delivery work such as was performed by their peers working as messenger boys and newsies in the city streets, or as cash boys and girls in city department stores: “‘Take-out boys’ and ‘snapper-ups’ carried the blown glass in tongs from the blowers to the finishers; the ‘carry-in boys’ picked it up from the finishers and placed it in the cooling ovens to harden” (Nasaw 1985: 44).

In pre-industrial times, young children from poor families were frequently “placed out” in wealthier families to serve as maids, servants and helpers – indeed, domestic service remained the largest employer of young women throughout the nineteenth century (Ben-Amos 1995; Kett 1977; Nasaw 1985). As was the case in manufacturing settings, children and youth who worked in household-based production and agriculture typically found themselves performing service and support tasks (cleaning, carrying, fetching, etc.) for adult kin. While apprentices of this period were in theory placed under the control of master craftsmen in order to learn a skilled trade, an all too common complaint from young apprentices was that they were taught no skilled trade at all, but were instead expected to perform rote, mundane, unskilled and dead-end service and support work (Hine 1999). (This, of course, is a complaint one hears to this very day from youth who take on low-paid or unpaid “internships” in

the often frustrated hope of learning about and gaining entry to prestigious and high paid occupations in media, law, finance, and so forth.)

In the early twentieth century, child labor laws focused on removing children from industrial employment, while more enduring and traditional forms of youth service and delivery work (exemplified in the era by messenger boys and newspaper carriers) continued to be considered widely acceptable (Zelizer 1985). The spread of compulsory schooling undeniably had an enormous impact on removing children from the full-time waged workforce. Yet child and youth part-time and seasonal service work continued to be an integral part of American society and economy. Thus A.B. Hollingshead (1949: 267), in *Elmtown's Youth*, his classic study of the lives of American adolescents in the 1940s in the mid-western U.S., could write that:

The Elmtown economy has relied upon the labor of boys and girls since frontier days. The language is sprinkled with descriptive terms indicative of the roles boys have played in the mines, mills, stores, and offices: grocery boys, butcher boys, mine boys, water boys, engine boys, barge boys, stable boys, donkey boys, printer's devils, office boys, dray boys, ash boys.... The working girls' roles have been limited traditionally to housemaid, nursemaid, ribbon clerk, office girl, waitress, seamstress, and barmaid.

Hollingshead noted that "Elmtown's economy [had] changed radically in the last two generations" (p.267); and that "unions no longer allow thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys in the coal mines, the Mill, or the Foundry" (p.268). However, Hollingshead also pointed out that "there are no union pressures to keep [boys] out of any small business, ... nor has the union closed the door to girls who wish to work in restaurants, stores, and homes" (p.268). "Today," wrote Hollingshead in 1949, "the distributive and service aspects of the economy have as much need for adolescent employees as in an earlier era, perhaps more" (p.268).

Why have working youth and children been consistently concentrated in low-end service work? The answer has less to do with any innate capacities (or lack thereof) or affinities that young people have for performing service work, and more with what Phil Cohen (1999) talks of as a labor market system of "patriarchy," and what Diane

Elson (1982) describes as a labor market system of “seniority.” Focusing on the issue of child labor, Elson (1982: 479) argues that occupational hierarchies in society are constructed not just along lines of race, gender and class, but also of age:

Children’s labour power is systematically differentiated from the labour power of adults working for capitalist enterprises. The most obvious and universal differentiation is that children’s labour is remunerated at a lower rate than that of adults. There is also differentiation within the labor process, where children generally have a different status from adults – they are ‘trainees’, ‘apprentices’, ‘casual’ or ‘temporary’ labourers, helpers or ‘mates’ of adult workers, subject to the authority of adult workers, as well as to the owners or managers of the enterprise.

Age hierarchies structure remuneration and status within occupations, as well as age-based stratification across occupations. The kinds of tasks that comprise low-end service work have long been seen as low in status, value and skill – and, in fact, unlike even the most menial forms of agricultural and industrial labor, as hardly even constituting “real” work. Such tasks, consequently, have historically been consigned to those groups who are most disempowered and marginalized: women, minorities, immigrants, as well as children and youth (Glenn 1992; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996).

