

Leftists Have Servants?

WSJ tweaks liberals about their affluent behavior

by Jonathan Kaufman

The last thing Robert Edelman, a history professor, expected to come home to was a live-in maid. "When I was growing up, I didn't think I would be a landlord and employing servants, and here I am doing it," says Mr. Edelman, a self-described leftist who teaches at the University of California at San Diego. Along with a maid, he and his wife, Victoria, employ a part-time gardener and a pool cleaner. Mrs. Edelman, a financial planner who commutes to work by train, recently hired a woman with a car to drive her between the train station and her job.

Buoyed by a robust economy and a surging stock market, more Americans, particularly dual-income couples like the Edelmans, are paying others to cook, clean, mow, weed, drive and mind the children, among many other chores. Last year, the number of servant-type jobs — nannies, maids, gardeners, pool cleaners, butlers, cooks — grew 8 percent to almost 1.8 million, more than five times the

rate of overall job growth, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And that probably undercounts the use of domestic help, since it doesn't include illegal immigrants. Newport Domestic Agency, a Southern California company that places cooks, butlers, nannies and housekeepers, says business is up 20 percent annually in the past two years. "The stock market is over 10,000, we have the lowest unemployment in 25 years — the money is there," says Roman Machutt, the company's owner.

The rich, of course, have always had help. Before World War II, many middle-class families had full-time maids as well. But the widespread use of domestics, especially live-in help, ended after the war as the waves of immigrants who had filled domestic jobs, especially the Irish in the Northeast, subsided, and many blacks left domestic work.

Today, people from all walks of life have help. Among recent clients at Maria America, a Southern California agency that places housekeepers, nannies and other domestic help: a plumber, a Pizza Hut manager and a cashier at Costco.

The current boom in domestic help is fueled not just by the growing wealth of the middle and upper middle class, but also by the abundance of illegal immigrants, particularly in California and Texas,

willing to accept extremely low wages for domestic work. In Southern California, for example, an undocumented immigrant working as a live-in housekeeper earns just \$150 a week, while an English-speaking maid who knows how to drive commands \$300.

"This is the dirty secret of a lot of middle-class Californians," says Phil Kasinets, a professor at City University of New York. "When labor gets this cheap, huge numbers of people are beneficiaries of illegal immigration."

Here in Irvine, where most domestics are Mexican immigrants — legal and illegal — a popular book titled "How to Communicate With Your Spanish-speaking Help" offers phrases like "Don't pour grease down the garbage disposal" and "How long are you planning to stay in the USA?" New subdivisions in the area feature houses with separate quarters for live-in help.

"To have a domestic in this area has become a kind of sine qua non of social status in addition to economic well-being," says Mark Petracca, a professor of political science at the University of California here. He employs a live-in nanny but refuses to hire a gardener, making him the sole homeowner on his street, he says, to mow his own lawn. It reeks of a kind of imperial colonialism one can imagine present in Shanghai in 1920," the professor says.

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Elsewhere in the area, biologist Judy Brusian and her husband, Carl Switzky, an engineer at Sun Microsystems, employ a part-time gardener, a man to clean the hot tub and a part-time housekeeper, all for less than \$300 a month.

"When you add it up, it isn't that much money," Mrs. Brusian says, adding that she tries to compensate for the low salary. "When we give our cleaning lady a \$100 bonus, she is so happy. They really need the money."

Many undocumented workers complain that their employers expect them to work long hours for little pay. "The people said I would only have to work from 8 to 6, but last night they didn't come home until 9 p.m. and I missed the last bus home," complains one housekeeper at Maria America, speaking in Spanish.

Diane Kees, a hospital executive in Irvine, felt so conflicted about taking advantage of locally available cheap labor that when it came time to hire a live-in housekeeper she decided on a woman from Canada. "I couldn't hire a Latina," she said, using Californians' term for a female Mexican immigrant. "I felt too guilty, too exploitive."

Ms. Kees and her husband, Ken, also employ a part-time gardener. "My grandfather must be turning in his grave that there are people mowing our lawn," says Mr. Kees, who is a software engineer. "We never had help when we were growing up. Up until a few years ago I mowed my own lawn. But I dreaded racing home from work, scrambling to make dinner for the kids. Our careers have accelerated and this makes life so much

easier."

Mr. Edelman, the history professor, says live-in help has changed his lifestyle in many ways: "You don't walk around naked and you don't fight with your wife." But he says balancing fast-paced professional life with a growing family — the Edelmans have three small children — requires live-in help. "It's been a necessity," he says.

He concedes the inequities of the arrangement. "You're basically taking advantage of their difficulty," he says. He won't say how much he pays his help but says he wishes he could afford to pay more.

Bridgett Klein, a mortgage broker, has a different view. She complains that while two years ago she was able to hire a full-time nanny for \$150 a week, "now they want \$300 and they're more particular about what they will and won't do." But Ms. Klein says she and her husband, who is in the music business, will hire someone because they prefer the flexibility full-time help gives their schedules.

Heather Keenan, who runs a special-events planning company in San Francisco, is also interviewing. She now employs a part-time gardener and a housekeeper. But after recently landing a big client, she began looking for a live-in "house manager" who will do the grocery shopping, cook, drive her seven-year-old daughter to lessons and do other chores.

Ms. Keenan is offering \$12 to \$15 an hour plus room and board. So far she hasn't found anyone because many in Silicon Valley are offering \$20 an hour. Now she is flying applicants up from Southern

California for job interviews.

"My therapist says that having someone live with you is completely different than having someone who comes in and leaves," Ms. Keenan says. Still, she adds: "I manage a business and I think I can manage my house in the same way."

People who only recently did all their own chores find that having domestic help can be a quickly acquired taste. Christopher Mears, a successful lawyer, was initially resistant to hiring help, telling his wife "that's what rich people do." But a few weeks ago he went golfing with a friend who had injured his back while bending over to clean a stain on the bedroom rug. "Why would you do that yourself?" Mr. Mears recalls asking his friend. "Why don't you hire someone? Why do you make all the money you make if you can't hire people to do it for you?"

Most employers pay their help in cash, avoiding Social Security taxes and questions about immigration status. But Jeffrey Wasserman, a health-policy consultant whose wife works for an Internet company, pays their full-time nanny's Social Security and has set up a retirement account for her. "Wages may be low, but people are competing on benefits to keep good help," he says.

Mr. Wasserman, who grew up in a household where the staff consisted of a weekly cleaning woman, says, "It's not unusual that I come home and find six people in my house" — the full-time nanny, a part-time nanny, a housekeeper, a gardener, a pool cleaner and a car washer. "We joke that we spend more time managing our staff than

doing everything else.”

One challenge: juggling schedules, so that the gardener, for

example, finishes before the pool cleaner arrives. Otherwise, the

gardener blows grass clippings into the pool. •