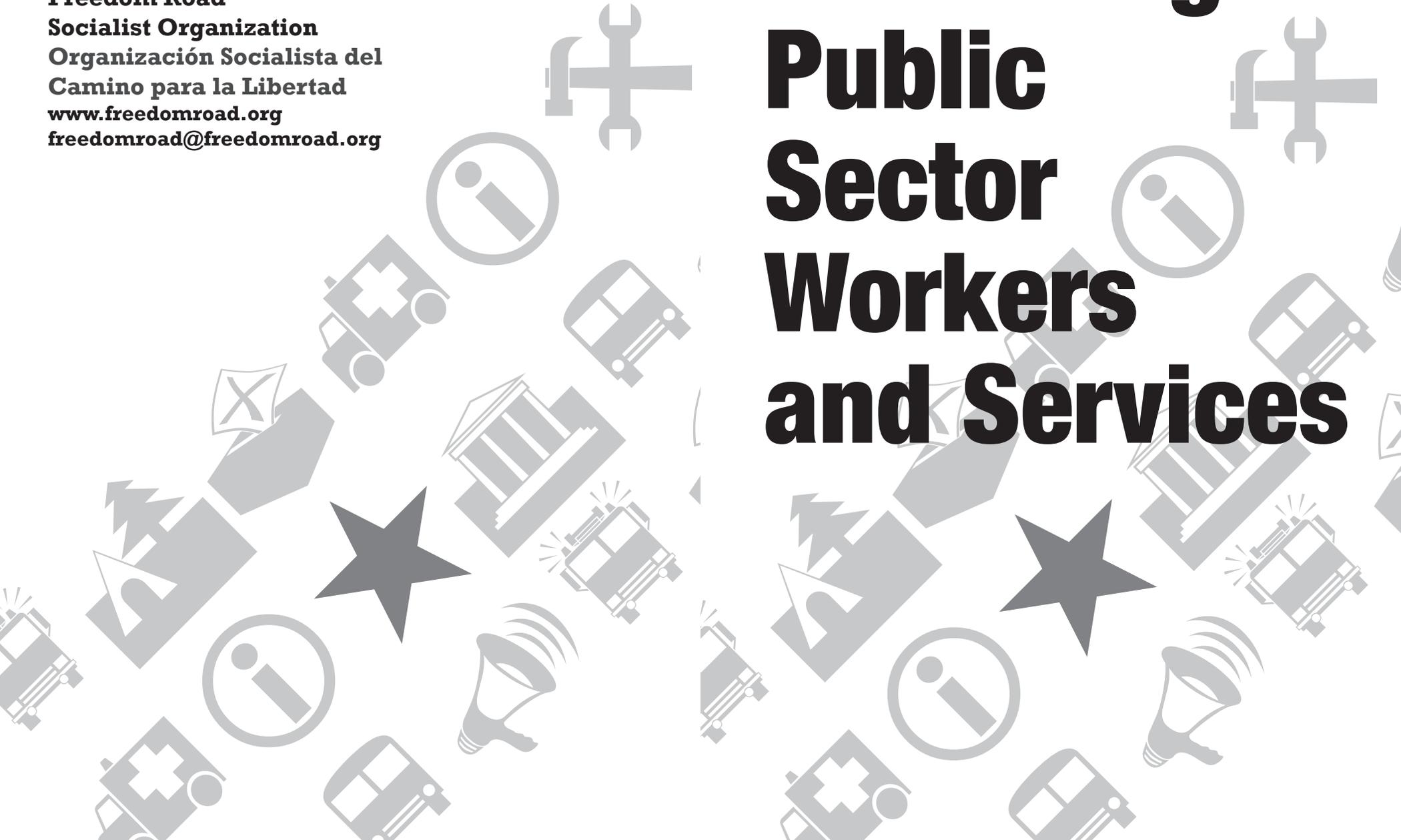




**Freedom Road
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ON THE FRONT LINES:

Defending Public Sector Workers and Services



Notes

ONE of the front lines in our fight to build a better life for those oppressed by capitalism is the fight for the public sector. The destruction of the public sector tears down living standards for workers, their communities and their children. Businesses and governments justify this destruction with an economic argument about the importance of government budget deficits, but this masks what is actually a political project to undermine the last bastions of working class resistance. Elites first blame these budget deficits, falsely, on “out-of-control” service provision and “greedy” public workers. They use this smoke screen to eliminate or privatize public services, appropriating public wealth to create private profit. At the same time they implement a classic divide-and-conquer tactic with a claim that the most significant wedge dividing society is **not** between workers and capitalists, but within the working class: between public workers who provide services, and private sector workers who utilize those services. Having done everything in their power to destroy private sector unions, denying private sector workers decent health care and a dependable pension, these elites now want to shift blame onto public sector workers and their unions, claiming that the fights for health care, livable pensions, and a decent income are a form of “greed”.

The fact is that deficits have not been caused by out-of-control public spending. Deficits have been caused by long-term declines in revenues and by our current economic crisis. The motivation behind attacks on public services, often characterized as “necessary cutbacks,” is not to correct deficits but rather to spread privatization. Corporations want private profit from public wealth. They are being accommodated by politicians, who are restructuring the organization and delivery of services such that they can be transformed into a source of capital accumulation (profit). The global thrust toward the commoditization of all realms of existence is being facilitated through government policies like the “Race to the Top”, “No Child Left Behind”, and the “Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act”. Efforts to privatize programs like food stamps, child protective services, public transportation, prisons, and public education are all key examples as well.