Working youth have been confined to low-end service work in large part through their being explicitly excluded, both institutionally and ideologically, from higher wage and higher status occupations. Seniority rules, limited openings in apprenticeships and professional schools, minimum age limitations, and compulsory schooling (that restricts school age youth to part-time employment) have all been used by adults (especially white males) as ways to protect their own interests in the labor market and exclude youth from good and stable forms of employment (Osterman 1980). Prejudicial stereotypes of youth as being immature, ignorant, incapable, unstable and unreliable have long been invoked to argue that youth are fit for little more than the most mundane, unskilled forms of entry-level service work (Tannock 2001). Condemning youth to tedious and routine service sector jobs has further been justified by popular beliefs in the “school of hard knocks” and the value and necessity of

“paying one’s dues.” Even the most unpleasant and intolerable forms of child and youth work have been constructed as being “character-building” and valuable for the socialization and education of younger generations (Greenberger & Steinberg 1986; Nieuwenhuys 1986). The long history of youth in service has produced – and itself been reproduced by – a constellation of beliefs and practices that today lead many adults and youth alike to see the contemporary concentration of working youth in low-end service work as being natural, inevitable and altogether unremarkable: for this, after all, is what young people do and have always done.

### **Post-Industrialism, Educational Expansion and the Rise of the Student Worker**

To say that there have been continuities in the lives of working youth through history is not to deny that there have simultaneously been radical changes. One of the most significant has been caused by the broad shift in the United States, over the last several decades, from an industrial, manufacturing-based economy to a post-industrial, service and information economy. While employment numbers and conditions in America’s manufacturing sector have been eroded through a combination of technological change, managerial restructuring, deunionization, global competition and capital flight, low-end service jobs have proliferated almost endlessly. Job categories such as cashiers, drivers, security guards and sales clerks continue to be predicted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to be among the largest growing for the foreseeable future. Already, over three quarters of Americans of all ages are employed in the service sector, a good many of them in low-end, low-wage jobs (Herzenberg, Alic and Wial 1998). In a telling sign of the times, Wal-Mart, which has been for several years the largest private employer in the United States, passed Exxon Mobil in January 2002 to become the nation’s largest company in terms of revenue.

The shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy has had its primary impact on the lives of working-class and minority youth, and on youth over the age of seventeen (working minors, after all, have rarely been employed in manufacturing,

since the passage of child labor laws and spread of compulsory secondary education in the early twentieth century). Working class and minority youth used to be able to graduate from or drop out of high school and find stable, long-term, relatively well-paying employment in manufacturing, mining, and other resource extraction industries – as well as in what was, for many years, an expanding public sector. With the collapse of America’s manufacturing base and the freeze or downsizing of public sector employment (brought about by fiscal crisis and the rise of neoliberal ideology), job opportunities for working class youth were altered almost beyond recognition (*The Forgotten Half* 1988; Weis 1990). Poverty rates for working youth close to doubled over the last two decades (Newman 1999: 42); while in inner-city neighborhoods across the country, unemployment rates for minority youth soared (Newman 1999; Wilson 1996).

Stable, well-paying jobs these days are increasingly available primarily for “knowledge workers” (i.e., professionals, administrators, technology workers) with advanced levels of training and education. High school graduates and dropouts now find themselves, upon leaving school, floundering in what *The Forgotten Half* (1988: 11), the influential report on work, youth and family from the William T. Grant Foundation, described as “a sea of part-time, low-paying, limited-future” service-sector jobs – that is, if they are lucky enough to get a job at all. Post-industrialism is creating a society increasingly polarized along the lines of education between the haves and the have-nots: between high wage knowledge workers who require high levels of education, and much larger numbers of low wage service workers, whose advanced educational accomplishments or potential are made largely irrelevant by the limited educational demands of their jobs (Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Herzenberg, Alic and Wial 1998; Reich 1992). New generations of working class youth, some worry, are at risk of being locked into a new “service proletariat” (Esping-Andersen 1993). Only those who are able to continue with further education will be able to use their post-secondary credentials to secure increased employment opportunities.

