

## Economic Justice Unity Statement

Over the past 40 years, the global economy has undergone dramatic changes, a shift marked by a decline in protectionist and welfare state policies in the global north, the emergence of non-western economic superpowers, the expansion of low-wage manufacturing in poor countries. Global restructuring and neoliberal social policy have devastated communities from Detroit to Buenos Aires to Mumbai. Developed countries have experienced a transition from a disproportionate reliance on manufacturing to service sector employment and corresponding economic instability for much of the working and middle classes. Factories have shut down, well-paying jobs have disappeared, vast communities abandoned and carceral economic landscapes entrenched. Sectors of the population that relied on stable, unionized blue-collar jobs with benefits are no longer able to do so. Outsourcing and subcontracting of jobs and technological displacement, together with an unrelenting political assault, have eroded the power of labor unions, and contributed to the rise of the “precariat”—a cohort of workers who work part-time, intermittently, or as independent contractors.

Far from inevitable tendencies of a mature economy, these trends are produced and made possible by political choices that shape the rules of the economy such as tax policy, deregulation, economic development decisions and subsidies, divestment from public resources and new legal impediments to organized labor that have contributed to a concentration of wealth and power among a small group at the top. Inequality is greater today than it has been in 100 years.

The academy has not been sheltered from the trends. While historically the academic profession has been marked by relative job stability and financial security, there has been a growing trend of casualization. Almost three quarters of faculty are currently contingent workers with no access to tenure, a disproportionate number of whom are women and people of color. Women now constitute 51-61% of contingent faculty, a stark contrast to their continued underrepresentation among the ranks of tenured and tenure-track faculty. Moreover, underrepresented groups continue to see increased representation in contingent academic jobs with the pay disparity to match.

Although a broad swath of Americans is affected by these economic trends, communities of color, and especially women of color, immigrants, and LGBTQIA are hardest hit. The politics of race are central to how class is constituted, structuring both the labor market and class hierarchy. People of color disproportionately experience employment discrimination, job instability, wage theft, homelessness, unemployment, deep poverty, and incarceration and the mark of a criminal record. Deeply ingrained racism means that many white Americans believe that higher poverty rates in communities of color are due to racialized 'cultures of poverty' or character flaws. The normalization of white supremacy and neo-nazism is a frightening example of how an agenda that purportedly speaks to the working class can take the form of xenophobia, racism, and fascism.

The Economic Justice group of the Scholars for Social Justice Initiative aims to think through these trends by situating them in a broader historical context of gendered racial capitalism and drawing on the exciting new forms of labor organizing and resistance. Although mainstream labor unions have been weakened by these economic shifts, members of traditional unions continue to mobilize in the face of attack. In addition, poor and working people have been developing small-scale innovative strategies to counter economic devastation. New patterns of

labor and economic justice organizing—the formation of cooperatives and community gardens, alternative economies, organizing by restaurant workers, taxi drivers, farmworkers, fast food, retail and domestic and care workers—has emerged outside the boundaries of the traditional labor movement. The cutting-edge labor organizing is taking place largely in the service sector—healthcare, education, entertainment and other service jobs—that disproportionately employ women and people of color. Although organizing in this sector is not new (in some cases examples of it emerged over 100 years ago), the significance of this organizing is now becoming apparent. The service sector now accounts for 80% of jobs in the United States. The precarious nature of this work is serving as a model for a growing swath of the American working class that is increasingly encountering insecurity in the workplace. Their examples of “whole worker” organizing across lines of race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status and language; of organizing across employer, occupation, and industry; of targeting the state, especially at the local level with some victories in Blue Islands of governance; and organizing in public spaces utilizing social movement strategies to develop a broad base of support, are offering new ways forward for the labor movement.

At the same time, we seek to raise questions about whether work is the ultimate solution to poverty. A robust debate has emerged in the last few years between advocates of guaranteed jobs vs. guaranteed or basic income in response to dramatic transformations of the economy and predictions about the rise of robots, artificial intelligence and a jobless future. We ask if basic economic rights to housing, medical care, food and shelter should be linked to wage labor in the current system? How does the wage labor market value certain kinds of labor and not others? How can we account for labor that contributes to the betterment of communities and families and the well-being of society more broadly if that labor is not waged? In developing this line of inquiry, we join the growing calls for basic income and especially the demands developed by activists in South Africa and Namibia who have reclaimed the language of citizenship to demand a fair share of the nation’s wealth.

While efforts to rethink citizenship offer a welcome response to the state’s divestment from public services, we also question in whose interests the state operates and what implications that has if the state serves as the arbiter to determine how much and to whom assistance ought to be allocated.

Government assistance is often believed to be a tool to alleviate economic inequality but state practices and policies tell a different story. The welfare state has historically divided and stigmatized populations by race and gender and criminalized the poor. The widespread public hostility to government assistance to the poor is rooted in the broader history of racism and sexism and ways in which poor women of color, in particular, are considered undeserving of assistance. Federal policies that limit assistance and establish sanctions for the poor and state programs that mandate fingerprinting or drug-testing, serve as a regulatory practice to both surveil and stigmatize the poor. The outsourcing of government functions has also led to welfare programs becoming a source of financial gain for private sector interests. Such trends are not only visible in cash assistance programs, but in public housing and food stamps. Greater surveillance is coupled with increasing reliance on the private sector that has a vested interest in maintaining a population of poor people who it is believed are unable to fully integrate.

In addition to the intertwining of state and corporate interests and right’s successful efforts at undermining labor and environmental regulation, the current phase of globalization has dramatically reduced state capacity to intervene in the economy. Transnational capital flows, new networks of free trade and international financial institutions operate above and beyond the

state. While the consequences of these trends are unevenly distributed with states in the global north better positioned to withstand the consequences of globalization, the state can no longer be imagined as the only site for articulating demands of economic justice. Drawing inspiration from the Caribbean Community's demands for reparations and the World Social Forum efforts to articulate an alternative vision of the global economy, we will situate our work in a transnational context.

In keeping with the broader SSJ framework, the Economic Justice group will take up the questions above with explicit attention to the ways in which class politics has always been tied to racism and sexism. As black feminist organizers have historically argued, economic marginalization is a form of racial and gendered violence; moreover, economic insecurity drastically diminishes the capacity of women of color to combat physical violence and other forms of subordination in their lives. We believe that any program of economic justice or labor rights must have racial and gender justice at the center. Redistribution and collective engagement is essential to ensure economic well-being and the struggles of women of color must be core to those efforts.