



PUBLIC SECTOR EDUCATION AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING – PUBLIC POLICIES FOR A SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

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Abstract: The recent attacks on public education and the related public sector collective bargaining rights of faculty and teachers have been touted as necessary to balance state budgets and to address the debt problems in the United States. However, these policies have little to do with creating a sustainable economy or any level of social sustainability. Instead, these policies will lead to a destructive economic environment which will drive us further from the goals of social and economic sustainability. The direct cuts to the funding of education at all levels will lead to the potential loss of trillions of dollars to the US economy (OECD Report). The cuts to education will lead to a less educated workforce that is less prepared to engage in the innovation that is needed to create sustainable options for organizations (Becker, Carbo and Langella). These cuts will also lead to further private sector infringement on the research and education that is provided within the academic setting. Further, the cuts to the middle class faculty members and teachers will lead to greater levels of inequality – levels that have been shown to create a destructive, rather than sustainable environment (Wilkinson and Pickett). In order to create a sustainable economy and society, we must invest in education (Stiglitz) and we also must enact labor policies that will assure that workers' rights are upheld and that the American worker will share in the productivity gains related to their labor. Educational investment will lead to sustained economic growth and a workforce that will be more prepared to innovate in ways that will lead to more sustainable business operations. Further, pro-labor policies and the protections of faculty and teachers CB rights will protect the integrity of the educational system, thus supporting the development of critical thinking skills necessary to innovate. Such policies will also assure a fairer distribution on economic resources and create a more sustainable economic system.

Keywords: *Labor Relations, Public Education, Socially Sustainable Systems, Sustainability, Public Policy.*

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 2008, the United States suffered its worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression and dragged the global economy with it into the largest recession in nearly a century. Destructive business practices such as high risk financing, deceptive marketing, and the bundling of subprime mortgages in pursuit of exorbitant profits, bonuses and executive salaries and perks were all well publicized major factors in the meltdown of the global economy. Less well publicized was the systemic long term nature of the causes of this meltdown. In response to this economic meltdown, new economic measures were the subject of popular discussion. World leaders such as Sarkozy of France began to work with economic leaders such as Nouriel Roubini to develop or focus on new economic measures that would more accurately measure the economic outcomes for all of the people of the world rather than just the owners of corporate interests. There was clearly hope and an opportunity to address the destructive economic practices and to explore sustainable solutions to our current systems. In fact, then Senator Barack Obama ran a successful

Presidential campaign on the “hope and change” that this opportunity presented. However, much like the brief focus on poverty after the devastating after effects on Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the focus on creating a sustainable economy for all of the globe was fleeting.

Very quickly a new corporate agenda emerged to detract from the focus on the true destructive nature of our economic system. Instead, the focus became one of proposals that would further exacerbate the problems and to return to the same practices that created the disaster in the first place. This agenda became particularly relevant during the US election cycle of 2010 with proposals focused on austerity, cuts to federal and state budgets and attacks on government workers and their representatives. In Wisconsin, Tennessee, Maine, Ohio, New Jersey and Pennsylvania Governors and state legislators were elected on a platform of cutting state budgets including cuts K-12 and higher education. Once in office many of these legislators went even further attacking public servants, their representatives and labor unions in general. In this paper, we will show how this agenda will further exacerbate the current destructive

nature of our economic system. We will also present policies related to public education and towards labor relations that will help to create a socially sustainable economy.

What is a socially sustainable economy?

In order to understand whether or not a proposal is sustainable or destructive we must understand these terms. A starting point for understanding sustainability is to look at one of the earliest definitions from the Bruntland Commission. In this case, sustainability was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” One of the most widely adopted interpretations of sustainability has been a triple bottom line approach. First adopted by Elkington (1994), this triple bottom line includes the three components of people, planet and profit. In other words, we must engage in practices that are currently profitable, meet the needs of people and the current planet needs, but also will be profitable in the future, meet the needs of people in the future and also those of the planet.