Getting more education, however, is precisely what more and more youth – working class and middle class alike – are spending more and more of their lives trying

to do. In a society in which higher education is increasingly seen as being the *only* ticket to a middle class level of living, it is not surprising that the U.S. has seen a steady and continual increase in post-secondary education participation rates over the last century. Indeed, as sociologist David Livingstone (1999) argues, the United States is home to an escalating “educational arms race,” as individuals from all social backgrounds invest in ever higher levels of education in the hope of winning entrance into that elite minority of the country’s jobs that pay high wages, offer stable employment and require college degrees. “The popular demand for schooling is not diminishing,” Livingstone (1999: 17) writes, “on the contrary, it is extending further and further into adulthood.” The vast majority of youth in this country now spend the years following high school pursuing (occasionally in sporadic fashion) some kind of formal or non-formal education, whether in GED programs; private technology, arts, or media academies; trade or vocational institutes; or two-year or four-year colleges. Only a minority of U.S. youth ever obtain a bachelor’s (or higher) degree: many youth (working class and minority, especially) drop out of higher education without earning any type of credential whatsoever; others are able to earn a credential below the bachelor degree level and enter into what Norton Grubb (1996) has identified as a vast “sub-baccalaureate labor market” in which wages and working conditions sometimes constitute only limited improvements over the entry-level service jobs in which youth are initially employed.

Educational expansion, spurred by the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, has had a tremendous impact on both the nature and scope of youth work. The very category of youth itself – which historically has been closely associated with enrollment in formal education, exclusion from the full-time or primary labor market, and, consequently, an extended period of economic semi-dependence and legal and social semi-autonomy (Demos 1986; Fasick 1994; Griffin 1993) – has expanded upwards in its normative age range (Côté and Allahar 1994; Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998). Workers in their 20s and even early 30s, for example, who might have been identified in another era as clearly being “adult” workers, may now see themselves (and

be seen by others) as being “youth” workers. A key factor in this shift has been the rise and proliferation of the social category of the “student worker.” Whereas once it was usual that youth either went to school or they went into the workforce, nowadays in the United States, most youth, whether at the high school or post-high school level, combine both schooling and employment (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Horn 1998; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). An ever expanding segment of the nation’s workforce, therefore, is made up of (young) individuals who work in the low-end service sector, who identify themselves primarily as students rather than as workers, and who orient to their current service jobs as being temporary (or “youth”) places of employment that they hope will be left far behind once their programs of study have been completed (Tannock 2001; Tannock and Flocks 2002).

Educational expansion has also shaped where youth are working: in the low-end service sector. The reason is that students who want or need to work must find jobs that they can fit around their school schedules – they seek, typically, part-time, temporary, week-end, evening, or seasonal employment. As will be described in the following section, it is precisely these kinds of “irregular” or “nonstandard” jobs that have proliferated at an often breath-taking pace over the last few decades within the low-end service and retail industry sector. Youth, it is important to recognize, do not work in low-end service jobs just because of an absence of better employment opportunities in manufacturing or the public sector; they also work in these jobs because of their own presence within institutions of secondary and post-secondary education. This, in particular, is the irony of college student employment. College students, who work to cover rising costs of tuition, books, rent and personal living expenses, often find themselves having to look for employment in exactly the same kinds of low-status, low-wage service sector jobs that they have gone to college in the first place in order to escape (Tannock and Flocks 2002).

## **Transformations in the Retail and Service Industries**

In *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and their Unions in the Twentieth Century*, Dorothy Sue Cobble (1991) recalls an often forgotten history of restaurant work in the United States. Waitresses in the U.S. were once highly unionized. At their peak in the 1940s and 1950s, waitress unions represented one-quarter of restaurant waitstaff nationally, and as much as 70, 80 and even 90 per cent of waitresses in cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, Detroit, New York and Butte, Montana. Unionized waitresses saw themselves as skilled craftswomen, developed a strong occupational craft consciousness, and fought collectively to transform their work into a steady, respectable, rewarding, well-paid and career form of employment.

