

Living poor

“Hand to Mouth” author Linda Tirado speaks with Street Roots about her own experiences living in poverty and the misperceptions about the working poor

BY JARED PABEN
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In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned to rolling a boulder to the top of a hill, an act that required the greatest exertion, only to have it roll down again. This pattern would repeat eternally, and he would never get to the top.

Linda Tirado references Sisyphus in “Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America” to describe the lives of America’s working poor — always struggling to reach a comfortable place but never quite getting there. Her book is about her own experiences living in poverty.

“It’s far more demoralizing to work and be poor than to be unemployed and poor,” she writes. “I have never minded going without when I wasn’t working. It sucks not to be able to find a job, but you expect to be tired and pissed off and to never be able to leave your house when you’re flat broke. Working your balls off, begging for more hours, hustling every penny you can, and still not being able to cover your electric bill with any regularity is soul-killing.”

But, in another way, referencing the myth of Sisyphus is entirely inappropriate. He was punished for deceiving the gods on multiple occasions and sentenced for committing a crime.

The struggles millions of Americans face every day are not their fault, Tirado says.

“The economy is not the fault of every minimum wage worker,” she told me in a recent interview. “When 45 million Americans barely make ends meet, this is not the fault of somebody who had some bad luck or made a bad choice that one time.”

“Hand to Mouth,” released in hardcover in October, is Tirado’s first book. She landed the deal with Penguin Books after her online essay, “Why I Make Terrible Decisions, or, Poverty Thoughts,” went viral and was picked up by The Huffington Post, Forbes and The Nation. Her book is slated to be released in paperback form in September.

Jared Paben: From reading your book, I sensed a fairly deep resentment for what you could say were callous employers who expected more from their staff than they were willing to pay for. I wonder what messages you might have for any employers out there who are reading this interview.

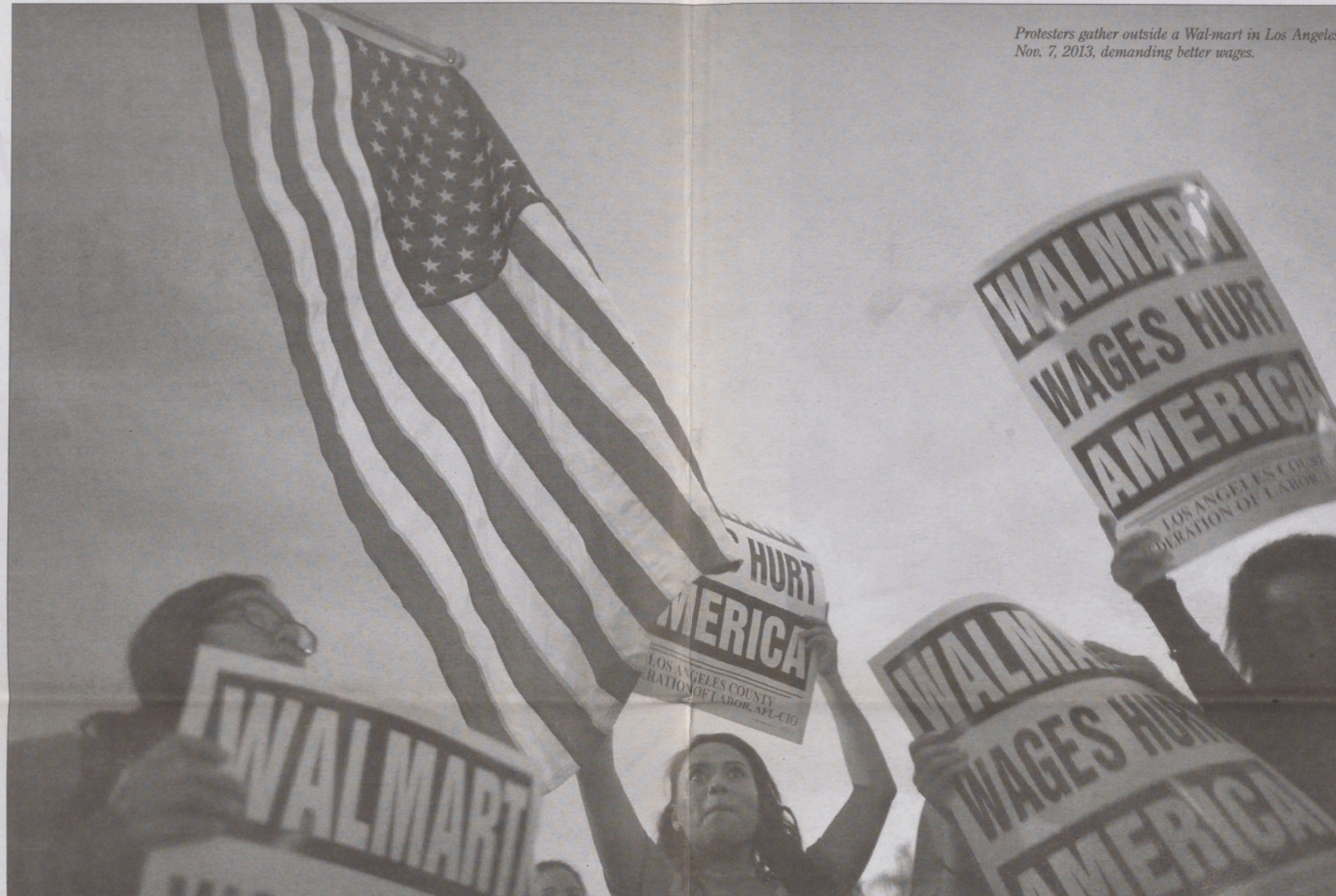
Linda Tirado: Treat your employees like you would want to be treated yourself. The problem is that you’ve got folks who are