In this paper we will explore the evidence that the current system is unsustainable from a macro-economic standpoint, a people standpoint and a planet standpoint. We will also then explore the policies that have led to this destructive environment. We will also explore many of the current public policy proposals concerning public education and labor and demonstrate how these proposals will merely exacerbate the destructive nature of the U.S. economic system. Finally, we will present policies in both labor and education that would support a sustainable system.

How Far off from Sustainability Are We?

The stark reality is that our current system and our current path is far from any definition of sustainable. The global economic and social systems have been on a destructive path since well before the economic collapse of 2008. In fact, for the last 30 plus years our economic system and business practices have been destructive to both the working people of the US and beyond and to the planet. For the majority of Americans, wages have stagnated, their share of the economic resources has declined, their debt burden has

increased and their financial security has disappeared. At the same time, we have seen a proliferation of greenhouse gasses leading to rising temperatures and climate change, islands of garbage polluting our oceans, the extinction of thousands of species of plant and animal life, deforestation of the planet, pollution of our food and water supplies and vast exploitation of our natural resources that has made the availability of these resources for future generations doubtful.

For the past 30 years the wages for the majority of Americans have stagnated or declined (Mishel, et. al. 2009). From 1980 to 2005, the wages for workers with bachelor's degrees or high school degrees did not keep up with the productivity gains over that era (Levy and Kochan, 2011). Instead the vast majority of these gains went into profits and the ownership class. These factors together produced the highest levels of inequality we have seen since the Great Depression with the top 1% taking the largest share of the national income since the Depression (Mishel, et. al, 2009) and holding more wealth than the bottom 90% of Americans (Jones, 2008). By 2003, one in four jobs in the US paid less than a living wage

with no benefits (Quigley, 2003). Even during the better economic years of the 1990s, the vast majority of economic gains avoided the middle and working class and instead went to the ownership class (Hertz, 2003)

This vast level of inequality is simply unsustainable and is destructive to our society. First, the fact that US jobs pay less than a living wage means that these low wage workers are unable to meet even their basic needs today. Second, the decreased spending power of the working and middle classes led first to ballooning debt, then when this credit availability dried up we faced a severe demand shortage. Much of the consumer debt was taken out against the equity of the homes and while this debt that propped up spending during the 90s when the debt bubble burst demand plummeted and many Americans were left with more debt on their homes than they could afford. This led to the foreclosure crisis, growing levels of homelessness and of course bankruptcies. There are also many less direct outcomes to these rising levels of inequality. According to an extensive study by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), these increased levels of inequality lead to negative health outcomes,

higher rates of violence, higher incarceration rates (when the US already lead the world in terms of prison population), higher rates of drug use, mental disease, teen pregnancy and worse educational outcomes. There is little doubt that the stagnating wages and the growing inequality in the United States is destructive.

From a planet standpoint, the outcomes have not been much better. Business practices such as planned and perceived obsolescence have led to a consumer rush to buy and dispose of more and more products (Leonard, 2010). This has led to the destruction and obliteration of forests and other natural resources to manufacture products, the exploitation of workers across the globe to keep the prices for this “stuff” low, a huge influx of carbon dioxide and other toxins into our environment during the production stage and the polluting of our water, air and land in the disposal stage. With islands of garbage as large as states in the two largest oceans in the world (McClendon, 2010) landfills that are the size of cities, growing levels of drinking water contamination and soaring planetary temperatures (The United Nations News Centre, 2007) the current practices are

as unsustainable for the planet as they have proven to be for the workers of the world.

A Sustainable Policy Analysis

To create a socially sustainable economic system, we must engage in meaningful policy analysis. We can no longer afford to analyze policy proposals based on potential profit, GDP or other benefits alone. Instead, we must begin to analyze policies based upon whether they will be destructive or sustainable. In other words, we must determine whether policies will help us to meet the human rights and needs of the current and future generations while protecting the planet and our ecosystem. Policies that do not should be viewed as destructive and will need to be rejected. Policies that do would be viewed as sustainable and should be adopted. In the last section of this paper, we will analyze policies that have been proposed to cut public education at all levels, to cut public workers and to attack workers’ rights to engage in concerted activity. While the 2010 elections ushered in a plethora of anti-education, anti-public employee and anti-union platforms, for these purposes we will focus primarily on

the proposals in Wisconsin (due to the well known nature of the battles in the Badger state) and the proposals in Pennsylvania (while less well known nationally these proposal directly impact the authors of this paper who all work in public higher education in the state). We will also propose and analyze alternative policies based on this sustainability level analysis.

