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After the Wreckage: The Job Guarantee as a New Labor Standard

by

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ABSTRACT

The job guarantee (JG) has long been theorized as a cyclical stabilizer, a buffer stock of publicly employed workers that expands in downturns and contracts in booms. That framing was useful but is no longer sufficient. This paper reframes the JG as a permanent structural reform—a new labor standard and an institutional anchor for rebuilding the public sector from the ground up—rather than as a safety valve or transitional employment.

The argument proceeds on two fronts. The JG must shift focus from its anti-cyclical features and toward its structural role in re-engineering the precarious labor market. Precarity is the business model. No cyclical stabilizer addresses the systemic levers firms use to suppress labor costs: wage theft, irregular scheduling, chronic misclassification, and the denial of basic benefits. The JG can be designed in such a way as to remove that leverage. At the same time, the JG must be decisively married to the direct provision of public services that markets either overprice or refuse to supply altogether. After decades of austerity and deliberate dismantling of federal capacity, the public sector must itself be rebuilt. It needs to be staffed, funded, and directed toward the concrete, unmet needs of American families: healthcare, childcare, housing, elder care, and energy security. The JG is the institutional mechanism that does both at once—not as a patchwork of separate interventions, but as the foundation of an economy that finally works for the people who do the work.

KEYWORDS: job guarantee; Employer of Last Resort; labor standards; precarious employment; socialization of investment; affordability crisis; public sector capacity

JEL CODES: E24; E61; E62; H55; I38; J08; J21; J38; J48; J58

INTRODUCTION

The United States already has a job guarantee. It guarantees jobs to prison guards and ICE agents, to defense contractors and detention center staff, to the soldiers and intelligence officers who staff an ever-expanding war apparatus. The question has never been whether government can guarantee employment. It clearly can and it does. The question is: for whom, and to what end?

Meanwhile, we are left with a public sector that has been deliberately dismantled. Government agencies have been gutted, their staff slashed, and the public services that millions depend on handed to contractors. What is the policy response equal to that scale of damage? Last year saw the most aggressive damage to public capacity in American history, a process that began with the Reagan revolution and accelerated under DOGE.

The answer cannot be a return to generic fiscal stimulus or a revival of industrial policy alone (no matter how bold). It has to be something more deliberate: the direct rebuilding of public agencies, putting public money to public purpose, and it has to be structurally different from the public sector that emerged in the immediate postwar era.

What is needed is a framework that restores public capacity and re-engineers the foundations of economic security, securing both legs of the postwar promise that was never fully delivered: guaranteed public services and guaranteed employment. The choice is not between a job guarantee and no job guarantee. It is between a job guarantee aimed at policing, incarceration, and forever wars and a job guarantee aimed at care, community, and shared prosperity. This paper reframes the job guarantee (JG) as the centerpiece of that second project.

The job guarantee (JG) in recent decades has been associated with the cyclical stabilizing framework based on Minsky's Employer of Last Resort proposal, in which a pool of publicly employed workers expands during downturns and contracts during booms as an automatic employment stabilizer (Minsky 1986; Tcherneva 2012a). That framing was useful but is no longer sufficient, and I have been moving away from it for a while (Tcherneva 2020). The world we face demands more. The JG must be reframed as a permanent structural reform. It is not a safety valve, but a new labor and public service standard.

The buffer stock feature of the JG remains important. Direct public employment can offset private sector fluctuations, and the JG remains superior—on both economic and humane terms—to managing unemployment through the NAIRU. But we are way past this. The JG needs to be combined with a suite of other policies to help change how labor markets and the public sector work altogether.

Job guarantee or not, one of the core economic challenges today is eliminating the private sector's ability to hire at the lowest possible cost. A second is tackling the economic insecurity that precarious work and unaffordable essentials have made the default for most Americans. With a job guarantee, the tasks are easier. Here "low cost" means far more than low wages. It means wage theft. It means irregular and unpredictable scheduling. It means inhumane working conditions, unsafe worksites, lack of basic benefits, and the chronic gigification and misclassification of workers to avoid legal obligations. These are not anomalies but systemic levers firms use to suppress labor costs. *Precarity is the business model*. No cyclical stabilizer addresses that, be it a well-designed income or an employment stabilizer (e.g., unemployment insurance, basic income, or job guarantees). Together, though, they can be part of a comprehensive policy framework alongside wage legislation, labor standards enforcement, sectoral bargaining, and more that can establish a genuine labor standard. Here is why a public option for employment is central to that project.

