

By Mimi Abramovitz

THE FEMINIZATION OF AUSTERITY

THE CURRENT ATTACK ON PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS IS THE LATEST STEP IN A long-term effort to “end big government” through a three-pronged strategy that falls heavily on women. The strategy targets three public sector groups: service users, workers, and unions. Yet most of the prevailing analysis focuses on one group or another and thus misses the whole story and the strategy’s wider

impact, particularly on white women and women of color—the people who comprise the majority of public sector program users, workers, and union members.¹ This is largely a result of the gender division of labor that still assigns most “care work” to women, including the type of care work that remains embedded in many public sector jobs.

THE WIDER CONTEXT: THIRTY YEARS OF NEOLIBERALISM

THE STRATEGY TO DISMANTLE THE public sector is not new or accidental. It emerged as part of the wider neoliberal response to the economic crisis of the 1970s, and relies on the calculated use of what Naomi Klein has called the “shock doctrine” to win support for otherwise unpopular ideas.

Over the course of the last thirty years, U.S. leaders have pursued a policy agenda

variously referred to as Reaganomics, supply-side economics, or neoliberalism. Designed to redistribute income upwards and shrink the state, the now familiar tactics include: reducing taxes paid by corporations and wealthy individuals, and otherwise eviscerating the progressivity of the tax code; slashing the budgets of public programs that served—and, at times, emboldened—the poor and the working class; shifting government services to the private sector; and deregulating businesses, banks, and labor markets. At the same time, the “reformers” worked to end consumer, workplace, and environmental protections; devolve federal responsibility for public programs to the states; and weaken the power of social movements by reversing their gains. Meanwhile, the right called for the restoration of family values and a color-blind social order.

More recently, conservatives have drawn on the shock doctrine to invigorate their

anti-public sector campaign, buoyed by the 2008 economic collapse, conservative electoral victories, and the Democrats' failure to present an alternative narrative. Having created a budget crisis by refusing to raise taxes for

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more than a decade, elected officials knowingly exploited deficit fears to win support for more tax and budget cuts and for highlighting 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 fear and hate have kept people divided, blinded to their shared interests, and—until recently—demobilized.

In 2011, federal spending rose to 25.3 percent of the GDP—the highest level in any year since World War II. Meanwhile, tax cuts and unusually high unemployment rates caused federal revenues to fall to 14.4 percent of the GDP—the lowest level since 1950.² From 2001 to 2007, the share of the revenue gap stemming from tax cuts (48 percent) far exceeded the share due to entitlement (10 percent) and discretionary spending (7 percent).³ Although critics like to blame future deficits on Obama and Congress's current policies, budget analysts report that over the next decade the deficit will largely be due to "the economic downturn, the Bush tax cuts, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq."⁴ Ignoring this fact, in February

2011 the House of Representatives voted for draconian public sector budget cuts (H.R. 1, The Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011). In August 2011, House leaders demanded still more spending cuts, but no new taxes in exchange for agreeing to lift the debt ceiling.⁵ In October 2011, Congress defeated the American Jobs Act—Obama's plan to create employment opportunities for teachers and other public sector workers, and rebuild the nation's infrastructure.⁶ These legislative actions have established a template that many regard as representing a "war on women,"⁷ not only because women comprise the majority of public sector program recipients, workers, and union members, but also because government services underwrite women's unpaid labor in the home.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON WOMEN

INTENTIONAL OR NOT, THERE IS strong evidence that the attack on the public sector falls heavily on women. Cuts have

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been made to programs ranging from reproductive health to public education.

Fewer Services

Congress created most of the programs now on its chopping block to address the basic needs of women and their families over their life spans.

