

Women and Public Sector Precarity: Causes, Conditions and Consequences

FACT SHEET 7: NEOLIBERALISM AND RESISTANCE TO PRECARIOUS WORKING CONDITIONS

Given the wide-ranging negative consequences of public sector precarity, it is important to consider how this situation has come about. In short, we point to the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideas, models, and policies, which have been introduced into all levels of government across Canada.

NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is based on the belief that promoting and supporting market activity increases individual freedom. It generally favours mechanisms such as de-regulation, privatization, and limitations on public social programs, along with the reduction of powers of collective actors such as unions. In this model, it is assumed that everyone is a self-sufficient market actor, and gender, ethnicity, race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability are invisible both within and through state policies masking systemic and structural oppression.

Over the past three decades in Canada, changes aligned with neoliberalism have included the privatization of public enterprises, increased contracting out, expansion of user charges and a general reduction in the size of the public service and public payroll.

In the 1980-90s, all levels of government reduced programme spending and number of programmes through outsourcing, and by creating public-private partnerships and alternative delivery mechanisms. These models can now be found in a variety of public services such as airport security, postal service, education, health, and home care. The 1980s were a time marked by equality gains for women and minorities, but also by growing attacks on public sector collective bargaining, cuts to unemployment insurance, and a rise of precarious employment. As noted above, part of the neoliberal strategy of weakening labour rights involves weakening unions, an approach that also has gendered impacts.

Neoliberal reforms over the last several decades have fundamentally reorganized the public sector in Canada, including creating more precarious work and services. The erosion of full-time, permanent public sector positions is especially problematic for women, who have historically enjoyed better access to equitable work and human rights protections in the public sector as compared to the private sector. For marginalized women, including women with disabilities, racialized women, Aboriginal women, and LGBT women, secure public sector employment has been critical to broader equity gains. **Neoliberal reforms put employment equity at risk.**

Additionally, women are more likely to enter into precarious jobs because of ongoing imbalances in caregiving responsibilities. Precarious work conditions lead to concerns about the quality and safety of public services, and this in turn is especially problematic for

This is the seventh of seven fact sheets on women and public sector precarity. All of the fact sheets are available at:

<http://www.criaw-icref.ca/en/page/women-and-public-sector-precariety-fact-sheet-series>

CRIA W-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization.

PRECARIOUS WORK

is characterized by employment that is low-paid, little or no benefits and with high job insecurity.

precariously employed women, who have less access to good incomes, benefits, and job security.

RESISTANCE

Some valuable examples of resistance to precarious working conditions have emerged in the research. For example, unions have bargained not only to limit the use of precarious workers, but also to gain rights and benefits for those who do end up in precarious work arrangements.

- ▶ The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), has bargained for a number of clauses regarding the use of temporary workers. In the past, efforts by CUPW and the Organization of Rural Route Mail Couriers (ORRMC) led to workers gaining employee status, the protections of a collective agreement, and access to the Canada Post Pension Plan.
- ▶ The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has negotiated better health benefits for part time employees in several sectors, increased its bargaining focus on part-time workers generally, and prioritized job security in a number of recent strikes.
- ▶ Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) are campaigning against the increasing casualization of academic work.

In addition to bargaining, unions have used political action to advocate for precarious workers, often in coalition with community allies. A recent example is the Vote Child Care 2015 campaign, an effort by unions and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada to make childcare a federal policy priority. In another coalition involving CUPE in Toronto, library workers and supporters successfully defended against service cuts and privatization, and improved job security for staff.

Through court action, and working in solidarity with other organizations, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) has been actively involved in winning gains and protections for LGBT workers, including having been active in the court case that led to the establishment of sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination under Section 15 of the Charter. In Nova Scotia, CUPE partners with the Nova Scotia Citizens' Health Care Network to support the network's efforts to protect, strengthen and extend public health care".

There are also instances of resistance to precarity around the world. For example, workers in the UK are protected against unfair treatment on the grounds of being fixed-term or part-time workers. This means that part-time workers should have access to the same pension opportunities and benefits, holidays, career development, pay rates, and so on as full-time workers. In Norway, part-time employees have rights such as having a preferential right to an extended post rather than having the employer create a new position.

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