Despite considerable strength and success, however, the waitress unions, by the beginning of the 1980s, had all but disappeared. “Granny unionists” and full-time, career waitresses were increasingly being forced aside by waves upon waves of young, temporary, part-time, and often student workers:

Part-time and temporary waitresses had always been a significant sector of the trade but definitely a minority faction. In the postwar era, the retail food industry became a primary employer of part-timers – teenagers, college students, married mothers, and multiple job-holders or “moonlighters” flooded into the new part-time job openings. In 1940, 21 percent of female servers were part-time; thirty years later the figure had skyrocketed to 63 percent. The rise of male part-timers was just as phenomenal: from roughly one in ten in 1940 to a majority of the trade by 1970.... By 1980, the Department of Labor estimated that only one-fifth of food service workers were employed year-round and full-time, the lowest of any occupational category except private household. The average age of food servers dropped as well as employers turned to teenage and student help. (Cobble 1991: 195)

The waitress unions, with their highly developed sense of craft consciousness and occupational solidarity, had a difficult time connecting with the new generations of workers who were spilling into the nation’s restaurants. Few of these young workers, writes Cobble (1991: 196), “saw their primary commitment as being to the culinary workplace; their interests and identity resided elsewhere. They considered themselves

actresses or students or some other label – but not food servers. Waiting, said one, ‘is like the way station of life. You can’t have your dream now, so you work in a restaurant.’”

The story of radical labor market transformation that Cobble tells is not unique to the restaurant industry. Similar accounts have been produced, for example, for the department store and retail clothing sector (Benson 1986; Bernhardt 1999; Noyelle 1987); and for the grocery trade (Hughes 1999; Mayo 1993; Walsh 1993). What happened to cause such transformations? In part, labor market shifts were the simple result of the rapid expansion of many service industries during the post-war period – an expansion brought about by increasing prosperity, rising consumerism, and a “self-fulfilling cycle” in which the mass entrance of women into the labor force led to the spreading commodification of services that had previously been provided by housewives within the home (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 2). Finding it difficult to fill burgeoning job openings, service employers turned to exploit a new, massive, cheap and largely untapped source of labor: teenagers and students (Marquardt 1998; Reiter 1991). The explosion of fastfood and other franchise industries in the 1960s and 1970s happened to coincide, fortuitously from employers’ point of view, with the baby-boom expansion of the teenaged population in the United States, so that there were more teenagers in the country than there ever had been in history (Luxenberg 1985; Schlosser 2001).

Structural shifts within restaurant, retail and service industries facilitated the move from a workforce dominated by skilled, career craftsmen and craftswomen to one based upon young, temporary, minimally trained and minimum wage workers. Regional and national chains and franchises, building their empires on cheap, fast and no-frills service, swept through a sector that had once been made up largely of small, local and independent proprietorships (Luxenberg 1985). “In 1931,” writes Cobble (1991: 193), “fewer than 3 percent of the nation’s restaurants were chain-operated; in the 1980s, McDonald’s alone accounted for 17 percent of all restaurant visits.” In their search for greater efficiency and reduced production costs, the chains turned to increased automation and routinization (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1996); to the mass

employment of cheap teenaged labor (whose low wages could be subsidized by parental earnings); and to what Nona Glazer (1993) calls “work transfer,” that is, the shift from a full-service to a self-service retail model. From grocery stores to gas stations, department stores to restaurants, customers were increasingly asked to help themselves, while the core tasks for which service workers were held responsible were whittled down to a mundane core of stocking, cleaning, machine-tending, script-following and cashiering.

Low end service industries moved geographically during the post-war era, from city centers to the suburbs where the bulk of the nation’s white, middle-class consumers were now living (Luxenberg 1985). This suburbanization of service work had a considerable impact on one of the more widely noted characteristics of youth (specifically teenage) employment in the United States: unlike in many other countries, in the U.S., middle class teenagers are more likely to work than poor teenagers (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986). One direct cause of this is differential access to employment (Boyden, Ling and Myers 1998). Middle class teenagers work in the low end service sector in part because low end service jobs have come to them. The restaurants, retail outlets, supermarkets and movie theaters in which these youth find employment are close to their homes, in their neighborhoods, and adjacent to their high school and college campuses.