Take public education, for instance. The \$2.5 trillion global “market” in education is a facet of the neoliberal strategy to manage the structural crisis of capitalism by opening the public sector to capital accumulation. In the education sector, budget shortfalls and the rise of privately-run charter schools are being sold as increasing “choice.” In Oregon recently, this notion of “choice” was used to pass legislation that permitted parents not only to place their children in any school district they wanted, but also to take the funding that would have otherwise gone to their previous school district with them. In the case of inner-city schools, this measure serves to make poor school districts even more impoverished and at further risk of being completely shut down. Thus collective welfare is being ideologically pitted against individual choice.

Charter schools are publicly funded but operated privately. They eliminate democratic governance. Although in some cases they can be run by nonprofit community

and there is no other. But our class has been on the defensive for most of its existence. We are optimistic that we have an opportunity at this particular point in history, based on the actual nature of the history, class structure and struggle in the U.S. today, to overcome past weaknesses to create a new, stronger labor movement set on a revolutionary course.

Join us to build social justice unionism in the United States, to build progressive New Working Class Organizations among oppressed sectors of our class, bring them together in communities of solidarity, and build the socialist current among working class people.

To contact Freedom Road Socialist Organization, visit us at www.freedomroad.org

6. Build “tax the rich” campaigns; fight for progressive taxation.
7. Build state-based Single Payer Healthcare proposals. Twenty-one states have such proposals on record.
8. Advance legislation that requires all-inclusive, actual cost analysis before contracting services out to private companies.
9. Fight for expansion of services for all, regardless of national origin or immigration status.
10. Seek stronger legislation for protecting the environment and promoting a sustainable economy.

About Us

Freedom Road Socialist Organization/Organizacion Socialista del Camino para la Libertad members are working class people and people of all races and gender identities. We are both veteran comrades who have 30 to 50 years in the trade union movement, and young people who recently joined our revolutionary movement through Workers Centers, or just began to work. We take pride in the fact that our members work respectfully with other socialists, progressive activists and all others in a non-sectarian way, seeking to learn, share lessons from victories and defeats, and humbly contribute to building the left wing of the labor movement. We also work with other socialists, revolutionaries, revolutionary nationalists and leaders of social movements to create a revolutionary party in the United States, a process we call “Left Refoundation.” See our pamphlet *Which Way is Left? Theory, Politics, Organization and 21st-Century Socialism* for more on this topic.

