

Forget the images of men in hard hats standing before factory gates, of men with coal-blackened faces, of men perched high above New York City on steel beams. The emerging face of the American working class is a Hispanic woman who has never set foot on a factory floor. That's not the kind of work much of the working class does anymore. Instead of making things, they are more often paid to serve people: to care for someone else's children or someone else's parents; to clean another family's home.

The decline of the old working class has meant both an economic triumph for the nation and a personal tribulation for many of the workers. Technological progress has made American farms and factories more productive than ever, creating great wealth and cutting the cost of food and most other products. But the work no longer requires large numbers of workers. In 1900, factories and farms employed 60 percent of the work force. By 1950, a half-century later, those two sectors employed 36 percent. In 2014, they employed less than 10 percent.

For more than a century, since the trend was first documented, people have been prophesying a dire future in which the working class would no longer work. In 1964, a group of prominent liberals wrote President Johnson to warn of a "cybernation revolution" inexorably creating "a permanent impoverished and jobless class established in the midst of potential abundance."

Machines have taken the jobs of millions of Americans, and there is every indication that the trend will continue. In October, Budweiser successfully tested a self-driving truck by delivering beer more than 120 miles to a warehouse in Colorado. In December, Amazon opened a small convenience store near its Seattle headquarters that has no cashiers. Customers — for now, Amazon employees only — are billed automatically as they leave the store...

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