Expanded work hours also had a pivotal effect on the service sector workforce. Whereas retail had once been organized as a Monday to Friday (or Saturday) and 9 to 5 business, consumer demand and the large-scale entrance of women into the workforce (that made day shopping more inaccessible for many women) pushed the industry increasingly toward a seven day a week, round the clock schedule (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Walsh 1993). Expanded work hours led employers to turn to teenagers and students to fill irregular evening and weekend work shifts. Expanded work hours were also one of the critical wedges that initially sparked the growth of part-time jobs in the retail sector (Tilly 1996). Once employers began using part-timers en masse to staff irregular work shifts, they quickly became aware that switching entirely from a full-

time to a part-time workforce could bring considerable cost savings – both through reduced wage and benefit packages, and through new “lean and mean” just-in-time scheduling practices that minimized shift lengths and staggered shift starting points throughout the day in an effort to squeeze out every last minute of “excess” staffing time (Tilly 1996). The ensuing part-time revolution transformed working conditions for all workers in the low end service industry; it also shifted the very make-up of the service workforce, by favoring the employment of youth (and other groups) who were willing and able to work only part-time hours.

That service sector employers were able to make such dramatic changes in their labor process – changes which led to the steady deterioration of working conditions for their employees – was a product of several broader factors. The collapse of high wage manufacturing in the U.S. meant that service employers faced little competition in securing their workforce. Educational expansion created a ballooning population of secondary and post-secondary students who were willing and eager to take on part-time jobs and see themselves as only temporary service workers. The long history of assigning youth to menial service tasks – in other words, the pre-existing ageist, patriarchal or seniority-based structure of work discussed earlier – provided service employers with a widely accepted set of practices and ideologies with which they could expand and entrench a ghettoized youth labor market.

By the start of the twenty-first century, many low end service employers were deliberately constructing all of the jobs they offered as being explicitly youth jobs – even when these jobs were being held by individuals who were no longer teenagers and no longer in school (Klein 1999). When a group of Borders Books and Music Store employees, most of whom were in their 20s, tried to unionize with the UFCW during the late 1990’s, for example, their employer sent out the following response in its monthly newsletter:

We have highly educated employees who consider themselves ‘professionals,’ but who are in reality working at an early level retail job. Ultimately, each person must make a choice within the modalities of the possible. If you desire an

enjoyable job while you figure out what to do with your life, this is a good place to be. But if you try to make a career path out of something which can never be a well-paying job, you will be up against an impossible task because of all of the economic constraints in the retail industry. (quoted in Slaughter 1997: 3)

As Naomi Klein (1999: 232-233) writes, service sector workers are increasingly being treated as if they are not “real” workers and as if the jobs they hold are no more than “hobby” jobs: “Most of the large employers in the service sector manage their workforce as if their clerks didn’t depend on their paychecks for anything essential, such as rent or child support. Instead, retail and service employers tend to view their employees as children: students looking for summer jobs, spending money on a quick stopover on the road to a more fulfilling and better-paying career.... Never mind that the service sector is now filled with workers who have multiple university degrees, immigrants unable to find manufacturing jobs, laid-off nurses and teachers, and downsized middle managers. Never mind, too, that the students who do work in retail and fast food – as many of them do – are facing higher tuition costs, less financial assistance from parents and government and more years in school.”

### **Consumerism and the Commodification of Youth**

*The Kinko’s, Starbucks and Blockbuster clerks buy their uniforms of khakis and white or blue shirts at the Gap; the “Hi! Welcome to the Gap!” greeting cheer is fueled by Starbucks double espressos; the résumés that got them the jobs were designed at Kinko’s on friendly Macs, in 12-point Helvetica on Microsoft Word. The troops show up for work smelling of CK One (except at Starbucks, where colognes and perfumes are thought to compete with the “romance of coffee” aroma), their faces freshly scrubbed with Body Shop Blue Corn Mask, before leaving apartments furnished with Ikea self-assembled bookcases and coffee tables.*

- Naomi Klein (1999) *No Logo*

There is a strong sense of circularity in much youth employment, particularly in the retail sector. Youth often seem to work where they shop and shop where they work. Their paltry wages seem to cycle back inescapably to their employers through their endless purchase of overpriced consumer goods that they themselves are hired to market and move. Dressed in the same types of clothing they are selling, and eating the same kinds of food they are serving, the lines between consumer and worker in the lives of contemporary youth frequently seem to blur.