As we stated in our introduction, these are tough times for workers in the U.S. This is the hand we have been dealt,

organizations or groups of parents or teachers, whether non-profit or for-profit, market forces pressure a drive to reap large management fees for running schools and education programs. This strategy is widespread and growing, helped substantially by such “charitable” givers like Bill and Melinda Gates, who get tax deductions for funding their individual pet projects. For example, Edison Learning, a transnational for-profit management organization, claims it serves one-half million students in twenty-five states in the U.S., the United Kingdom and Dubai.

Another way of understanding this crisis is from the ecological perspective. John Bellamy Foster recently wrote, “Every day we are destroying more and more public wealth—air, water, land, ecosystems, species—in the pursuit of private riches, which turns consumption into a mere adjunct to accumulation thereby taking on more distorted and destructive forms.” Use value (resources necessary for collective human survival) is dramatically being converted to exchange value (that which is privately owned and exchanged for profit). One example is public transit: It is more ecologically sound than the use of private automobiles. Transit workers and services are publicly funded, and serve a broad public interest in providing affordable transportation while greatly reducing pollution and waste. As privateers seek to convert public wealth to private profit, they limit services to the most profitable routes while reducing or eliminating less profitable routes. As taxes flow into private pockets instead of local economies, service to workers and the community is reduced and pollution and waste increase.

In yet another scenario, the Michigan state legislature has created legislation that permits the negation of labor agreements and eliminates elected governance in favor of privately run corporate entities in the event of an “economic emergency” is claimed. The direct removal of

democratically-elected governing bodies by the state is a reality today. Democracy itself is at stake.

Defense of the Public Sector, Class, and the National Question

In the last three decades, attempts have been made to privatize nearly every function of the state. One of the most dangerous and anti-democratic attempts is the escalating development of private prisons. We are now learning that many private prison contracts now come with guarantees from agencies to keep from 90% up to 99% of the beds of private prison facilities filled. This is a fundamental corruption of what passes for a criminal justice system. Along with the war on drugs these arrangements represent an all-out attack on communities of color, as police target African Americans, Latinos and other minorities for arrest. As a result of budget cuts, public defense legal help is increasingly unavailable. As judges react to the mandate to keep the prisons full we see an ongoing pattern of criminalizing and containing communities of color to maintain white rule.

The public sector is a major source of employment for oppressed minorities and women. In 2010, 11% of Latinos and Latinas worked in the public sector but were 16.3% of the population. People of Asian descent were 4.1% of the public workforce, the same percent as they are in the overall population. Native participation in public employment is so low the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) doesn't even track it. But African Americans, who are only 12.6% of the U.S. population make up 20% of public employees. The public sector is the single most important employment source for African American men and second for African American women. Twenty-three percent of Black women work in the public sector compared to 14.2% of non-Black women. One half of African American

In fact, we want to expand the notion of public service in areas of healthcare, housing, unemployment, education, transportation, ecology and infrastructure development. Our argument is that such spending is more cost-effective than underfunding necessary programs because the social issues resulting from inadequate funding create greater problems and costs down the road.

2. Fight for the expansion of public services and make war against the attempts to privatize services whenever it is possible for us to mobilize resistance.
 - a. Organize ourselves so that we can effectively summarize and provide analysis of our own struggles and the successes and failures of other efforts;
 - b. Educate unions and other labor organizations about the defense of the public sector;
 - c. Build public coalitions to defend the public sector through unity of action around issues of common concern like fighting national oppression;
 - d. Constantly agitate about how privatization is stripping public resources and services for the advantage of private profit.
3. Link empire-building to the crisis in the public sector. Demand swords (military budgets) be beaten into plowshares (money for services), etc.
4. Demand the regulation of financial institutions. For example: in Oregon, people are trying to establish a state bank to create a publicly governed and regulated financial institution.
5. Establish criteria for quality education and fight for it to be funded.

enfranchisement of southern public workers in terms of collective bargaining, many public sector locals employ a “non-majority” organizing model. The non-majority union in its efforts to become the majority uses every attack as an organizing opportunity. Mobilizations, political action, direct action are seen as opportunities to empower workers in their worksite and community through building workers’ organization. Non-majority campaigns are being waged successfully in Texas, Tennessee and Mississippi where locals are positioning themselves as advocates both for public services and public employees, centering their work around class unity through opposition to all forms of discrimination, whether it be racist, gender discrimination, or homophobia.