Cutting Education Spending

In both Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, the Republican gubernatorial candidates ran on a platform of massive budget cuts. Once in office, both of these Governor's, Scott Walker in Wisconsin and Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania went even further in their proposals than many voters expected. In Pennsylvania, the Governor proposed a 50% cut to the state's public higher education appropriation, similar cuts to the state funded universities and half a billion dollars in cuts to k-12 (Maureillo & Olson, 2011). In Wisconsin, Walker's budget proposal would cut over \$800 million from K-12 over the two year budget, cut 11% from the University of Wisconsin - Madison and cut similar amounts from the budgets of other state

owned Universities (Walker's budget cuts, 2011). In both cases, the Governor's of both of these states used the budget deficits as excuses for making these cuts, while ignoring the possibilities of potential revenue streams to fill the shortfall and ignoring the increases in other spending (for Corbett increases in law enforcement and his own office) and even providing additional tax cuts in Walker's case.

As the Supreme Court unanimously agreed in 1954, "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments...[it] is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment (Brown v. Board of Education)." Today education is critical to a sustainable economy. We need an educated workforce to confront the problems facing our environment, to solve our energy dependence issues, to innovate to find ways to manufacture products so that we are not wasting the

Earth's resources, polluting our air and water supplies through the production processes, and polluting our lands, rivers and oceans through our disposal processes (Becker, Carbo, Langella, 2010). As we cut education we are cutting the innovative potential of our future labor force.

These budget cuts will directly impact the innovativeness of the future labor force. At the higher education level, we already see reports that graduates too often are not reading enough or writing enough to gain needed critical thinking and analysis skills (Arum and Roska, 2011). When we cut the budgets to higher ed, the shortfall must be made up somewhere and one such measure we see spreading is increased class sizes. As these class sizes increases, the logical outcome is that there will be fewer and fewer writing assignments and more and more multiple choice exams and thus even lower levels of critical analysis skills. Further, the budget cuts to higher education make higher ed less accessible to many and will lead to more students dropping out before completing their education. Many of these budget cuts are passed on as tuition and fee increases for students. Both in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania,

tuition increases were indeed part of the path to filling the appropriation cuts. Tuition increases are one of the major reasons that students drop out of college (Pleskac, et. al. 2011). Other reasons that students drop out can also be linked to cuts in appropriations. For instance, students often drop out due to roommate problems or depression (Pleskac, et. al. 2011). Many campuses have offered services to deal with these issues. However, as budgets are slashed these extra services will become tougher and tougher to provide. Another reason that we see students drop out of school is an unexpected bad grade (Pleskac, et. al. 2011). Again as class sizes are increased to cover up the budget shortfall students are less likely to have close interaction with faculty and the unexpected bad grade will become a more common occurrence. The budget cuts make higher education less accessible to students, force educators to offer a watered down education and make it more likely that those who pursue an education will drop out before they have completed their education. The cuts make it less likely that we will be able to solve our future problems, meet our future needs and protect the environment upon which depend for survival.

Further, those students that are still able to attend college, their costs will be increased. This will either mean less spending elsewhere (for instance many students are renting books or not buying books), or it will mean increased student debt loads. The overall student debt load has increased by nearly 25% during the course of the recession (Eichler, 2011) and the uptick in student debt default poses serious concerns for the economy (Eichler, 2011). The decreased appropriations are also likely to lead to Universities looking for alternative sources of revenue, including turning to the private sector. We already have problems with corporations and their interests interfering with the curriculum (Marens, 2008), the running of the University (Lieberwitz, 2005) and an neoliberal restructuring of public education (Lipman, 2011). This will make these public institutions even more beholden to corporate interests, their positions and their research desires, when we need Universities to be questioning the destructive corporate practices.