Linda Tirado

under pressure from both sides. They have to hit their margins. We’re increasingly moving into a quarterly performance country where it’s all about the shareholders, this quarter’s performance and are you showing growth. There is no room for a decent-sized profit and that being good enough. You have to be more, you have to get more. And people are operating on increasingly thin margins, because the less we pay people, the less money there is in the economy and the fewer customers that they have. So then they have to squeeze more productivity out of their employees. And we’re seeing that reverse. Even Walmart comes out and says, “Look, our employees are treated so poorly, and they’re so demoralized, that it’s actually affecting our sales.” The store-to-store sales, year-over-year, have been historically down. And they’re picking back up this year a little bit, but for the past few years running their customer surveys have come back and said “Look, your stores are never in order, we can never find employees, your lines are long. You’ve got 38 cash registers and only four cashiers are on staff at a given time. What the hell, Walmart?” And when even Walmart is saying, “We have to give people a raise. We have to tell people their schedules in advance.” Those sorts of things matter, and they matter to the bottom line of companies. So I’m hoping we’re starting to see a trend where companies will do what’s best for them, because treating your employees well is good for the company.

J.P. Actually I’m glad you mentioned that. I saw that Walmart is planning to bump half a million employees up to \$9 in April and then \$10 by next February. And then you mentioned the schedules as well. They said



Protesters gather outside a Wal-mart in Los Angeles Nov. 7, 2013, demanding better wages.

REUTERS/LUCY NICHOLSON

more control over the schedules.

L.T. Walmart buried the lead there. They announced marginal wage gains, instead of a huge quality-of-life step forward, which is having your schedule two weeks in advance so that you can plan your life. That is a giant, giant thing for most working people, because we’re holding down two or three jobs, there’s child care, there’s

transportation, there’s one car between two people and there’s buses to deal with. Whatever it is, that’s going to be the big effect. The raise that they are giving is actually catching their employees up from 2008. If they had raised their wages along with inflation, they would have gotten already to this point. They’re essentially giving people a raise to inflation plus 50 cents an hour. It’s not a huge wage gain. You’re talking another maybe \$1,000-\$2,000 a year for full-time employees. You’re not even talking about the part-timers who will make less of a gain. When they’re talking about that, they’re saying, “Look, aren’t we generous?” No, you’re not. You’re not. You’re making a good business decision and you do not get cookies for being the last to the party. Other major retailers have done this. They’ve been doing this for years.

Costco, Target, all these big employers — these big-box stores — have been paying their employees more. Walmart is the very, very last major employer to really sit down and look at this. And then they put out a press conference and they want everybody to call them good corporate citizens. This is not good corporate citizenship, this is incredibly slow business sense.

J.P. Seattle and San Francisco are moving to a \$15 minimum wage, and activists here in Portland are urging the city to do the same. Do you see a \$15 minimum wage as substantially improving the lives of working poor?

L.T. Doubling the minimum wage? Hell yes! That said, when it comes to minimum wage, I would really like to see something tied to the cost of living. Because what I need in small-town Utah to survive is not what I need in a city like Portland or New York City. A living wage is going to be different depending on where in the country you are. And I would really like to see the minimum tied to a basic living standard so that everybody who does a full day’s work can go home, afford to put food on the table and also afford the time to eat it with the

you have to explain yourself to anybody else. As though the poor haven’t been having children for millennia. Who do you think is going to work in your restaurants tomorrow? Your own children? You think anybody is going to go to the Ivy League and be a janitor? This is a terrible, terrible, terrible. On a moral level, it’s a terrible question to ask. On a practical level, it’s a stupid question to ask. But, more importantly, it takes \$280,000 to take a child in the middle class from birth to college right now. So if you’re going to start talking to the poor about whether they have enough money in the bank to have a child, I’m going to need a certified letter from everybody saying that they’ve got \$280,000 just sitting around in case of an accident, in case they lose their job, in case they have a medical emergency and they can afford their children in the way they think their children should be raised.