I. FROM STABILIZER TO STANDARD: WHY THE OLD FRAME NO LONGER FITS

My own thinking on the job guarantee has evolved, and it is worth stating how and why. I was drawn to the Employer of Last Resort proposal (ELR), largely as a macroeconomic stabilization policy (Tcherneva 1996). The goal was to show in clear terms 1) how an infinitely elastic public employment program is superior to the current practice of managing unemployment through the

NAIRU; 2) how the public sector could anchor the value of its currency to a concrete hour of productive labor; 3) how such spending operates on an anticyclical basis without depending on large deficits, aggregate demand management, or fine-tuning; and 4) how the ELR was less inflationary than the above-mentioned conventional policies (Tcherneva 2014). Those functions remain important and I have not abandoned them.

My thinking, however, started shifting when I closely studied Argentina's Plan Jefes—a program designed in part based on the ELR proposal we had developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the Levy Economics Institute (Tcherneva and Wray 2005). The program in Argentina was implemented from the ground up, with participants at the center of its design. The results were important, though the program was too short-lived to study its long-term benefits, and it was eventually reformed along gendered ideological lines, redirecting women away from employment and back toward cash transfers. Notably, the women themselves preferred the jobs (Tcherneva 2012b). That experience prompted me to study other JG–like programs around the world, and I put together the following resource for other interested researchers (jobguarantee.org). What I took away is that many typical concerns around the job guarantee are theoretical or ideological and not grounded in practical experience. Some of these include the concerns that the JG would create "lesser" jobs or that it would be unable to identify useful employment for a large number of people. Of course, some of the difficulty lies in what the prevailing view considers "socially useful" and "productive."

The other lesson was that, in practice, the theoretical lines between a buffer stock employment and traditional public service jobs or public works often blur. When job guarantee/ELR–type programs are attempted, the hiring and project creation happens at every level of government. The programs were organized and managed in many different ways—by village councils (India), social enterprises (France), national governments (South Africa), community groups (Argentina), and almost always by some combination of the therein.[1]

[1] www.jobguarantee.org

The operative principles for the job guarantee, however, remain quite straightforward: 1) public money for public good, 2) no one is unemployable, and 3) there is abundant socially useful work to be done. Projects were not "lesser jobs," but jobs that addressed concrete community need.

Have these JG-like programs been without flaws? No. But we need to be clear-eyed about why. It is not because of "abuse," "make-work," or "shirking." In almost every case, these programs have been handed a pittance for funding, starved of resources mid-implementation, and designed from the outset to be temporary. Policymakers never fully committed to them. Often, they did not include the hiring in the official employment figures, and frequently viewed participants (whose lives were meaningfully improved) as "unemployable." That is not a failure of the job guarantee proposal. That is a failure of political will. Success requires permanent infrastructure (like that for public schools, policing, and the post office) and stable funding (which, apart from law enforcement, public services rarely enjoy).

This also means that drawing clear lines between the JG and the mainline public sector is not possible, nor is it necessary. A job is a job.

In this context, then, what is the ultimate goal of the job guarantee? I would suggest that it centers on the question of *what constitutes the minimum labor standard in the twenty-first century*? In other words, what does a decent job actually look like today? What does it pay, what other conditions does it offer, and what dignity does it afford the person doing it? The question extends beyond what we have referred to as the "base wage." It is about stable, predictable hours, access to healthcare, paid leave, childcare, retirement security, the right to organize, and the capacity to exercise one's real voice in the workplace. It is about real access to opportunities to build skills and obtain on-the-job training, and fundamentally, it is about recognizing that certain types of work that have genuine social value are productive. The job guarantee can help set the floor to such a standard.