The cuts to education also mean a drastic loss of economic activity. According to an OECD report (2010), an investment in

education that would bring US PISA scores up to the level of Finland's would add \$103 trillion to the US GDP over the next 40 years. By cutting education funding, even if it means funding education through further public debt, we are foregoing a critical investment that could help to turn around the economic slump (Stiglitz, 2010). In essence, this de-investment policy by the governor's of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and many other states is likely to have a long term negative impact on an already shaky economy.

From a worker standpoint, these cuts are destructive for both future and current workers. From a people level as students have less access to a quality education they will have less access to the meaningful jobs that will afford them the opportunities to meet their needs. Even today with the unemployment rate near double digits, employers claim to have jobs that they cannot fill because applicants do not have the skills (McKendrick, 2011). These cuts will further cut the skill level of the labor force. These cuts also mean direct cuts to current workers. For teachers and staff in K-12 and higher ed, many of these cuts have come at their expense. For hundreds of teachers, staff and

even union staff members, these cuts have meant the loss of their employment. For others, the cuts have meant reduced pay, higher costs for benefits and the loss of benefit. These lost jobs and benefits will further exacerbate the current unemployment problem. They also will further exacerbate the demand problems caused by stagnating wages that plague our economy. As benefits are lost we are also likely to see more and more individuals unable to survive their retirement and more and more bankruptcies from medical bills.

Attacks on Public Workers and Unions

A large part of Governor Walker's budget proposal encompassed taking away collective bargaining rights from state workers and hamstringing public unions. This budget proposal stripped public employees of their rights to collectively bargain over anything other than wages (Davey and Greenhouse, 2011) and also took away the public sector unions ability to collect dues through payroll deduction (Kroll, 2011 Jones). In Ohio legislation was passed that limited collective bargaining for all public sector employees to wage issues (Wisconsin

excluded police and firefighters from this limitation) also did away with payroll deduction for union dues and even gave government actors the power to unilaterally implement a last, best and final offer (Greenhouse, 2011). In New Jersey similar legislation took benefits outside of the scope of collective bargaining and immediately increased the cost of benefits to state workers (Santi, 2011). Similar legislation as well as right to work legislation has been discussed in many other states including Pennsylvania and at the federal level Republican legislators have attempted to make it tougher for FAA employees to organize

While those proposing these policies attacking the labor movement have suggested they are necessary to solve the current financial crisis, the reality is they are anything but a solution and instead will exacerbate the current problems, will violate the rights of current and future workers and will also have a detrimental effect on all workers (the majority of US citizens) in the United States. As has been pointed out by numerous economists, including Levy and Kochan (2011), a large part of the economic crisis of '08 can be linked to a wage and demand

problem. For the past 30 plus years, the wages for the majority of US workers have stagnated or even declined (Mishel, et. al. 2009). Workers have not shared in the productivity gains and as a result we have record levels of inequality in the US (Hertz, 2003). This inequality has been shown to lead to adverse health outcomes, educational outcomes, increased crime and incarceration as well as other destructive outcomes to the US. Even before this crisis, one in four US jobs paid less than a living wage (Quigley, 2003). The stagnating wage problem has also led to less demand as workers have struggled to meet their needs, much less engage in discretionary spending.

These proposals that further weaken the labor movement and pass additional costs onto public sector employees will only further exacerbate the problems of stagnating wages, inequality and reduced consumer demand. First, these policies will clearly have the direct effect of reducing the discretionary income of these state workers. As they are being forced to pay more their current benefits this will mean less dollars available to be spent in other areas. For many workers, this may mean they will be unable to meet

their current other needs such as housing, food, utilities, etc. Long term we can expect that union strength and representation will also decline and clearly this will mean a decline in wages, as there is no disputing the union wage benefit. Perhaps most costly will be the loss of benefits. These state workers will no longer be able to negotiate for the benefits they have bargained for in the past. The decent health and retirement benefits that they have today will most likely be replaced with inexpensive employer options such as 401(k) plans and major medical coverage. These plans will make retirements less stable for these employees and also lead to