Non-majority organizing has been around for a long time. It is, at this point, one of the most available means of organizing the public sector, particularly the South and the Southwest. The intent of this model is to become a majority union by building a long-term base of union members who work together to achieve common goals by acting in concert. This kind of organizing requires that locals act as a union while building the union. This method is especially relevant in organizing the public sector in states that deny collective bargaining rights to their employees.

Here are some characteristics of an effective public sector plan:

1. Counter the pervasive (hegemonic) framing of the problem as one of spending. Given increased corporate control of the media, attributed to deregulation, we have the burden of advancing our analysis of the public sector and its economic problems as one of revenue, not of spending. Using this general analysis we promote the idea that public tax dollars and services should serve the general welfare of the people and not the profit aspirations of corporations via privatization.

professionals work in the public sector. However, it is still the case that non-white public workers are over-represented in lower rung occupations, while whites retain their lock on most top administrative positions, occupations, and pay. The one exception is the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), where 1/3 of senior executives are minorities. Twenty one percent of postal workers are black. The proposed cuts at the USPS will disproportionately affect African Americans.

Researchers have attributed the greater rise in African American unemployment (as compared to whites) to the huge layoffs in the public sector. An article by Akito Yoshikane for *In These Times* reported that 429,000 public workers have lost their jobs since January 2009. Public sector employment is at its lowest level since 2006 and job cuts continue. This is proving disastrous to African Americans’ efforts to climb out of poverty.

The dramatic increase of African American employment is the direct result of the Black Freedom Movement and the federal legislation it forced in the 1960’s. For example, in 1940 only 1.6 % of Blacks worked in public employment (for whites the rate was 4.4%). Even the small number of public employees at that time was often vital to the struggle for freedom in the south. It was common place for African Americans to try to register to vote in the morning and return home to find themselves fired, removed from plantation housing (and worse). Public employees and the self-employed, like insurance salesman Medgar Evers, had job protection. Some, like local leader and postal worker Amzie Moore, were indispensable to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

“The public sector in the South and southwest offers interesting opportunities to link electoral activism, community based work (including demands for reforms in the public sector), and worker rights. It pro-

vides a means to organize African American workers and communities (and increasingly Latino immigrant communities) in the South and Chicano and Native American workers in the Southwest.

Yet, if carried out in traditional trade unionist ways, an organizing effort in these regions will inevitably fail...any new efforts in the South must recognize the centrality of the African American struggle, the newly emerging struggles of Latino immigrants, and the role of community based organizations. With this focus, organizing departs from traditional union organizing, instead following along the lines of the organizing cities concept and becoming a political-geographic project that embraces a variety of forces.”

Excerpt from “Public Sector Unionism in the South and Southwest,” Chapter 9 of *Solidarity Divided*. In the same vein the issue in the Southwest is the Chicano struggle for self-determination.

Both in terms of union work, and in terms of broad social justice work, defense of the public sector is one of our most important tasks. In particular, defense of programs that represent victories won by the working class such as voting rights, affirmative action, assistance programs for the poor, unemployment insurance, etc. is critical. The neoliberal agenda is to destroy all the gains made by working people over the last 100 years of struggle as the capitalists attempt to inexorably move toward total hegemony. There are those who argue that the fight for these issues is reformist, and that revolutionaries should be engaged in “more radical” efforts. If combating the cultural and political hegemony of capitalist ideology is a principle strategic effort for the left, these specific fights are the tactical means of waging that fight. These are the battles of the working class in this period of time, and our job is to engage in them to win and to demonstrate that it is