The focus of the job guarantee needs to shift away from its anti-cyclical features and toward its structural benefits. In the US, unemployment behaves like a yo-yo: it spikes sharply during recessions and then falls back down during expansions, though the recovery is always slower than the collapse. This pattern, however, is not universal. Other countries experience unemployment differently: some see smaller swings, while others carry persistently high unemployment even during periods of strong economic growth.

Regardless of how unemployment moves, the underlying problem of precarious employment and the lasting damage and scarring effects it leaves are ubiquitous. That is why fixating on the JG as a tool to *smooth out* the business cycle misses the bigger case for it. Its real value is structural, it addresses the chronic, persistent failure of labor markets to provide stable, decent employment across all economic conditions, not just during downturns.

The stabilizing feature of the JG program has long been theorized through its buffer stock mechanism and base wage that anchor all wages in the economy. The stabilizing aspects of the JG must be understood more deeply. It is not simply a matter of setting a $20-an-hour base wage and providing employment on demand. The public sector must now be theorized as a structural force in three distinct but related ways: 1) fulfilling its core function of guaranteeing public services that the private sector will not provide; 2) acting as a direct creator of employment and investment in communities on the brink of collapse (the town where the only plant has shut down, the rural county that private capital has written off, the coastal community ravaged by fires and floods); and 3) establishing a clear institutional framework that defines a new labor standard for all workers, covering wages, benefits, regulated working hours, and the conditions of dignified work. The JG is a policy tool that directly confronts precaritization.

Give an Uber driver a real option: a job with regular hours, full benefits, and a living wage—running a local meals-on-wheels program, providing community transport, staffing a neighborhood health clinic. That is not a lesser job. That is a better job. And its existence changes what every employer of drivers as independent contractors—from Lyft to Door Dash—has to offer to attract workers.

We have not had a serious conversation about what constitutes a good job since the labor reforms of 1935. The postwar contract failed. The set of policies it provided to address economic insecurity did not hold. We need something new, something that can reverse-engineer the labor market so it works for American families. That means rebuilding the forces that once held the labor market together: tight full employment and real employer competition for workers, robust labor regulations, and genuine worker power. The job guarantee is the institutional mechanism that can reintroduce all of these at once, not as a patchwork of separate interventions, but as an institutional structural force that resets the terms on which employers must compete for labor (Tcherneva 2025).

This also means abandoning the old formulation that the JG should be as small as possible, i.e., a transitional employment program attached to an otherwise adequately resourced public sector. That formulation (which I have also used) makes sense in a world where the public sector is intact. It does not describe the world we are in today. After decades of disinvestment, austerity, and now deliberate dismantling (in the US, most recently via the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)), the public sector needs to be rebuilt: not on the neoliberal model of giant contracts to private firms padding their profits, but as a direct provider of missing public services. Yes, the argument is to fully and adequately staff all public offices—from the Food and Drug Administration and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to the local DMVs and post offices; to embark on large scale employment for the purposes of building public housing, community clinics, nursing homes, early childcare centers; to initiate flood control, fire prevention and other infrastructure projects—to name a few.

This is Keynes's broader socialization of investment, combined with on-the-spot employment for those who need it (Tcherneva 2012c), including the so-called marginal or hard-to-employ worker, the caregiver with big gaps in employment experience, the young entrant with no experience whatsoever, the prime working-age worker who is often turned away for being "overqualified," and everyone else in between who labor markets leave behind.

II. THE AFFORDABILITY CRISIS IS NOT AN INFLATION PROBLEM

What the 1970s taught us, and what the post-COVID inflation surge confirmed, is that unemployment and inflation are twin threats to working people, and that economic policy cannot solve one by ignoring the other. If workers have secure jobs but cannot afford the essentials of a decent life, they are still being squeezed. If prices are low and stable but unemployment is high, it is no comfort to the family that cannot earn a paycheck. The JG addresses both: it stabilizes the most essential price in the economy (the wage), and actively deploys public employment to provide the affordable, and in many cases free, public services that make a material difference in people's lives.