These proposals will not only affect the currently unionized workers, but will also have an effect on all working people. As these public sector workers are de-unionized and stripped of their collective bargaining rights the union threat effect that benefits other workers in the relevant labor market and even in the broader economy will be lost. In the private sector employers often pay a relatively competitive wage and provide relatively competitive benefits to avoid unionization. As the threat of unionization diminishes we see these

wages and benefits also diminish. Further, employers that are competing for labor (those that are concerned about the quality of their labor force) must meet the wages and benefits available to workers through other employers. For instance, if an employer wants to attract college graduates they must pay a wage that is competitive for college graduates. In this case the direct analogy is that private sector employers must pay enough of wage and offer enough benefits to attract workers away from the public sector jobs. As these jobs offer fewer benefits and lower wages, the private sector employers will be able to engage in this same downward trajectory. These policies that have been passed and/or proposed today will create a vicious cycle that will see wages and discretionary income decrease thus decreasing demand throughout the already weak economy.

Alternative Sustainable Policies

While the current proposals discussed above concerning labor and public education will be destructive to our economy, our planet and the people of this planet, there are sustainable alternatives. The alternatives that will

lead to a sustainable economy include investments in education at K-12 and higher education and labor policies that promote collective bargaining, assure stronger wages, provide job security, decent benefits and a secure retirement. These policies will be described in more detail in this final section of the paper.

Investments in education will have a number of sustainable benefits to our economic systems. First, according to the OECD report, there will be a long lasting economic benefit – in fact the investment in education to improve US PISA scores to the level of Finland’s would add over \$100 trillion to the US economy over the next 40 years (OECD, 2010). These are benefits not just for the current generation but also for those in the future. Investments in education will also help to develop the type of workforce that is necessary to solve the current environmental problems, to develop new manufacturing techniques, to develop processes that prevent the types of waste that are wreaking havoc on the planet (Jones, 2008, Becker, et. al. 2010). The investment in K-12 and higher ed will protect the current wages of teachers, faculty and staff members and will protect the benefits

that keep these workers healthy and financially secure. Only where there is public investment in research can we assure that academic research will be free from corporate influence (Marens, 2008, Lieberwitz, 2005). This research is also needed to question the current practices that are leading to these destructive outcomes and also to find new paths that will lead to socially sustainable systems.

From a labor standpoint it is critical that we return to the policies of the New Deal that promoted collective bargaining. We have seen through experience that it has been through collective bargaining that employees have been able to secure decent wages and benefits that protect themselves and their families (Yates, 2009; Kaplan, 2009). A revived labor movement and collective bargaining will address the wage problem and the demand problem that plagues our economy (Levy and Kochan, 2011). A revived labor movement will also provide employees the just cause protections that are so vital to allowing employees to take the type of risks that are necessary for the innovation needed to create a sustainable system (Dannin, 2011). Finally, a revived labor movement will also

lead to greater levels of equality (Western and Rosenfeld, 2011) and thus address the destructive problems caused by the high levels of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The financial crisis of 2008 and the elections of 2010 ushered in an era of critical public policy decision making. The choices we make today will play a major role in determining whether or not we will have a socially sustainable economy or an economic system that is destructive to the planet and its inhabitants. Corporate backed politicians such as Governor's Walker (Wisconsin) and Corbett (Pennsylvania) and others have proposed, passed and implemented policies that support a destructive system. Specifically in both of these states as well as in states such as Ohio, New Jersey and others we have seen cuts to education at the k-12 level and higher education level that will hurt current students, the future labor force and will stymie innovation. We have also seen attacks on labor that will lead to further levels of inequality, stagnating wages and will also stymie workforce innovation. While these policies have been

proposed as being necessary, the reality is they are anything but. If we want to pursue a socially sustainable economy that will protect the planet, provide good paying jobs that will meet the needs of current and future generations and lead to a change to the destructive practices that we see today, we must support investment in education at all levels and a return to the New Deal types of protections for workers and collective bargaining that have deteriorated over the last thirty years. If we follow these policies we can indeed create a green economy, an innovative workforce, a more equal society with better social outcomes and a bright future for generations to come.

BIOGRAPHY

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