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## [Foreward to] Public workers in service of America: a reader

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## Foreword

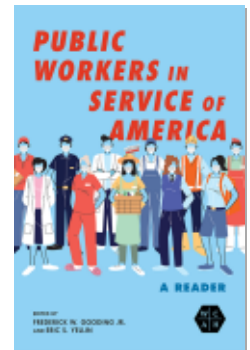
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# Foreword

JOSEPH A. McCARTIN

While public sector workers and their unions have been at the center of many of our biggest, bitterest fights over labor policy, law, and politics in recent years—becoming both the prime target of antiunionists and organized labor’s most energetic incubators of innovation and militancy—these workers generally have yet to receive the attention they deserve from historians. This volume helps correct that problem and it could not be more timely. As the essays that follow make clear, the struggles of public workers have deeply impacted the status of all U.S. workers and unions, shaping the quality of our democracy, as well as its limitations for much of modern U.S. history. It is long past time that we give these workers their due.

For recent evidence of the central importance of public sector workers and labor struggles, consider what transpired between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. As Wall Street’s 2008 implosion triggered the largest downturn since the 1930s, a ferocious antiunion struggle erupted that targeted public workers. Republican governors used the recession to drive a wedge between laid-off private sector workers and workers who remained on government payrolls, opening up an all-out assault on public sector unions. Minnesota’s governor, Tim Pawlenty, charged that government workers were “over-benefited and overpaid compared to their private-sector counterparts,” while Indiana’s Mitch Daniels called them “a new privileged class in America.” For his part, Wisconsin’s Scott Walker translated such divisive rhetoric into a policy breakthrough. In 2011 he pushed through Act 10, a law that effectively stripped most of Wisconsin’s public workers of the right to bargain collectively. Inspired by Walker, a dozen states amended their laws within a year to weaken government workers’ unions. The U.S. Supreme Court soon joined the fray.

In a string of decisions culminating with *Janus v. AFSCME* in 2018, the court invalidated laws that allowed unions to collect fees from the government workers they represented in contract negotiations and grievance appeals.<sup>1</sup>

That assault against government workers rippled far beyond the public sector. In state after state, attacks on government unions opened the door to a broader offensive against unions in general. Indeed, in Indiana and Michigan in 2012 and in Wisconsin two years later, attacks on the collective bargaining rights of government workers catalyzed enactment of “right to work” laws that weakened private sector workers’ unions.<sup>2</sup> The decimation of these unions in key states like Michigan and Wisconsin in turn proved decisive for Donald Trump. In 2016 he narrowly won both of those states and with them the presidency. The targeting of public sector workers thus set the stage for the Trump era.

Yet, public sector workers and unions were not only targets of attack during these years, they were also agents of innovation and militancy, inspiring and sustaining the broader labor movement during challenging times. Teachers’ unions played an especially important role in this regard. Beginning with the Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012 and reaching a crescendo during the #RedforEd teachers’ strikes and mobilizations of 2018 that spread from West Virginia to Arizona, teachers began pushing back against neoliberal education policies and fighting for the “schools our children deserve,” as the Chicago teachers put it. Through these efforts, organized teachers almost single-handedly revived the strike after years of dwindling labor militancy. Thanks to the #RedforEd upsurge, more workers walked off the job in 2018 than in any year since 1986, and a staggering 89 percent of those strikers were employed in public education. During the pandemic, these same unions pushed hard for policies that would protect students and their families from COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

Public sector fights not only revived militancy; they also helped revive social unionism through new initiatives such as Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG). BCG represented a transformative union strategy that was devised by public sector unions in the aftermath of the passage of Wisconsin’s Act 10. It grew out of government workers’ realization that they could not preserve their collective bargaining rights against the antiunion onslaught unless they began to ally their cause with that of beleaguered private sector workers and residents of working-class neighborhoods, expanding the scope of public sector bargaining in ways that addressed the issues of community members and private sector workers as well as government employees. Thus, teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota, demanded their school districts cease doing business with banks that would foreclose on students’ families during the school year; Chicago teachers demanded a housing program that would deal