Americans are right to be angry about prices. But let us be precise about what is actually driving that anger. It is not the price of avocados or the price of eggs. Those prices are insult to the injury of being unable to afford healthcare, housing, and a college education (things one typically associates with a decent standard of living). When the costs of maintaining that standard of living become onerous (e.g., utility bills, rent increases, insurance costs, fees and surcharges attached to every transaction), the problem of affordability is not the same as the problem of post-energy shocks or post-COVID inflation. This is a structural affordability crisis, decades in the making. It is the product of stagnant wages, the systematic erosion of worker power, and the already expensive essentials like healthcare, childcare, and housing that were never fully guaranteed to begin with. Post-COVID inflation emerged as the villain, but the underlying conditions long predated these specific price spikes.

That is the affordability crisis; and it will not be solved by monetary policy or inflation targets, or even by policies that primarily focus on the pricing power (price gouging?) of corporations. They will also not be solved by a base-wage automatic employment stabilizer. American families need public options for jobs *and* public services. They need the public sector to establish the floor for essential goods provisioning and for an adequate wage-benefit package in the economy.

The JG must unequivocally marry itself to the provision of essentials. This means using public employment to put people to work *and* to directly supply the goods and mostly services (such as healthcare access, childcare, housing support, community infrastructure) that the market either overprices or refuses to provide at all. Here the JG shares common ground with the well-resourced public sectors of northern Europe, but with a foundational addition. A well-funded public sector can provision services. The JG does that while also guaranteeing the employment itself. Adding the employment mandate is what re-engineers the precarious labor market, because it makes the explicit funding of socially useful work for all who need it a non-negotiable public commitment. The JG can employ prime working-age people trapped in long-term unemployment, provide productive roles for end-of-career professionals not ready to retire, create structured on-the-job training for young people just starting out, and offer re-entry points for caregivers who have been out of the workforce for long periods. It can match existing skills to unmet social needs and create meaningful employment even for those with the worst prospects of employment, like people with disabilities or veterans.

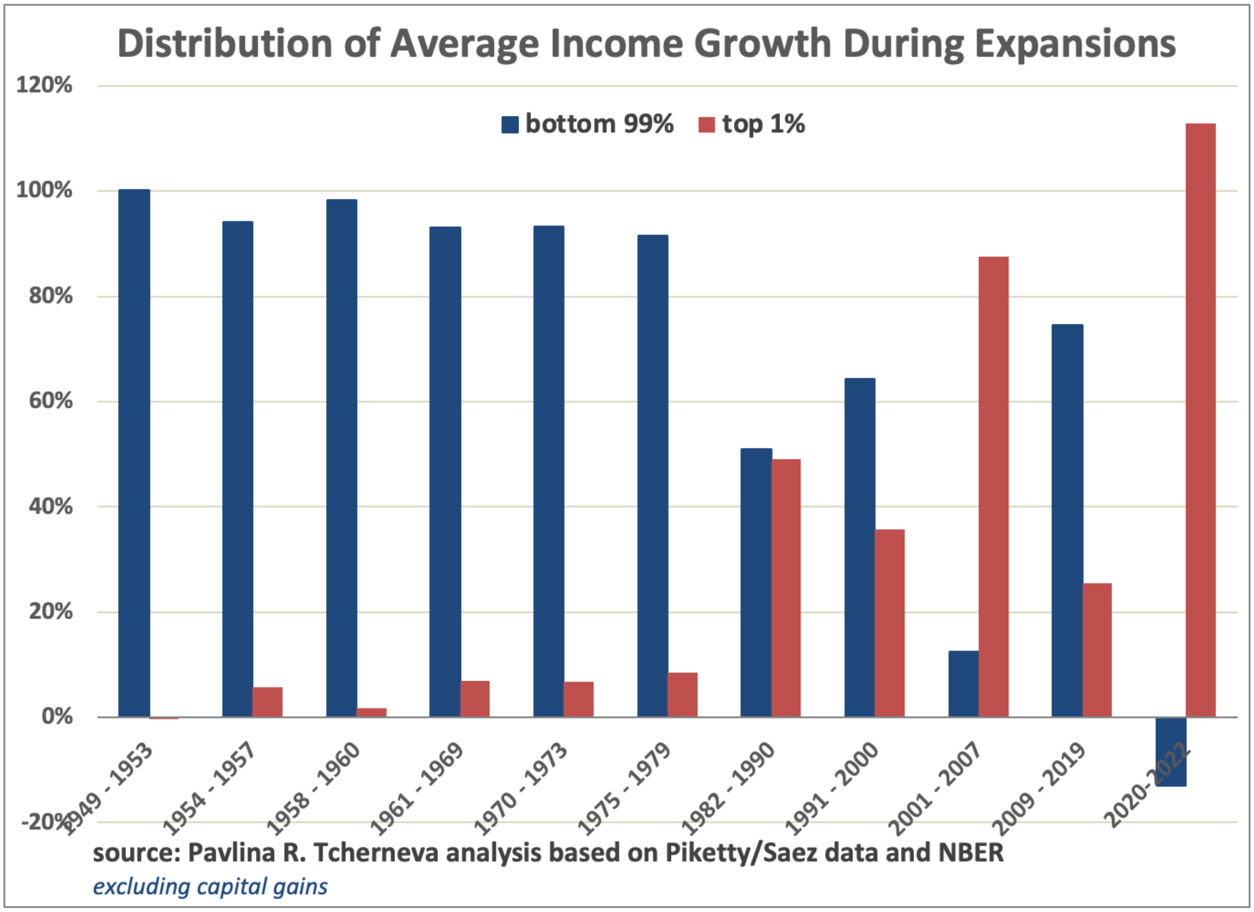
In this way, the JG has the potential to serve two goals at once: provisioning the essentials that define a decent standard of living, and guaranteeing employment to all who need it in a manner that defines the labor standard.

