

Triple Jeopardy:
Women Lose Public Sector Services, Jobs, and Union Rights

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Abstract

The author describes how the effort "to end big government" has increasingly relied on a three-pronged strategy that includes dismantling public sector services, jobs, and unions. However it is rarely noticed that women comprise the majority in all three spheres and therefore that the resulting austerity hits them especially hard.

With women being left behind in the country's anemic recovery, it's unconscionable for leaders to slash programs that disproportionately employ women as well as disproportionately serve them...

—Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW, 2011)

Public social programs are under attack. Direct government services and government-funded nonprofit agencies are facing retrenchment, as are public schools of social work. Too many social workers and too many clients have lost their jobs or otherwise lost ground. This attack on the public sector has hit program users, workers, and union members. Yet, because most analyses focus only one group or another, they miss both the whole story and the strategy's wider impact. Similarly, women represent more than 50% of the U.S. population, yet women's issues are hard to find in the media, on the public policy agenda, and within the social work curriculum. Despite the overwhelming presence of women throughout the public sector, most public and academic analyses also miss the gender implications of the ongoing effort to shrink the state. To better understand these trends, it helps to understand their origins and consequences.

Origins: Thirty Years of Neoliberalism

The current attack on the public sector is not new, accidental, or simply mean-spirited, nor is it limited to social service programs. Rather, it is the latest step in a long-term strategy to “end big government” by dismantling public-sector services, jobs, and unions. The three-pronged strategy emerged as part of the wider neoliberal response to the economic crisis of the 1970s; relies on the calculated use of what Naomi Klein (2007) called the “shock doctrine” to win support for otherwise unpopular ideas; and falls

heavily on White women and women of color (Deprez & Rosenkrantz, 2011) who compose the majority of public-sector service users, workers, and union members.

Both the rise of the public sector in the 1930s and the effort to dismantle it that began in the mid-1970s, represent responses to economic crises that resulted when the institutional arrangements that had fueled profits and economic growth during the prior 50 years deteriorated and had to be “reformed” (Bowles, Gordon, & Weisskopf, 1986; Kotz, 2003). In the 1930s the elites blamed their economic woes on the laissez-faire market and asked the federal government to step in. The resulting New Deal programs redistributed income downward, expanded the role of the state, and otherwise eased the economic collapse (Abramovitz, 2004). Many refer to the post-World War II years (1945–1975) of peace, profits, prosperity, political stability, and welfare-state expansion as the “golden era of capitalism”—although more White people typically benefited in the growing public sector than persons of color because of “welfare racism” (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). It also served more men than women and more heterosexuals than gays. When structural shifts in the domestic and global economies created another major economic crisis in the 1970s, many of the elites reversed their prior analysis and blamed their financial woes on “the era of big government.” They launched a U-turn in public policy that worked to undo the New Deal by redistributing income upward and downsizing the state.

During the last 30 years the nation’s leaders have pursued this policy agenda, which is variously called Reaganomics, supply-side economics, or neoliberalism. Designed to shrink the state, the now familiar tactics include (1) reducing taxes paid by corporations and wealthy individuals and otherwise eviscerating the progressivity of the tax code; (2) cutting the budgets of public programs that served and, at times,

emboldened the poor and working class; (3) privatizing or shifting government services to the private sector; (4) deregulating business, banks, and labor markets and ending consumer, workplace, and environmental protections; (5) devolving responsibility for public programs from the federal government to the states; and (6) weakening the power of social movements by reversing their gains. At the same time the Right called for (7) a restoration of family values and (8) a color-blind social order.

The Shock Doctrine

From the start, the opponents of “big government” resorted to the N. Klein (2007) shock doctrine to win support for their austerity agenda. The “shock doctrine” refers to the creation or exploitation of a crisis or a disaster and a manipulation of the resulting panic to impose policies that the people would not tolerate otherwise. Reagan used the shock doctrine to win the presidency by telling the country that the federal debt was “out of control”—in fact, it was the lowest share of the GDP in 50 years. He hoped that belief in a pending budget crisis would shock or frighten the American people into supporting deep spending cuts.

More recently, conservatives drew on the shock doctrine to invigorate their campaign against the public sector, emboldened by the 2008 economic collapse, conservative electoral victories, and the absence of a convincing alternative narrative. Having created a budget crisis by refusing to raise taxes for more than a decade, elected officials knowingly exploited deficit fears to win support for further tax and budget cuts and deficit reduction rather than job creation. They sealed the deal by using the race, welfare queen, gay marriage, and/or immigration cards to convince people to vote for measures that undermined their economic security and the common good. The politics of

hate kept people divided, blinded to their shared interests, and until recently, demobilized.