Such circularity in youth employment, of course, is anything but accidental. The spread of mass consumerism in post-war America and the rampant fetishization and commodification of youth in mass advertising has created an apparently endless demand for and supply of young service sector workers. Service sector employers hire young workers because youth is what sells their product – indeed, youth often *is* the real product that is being sold, whether a business is ostensibly hawking jeans or t-shirts, sneakers or snowboards, soft drinks or CDs (Giroux 1997; Klein 1999). Retail and food service companies routinely exploit the sexuality of young workers (women especially) in order to attract customers and increase sales. More generally, employers staff their stores by hiring young workers who have the right “look” – they screen, in their recruitment and hiring process, for an appearance, attitude and demeanor that is strongly age, gender, race and class based.

As the distinction for service sector employers vanishes between advertising youth and hiring youth, young workers find themselves literally becoming walking, talking billboards (Klein 1994). Abercrombie and Fitch, a national clothing chain that is heavily oriented to the youth consumer market, represents an extreme example of the general trend. The company no longer hires cashiers or clerks but instead refers to its young employees as “brand representatives”:

Exhibiting the “A&F Look” is a tremendously important part of the overall experience at the Abercrombie & Fitch Stores. We are selling an experience for our customer; an energized store environment creates an atmosphere that people want to experience again and again. The combination of our **Brand**

**Representatives'** style and our Stores' Visual Presentation has brought brand recognition across the country. Our people in the store are an inspiration to the customer. The customer sees the natural Abercrombie style and wants to be like the **Brand Representative**. **Brand Representatives** will do just what the title suggests: represent the Abercrombie brand to the customer. Our Brand is natural, classic and current, with an emphasis on style. This is what a **Brand Representative** must be; this is what a **Brand Representative** must present in order to fulfill the conditions of employment. (*Abercrombie Look Book: Guidelines for Brand Representatives of Abercrombie & Fitch*, boldface in original)

Abercrombie & Fitch, writes a young college student (White 1997), "entices us into their store with employees who are our peers. In fact, our peers have been scouted – probably on campus – and chosen to sell an image back to us. College students are the featured models in the huge posters adorning the walls of the shop, and we flock to Abercrombie in large numbers to get a piece of the look for ourselves." Another college student – and Abercrombie & Fitch employee – describes the outlet where he works: "Every Brand Rep is between the age of 18 and 23, attractive, slender and always dressed well. Abercrombie imposes extremely strict rules concerning the physical appearance of their Brand Reps. Although nowhere is it written on paper, few will disagree that 'good looks' are an essential attribute to possess in order to be employed. In fact, there are countless rumors of managers being confronted by people higher in management because their store employees are not 'adequately attractive'" (Cavenay 2000).

If service sector employers hire young workers because it helps them build a preferred image and sell their particular product, young workers, likewise, often seek out certain retail and service jobs over others because of their desire to be associated with an idealized company image (or logo) and, more materially, because of their interest in obtaining price reductions and give-aways on much sought after brands of clothing and other heavily marketed commodities. While preferences vary by time, place and peer group, youth in any neighborhood in the country can tell you what are "cool" and "uncool" places for local youth to work – working at Starbucks and Banana Republic may be "in" for the moment, while jobs at McDonald's and Target may be

decidedly “out” (Johnson 2001; Newman 1999). Employers such as The Gap commonly find that they are able to attract young workers even in a tight labor market, and even without raising wage offers much above the legal minimum, by holding out the seemingly irresistible lure of promised clothing discounts (Reuters/CBS 2000).