with the growing homelessness and the impact of gentrification; Los Angeles municipal workers urged reforms in their city's relationship to financial entities, pointing out that LA spent more in fees paid to Wall Street firms than it did repairing and maintaining city streets; and LA teachers fought for an end to random student searches by public safety officers on school campuses. In these and many other BCG-style campaigns, public sector unions began using the collective bargaining process to fight for racial justice, immigrant rights, tax reform, and other demands important to their community allies.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways the growing racial and gender diversity of government workers' unions—whose ranks include more women and African Americans than the private sector workforce on average—was key to both their vulnerability to Act 10–style attacks and their BCG-style innovations. Their vulnerability became evident in the upsurge of right-wing populism during the Great Recession, as Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes have shown, when right-wing populists used the prominent roles played by women and people of color in public sector unions to impose on them a set of racialized and gendered stereotypes that portrayed them as “the new welfare queens,” as Jonathan Cohn memorably put it.<sup>5</sup> This trope was no more accurate than the original welfare queen myth, for in reality women and African American public employees suffered disproportionately from Great Recession austerity. Some 70 percent of the 765,000 state and local jobs cut between 2007 and 2011 were held by women; 30 percent by African Americans.<sup>6</sup> Yet it was also the vulnerability of public workers that incentivized them to lead creative new efforts like BCG. It is no coincidence that the majority of the advisory committee for the Bargaining for the Common Good network is made up of women and people of color.<sup>7</sup>

As this recent history suggests, the story of public workers and their struggles helps illuminate the clashing forces that are contending to shape America's future. To fully understand those forces requires that we step back to consider the changing dynamics of public employees and their organizations in multiple settings over a broad sweep of time, as the essays in this volume do.

Twenty years ago, U.S. historians had scarcely begun to tell the story of public workers and their organizations or to properly integrate them into the narrative arc of American labor history. “Where are the organized public workers?” historian Robert Shaffer asked in 2002, as he chronicled their near complete absence from U.S. history textbooks even as government workers were then on a trajectory to become one-half of the union movement's membership.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, Shaffer was not alone in taking notice. A historiography of public workers and their unions was beginning to emerge, led

by such works as Margaret C. Rung's *Servants of the State: Managing Diversity and Democracy in the Federal Workforce, 1933–1953* (2002) and Joseph Slater's *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900–1962* (2004).<sup>9</sup> Within a decade, the number of scholars “bringing the state’s workers in” to U.S. labor history began to multiply.<sup>10</sup>

This volume builds on that foundational scholarship. Indeed, in many ways these essays represent a coming of age for the historiography of public sector workers and unions, illuminating the long-range historical processes that have shaped this current moment for public workers, the labor movement, and the nation.<sup>11</sup> The volume’s able editors, Frederick W. Gooding Jr. and Eric S. Yellin, limn both the attractions and disappointments that federal government jobs have held for African Americans across the twentieth century. Katherine Turk and Cathleen D. Cahill demonstrate how gender has shaped public workers’ experience in different settings and historical eras. William P. Jones, Francis Ryan, and Amy Zanoni show how the intersection of politics and race (and in Zanoni’s case, gender as well) both animated and constrained public workers’ organizing efforts in diverse settings. Joseph E. Slater and Jon Shelton, meanwhile, analyze the complex yet pivotal roles played by two strategically crucial groups of public workers—police officers and teachers—in shaping the historical trajectory of public sector unionism from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first.

Taken together, these essays uncover the long roots of our contemporary conflicts, and by doing so they help shine a light on both the threats and the opportunities we now face as we struggle to deal with the twenty-first-century labor question. Most importantly, they remind us that if we hope to create a more just, sustainable, and democratic society in this century, we cannot afford to neglect the needs, aspirations, and energy of public workers.

