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A Public Service Job Assurance: A Most Fitting  
Tribute to Dr. King  
Special Report 2001/01

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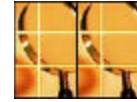
# Special Report 01/01



## **PUBLIC SERVICE JOB ASSURANCE: A MOST FITTING TRIBUTE TO DR. KING**

BY  
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## PUBLIC SERVICE JOB ASSURANCE: A MOST FITTING TRIBUTE TO DR. KING

BY MATHEW B. FORSTATER, DIRECTOR

Not many folks remember that the 1963 “March on Washington” was officially named the “March on Washington for *Jobs and Freedom*.” This detail often gets lost amid the important celebration of the general achievement and highlights such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” oration. Indeed, the theme of job creation runs through Dr. King’s writings. Perhaps no single policy could have as great a social and economic impact on the African American community—and the entire country—as federally funded job assurance for every person ready and willing to work. This is a policy approach that was explicitly supported by Dr. King, and that is currently receiving attention in economic and policy circles.

In an article in *Look* published just after his assassination (King, 1968), Dr. King wrote that: “We call our demonstration a campaign for jobs and income because we feel that the economic question is the most crucial that black people, and poor people generally, are confronting.” Thirty-three years later, at the peak of a peacetime economic expansion heralded as the longest and strongest in recent history, not only is the African American unemployment rate stuck at twice that of whites, but at around 8% that figure remains at a rate that would be considered evidence of a deep recession were it to hold for society as a whole:

There is a literal depression in the Negro community. When you have mass unemployment in the Negro community, it’s called a social problem; when you have mass unemployment in the white community, it’s called a depression. The fact is, there is a major depression in the Negro community. The unemployment rate is extremely high, and among Negro youth, it goes up as high as forty percent in some cities. (King, 1968)

Yet another generation has had to witness the inability of a ‘booming’ economy to provide gainful employment for every person willing and able to work, a point well understood by Dr. King:

Economic expansion alone cannot do the job of improving the employment situation of Negroes. It provides the base for improvement but other things must be constructed upon it, especially if the tragic situation of youth is to be solved.

In a booming economy Negro youth are afflicted with unemployment as though in an economic crisis. They are the explosive outsiders of the American expansion. (King, 1967)

As politicians and media figures laud the relatively lower aggregate unemployment rates and the ‘success’ of ‘welfare reform,’ more careful observers note the hidden unemployment official numbers do not account for and caution the optimists that the real test of the ‘Personal Responsibility Act’ will be as the economy goes into recession. Official unemployment figures go down not only when the unemployed find work, but when ‘discouraged workers’ drop out of the labor force, a process with harsh consequences:

[T]he expansion of private employment and nonprofessional opportunities cannot, however, provide full employment for Negroes. Many youths are not listed as unemployed because in despair they have left the labor market completely. They are psychologically disabled and cannot be rescued by conventional employment. (King, 1967)

Those in prison are also disproportionately young, black, and male and are also not included in official unemployment figures. Combined with other recent developments such as the exploding homicide rates for young, Black men (itself linked to the ‘war on drugs’) and the return of the death penalty (with a disproportionately young, Black, male death row), this explains the decline in marriageable-age Black men—unlike ‘welfare incentives’ a factor with some explanatory power in understanding the decline of the two-parent family among African Americans (see Darity and Myers, 1994). As Dr. King well-understood, what emerges is a system that excludes many young African American women and men from participating, and creative policy measures are required to respond effectively and fairly to this challenge:

There are also some Negro youth who have faced so many closed doors and so many crippling defeats that they have lost motivation. For those youth who are alienated from the routines of work, there should be... work situations which permit flexibility... until they can manage the demands of the typical workplace. (King, 1967, p. 126)

The private sector, even in the “best of times” is unable to provide jobs for all. Moreover, racial wage and employment gaps are not fully explained by human capital, i.e. differences in skill and education levels. Dr. King’s alternative explanation points to the functional role of racial economic inequality in modern capitalism:

Depressed living standards for Negroes are not simply the consequence of neglect. Nor can they be explained by the myth of the Negro’s innate incapacities, or by more sophisticated rationalization of his acquired infirmities (family disorganization, poor education, etc.). They are a structural part of the economic system in the United States. Certain industries are based on a supply of low-paid, under-skilled and immobile nonwhite labor. (King, 1967, p. 7)

