

# The Assault on Workers' Rights

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The November 2010 election in the USA resulted in a wave of conservative candidates winning in local and national contests, and taking office in January 2011. Most analysts argued that this election result was due to a combination of typically small voter turnout for by-elections, a strong turnout by zealous advocates of the now well known Tea Party, and general voter dissatisfaction with the sluggish state of the economy and relatively high unemployment levels. Progressives and those who made up the 'Obama coalition' were discouraged after two years of tepid political action and a general disappointment over the positions and programs of Obama's presidency to that point.

All reports indicated that the key issue for voters was the economy and unemployment, and yet after the election, to hear conservative politicians tell it, it was this mantra that government was too big, spending exceeded revenues, and the voters have voiced their desire to put an end to government regulations and reduce the national debt. The neoliberal agenda is now in full swing, Republicans at all levels of government speak with one voice, and social programs are on the radar to be eliminated. Emboldened conservatives are demanding major cuts in social programs to the tune of over \$60bn in the current budget, and are attacking the favorite targets of the Right. Programs like National Public Radio and Headstart programs for children are on the chopping block, and even the Obama administration is climbing on the bandwagon by proposing to cut funding for LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) designed to subsidize fuel costs for the indigent. With no sense of embarrassment, and with the rhetoric pouring out about the need to curtail the deficit even as these targets hardly put a dent in the problem, critical services long opposed by conservatives are in line for defunding. Regulations designed to protect consumers or curtail the actions of corporations in finance, pharmaceuticals, mineral extraction, oil exploration, food production and all the rest are called 'job killing' restraint, and either the regulations are being dismantled and altered or the enforcement arm of government agencies are having budgets slashed. A feeding frenzy has begun on the right, and the target is all those programs and policies that enable workers to fight for a decent life.

What cannot be done on the Federal level is being done in many of those state governments recently captured by conservatives. Governors of many states have announced cutbacks on Medicaid and a reduction in the number of weeks unemployed workers can receive benefits, all the while cutting business and other taxes. Perhaps the most transparent of these efforts are seen in Wisconsin and Ohio, where any semblance of a rationale to cut costs has disappeared. The recently elected Wisconsin governor and state legislature announced that in order to balance the state budget, concessions from state workers are necessary and the only way to ensure these concessions is to legislatively deny public sector workers the right to collective bargaining. Never mind that a business tax cut passed in the opening of the legislative year in Wisconsin resulted in a loss of

revenue that would have made up most of the deficit, and never mind that the major state employee unions have agreed to changes in order to close the budget gap. A more common approach is privatizing public sector jobs. Recently New Haven, CT is looking to do just that to 'save' over \$7m by contracting out custodial services (*New Haven Register*, 2011), which is threatening to cost almost 200 janitors their jobs in a move to close half of the deficit (see Wicks-Lim, 2011 for a careful analysis of the social costs of this action).

We are not strangers to the impact of neoliberalism and its efforts to change social as well as economic relations – though most often analyses focus on its impact on the developing world. Earlier local efforts to impose neoliberal policies have been chronicled in the pages of this journal (see Carroll and Ratner, 1989 regarding policy initiatives in British Columbia), and authors have tried to understand how economic policies like neoliberalism should be understood and modeled (Carchedi, 2008). Articles have assessed the impact of neoliberalism on gender (Acker, 2004), on management (Connell, 2010), and on the very nature and form of neoliberal policies (O'Connor, 2010), to list but a few. Recent events here and in the UK demonstrate the toll applying such policies take on the average worker, and perhaps for the first time people can begin to understand why there is such opposition to neoliberalism in the rest of the world.

For most of my academic career I have argued that it does no good to envision capitalists as evil people. Certainly they care little for the conditions and safety of their workers and there is no real understanding of the life one leads on the salaries on offer. But the intellectual agenda had to be about how to understand capitalism as a system and to regard the behavior of capitalists as the byproduct of pure profit motives and the market economy. Of late, however, I am starting to wonder. That is, can we explain this behavior as structural, and assume what motivates individuals are the demands of their location in capitalist social relations? I cannot understand the disconnect when conservatives cut revenues drastically, and then complain that it costs too much to provide social services to alleviate the ravages of poverty or cut regulation so that the market can operate 'unfettered' by government bureaucracy. There seems to be no requirement to explain how cutting government spending generates jobs, or why the poor and the rest of us are better off as a result of these cuts.

This metaphor of starving the government of resources and my increasing willingness to see these efforts as pernicious and mean spirited calls to my mind less pleasant images. In effect, first revenues disappear, and then programs are cut because revenues are insufficient to fund them. There is no connection between the first action (restricting income) and the logic of the consequences, there is no recognition that we should decide as a society what is to be funded and then figure out how to pay for those programs. The maliciousness is hard to ignore; a comparison lends itself. The average 25-year-old male, at about 150 pounds, 5'7" tall who moderately exercises requires about 2250 calories to maintain weight, or 1800 to promote fat and weight loss (the levels go up to 3100 and 2500 with heavy exercise or strenuous work). For comparable females weighing 125 pounds and 5'4" tall the figures are 1800 (2500 working out) and 1450 (2000) calories a day. The recommended minimum daily intake is 1200 calories for women and 1500 calories for men (Lance Armstrong Foundation, 2011). Making the theft of food punishable by death, the Nazis during World War II limited calorie allocations in their concentration camps to between 500 and 1700 each day as the inmates performed hard labor. Warsaw ghetto food rations were even more meager, with estimates of allocations ranging from as low as 200 calories each day to between 650 and 800 calories each day (Shoah Education Project Web, 2011). The inhumanity of this is clear to anyone, but the real deviousness is the consequent logic. If you stayed alive you must have stolen food to increase your calorie intake – to do otherwise is to die of hunger and malnutrition. And if you stole

food, you were liable under the law to be found guilty and punished by death. Through this (and other) legalistic twists inhuman behavior hides behind rational arguments.