The link between youth consumerism and youth employment has sometimes been singled out for censure as a telling indictment of the state of youth in the contemporary U.S. Young people work, some worry, for no better reason than to feed their ravenous appetites for expensive, luxury consumer items that they don't really need; youth employment, some fear, has become, by the start of the twenty-first century, closely linked with growing materialism, self-indulgence and frivolity among the nation's younger generations (see, for example, Greenberger and Steinberg 1986). It is critically important to put concerns about youth consumerism in proper perspective – for otherwise, these kinds of sentiments lead all too easily to youth bashing and the production of inaccurate and unjust youth stereotypes. As Mike Males (1999) points out, consumerism is by no means a specifically youth phenomenon. It is all too common for social commentators to sound the alarm over growing youth consumerism while completely ignoring an even larger growth in adult consumerism. As Males (1999: 274) reminds us:

Adults, including parents and teachers, spend \$5 trillion per year on personal consumption, including \$100 billion on alcohol and tobacco, \$40 billion on jewelry, \$45 billion on sports supplies, and \$90 billion on video and audio products (including 600 million “adult movie” rentals). American adults spend three times more (\$300 billion per year) on clothes and accessories than on their own education. American adults gamble half a trillion dollars per year, an amount equal to the total national, state, and local spending on all primary, secondary, and higher education. Where's the liberal tongue-clucking on that “moral barometer”?

Youth consumerism, furthermore, is deliberately manufactured and manipulated by an enormous, adult-led, round-the-clock army of advertisers, marketing consultants and youth researchers (Klein 1999; PBS Frontline 2001). “Teens are exploited,” as Cynthia

Peters (2001) puts it succinctly, “from both directions in the retail world – as cheap labor and as a demographic to be analyzed, probed and minutely nurtured as consumers. When they’re not working the cash register as an employee, we seem to expect them to be working it from the other end – purchasing a steady flow of brand name goods that keep marketers drooling over the current teen baby boom.”

The stereotype of the youth worker in discussions of youth employment and consumerism, finally, tends to be an image of a middle-class fifteen or sixteen year old, still living at home, getting his or her first experience in the workforce, earning some extra pocket money, and having no “real” financial needs (Tannock and Flocks 2002). As I have written elsewhere, this “stereotype of the affluent, middle-class teenage worker obscures the fact that, in the United States, there is a sizable group of teenage workers from working-class and poor family backgrounds whose minimum wage earnings constitute critical financial supplements to the well-being of their parental families and households” (Tannock 2001: 2-3). The stereotype of the middle-class, fifteen or sixteen year old worker also obscures the fact that most of the workers who we would think of today as being “youth” workers are actually in their late teens and twenties. These youth are often working to pay rent, cover college tuition, meet personal expenses, help out their parents and support their children (Tannock and Flocks 2002). In other words, while they may be drowning in consumerism like the rest of us, most young workers undeniably have serious financial concerns that drive them to seek employment under the limited circumstances available to youth and young adults in the contemporary U.S.

### **Conclusion**

Improving the generally poor working conditions of young workers in the low end service sector is critically important – not just for the interests of youth, but for adult workers as well. Employers have a long history of exploiting divisions within the workforce, along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, as well as age. When service sector

employers decide that they prefer to hire youth because they feel that they can pay them less, work them harder or exploit their youthful appearance, adult and youth workers alike suffer: indeed, adult workers may find themselves being displaced and put out of work by an exploited teen and youth workforce. The easy access of low end service employers to large, cheap and disposable pools of student workers exerts industry-wide downward pressure on wages and working conditions.

Improving working conditions for working youth – and by extension, for all workers throughout the low end service sector – requires, however, a robust understanding of why working youth work where they do. Too often we seek answers to this question in narrow, unidimensional and localized fashion – at worst, we hear social commentators invoke internalized, psychologistic factors that reproduce prejudicial stereotypes of youth and function to hold youth responsible for their own workplace and labor market difficulties (Tannock 2001). What I have sought to demonstrate in this brief discussion is that addressing the position of youth in the workforce requires an approach that is at once historical and global. Issues that need to be considered by educators, policy makers, youth and labor activists when thinking about working youth include: the changing conditions within the service sector workplace itself; the struggles and transformations that are occurring within the manufacturing sector; the besieged and constricted state of public sector employment; the explosive growth of educational participation rates across the U.S. population; the spread of mass consumerism and advertising; as well as the age-old phenomenon of age-based discrimination in the workplace.

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