The Consequences

The assault has taken its toll. In 2011 federal spending rose to the highest share of the GDP than in any year since World War II, but federal revenues fell to their lowest share since 1950 (Tax Policy Center, 2011). The opponents of big government blamed the revenue shortfall on public-sector programs, despite data showing that from 2001 to 2007, tax cuts accounted for 48% of the revenue shortfall compared to only 10% for entitlement and 7% for discretionary spending (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2008). Budget analysts add that over the next decade, “the economic downturn, President Bush’s tax cuts and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” will account for the entire deficit (Ruffing & Horney, 2011). Yet in February 2011, many House lawmakers voted for more draconian public-sector budget cuts (H.R. 1). In August 2011 House leaders demanded more spending cuts and no new taxes in exchange for agreeing to lift the debt ceiling (Vogtman, 2011). As of October 2011, these early decisions had established a template that many regard as a “war on women” (Barrera, 2011; Pike, 2011), because women compose the majority of program recipients, workers, and union members and because the government underwrites their unpaid labor in the home.

Fewer Services

Many of the programs now on the congressional chopping block were established to address the basic needs of women and their families over the life span, ranging from family planning and K-12 education to services for the elderly, among many others. The

proposed cuts go beyond the smaller discretionary programs to target the more popular entitlement programs where women also predominate: TANF (90%), Social Security (57%), Medicare (56%), and Medicaid (54%); (Campbell, 2011; Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). Until now, the latter have been referred to as the “third rail” in politics, meaning that no politician would dare touch them (Covert, 2011; Yoder, 2011). Less spending by Washington also translates into less federal aid to states and cities that created their own budget crises by failing to raise taxes. To balance their budgets the states will spend \$75 billion less in 2012 than in 2011 (Cooper, 2011; McNichol, Oliff, & Johnson, 2011).

More Care Work

The loss of public services also translates into increased care work for women (Pollitt, 2011). From 1935 to 1970, the expanding public sector, especially the social welfare programs, subsidized family maintenance and reduced women’s care work by absorbing some of its costs and responsibilities (Abramovitz, 1992). However, starting in the mid-1970s, the U-turn in public policy reversed this pattern, as tax cuts, budget cuts, and privatization shifted the cost and responsibility for care work from the government back to women. Welfare reform sent low-income women into low-wage jobs (Glenn, 2010). The lack of paid family and medical leave, quality child care, and access to health insurance, affordable housing, good schools, and abortions increases care work for all women (Boushey, Moughari, Sattelmeyer, & Waller, 2008; Noehren, 2011). So, too, does the growing practice of moving the elderly and disabled from publicly funded residential centers to home-based care and discharging more patients who need medical monitoring and nursing services from hospitals to home, where family members may be unequipped

to care for them (Boushey et al., 2008; Noehren, 2011; Office on Women's Health, 2008).

Employed or not, women still bear near-exclusive responsibility for the largely “invisible” domestic work. As the majority of the nation's 67 million informal caregivers, women pick up the slack when services disappear. As a group, they risk depression, long-term medical problems, weaker immune systems, and higher levels of obesity—factors that more acutely affect those with lower incomes (Office of Women's Health, 2008; Suthers, 2006). Yet the deficit hawks plan to cut the nation's first long-term care social insurance program that compensates family caregivers who provide \$450 billion a year in “free” care every year (Family Caregiving Alliance, 2011).

Fewer Public-Sector Jobs for Women

The antigovernment strategy also decreased women's access to public-sector jobs. Spurred by the labor, civil rights, and women's movements, access to jobs in the expanding public sector became an important route for upward mobility for White women and women and men of color not hired by private employers (Abramovitz, 2004). In January 2011 women composed 56.8% of all government workers: 43% of federal, 51.7% of state, and 61.4% of local government employees (Feiner, 2011; NWLC, 2011b). The public sector also has become the single most important employer for Blacks, who are 30% more likely than other workers to pursue such careers. More than 14% of all public-sector workers are Black compared to 10% in most other sectors.

Once considered at the periphery of economic life, the nation's vast care work economy increasingly depends on the millions of women of all races who work in the public sector or for publicly funded nonprofit agencies as social workers as well as

teachers, hospital employees, nursing home aides, and child-care workers, among others. Driven by the U-turn in public policy—especially privatization and ongoing budget cuts followed by the economic meltdown and the sagging economy in 2008—these jobs have steadily disappeared. From 1979 to 1998 both sexes lost public-sector jobs. Initially men, especially men of color, experienced greater job losses than women (Bernhardt & Dresser, 2002). However, once the recovery began, women who work in the traditional female occupations, often slated for most of the cuts, fared worse. From June 2009 to July 2011 women lost almost 70% of the 595,000 jobs that disappeared from the public sector (NWLC, 2011a). It did not help the gendered outcomes that the early stimulus package created more “shovel-ready” jobs that employ men than “service-ready” jobs traditionally reserved for women or that the president’s proposed Job Creation bill continues the focus on infrastructure jobs more likely to be filled by men (Abramovitz, 2009). Fueled by H.R. 1, the debt deal, and a manufactured budget crisis, thousands of additional women workers will join the ranks of the unemployed. Some women’s groups argue that women are being asked to shoulder a burden that is not of their making, to pay a “fair share” of the sacrifice that is needed when they are not getting a fair share of the jobs in the recovery or equal pay for an equal day’s work. (Seltzer, 2011)