III. THE JG AS THE MISSING PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT OPTION

Society has repeatedly recognized that certain goods are too important to leave entirely to the market and has responded by guaranteeing public options. We guarantee a minimum standard of education to every child, regardless of income or zip code, through public schools. We guarantee mail delivery to every address in the country. We guarantee access to public libraries, public parks, and to public transit. In each case, the public option does two things: it ensures guaranteed access, and it disciplines private alternatives by giving people another choice. Employment should be no different. A job guarantee ensures that anyone who wants to work can work, on terms that are decent. And it serves as competition to employers who currently face no meaningful constraint on the employment conditions they impose.

The JG's pressure on the private sector is a feature, not a bug. When the government offers living wages, stable hours, and real benefits for socially necessary work, private employers must compete or lose workers. That is the point. Right now, firms do not have to compete. And it is important to state that we are not at full employment. The current "low hire-low fire" environment is characterized by firms unwilling to pay higher wages and workers unable to find better employment conditions. If true full employment were the case, wages would be rising, as firms compete for workers. They do not. The small nominal wage increases in the post-COVID era were eaten away by price increases and made no dent in the highly unequal distribution of income (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Growth for Whom: Post-COVID runaway inequality



These small nominal wage increases also made no improvement in the relative position of working families. The labor income share in the economy continued to fall to historic lows. Many firms across the country continue to pay poverty wages, schedule workers at will, deny benefits, and rely on the absence of any alternative to keep workers in line. The JG removes that leverage.

Consider what that means concretely. David Graeber (2018) documented an economy full of jobs that workers themselves describe as pointless: compliance consultants generating paperwork no one reads, telemarketers running scripts no one wants, middle managers coordinating the work of other managers. These jobs exist not because they produce social value but because the organizational and financial logic of large private firms generates them. Workers doing this work are burned out. They hate their schedules. They cannot structure their lives around their families because the job was never designed with that in mind.

Then COVID arrived and proved that none of this was inevitable. Flexible hours are possible. Remote workers are equally productive. The rigid structures of the pre-pandemic workplace were deliberate choices, and when the political will existed we could guarantee access to free healthcare and child allowances almost overnight. The return to five-day, in-person workweeks was a method of reasserting control, even in well-paid middle-income sectors. Cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and increases in health premia were political choices. Workers noticed.

