Assignment 5: Op-Ed Options

Evaluating Labor Policy Claims

PADM-GP 2163: Labor Policy and the Future of Work

Spring 2026

Instructions

Choose **ONE** of the following four op-eds to analyze for Assignment 5. Each op-ed makes several empirical claims about labor markets. Your task is to trace these claims to their original sources and evaluate whether the evidence supports the author's argument.

Option A: The Robot Apocalypse Is Coming for Your Job

By James R. Thornton
The American Prospect, March 2024

The robots are coming, and they're coming for your job. This isn't science fiction—it's the conclusion of serious academic research. Within the next two decades, nearly half of American workers will find themselves replaced by machines.

A landmark Oxford University study found that **47% of U.S. jobs are at high risk of automation**. That's not 47% of low-wage jobs or 47% of factory jobs—it's 47% of *all* jobs. From truck drivers to accountants, from paralegals to radiologists, no occupation is safe from the relentless march of artificial intelligence.

The numbers are staggering. According to McKinsey Global Institute, **automation could displace 73 million American workers by 2030**. That's more than the entire population of California and Texas combined, suddenly finding themselves without work. And unlike previous technological revolutions, this one is happening too fast for workers to adapt.

Consider what's already happening. **Amazon has replaced over 100,000 warehouse workers with robots** in its fulfillment centers. Self-checkout machines have eliminated millions of cashier positions. Automated customer service systems handle calls that once required human operators. This is just the beginning.

The economic consequences will be devastating. When robots replace workers, those workers don't simply find new jobs—they fall out of the middle class entirely. Research from MIT economists shows that **each industrial robot eliminates 6.2 workers** and drives down wages for those who remain employed. Communities built around manufacturing have been hollowed out, their Main Streets lined with shuttered businesses.

Some optimists point to history, arguing that technology has always created more jobs than it destroys. But this time is different. Previous waves of automation affected manual labor; AI threatens cognitive work too. A lawyer who spent years learning to research case law can be replaced by software in an instant. A radiologist who trained for a decade to read medical images can be outperformed by an algorithm.

The truck driving profession illustrates the threat perfectly. There are **3.5 million truck drivers in America**, and self-driving technology is advancing rapidly. Companies like Tesla, Waymo, and Aurora are racing to deploy autonomous trucks. When they succeed—and it's a matter of when, not if—we'll see the largest displacement of workers in American history.

What's particularly troubling is who will bear the brunt of this transformation. Automation doesn't affect all workers equally. **Workers without a college degree are four times more likely to be displaced** than those with advanced credentials. The same working-class communities that have already been devastated by globalization will now face a second wave of job destruction.

Policymakers are woefully unprepared. While Silicon Valley celebrates each new AI breakthrough, Washington remains paralyzed. We need bold action: a federal jobs guarantee, massive investment in retraining programs, and serious consideration of universal basic income. The alternative is a dystopian future of mass unemployment and social unrest.

The robots are coming. The only question is whether we'll be ready.

James R. Thornton is a senior fellow at the Institute for Economic Futures.

Option B: The Hidden Cost of Mass Immigration

By Patricia Whitfield
National Affairs Quarterly, January 2024

For decades, economists assured us that immigration was an unambiguous good for the American economy. More workers meant more growth, they said. The evidence, we were told, was overwhelming. But a growing body of research tells a different story—one that establishment economists have been reluctant to acknowledge.

The uncomfortable truth is that mass immigration has been devastating for American workers, particularly those without college degrees. When employers have access to an unlimited supply of foreign labor willing to work for less, it's American workers who pay the price.

Harvard economist George Borjas, one of the few scholars willing to challenge the consensus, has documented the damage. His research shows that **immigration between 1980 and 2000 reduced wages for American workers without a high school diploma by 7.4%**. That's not a rounding error—it's thousands of dollars taken from the paychecks of America's most vulnerable workers every year.

The scale of immigration makes these effects impossible to ignore. Today, **over 45 million people living in the United States were born in another country**—more than the entire population of Canada. In key industries, foreign-born workers now dominate. **In construction, over 30% of workers are immigrants.** In agriculture, the figure approaches 50%. American workers in these industries have seen their bargaining power collapse.

Proponents of high immigration often point to studies showing minimal wage effects. But these studies typically use flawed methodologies that obscure the true impact. They compare cities with different immigrant populations, ignoring that American workers move away from areas flooded with immigrant labor. When you account for this "native flight," as Borjas has shown, **the negative wage effects are three to four times larger** than the optimistic estimates suggest.

The impact extends beyond wages to employment itself. **For every 10% increase in immigrant workers in an occupation, native employment in that occupation falls by 5%.** Americans aren't choosing to leave these jobs—they're being pushed out by employers who prefer a more compliant, lower-wage workforce.

Consider the meatpacking industry. A generation ago, these were good union jobs paying middle-class wages. Today, after decades of deliberate recruitment of immigrant labor, **wages in meatpacking have fallen 45% in real terms**. The workers who once supported families in small-town America have been replaced.

Some argue that immigrants "do jobs Americans won't do." This is exactly backwards. Americans won't do these jobs *at the wages employers are offering*—wages that have been suppressed by decades of labor oversupply. In tight labor markets, employers raise wages and improve conditions. Mass immigration ensures the labor market is never tight.