Paid for by discretionary and/or entitlement funding, they include: Head Start, child care, K-12 education, family planning, Pell grants, job training, reproductive health services, domestic violence prevention, and care for the elderly. The latest round of cuts proposed by

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H.R. 1 would heavily affect Title X funding and the work of Planned Parenthood (the largest recipient of Title X funds). Title X subsidizes comprehensive family planning services for more than five million low-income women and men at more than 4,500 community-based clinics nationwide. Each year, Planned Parenthood provides nearly one million cervical cancer screenings, 830,000 breast exams, contraception to nearly two million women, and sexually transmitted infection tests and treatments to 1.2 million people.⁸ By June 2011, North Carolina and New Hampshire had stripped Planned Parenthood of state funding.⁹ On August 1, 2011, Minnesota closed six Planned Parenthood clinics.¹⁰ Up until then, New Hampshire's low-income women paid an average of \$5 to fill a birth control prescription through Planned Parenthood, compared to \$40 to more than \$100 at a regular pharmacy. "We can't even provide patients with antibiotics for urinary tract infections or STDs anymore," said Jennifer Frizzell, a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.¹¹ The House bill proposes to cut \$50 million from the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant (Title V) that provides prenatal health services to 2.5

million women, and primary and preventive health care to thirty-one million children every year.¹² It also targets the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program that, in August 2011, supplied nutritious food, counseling, and other services to 9.1 million low-income people, 2.1 million women, 2.1 million infants, and 4.8 million children.¹³ Although WIC yields higher birth weights and lower infant mortality rates, it has lost \$747 million.¹⁴

H.R. 1 proposes dramatic decreases in food subsidies, job training, and child care—key discretionary programs that help women balance their work and family responsibilities. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly Food Stamps—faces conversion to a block grant and a 20 percent funding cut, while Head Start stands to lose more than \$1 billion.¹⁵ The Child Care and Development Block Grant, which helps more than 953,000 low-income, mostly female-headed households afford

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child care, is at risk too.¹⁶ H.R. 1 would also cut more than \$2 billion from job training programs, such as those provided under the Workforce Investment Act and through the Green Jobs Innovation Fund, that could open up opportunities for low-paid women currently working in dead-end jobs.

The proposed cuts go beyond the smaller discretionary programs to target the more popular entitlement programs that serve large numbers of women, including TANF

(Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, 90 percent), Medicaid (54 percent),¹⁷ Social Security (57 percent), and Medicare (56 percent).¹⁸ Once regarded as “third-rail” issues, because no politician would dare touch them, this is no longer the case.¹⁹ In 2007, women comprised nearly 80 percent of the non-elderly adults (mostly pregnant women and low-income parents) who relied on Medicaid, 70 percent of elderly Medicaid recipients,²⁰ 76 percent of nursing home residents, and the overwhelming majority of nursing home staff.²¹ This means-tested health insurance program pays for general inpatient and outpatient health care for low-income children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with disabilities.²² The benefits cover over 40 percent of all births, prenatal visits, ultrasound and amniocentesis screenings, and sixty days of postpartum care. At the other end of the life cycle, Medicaid supports personal health aides, rehabilitation services, nursing home care, and other long-term care services for older women not covered by Medicare. Nonetheless, H.R.1 proposes to strip Medicaid of its entitlement status by converting it into a block grant and cutting spending by 35 percent in 2022 and by 49 percent in 2030.²³ Meanwhile, states have already ended or reduced (by 15 percent to 20 percent) the already low cash benefits (TANF) available to hundreds of thousands of single mothers and their children, and have shortened the lifetime limits on benefits received by these female-headed households.²⁴

The Budget Control Act of 2011, passed to lift the debt ceiling, took another giant step toward dismantling the welfare state programs that serve and employ large numbers of women. Part I of the deal caps non-defense domestic discretionary spending in order to save more than \$917 billion over the next ten years. Part II directs a bipartisan group of congressional representatives (“the super committee”) to recommend another \$1.5 trillion worth of cuts to discretionary and entitlement programs

(e.g., Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security). When the super committee failed to reach an agreement by November 2011, Part III activated automatic across-the-board cuts to discretionary spending, but also to Medicare payments for doctors, hospitals, nursing homes, and other providers in 2013. Given that the 2012 elections are approaching and Congress has a year to negotiate the details, no one can say which programs or how much spending will be cut. Whatever the cuts amount to, they are not likely to be inconsequential.²⁵