Loss of Union Rights

The conservative strategy to undo the New Deal sought to increase profits and lower labor costs by weakening the influence of the labor movement, which was best positioned to resist this austerity program. By the 1980s, following a decade of union organizing, over one third of public employees belonged to a union (Aronowitz, 2011). Around the same time Reagan famously broke the federal air traffic controllers strike and empowered

employers to launch a major assault on organized labor. Total public and private union membership fell from a peak of 35% of the civilian labor force (1954) to 11.9% (2010) due to deindustrialization, globalization, and the ongoing attack on workers' rights. Private-sector unionization alone plummeted to a low 6.9% in 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). With 93% of private-sector workers lacking union protection, corporate America won the day. However, public-sector unions withstood the onslaught, maintaining an average membership of more than one third of the government workforce. It did not hurt that the majority of public-sector work—teaching, providing social services, delivering meals on wheels, running health clinics, staffing courts, repairing roads—cannot be done elsewhere (Feiner, 2011). In 2011 government workers accounted for some 8 million members or more than 50% of workers who were members of unions or otherwise covered by one (Aronowitz, 2011).

Seeking to weaken the remaining unions, foes of labor and government turned against labor's last stronghold—the public sector. Governors such as Scott Walker (R-WI) and John R. Kasich (R-OH), demonized government workers as the new privileged elite (with terms such as *lazy* and *overpaid*) to convince the public that the right to bargain collectively rather than tax cuts is the enemy of a balanced budget (Madland, 2011). The attack on public-sector unions falls heavily on women, given that 61% of unionized women work in the public sector compared to only 38% of unionized men (Laborers' International Union of North America Women's Caucus, 2011). In addition, governors have deprived unions representing teachers and nurses of their collective bargaining rights while sparing police, firefighter, and state trooper unions that are overwhelming male and political supporters of governors (Battistoni, 2011; NWLC, 2011b). The loss of union protection also sets women back economically. Unionized

women of all races in both public and private jobs earn nearly one third more a week than women without a union affiliation, although White women earn more than women of color (NWLC, 2011b). Trade-union women face a smaller gender wage gap and are more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and pension plans than their non-unionized sisters (CEPR, 2008).

Loss of a Strong Advocate

Public-sector unions historically pressed for high-quality services, dependable benefits, and fair procedures for themselves but also for others helping to reformulate economic and political citizenship. As early as 1920, the American Federation of Teachers stood up for greater school funding and smaller class sizes. In the 1960s unionized social workers fought for fair hearings and due process for welfare and Medicaid recipients. In the 1980s and 1990s home care workers sought more sustained care for their clients (J. Klein, 2011). The loss of union power will cost public-sector program users, workers, and union members a strong advocate. Unions are one of the few influential players with the interest and potential to represent the middle and working classes. They also provide a check against unmediated corporate power inside and outside government (Wright, 2011).

Conclusion

This gendered analysis has expanded the understanding of the attack on the public sector by detailing (1) the triple-pronged attack on government services, employment, and unions; and (2) the triple jeopardy experienced by women who simultaneously face fewer services (and more care work), fewer jobs, and less union protection. In July 2011 the National Council of Women's Organizations wrote to congressional leaders insisting

that the deficit problem should not be solved on the backs of vulnerable women. NCWO demanded a budget that would:

Respect women's contributions to the economy and their need for economic security.

Protect Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and programs that disproportionately serve and employ women.

Reject budget plans that threaten the economic security of women.

(NCWO, 2011)

In August 2011, on the 91st anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote, a new, multiorganization group launched HERvotes—an effort to mobilize women voters in 2012 to support the preservation of women's health and economic rights (*Ms. Magazine*, 2011). The National Economic & Social Rights Initiative (2011) reminds us that the current agenda amounts to “attacks on public responsibility, the notion of the public good, and the ability of government to secure economic and social rights for all.” In state after state, thousands of government workers and community supporters are rising up angry (think Ohio, Wisconsin, and Occupy Wall Street) to say that they will not take the assault on their well-being, dignity, and rights lying down. They proudly link access to government services and support for care work to collective rights for all.

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