The tech industry tells a similar story. The H-1B visa program was sold as a way to fill genuine skill shortages. Instead, it's become a tool for replacing American workers with cheaper foreign alternatives. Studies show that **H-1B workers earn 20-25% less than comparable American workers**.

It's time for an honest conversation about immigration policy—one that puts American workers first.

Patricia Whitfield is director of the Center for American Workers.

Option C: The Gig Economy's False Promise of Freedom

By Maria Santos-Reyes
The Progressive Voice, February 2024

Uber. Lyft. DoorDash. Instacart. TaskRabbit. These companies have fundamentally transformed how millions of Americans work—and not for the better. What Silicon Valley celebrates as "flexibility" and "entrepreneurship" is really a return to the exploitative labor practices of the 19th century.

The gig economy is built on a lie: that workers are "independent contractors" who choose their own hours and are their own bosses. In reality, gig workers have all the vulnerabilities of employees with none of the protections. They're told when to work, how to work, and how much they'll be paid—but without minimum wage guarantees, overtime pay, unemployment insurance, or health benefits.

The numbers reveal the human cost. According to research from the Economic Policy Institute, **gig workers earn an average of just $9.21 per hour after accounting for vehicle expenses, taxes, and the time spent waiting for rides**. That's well below the federal minimum wage—but because these workers are classified as contractors, minimum wage laws don't apply to them.

This isn't a small corner of the economy. **The gig workforce has exploded to over 59 million Americans**, representing more than a third of the entire U.S. workforce. For many, this isn't a side hustle—it's their primary source of income, with all the precarity that entails.

The toll on workers is devastating. A survey by the Rideshare Drivers United found that **78% of Uber and Lyft drivers cannot afford an unexpected $400 expense**—the classic measure of financial fragility. These are workers in one of the largest, most profitable sectors of the modern economy, yet they live on the edge of financial ruin.

The health consequences are equally stark. Without employer-provided insurance, gig workers must navigate the individual insurance market or go without coverage. **Over 40% of gig workers lack health insurance**, compared to just 8% of traditional employees. When they get sick or injured, they face impossible choices between seeking care and paying rent.

Platform companies argue they're just technology firms connecting buyers and sellers. But this is a legal fiction designed to avoid employer responsibilities. These companies control every aspect of the transaction: they set prices, they determine which workers get access to the most lucrative opportunities, and they can "deactivate" workers without warning or explanation. **In 2023, DoorDash and Uber deactivated over 50,000 workers without any due process.**

The racial dimension of this exploitation cannot be ignored. Studies show that **Black and Hispanic workers are significantly overrepresented in gig work**, often because discrimination in traditional labor markets has closed off other opportunities.

California's AB5 law attempted to address this by requiring gig companies to treat their workers as employees. The companies responded by spending **$200 million on Proposition 22**, the most expensive ballot measure in American history, to exempt themselves from the law.

This is not innovation. This is exploitation with an app.

Maria Santos-Reyes is a labor organizer and fellow at the Institute for Working Families.

Option D: The $15 Minimum Wage Will Destroy Jobs

By Robert J. Mitchell
The Economic Standard, November 2023

The push for a $15 federal minimum wage has become an article of faith among progressives. Who could oppose giving low-wage workers a raise? But good intentions don't repeal the laws of economics. A $15 minimum wage would be a disaster for the very workers it claims to help.

The basic economics are inescapable: when you raise the price of something, people buy less of it. Labor is no exception. **The Congressional Budget Office estimates that a $15 federal minimum wage would eliminate 1.4 million jobs**. That's not a projection from some industry-funded think tank—it's the nonpartisan CBO, the gold standard of economic analysis in Washington.

For workers who keep their jobs, a higher minimum wage is a windfall. But what about the 1.4 million who lose theirs? For them, the minimum wage isn't $15—it's zero. Telling an unemployed teenager that you've raised the minimum wage is cold comfort when no one will hire them.

The damage is concentrated among those least able to bear it. **Young workers ages 16-24 would account for half of all job losses** from a $15 minimum wage, according to CBO projections. These are the entry-level positions that help young people gain the skills and experience they need to climb the economic ladder.

Small businesses would bear the brunt of the impact. Unlike large corporations, small businesses operate on thin margins and can't easily absorb a doubling of labor costs. A survey by the National Federation of Independent Business found that **92% of small business owners oppose a $15 federal minimum wage**, and **half say they would be forced to lay off employees**.

We don't need to speculate about these effects—we can observe them in cities that have already raised their minimum wages. When Seattle implemented its $15 minimum wage, researchers at the University of Washington found that **hours worked fell so sharply that low-wage workers actually earned $125 less per month** despite the higher hourly rate.

New York's experience tells a similar story. After the state began phasing in a $15 minimum wage, **restaurant employment in New York City fell by 4.7%** while it continued growing in the rest of the state.

The employment losses fall disproportionately on minority workers. Economists have consistently found that **minimum wage increases have the largest negative employment effects on Black teenagers**, who already face the highest unemployment rates of any demographic group.

Some economists point to studies showing minimal employment effects from past minimum wage increases. But those studies examined modest increases during periods of economic growth. A $15 federal minimum wage is something else entirely—it would **more than double the current minimum wage in states like Mississippi, where the median wage is just $17 per hour**.

There are better ways to help low-wage workers: expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, improving job training, making childcare affordable. A $15 minimum wage sounds compassionate, but its real-world consequences are anything but.

Robert J. Mitchell is a senior economist at the American Enterprise Institute.