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Less federal spending translates into fewer services, more furloughs and layoffs,²⁶ and reduced aid to states and localities. Faced with their worst budget crises since the Great Depression, mayors and governors have resorted to increasingly desperate measures to cut costs, including teacher layoffs and slashes to Medicaid funding.²⁷ Thirty states have cut funding for schools—to levels lower than those in 2008—and the Topeka (Kansas) City Council almost decriminalized domestic violence because the cost of prosecuting it was too high.²⁸ Having already created their own budget crises by failing to raise taxes, the states plan to spend \$75 billion less in 2012 than in 2011 to balance their budgets—a drop from 4.75 percent of the GDP in 2008 to 4.25 percent in 2012.²⁹

More Care Work

The loss of public services increases women's care work. 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.³⁰ The public sector's more flexible work patterns continue to attract women who still bear the brunt of managing a family while balancing paid employment.

Since the mid-1970s, neoliberal budget cuts, privatization, and deregulation have shifted these caretaking responsibilities back to millions of women in the home. Most famously, the welfare reformers contradicted their own commitment to "family values," by requiring single mothers on welfare to work—typically in low-wage jobs that lacked the benefits and flexible hours needed for proper child rearing.³¹ 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.³² So do the growing practices of moving the elderly and the disabled from publicly-funded residential centers to home-based care arrangements, and discharging more hospital patients who are in need of medical monitoring and nursing services.³³

Employed or not, women are the majority of the nation's sixty-seven million informal caregivers, and they pick up the slack when services disappear. As a group, these caregivers—especially those with less income—are at risk for depression, long-term medical problems, weaker immune systems, and higher levels of obesity.³⁴ 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 worth of "free" care every year.³⁵

Fewer Public Sector Jobs for Women

The anti-government strategy also decreased access to the public sector jobs that had become increasingly available to women during the 1930s and after World War II. Pressed by the labor, civil rights, and women's movements, these jobs became an important route for upward mobility for white women and people of color when the private sector excluded them.³⁶ The share of female government workers rose by nearly 70 percent between 1964 and 1974, and by another 28 percent by 1981.³⁷ By January 2011, women comprised 56.8 percent of all government workers: 43 percent of federal workers, 51.7 percent of state workers, and 61.4 percent of local government employees.³⁸ The public sector also became the single most important employer for blacks, who are 30 percent more likely than other workers to hold public sector jobs. More than 14 percent of all public sector workers are black (in most other sectors, blacks make up about 10 percent of the workforce).³⁹ When compared to the general workforce, blacks are 70 percent more likely to be federal employees, 30 percent more likely to be state employees, and 20 percent more likely to be local government employees.⁴⁰

Once viewed as 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 teachers, hospital workers, nursing home aides, and social workers (among other occupations). Driven by the U-turn in public policy (privatization, ongoing budget cuts, etc.), the 2008 economic meltdown, and the sagging economy, many of these jobs have steadily disappeared.

Due to occupational segregation by sex, the fiscal downturn had a differential impact on women and men. From December 2007 to June 2009, men suffered more than 70 percent

of the job losses because in most recessions construction and other “male” jobs disappear first. However, since June 2009, the recovery has been tougher on women, due to large public sector job losses and the concentration of women in traditional female occupations that have been slated for most of the cuts. Women represented just over half (57.2 percent) of the public workforce at the end of the recession, but they lost the majority (63.8 percent) of the 578,000 jobs cut in this sector between June 2009 and October 2011. The private sector picked up 1.6 million jobs over the course of the recovery, but women gained just one out of seven of these new jobs (252,000 jobs).⁴¹ The stimulus package perpetuated sex segregation in employment by creating more “shovel-ready” jobs that employ men than “service-ready” jobs traditionally filled by women.⁴² The president’s jobs-creation program continued to focus on infrastructure jobs that are more likely to employ men, but it also included a \$30 billion investment in education to prevent the layoffs of up to 280,000 teachers as well as firefighters and police.⁴³ Sadly, women’s poverty has already reached record heights, climbing to 14.5 percent in 2010, the highest in seventeen years.⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵

Loss of Union Rights

The neoliberal strategy to undo the New Deal sought to increase profits and lower labor costs by weakening the influence of the labor movement, which is best positioned to resist this austerity program. Prior to the 1960s, most federal, state, and local employees lacked the legal right to bargain collectively. However, following an organizing surge in the 1960s and early 1970s, by the 1980s more than one third

of public employees belonged to a union.⁴⁶ Around the same time, Reagan famously broke the federal air traffic controllers’ strike and empowered employers to launch a major assault on organized labor, exacting an especially high toll on private sector unionism. The private sector unionization rate of 25 percent in 1975 has fallen to just under 7 percent. However, public sector unions withheld the onslaught—today, more than one third of the government workforce is unionized. It did not hurt that the majority of public sector work—teaching, delivering meals on wheels, running health clinics, staffing courts, repairing roads—cannot be done elsewhere.⁴⁷ In 2011, government workers accounted for some eight million union members (or more than 50 percent of workers in or covered by a union).⁴⁸

Seeking to finish the union-busting drive, anti-government interests and trade union foes have turned against labor’s last stronghold—the public sector. Governors around the country demonize public sector workers as the new privileged elite (lazy, overpaid, etc.) to convince the public that the right to bargain collectively is the enemy of a balanced budget. Governors Scott Walker (Wisconsin) and John R. Kasich (Ohio), among others, stoke fears of state budget debts to persuade the public that deficit reduction, rather than union busting, is what drives their interest in stripping state workers of their bargaining rights. This neoliberal attack on public sector unions falls heavily on women, given that 61 percent of unionized women—but only 38 percent of unionized men—work in the public sector.⁴⁹ In addition, governors have deprived unions representing teachers and nurses of their collective bargaining rights while sparing the police, firefighter, and state trooper unions that are overwhelmingly male and the governors’ political supporters.⁵⁰ The loss of union protection also threatens to set women back economically. Public employees earn an average of 4 percent less than their private sector counterparts with the same

levels of education and experience.⁵¹ However, unionized women—in both public and private sector jobs—earn nearly one third (32.6 percent) more a week than women without a union affiliation (48.1 percent more for Latina women and 25.4 percent more for black women).⁵² Trade union women experience a smaller gender-based wage gap and are more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and pension plans than their non-unionized sisters. All else equal, joining a union raises a woman's wages as much as a full year of college does, and it increases her chances to have health insurance more than earning a four-year college degree does.⁵³ In brief, the public sector may be far from a perfectly fair employment system—but its glass ceilings and gender gaps in pay and benefits are less onerous than those found in the private sector.

Loss of a Strong Advocate

Public sector unions have historically pressed for high-quality services, dependable benefits, and fair procedures for unionized workers, 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.⁵⁴ The weakening of unions will cost public sector program users, workers, and union members a strong advocate. Unions are one of the few influential players with the interest in and the potential to represent the

middle and working classes. They also provide a check against unmediated corporate power in and out of the government.⁵⁵

FIGHTING BACK

In a July 2011 letter to congressional leaders, the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO)—representing 240 organizations and more than twelve million women—argued that the deficit problem should not be solved on the backs of vulnerable women. NCWO demanded “a budget that will respect women’s contributions to their families and communities, protect programs that disproportionately serve and employ women, and reject cuts that threaten women’s well-being.”⁵⁶ On the August 24, 2011 anniversary of women winning the right to vote, a new multi-organization group launched HERvotes to mobilize women voters in 2012 around preserving women’s health and economic rights.⁵⁷ The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative reminds us that the current agenda amounts to “an attack on public responsibility, the notion of the public good, and the ability of government to ensure economic and social rights for all....”⁵⁸ In state after state, thousands of government workers and community supporters are angrily rising up to insist that they will not take the assault on their well-being, dignity, and rights lying down. These sentiments are now echoed by the Occupy Wall Street protesters whose championing of “the 99%” has made mounting inequality and the need for a more robust public sector front-page national news for the first time in many years.

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Greek riot police storming the Los Indignados encampment, Thessaloniki, Greece, June 2011.

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