Engrained in community, cultures of solidarity form the expectation that the community will respond to injustice and will hold itself accountable for defending social justice. Neoliberal cultural strategies create a formidable obstacle to cultures of solidarity. Manipulation of mass media is an important part of the neoliberal agenda. In the U.S., a conservative overhaul of the Communications Act of 1934, under Clinton in 1993, enabled the corporate monopolization of the media and enhanced corporate manipulation of culture. Neoliberal cultural strategies have played a major role in the reshaping of the cultural terrain of the U.S. working class. The cultural mainstream is dominated by an acceptance of consumerism, personal enrichment, privatization and the diminishing social role of government, deteriorating public infrastructure, deregulation, increased poverty, deteriorating healthcare and education, immigrant-bashing and racism as norms. All this plus a prevailing view that no alternative worldview exists frequently breeds hopelessness. National and local conservative cultures have diminished the scope of civic responsibility, along with notions of class solidarity. The deliberate construction of class-conscious cultures of solidarity which expand the scope of civic responsibility become an essential building block for creating an alternative worldview.

The Nuts and Bolts of Our Struggle

The suggestions below are based on real and historical struggle to maintain the public sector. Throughout the U.S. this fight is being waged at different stages. In the South, where the shadow of slavery and the legacy of Jim Crow looms large, the forces of national and class oppression have maintained its heel on the neck of working people. Public sector workers in the South have long experienced the state directed attacks now emerging against public workers throughout the U.S. As a result of the dis-

While it often seems like such changes can only be made in those unions whose members provide health, educational, employment, housing assistance, or other such services that help people survive or get ahead, workers and their unions in the repressive sectors such as the police must also challenge their relationship to the communities in which they work. They too can push for greater connections to the populations they are supposed to protect, for less brutal methods of work, and advocate for changes to laws like those defining “the war on drugs” that target the poor and minorities. These laws create more problems than they solve and put people in danger.

A Post-Capitalist Future

Public sector workers and their unions can be part of the leading edges of a movement to end the current exploitative and repressive system. In a post-capitalist system, government would not serve capitalists but serve the rest of society, the majority of which is working class and which will be majority people of color by 2042. The government employer would transition towards models which actually serve people and invite their participation, while changing the public employee role from one of gatekeeper to one of being a true public servant. The remaining repressive features of the public sector would be directed, not at the people, but only at those capitalists both internally and externally who would attempt to reverse this transition.

Reworking of the Cultural Terrain

In order to maintain its power capitalism must maintain cultural hegemony. This means that capitalists must maintain a firm hold on the ideology, values and behaviors of the people in the U.S. and prevent the development of communities of class-conscious cultures of solidarity.

capitalism itself that is the source of crisis. Particularly in the South and Southwest, the public sector has become a major battleground for both class and national issues. It is a key arena for struggles around racism and white supremacy. The fact that public sector programs and jobs have become a core target of the hard right agenda is due to the racist foundation of that movement.

Snapshots of Policy Impact on the Economy

The right wing in the 1970’s advanced a virulent revised conservative economic and political agenda that effectively escalated the redistribution wealth upward and the expansion of empire building. This agenda had five major policy components that continue to manifest themselves locally, nationally and internationally.

1. Increased wealth (profit extracted from workers) by implementing an increasingly regressive tax system;
2. Casualizing the workforce (more part-time and underemployed workers);
3. Reducing the political and economic role of unions;
4. Eliminating the role of government in regulating the private sector and conversion of public services to private enterprises (privatization);
5. Everlasting military adventures (perpetual war).

These policies have resulted in the crisis we see today throughout the public sector and the continued stripping away of public wealth by for-profit private corporations.