Now we realize that economic dislocations in the market operations of our economy and the prevalence of discrimination thrust people into idleness and bind them in constant or frequent unemployment against their will. Today the poor are less often dismissed, I hope, from our consciences by being branded as inferior or incompetent. We also know that no matter how dynamically the economy develops and expands, it does not eliminate all poverty. (King, 1972 [1968])

Unfortunately, Dr. King's hope has not been realized, as 'culture of poverty' and even bio-genetic theories continue to rear their ugly heads. The resurrection of these frameworks by authors such as Dinesh D'Souza, Thomas Sowell, and Charles Murray is in part a response to the failure of human capital theory. But their reemergence is also part of the trend toward *greater discrimination as the racial education and skills gaps are closed*—evidence further supporting the functional theory of racial economic inequality (Darity and Hamilton, 2001). Speaking of Black men, but of a process also relevant to the African American female experience, Dr. King wrote that:

The quest of the Negro male for employment was always frustrating. If he lacked skill, he was only occasionally wanted because such employment as he could find had little regularity and even less remuneration. If he had a skill, he also had his black skin, and discrimination locked doors against him. In the competition for scarce jobs he was a loser because he was born that way. (King, 1967, pp. 106-07)

In addressing these tremendous challenges, Dr. King's writings have a laser-like focus on job creation as addressing multiple concerns and carrying multiple benefits:

The nation will also have to find the answer to full employment, including a more imaginative approach than has yet been conceived for neutralizing the perils of automation. Today, as the skilled and semiskilled Negro attempts to mount the ladder of economic security, he finds himself in competition with the white working man at the very time when automation is scrapping forty thousand jobs a week. Though this is perhaps the inevitable product of social and economic upheaval, it is an intolerable situation, and Negroes will not long permit themselves to be pitted against white workers for an ever-decreasing supply of jobs. The energetic and creative expansion of work opportunities, in both the public and private sectors of our economy, is an imperative worthy of the richest nation on earth, whose abundance is an embarrassment as long as millions of poor are imprisoned and constantly self-renewed within an expanding population. (King, 1963)

Dr. King reiterated over and over again his proposal that "government... become an employer of last resort" (King, 1971 [1963]: "We need an economic bill of rights. This would guarantee a job to all people who want to work and are able to work... It would mean creating certain public-service jobs" (King, 1968):

We must develop a federal program of public works, retraining, and jobs for all—so that none, white or black, will have cause to feel threatened. At the present time, thousands of jobs a week are disappearing in the wake of automation and other production efficiency techniques. (King, 1965)

Dr. King's proposal was that anyone ready and willing to work would be assured a public service job. His vision thus extended to all those left behind, including unemployed and poor whites:

While Negroes form the vast majority of America's disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill. The moral justification for special measures for Negroes is rooted in the robberies inherent in the institution of slavery. Many poor whites, however, were the derivative victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth. It was free only to bargain from the depressed base imposed by slavery upon the whole of the labor market. Nor did this derivative bondage end when formal slavery gave way to the de-facto slavery of discrimination. To this day the white poor also suffer deprivation and the humiliation of poverty if not of color. They are chained by the weight of discrimination, though its badge of degradation does not mark them. It corrupts their lives, frustrates their opportunities and withers their education. In one sense it is more evil for them, because it has confused so many by prejudice that they have supported their own oppressors. (King, 1963)

Black and white, we will *all* be harmed unless something grand and imaginative is done. The unemployed, poverty-stricken white man must be made to realize that he is in the very same boat with the Negro. Together, they could exert massive pressure on the government to get jobs for all. Together they could form a grand alliance. Together, they could merge all people for the good of all. (King, 1965)

Dr. King clearly distinguished Public Service Job Assurance from 'training programs'. Too often, he wrote, "[t]raining' becomes a way of avoiding the issue of unemployment" (King, 1967):

The orientation... should be "Jobs First, Training Later." Unfortunately, the job policy of the federal programs has largely been the reverse, with the result that people are being trained for nonexistent jobs. (King, 1967)

While the development of skills and support of educational experiences are important characteristics of Public Service Job Assurance, "The jobs should nevertheless be jobs and understood as such, not given the false label of "training." (King, 1967, pp. 196-199)

Referring to the historical and structural socioeconomic experience of some of the young and long-time discouraged, Dr. King envisioned Public Service Jobs as providing them with "special work places where their irregularity as workers can be accepted until

they have restored their habits of discipline” (1967). At the same time, he insisted that “we need to be concerned that the potential of the individual is not wasted” (King, 1967). For Dr. King, Public Service Job Assurance is capable of reconciling these various requirements, as it is conceived around the idea that “New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available” (King, 1967).