On first blush this seems an unreasonable comparison. Yet, as unemployment benefits are cut and closing budget deficits are being proposed on the backs of low wage working people we can only ask whether or not there is any compassion, and whether or not the consequences of these actions are being conveniently masked by legalistic rationales like 'the public sector is broke'. When polled, the average person thinks taxes should be raised to close the deficits, and raised even more for those who earn exorbitant incomes. As was recently noted (yet again) concerning incomes of workers at banks,

[t]he clear trend, in both nominal and absolute terms, is up: Over the last eight years, average compensation for a full-time bank employee has risen by 35 percent to \$83,050, twice the rate of inflation. In 2003, the banking industry's 1.3 million full-time employees took home \$78.3 billion. In 2010, its 2.1 million employees took home \$168.1 billion. (Horwitz, 2011)

While this level seems high (and is indeed high when compared to median incomes in this country), it is not overly so for two reasons. First, outlandish salaries for senior executives with bonuses in the hundreds of millions each year will pull up the overall average. Second, as a recent New York Times article points out, a family of four requires \$67,920 in household expenditures to meet basic needs for survival, when compared to the Federal poverty level of \$22,050. Categories included in this projection include housing, utilities, food, transportation, personal items, health care (employer-based), child care, savings, and education (Rich, 2011). Even at a marginal tax rate of only 20 percent, a household would need around \$85,000 in annual earnings, or in other words the average bank employee earns just enough to live comfortably. What does it say about all the others who earn less, and about the custodial workers soon to be laid off as their jobs are privatized?

The events in Ohio and Wisconsin offer us reasons to both despair and hope. The agenda is first and foremost union busting, but it is also part of a larger pattern of animosity and anger at unions viewed as an oppositional force in society. For many it simply represents a vehicle to raise funds and agitate for more progressive (or at least more labor friendly) candidates in the political arena. But we need not limit our understanding simply to electoral politics. Unionists and activists are under attack more broadly, and this is a reason to despair and fear how far this can lead. For example, a recent coup in Honduras (with the tacit support of the Obama Administration) is now trying to silence organized opposition. The group Education International

calls on its member organisations to take action to protest against the brutal repression of teacher unionists by the Honduran authorities. The violent crackdown on teacher demonstrators has claimed the life of teacher Ilse Ivania Velásquez Rodríguez. In addition to dismissals of the leaders of the six teaching associations, the arbitrary arrests of at least 24 union officials, and blacklisting of protesting teachers, the authorities of Honduras have repealed the Teachers' Statute and announced the suspension of the collection of trade union dues. Further concerning developments include a new General Education Law discussed in Parliament that unions say opens the way to wide ranging privatisation of education provision. (Educational International, 2011)

It is all there: the effort to repeal legislation, deprive the unions of resources, end teachers' rights under the law, and privatize public sector workers. We do not have to think too far back to visualize teachers and other state employee union members protesting in the Wisconsin capital building to

protect and save collective bargaining rights. Our history is filled with strike breakers and mounted police attacking striking auto and steel workers and harassing protest marches, of companies intimidating coal miners and their families as owners seek to break up the union, and of marchers demanding basic civil rights being attacked by dogs and water cannons all in the name of law and order. The very laws passed to permit strikes, to prevent violence against workers and demonstrators, and to sanction collective bargaining are under attack at every level. What is happening in Honduras and other developing countries can happen here as well, if we are not vigilant.

But there is also reason to hope. The outrage over the Wisconsin legislation is fueling several key recall efforts and for the first time in a long while politicians may be made to pay for their arrogant disregard for their constituents' best interests. This sort of coordinated opposition is giving new life to labor unions that finally have found their voices of opposition. The situation in Ohio is even more hopeful, since Ohio state law has a referendum provision and unions are mobilizing to put the question of the right to collective bargaining on the ballot. The extremes in wealth, the constant news of banks bailed out with tax-payer dollars giving outrageous bonuses (we should point out these bonuses are not automatic if there is a will to fight them, see Wachman, 2011), executive pay that is hundreds of times that of the average worker, and hopefully the political maneuvering to deny people their rights will mobilize workers to fight for economic and political justice.

The articles in this issue of *Critical Sociology* show how important it is to first establish and then protect policies, in this instance affirmative action, that promote greater fairness and equality. The opening essay by Sharon Collins outlines what follows in the issue so there is no need to provide details here. What it is important to recognize is that the legislative changes are not enough – as we can see from current efforts these legislations and the rights they bestow can come under attack.

Closing out this issue are three articles, by Nopper, Volscho, and McKether. The first two bring home the consequences and outcomes of racism in the United States, however one may redefine or recast it in a new language. In the first Nopper demonstrates that instituting new guidelines to emphasize race and ethnicity without addressing racial stratification will not have the desired impact of increased minority lending. Volscho looks back, and points out how medical practices at the time (and perhaps today) resulted in what he calls sterilization racism to understand disparities in medical outcomes among women of color. This issue closes with Willie McKether's analysis of Black migration at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, focusing on one community, in which he traces the evolution of the Black church. He ties that transformation to shifting socio-economic circumstances arising out of a new awareness and expectation of later migrants to the North, which in turn influenced the development of the Civil Rights Movement of the middle of the last century.

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