In order for this to be accomplished, the role of the public sector and its related accountability has to be dramatically reduced and the burden of taxation has to be shifted onto the backs of working people. Data from the Tax Policy Center shows that in 1940 corporations paid

18.3% of the federal tax, and personal income accounted for 13.6%. In 2011, personal income accounts for 44% of the federal tax revenue and corporations pay 9.1%. A similar redistribution of the tax burden is reflected at the state level. In Oregon, 44.1% of tax revenue comes from personal income and corporations pay 3.6%. This dramatic drop in revenue at the federal and state level has resulted in the crisis we see today throughout the public sector. What is left is being stripped away through privatization as public wealth is redistributed to private sector corporations.

From 1983 to 1989, the top 5% of all families saw their combined wealth increase by \$1.45 trillion, while the wealth of the bottom 40% of families went down by \$256 trillion. Remarkably, during the same years the federal debt rose by \$1.49 trillion. It was as if the entire federal debt had been awarded directly to the super-rich (Les Leopold, *The Looting of America*).

In an economic snapshot presented by Robert Reich, Professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley:

1. The U.S. economy has doubled since 1980, but wages (when adjusted for inflation) have not increased;
2. All gains have gone to the super-rich. In 1980 the top 1% had 10% of the wealth, now it has 40%;
3. The super-rich have used that increased economic power to lower their taxes. They used to pay 70% in taxes-now it is officially 35%-but most of their income is in the form of capital gains, which are taxed at 15%. The richest 400 families pay only 17% in taxes;
4. Tax revenues are down to 15% of the economy, the lowest rate in 60 years. This has resulted in increased deficit spending (exacerbated by everlasting war), elimination of the social safety net, slashed spending on

expansion and improvement of the services they provide to the people. It is precisely this contradiction that the capitalists are exploiting with the current attacks on public services and public sector unions.

In the private sector, workers and their employers face each other as points on the opposite ends of a line. Of course they exist in a sphere of government intervention and support, but it remains very different from the public sector. In the public sector three points are connected in a triangle: the employing government entity, the employees/service providers, and the people served (who also fund the enterprise). Profits are not made. Workers are essentially paid by community members. However, rather than taking advantage of their intimate connection with the surrounding community to create a different model of unionism, many public sector unions have often mimicked those in the private sector, encouraging the commonly-held misconception that they do not care about the quality and quantity of services provided and are solely interested in preserving their own members' jobs and benefits rather than in social justice unionism.

What could be done instead? If public sector workers are truly serving the people, then building strong links to those whom they serve should be a top priority for their unions. Such links could be developed through strong community liaisons, joint work with existing advocacy organizations, holding public meetings and forums to discuss the provision of services, forming joint community/union committees to surface issues and brainstorm improvements and, where relevant, including representatives of the community served in collective bargaining. There should be no hard line between the workers served and workers serving. Instead we should be building communities of struggle expressed as an employee/community working class alliance to counteract the governmental/corporate capitalist class alliance.

The attitudes of today's working class are as contradictory as the roles played by the public sector. Working class people are on the receiving end of the repressive aspects of the public sector, whether at the hands of the schools, the police, or the prisons. However, the military and the police are among the few remaining places to find a decent paying job with benefits. At the same time that the police and the prisons are expanding, the number of jobs in those agencies which deliver social services is constantly being reduced. While workers want and need services from transportation to health care to job training, their resentment extends to workers providing critical services who, in their role as public sector gatekeeper, must tell them they are ineligible for some program because they earn \$10 too much.

Key to resisting predatory neoliberal policies requires acknowledging and grappling with the exclusions and inequities of public institutions. In education, for example, understanding the public appeal of charter schools, choice and teacher accountability will require reconstructing democratic models for education.

Public Sector Unions

Public sector workers serve two masters: the state, which is their employer, and the people, who pay their wages with tax dollars. However, the people have little or no control over the services for which they pay. The state, which controls the services, works mainly in the interests of the capitalist class from which most politicians arise. As a result of the legacy of business unionism, many public sector unions have often been more vested in fighting with the government for better wages, benefits, and working conditions, paid for disproportionately by the tax-paying public rather than the tax-evading corporations, rather than linking that fight to raising adequate revenue for the

infrastructure, education and public services. Add to this the crisis caused by deregulation and the rampant speculation by financial institutions, such as the housing crisis, runaway gas and food prices, and stripping away the equity of retirement funds.