J.P. I’m wondering if you can think of any mistakes that you may have made in your past that would have contributed to falling through the “porous sponge.” I think is how you put it, into poverty, and, if so, what advice would you have for others to avoid those mistakes.

L.T. You know, it’s hard to sit down and say, “This is what made you poor.” Because it’s so many things. It’s so many. One thing that a lot of people point to is that I dropped out of college. And, you know, over the course of your life, statistically, yeah that’s a problem. You’re going to make less money; however, how much money are you going to put into it, and is that worth it? I graduated high school when I was 16. I wasn’t ready for college. I was taking out a ton of loans. I wasn’t mature. I wasn’t going to class. I just wasn’t ready. So I thought, “I’ll just drop out, I’ll work for a couple of years, figure out what I want to do and then I’ll go back.” And that kind of worked out really poorly for me. You know, there’s things like I didn’t take the best jobs, I didn’t take the most stable jobs. I took what was available. Now was that a bad

decision on my part? Probably. Maybe not. I don’t know. The mistakes that I have made, in general, have been fairly personal. And they’ve been dynamic. It’s easy for me to point at the thing that made me OK. I sat down and wrote on the Internet. Bam! There you go. Everything’s fine. But, you know, it’s hard for anybody to sit down and say, “This is the one thing that changed the entire course of my life,” because if it was that easy, nobody would be poor. We’d just all correct that one mistake.

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J.P. Reading your book, one of the lines that struck me the most in the “babies” chapter was “Let’s stop saying that poor people are irresponsible parents and start admitting that society doesn’t seem to believe that if you are poor you are entitled to be a parent at all.” Can you talk more about that?

L.T. So if you go into the comments on my original piece, one of the most disturbing to me, and it happened again and again and again and I still get questions: “Well, how could you justify having children when you didn’t have enough money? How could you justify it?” As though you needed a justification to have a family. As though

hours of running around to find out that, no, you can’t get \$500, but here’s \$150. It was eight different programs that I went to. And those are the sorts of things that you have to deal with. The logistics of poverty are what kills you.

If it was just you go to work and you work really hard all day and you go home, everybody would be down with that. It’s the fact that you can’t just go to work and work eight hours and go home. You go to work and you work two hours or possibly six hours, depending on how much your employer needs you, and then you have to figure out how to get home after that for your next shift. And who’s going to pick up the kids? And when do you have time to eat? Do you even get to eat today? Do you have enough money to eat? How much did you need in these hours and what’s that going to be for your paycheck at the end of the week? Do you need to call your bank? Do you need to call the electric company and ask for extra time? All of these things are in your head constantly. It is a constant, constant logistics struggle. And that’s the tiring part, that’s the crushing part. There is no stability to it.

J.P. I had a boss at a previous job who cared very much about people living on the streets and she carried canned food around. When they asked her for money she would hand out canned food as opposed to money.

L.T. Do they have can openers?

J.P. She bought the ones with the pop tops that don’t need a can opener. I guess I’m wondering: What are your thoughts if you see someone on the street who asks for money, giving them money versus donating it to a shelter versus giving them food?

L.T. If your life is so rough that you’re having to live on the streets, maybe you deserve to be drunk once in a while. I think maybe there’s nothing wrong with wanting to escape a life that is out of control and a little bit horrifying. Look, in L.A. on Sunday (March 1), the cops rolled onto Skid Row, found a tent, went into it, tore this dude’s house down around him, tazed him and then shot him five times. That guy could have been as drunk as he wanted to be for the last year and a half and, you know what, more power to him, I got no problem with it. What I do have is a problem with people saying I know better than somebody else what’s best for them.

When you say, “I’m not going to give you money because I think you’re going to spend it improperly,” you’re saying, “You don’t know how to run your own life. I don’t trust you that far.” I would actually say it’s lovely to give somebody food. It’s lovely to give somebody supplies, if you’re doing it simply because they need food or supplies. If you’re doing it because you’re afraid they’re going to go out and get drunk, keep your money and give it to somebody you think deserves it.

Look, I’m from Utah, which is the land of non-drinkers and teetotalers. My parents are Mormon. They don’t normally get drunk on the weekends. But for somebody who does have a glass of wine to relax in the evening to say that somebody else shouldn’t get a bottle of something, I don’t understand that

J.P. One of the things that struck me most reading the book was you described it as just tiring. All day you’re tired. And that just really affects your whole life, because you’re struggling to work enough hours and that you’re just always tired.

L.T. It seems that people underestimate the amount of work that goes into being poor. I never really did sit down and track how many hours I spent chasing this or that thing. So the other day I thought, OK I’m going to see what would happen if I needed to come up with \$500. Just say I missed a week at work and I gotta pay my rent. I need \$500. And it took me seven and a half