The conditions workers live with now (high prices, punishing employment conditions, fines, fees, and surveillance at work) have corroborated a growing sense that has been building since at least the Great Financial Crisis that the economy is rigged against almost everyone except the ultra-wealthy.

IV. REBUILDING THE PUBLIC SECTOR FROM THE BOTTOM UP: JOBS AND SERVICES

It is no longer adequate to conceive of the JG as a buffer stock or a transitional stepping stone and I have long argued that it is an institutional vehicle for social transformation and a way to democratize work (Tcherneva 2022a, b). The JG must be decisively married to the broad socialization of investment: the kind that tackles the affordability crisis head on. After decades of disinvestment, austerity, and deliberate cuts to federal institutions and infrastructure, the public sector is starved of finance, staff, and resources. Government agencies have been hollowed out. Public services have been allowed to deteriorate. The JG is the mechanism for rebuilding that capacity: funding the work, employing the people, and delivering the services that markets leave unfinished. It is not a *supplement* to public investment. It *is* public investment in the labor that society needs most.

The program must be directly married to the concrete public needs we have long been told the government cannot supply: affordable and accessible healthcare, food, childcare, and eldercare education; energy independence; housing security; and restored infrastructure. These are not abstract concepts, but the areas where private capital has failed and the state has been starved of the resources to respond. The JG staffs that response.

The predictable objection is that expanding public employment simply means expanding an inherently bloated and inefficient bureaucracy. The evidence runs the other way—and it runs in a specific direction. Where government has been bloated, it is largely because public functions have been outsourced to private contractors who charge more, deliver less, and answer to shareholders rather than to the public. The bloat is in the contracting. The public agencies themselves tell a different story.

Consider the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration: 350 federal investigators oversee safety compliance for roughly 500,000 commercial trucking companies across the United States[2]; or the FDA: 433 inspectors responsible for regulating over 220,000 registered food facilities, 12,000 animal and human drug facilities, and over 25,000 medical device facilities, while monitoring over $3.5 trillion worth of imported and exported regulated products annually.[3] The Social Security Administration processes tens of millions of claims and payments with administrative costs that run around 1 percent or less benefits paid,[4] compared to an average of 12.4 percent for private insurers (Woolhandler and Himmelstein 2017). The Bureau of Labor Statistics produces the most comprehensive labor market data in the world and a gold standard for many private and public statistical firms, and operates on a budget equivalent to half a dozen

[2] https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/safetyfirst/federal-motor-carrier-safety-administration

[3] https://www.fda.gov/media/176816/download

[4] https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/admin.html

army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. These agencies are not bureaucratic sinkholes. By any measure of output per employee, they are very productive, operating on chronically constrained budgets, and doing more with less as a matter of institutional habit. These are but a few examples of underfunded consumer protection agencies, public and social services.

The objection that expanded public employment means bloated, wasteful government gets the story backwards. The agencies that have been deliberately starved of staff and resources are an illustration of what happens when the commitment to public service is undermined by design, *not proof* of government's inherent inefficiency. A properly staffed public sector, delivering public services by public means is the objective.

With that foundation established, the design of the program follows from its goals. Wages will be set at prevailing rates where applicable, but a guaranteed wage floor will anchor the program. The benefit package requires a serious rethink. Every public JG job should carry Medicare, Social Security, two weeks of paid leave that grows with accumulated work experience, and guaranteed free public childcare. These are also not add-ons, but part of what a *good* job actually includes. The policy process can arrive at other components to the policy—reduced working hours, a child allowance for working parents and other.

The JG remains a buffer, but now of a slightly different sort: in addition to being a buffer between boom and recession, it is also a buffer between the worker and the poverty wage–paying employer.

V. REAL WORK, UNMET NEEDS, AND THE QUESTION OF DESIGN

A reasonable objection arises at this point: is this still a job guarantee, or have we simply folded it into mainline public investment? The separation between the two has never been clean, and the design question "How do you ensure the JG does not compete with existing public employment?" comes up every time. The honest answer is that a clear separation is not possible. Nor should we insist on one.