5. No purchasing power + no jobs = weak or no economic recovery;
6. A working class (Reich calls it "middle class") divided against itself by a number of measures: union vs. non-union, race, national origin, immigration status and gender.

Natural and Man-Made Disasters

The rationale for the Michigan-style takeover of state and local governments and even deeper attacks and penetration into public funding by privateers is facilitated by natural or manufactured disasters as exemplified in Naomi Kline's *Shock Doctrine*.

Nowhere did the rollback of social welfare policies and public institutions occur with greater force than in hurricane-devastated New Orleans. In the words of Black Studies professor George Lipsitz, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina ushered in an orgy of "legalized looting to enable corporations to profit from the misfortunes of poor people." Public education was at the leading edge of that looting. At all levels, the state in alliance with local and national capital and neoliberal think tanks took advantage of the chaos and the exodus of low-income working class African Americans from the city to dismantle their public schools. This was a strategic move to exclude low-income African Americans from the city altogether. Not only had they no homes to return to, they had no schools. Before Katrina hit in August 2005, there were 63,000 students in

New Orleans public schools. About 24,000 began classes there in the fall of 2008.

Just weeks after the disaster, the state took over one hundred public schools and began turning over millions of dollars of taxpayer money to private corporations to run them. The state dismissed all 4,500 public school teachers, broke the city's powerful Black-led teachers' union and dismantled the school system's infrastructure. Right-wing foundations quickly issued reports calling for vouchers, and President Bush proposed \$1.9 billion for K-12 students with \$488 million targeted for vouchers to be used in schools anywhere in the country (Pauline Lipman, "Neoliberal Education Restructuring: Dangers and Opportunities of the Present Crisis," *Monthly Review*, Vol. 63 #3 (July-August 2011) pp. 118-119).

Manufactured, legislated disasters include: Bush's tax cuts for the rich, which costs four trillion dollars in tax revenue; petroleum tax subsidies which costs Americans sixty billion dollars annually; Bush's unfunded mandate, "No Child Left Behind," which further enflamed the already-desperate state of public education funding, or the Bush-sponsored Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006 which was designed to bankrupt the U.S. Postal Service and devastate the 543,000 unionized postal workers.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR BELONGS TO THE PUBLIC

The Current Role of the Public Sector

In the current U.S. system the public sector plays two contradictory roles, a contradiction which helps explain the attitudes of the capitalist and the working classes toward it. On the one hand, public sector workers deliver and en-

able access to crucial services which improve the lives of ordinary people. On the other hand, public sector workers also are forced to act as gatekeepers to those services, administrators of repressive rules and ideas, and enforcers of military domination abroad or immigration and discriminatory drug laws at home.

The public sector has always been a battleground. Some public services upon which working people depend—such as public education—were initially instituted by the state in order to meet the needs of industry for a literate workforce. Later they were forced to expand through popular demand by freed slaves and their allies after Reconstruction. Others, such as assistance for the unemployed, health and safety laws, regulation of business, voting rights and affirmative action, and social security were demanded, fought for and won by workers.

Over the past thirty years, the U.S. has seen an enormous and steady transfer of wealth from the majority to the top one percent. As the capitalists have scoured the world for new investment opportunities, the privatization of public resources has provided a lucrative means of transferring wealth. Selling off the public sector, whether through private military contractors, private prisons, or charter schools, is big business today. In addition, U.S. capital's increasing reliance on cheaper global labor, both educated and uneducated, means even less interest on the part of the capitalists in maintaining those basic services which have been historically necessary for the reproduction of a working class that is capable of participating in whatever productive processes are needed by industry. While debate is ongoing at all levels of society about the need for financial, agricultural, and environmental regulation, the overall trend has been to gradually whittle down the public sector by weakening its regulatory and service functions in favor of repressive functions.