## Notes

1. Quotations from Joseph A. McCartin, “Convenient Scapegoats: Public Workers under Assault,” *Dissent* 58, no. 2 (2011): 45–50; Joseph A. McCartin, “An Embattled New Deal Legacy: Public Sector Unionism and the Struggle for a Progressive Order,” in *Beyond the New Deal Order: U.S. Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein, Gary Gerstle, and Alice O’Connor, 213–32 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Martin Malin, “The Legislative Uproar in Public-Sector Labor Law: A Search for Common Elements,” *Labor Lawyer* 27, no. 2 (2012): 149–64.

2. For an overview, see McCartin, “Embattled New Deal Legacy,” 213–32.

3. For detailed figures, see Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Work Stoppages Involving 1,000 or More Workers, 1993–2018*, <https://www.bls.gov/web/wkstp/monthly-listing.html/>,

accessed October 26, 2019. Teachers' strikes were led by the following unions: West Virginia Education Association; Jersey City Education Association; Oklahoma Education Association; Kentucky Education Association; Colorado Education Association; Arizona Education Association; North Carolina Association of Educators; Tacoma Education Association; and Local 3299 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents workers in the University of California system.

4. On Bargaining for the Common Good, see Joseph A. McCartin, "Bargaining for the Common Good," *Dissent* 63, no. 2 (2016): 128–35; on the St. Paul, LA, and Chicago examples, see McCartin and Marilyn Sneiderman, "Collective Action and the Common Good: Teachers' Struggles and the Revival of the Strike," in *Strike for the Common Good: Fighting for the Future of Public Education*, ed. Rebecca Kolins Givan and Amy Schrager Lang, 15–35 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); on the LA campaign against Wall Street, see Patrick Dixon, *Fixing L.A. and Remaking Public Sector Bargaining* (Washington, DC: Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor, 2016), <https://lwp.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/319/uploads/Fixing-Los-Angeles-and-Remaking-Public-Sector-Collective-Bargaining.pdf/>.

5. Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes, "Parasites of Government': Racial Antistatist and Representations of Public Employees amid the Great Recession," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2016): 931–54. HoSang and Lowndes borrow the concept of racial transposition from Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Jonathan Cohn, "Why Public Employees Are the New Welfare Queens," *New Republic*, August 8, 2010, <https://newrepublic.com/article/76884/why-your-fireman-has-better-pension-you/>.

6. Stephanie Luce and Ruth Milkman, "The State of the Unions 2015: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States," Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies, 2015, [https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY\\_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Communications/1509\\_Union\\_Density2015\\_RGB.pdf/](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Communications/1509_Union_Density2015_RGB.pdf/); David Cooper, Mark Gable, and Algernon Austin, "The Public-Sector Jobs Crisis," in EPI Briefing Paper (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2012), 1–22, <https://www.epi.org/publication/bp339-public-sector-jobs-crisis/>.

7. The BCG advisory committee includes Stacy Davis Gates of the Chicago Teachers Union, Cecily Myart-Cruz of the United Teachers of Los Angeles, and Merrie Najimy of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. See Bargaining for the Common Good, <https://www.bargainingforthecommongood.org/advisory-committee/>.

8. Robert Shaffer, "Where Are the Organized Public Employees? The Absence of Public Employee Unionism from U.S. History Textbooks and Why It Matters," *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002): 315, 331.

9. Margaret C. Rung, *Servants of the State: Managing Diversity and Democracy in the Federal Workforce, 1933–1953* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Joseph E. Slater, *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900–1962* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2004).

10. Joseph A. McCartin, “Bringing the State’s Workers In: Time to Rectify an Imbalanced U.S. Labor Historiography,” *Labor History* 47, no. 1 (2006): 73–94.

11. The most relevant previous works of these authors are Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869–1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Frederick W. Gooding Jr., *American Dream Deferred: Black Federal Workers in Washington, D.C., 1941–1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); Francis Ryan, *AFSCME’s Philadelphia Story: Municipal Workers and Urban Power in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Jon Shelton, *Teacher Strike!: Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Slater, *Public Workers*; Katherine Turk, *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Eric S. Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson’s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Amy Zaroni, *Poor Health: Retrenchment and Resistance in Chicago’s Public Hospital, 1950s–1990s* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2020).