Part of the problem may be of our own making. The framing we have long used (“fitting the job to the worker, rather than the worker to the job”) has been misread. Many interpret it to mean that what the worker does is secondary, that the job is a placeholder, that it is not real work in any meaningful sense. Nothing could be further from the truth. The original framing was, in Minsky’s words, “to divorce the offer of employment from the profitability of employment,” but *not* from the requirement of usefulness. The goal is to fit people to socially useful work. And the socially useful work that goes unstaffed, underfunded, and unrecognized in this economy is vast.

Start with care and climate. The care economy—including childcare, elder care, disability support, and community health work—is chronically shorthanded. Meanwhile, energy shocks and price volatility are here to stay. Whatever one may think of the green transition, it is clear that we need to shield our economy from these risks. Therefore, large mobilization of labor for weatherization, alternative sources of energy, conservation, remediation, and resilience infrastructure can help. Beyond these, the list is long: public schools needing aides and counselors, hospitals running on skeleton crews, public offices where one overworked staff member handling the work of four, youths who need structured internship pathways into productive careers. Staffing these gaps is not a second-best use of JG employment. It is its first goal at every skill level, with requisite training, pay, and certification. Its second goal is to guarantee employment to anyone who wants paid work by funding a guarantee solution (on-the-spot employment and training by finding socially useful projects even for the least skilled among us).

One reference point for such design could be the Scandinavian economies in the immediate postwar era, where the public sector engaged in genuine tripartite negotiations among firms, public agencies, and unions to set wages, standards, levels of employment, and working conditions across the economy. The public sector was a real player and although in recessions it acted as a residual employer, it was the active institutional force shaping what labor markets looked like for everyone while preventing mass unemployment. For developed economies, the Austrian job guarantee pilot and the French Zero Long-Term Unemployment zones offer concrete examples of how a market economy can launch and sustain a job guarantee in practice.

For developing nations, employment programs in India and South Africa provide a useful starting point, demonstrating how public employment can build key assets and infrastructure while supporting the delivery of essential public services. The goal in both cases is the same: to use the job guarantee as an institutional vehicle to reverse the hollowing out of government whether through deliberate cuts, austerity, or underdevelopment, and to rebuild the public capacity that a functioning economy requires.

VI. POLITICS WILL CATCH UP, BUT WORKERS CANNOT WAIT

Is this a political nonstarter today? Under current conditions, yes, but so are most serious structural reforms aimed at rebalancing the economy. That has never been a reason to abandon them. But let us be clear that under the current administration, public employment and investment are *not* off the table. The difference is that the direction is toward prisons, ICE, detention centers, and war. That is what guaranteed jobs looks like when they are *not* anchored to a democratic vision of the public good.

The public job guarantee developed in my and my collaborators' work offers a different answer. It can facilitate the restoration of public capacity in the service of American families and shared prosperity. This is not an untested idea: the direct employment programs from the New Deal to Argentina's Plan Jefes, all emerged from moments that looked beforehand like closed political windows. That window will open again and some form of direct public employment and investment will be attempted again. The question is, will it be bold and transformative or—as has too often been the case—will it tinker at the edges?

The forces bearing on working families are not temporary. The extreme concentration of wealth and incomes, the explosion of private credit and financial speculation, the stripping of hospitals and care facilities by private equity, the threats to public pensions and retirement savings, the food and energy disruptions from ongoing conflicts, the relentless advance of AI displacing entire sectors and accelerating the precaritization of jobs—none of these are going away. Working families are being squeezed from every side: their livelihoods, their security, their access to affordable housing, healthcare, childcare, and basic public goods. This economic model will not hold.

What comes next must be bigger than the Green New Deal and bigger than Build Back Better. The policy response must match the scale of the crisis, and it must begin, not end, with working people. That means starting with a serious answer to a question we have avoided for nearly a century: what does a decent job actually look like, and who gets to have one? The new labor standard—including wages, benefits, regulated hours, dignified conditions, the right to a job—is not an afterthought to economic recovery. It is the foundation on which every recovery must be built. The job guarantee, properly conceived, is the institutional vehicle for establishing that standard. Not as a transitional measure. Not as a residual safety net. But as the institutional anchor of an economy that finally works for the people who do the work.

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