In *Where do We Go From Here?* (1967), Dr. King elaborated his vision of Public Service Job Assurance. First, development of skills and education are outcomes, not prerequisites, of the program. Second, the jobs are producing community and public services that are in short supply and that benefit the neediest communities. Third, the program generates incomes for individuals and families that have unmet needs. Fourth, there are numerous social-psychological benefits for individuals, families, communities, and the nation:

The big, new, attractive thrust of Negro employment is in the nonprofessional services. A high percentage of these jobs is in public employment. The human services—medical attention, social services, neighborhood amenities of various kinds—are in scarce supply in this country, especially in localities of poverty. The traditional way of providing manpower for these jobs—degree-granting programs—cannot fill all the niches that are opening up. The traditional job requirements are a barrier to attaining an adequate supply of personnel, especially if the number of jobs expands to meet existing need.

The expansion of the human services can be the missing industry that will soak up the unemployment that persists in the United States. *[It can be the]* the missing industry that would change the employment scene in America. The expansion of human services is that industry—it is labor intensive, requiring manpower immediately rather than heavy capital investment as in construction or other fields; it fills a great need not met by private enterprise; it involves labor that can be trained and developed on the job.

The growth of the human services should be rapid. It should be developed in a manner insuring that *the jobs that will be generated will not primarily be for professionals with college and postgraduate diplomas but for people from the neighborhoods who can perform important functions for their neighbors*. As with private enterprise, rigid credentials have monopolized the entry routes into human services employment. But... less educated people can do many of the tasks now performed by the highly educated as well as many other new and necessary tasks. (King, 1967, original emphasis, pp. 197-98)

Public Service Job Assurance provides the framework for income maintenance, skill development, and community service provisioning. Dr. King also believed that it could support goals in other areas, such as housing and education:

Work of this sort could be enormously increased, and we are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished. The poor transformed into purchasers will do a great deal on their own to alter housing decay. (King, 1972 [1968])

Health and childcare are other areas where Public Service Job Assurance may serve as the vehicle for progressive social policies. If the Public Service wage-benefits package included medical coverage and childcare, not only would this guarantee Public Service workers and their families coverage, but it also could pressure firms in the private sector to match such benefits. Failure to do so could leave firms unable to attract workers to their places of employment.

Individuals develop skills and work habits and provide community service, with the effects reverberating throughout the social fabric of society. The benefits of Job Assurance are potentially widespread and all-pervasive:

Beyond these advantages, a host of positive psychological changes inevitably will result from widespread economic security. The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the means to seek self-improvement. Personal conflicts... will diminish when the unjust measurement of human worth on a scale of dollars is eliminated. (King, 1972 [1968])

I am positive, moreover, that the money spent would be more than amply justified by the benefits that would accrue to the nation through the spectacular decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls, rioting and other social evils. (King, 1965)

Of course, Dr. King recognized that Public Service Job Assurance could not take the place of all social programs. He therefore supported comprehensive legislation that would:

guarantee an income to all who are not able to work. Some people are too young, some are too old, some are physically disabled, and yet in order to live, they need an income. (King, 1968)

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. supported Public Service Job Assurance throughout his life. It was a concrete part of his Dream, but he did not view it as utopian or overly-idealistic: "This country has the resources to solve any problem once that problem is accepted as national policy" (King, 1965). By supporting the provision of community services, "[i]t raises the possibility of rebuilding America so that private affluence is not accompanied by public squalor of slums and distress" (King, 1968). In 1963, he wrote: "I would challenge skeptics to give such a bold new approach a test for



the next decade” (King, 1963). We know that unfortunately we did not take up his challenge at that time, but it is not too late to take up that challenge now, as we enter the new millennium.

What better way to celebrate the Dream and the Vision of Dr. King?

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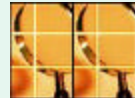
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“It was obdurate government callousness to misery that first stoked the flames of rage and frustration. With unemployment a scourge in Negro ghettos, the government still tinkers with half-hearted measures, refuses still to become an employer of last resort. It asks the business community to solve the problems as though its past failures qualified it for success.”

— **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his last letter requesting support for the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom”**

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