

**POLITICAL  
RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATES**

Challenging the Right,  
Advancing Social Justice

# Social Justice Feminism and How We Defeat the Right

By MARIYA STRAUSS and TARSO LUÍS RAMOS

***Every progressive social movement worthy of the name is ultimately about a liberatory project that extends outward, beyond those most affected by a particular form of inequity. It calls on each of us to combine with others and to commit our better, more selfless, justice-loving selves to building a society that lifts up the full humanity of all who have suffered discrimination, indignities, oppression, exploitation, abuse. When we're haggling over the politics of the kitchen, the bedroom, the boardroom or the congressional hearing room, that liberatory project can seem exceedingly remote and far-fetched. But, while we need to be pragmatic and tough enough to gain ground on feminist issues in an inhospitable political climate, we also need to keep a broader transformative vision alive.***

**-Linda Burnham**

## I. CONFRONTING THE CURRENT CRISIS



Hundreds march through downtown Minneapolis on July 31, 2015 to protest the deaths of Black women who have died in police custody. Photo: Fibonacci Blue/Flickr.

**T**he ascent of Donald Trump to the presidency has dramatically worsened an already grave set of challenges confronting justice-minded people, and has presented the women’s movement in the United States with an historic opportunity to create a stronger, cross-movement vision for organizing, including a resistance (and *alternative*) that’s infused with intersectional feminist values. This paper is a call to all progressives—regardless of gender—to embrace social justice feminist principles and leadership as a cornerstone of our response to mobilized white nationalism, misogyny, and the dominance of an economic oligarchy.

From the beginning of his presidential campaign, Trump linked the promise of economic revitalization to the subjugation and expulsion of vilified groups that fall outside a highly exclusionary racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious definition of *real Americans*. Railing against the perception of parasitic elites from above (Wall St. & Washington) and below (dangerous dark-skinned, foreign, sinful, poor, non-Christian), Trump’s racialized “makers and takers” narrative helped to forge a cross-class, cross-gender coalition of White voters that won him the Electoral College. Yet even as White

nationalism remains the ideological core of the insurgent “Alt Right,” and the wellspring for much of Trump’s rhetoric (and no small part of his policy agenda), their unabashed racism and xenophobia are inextricably entangled with *misogyny*.

From the campaigns of online harassment of women perpetrated by his Alt Right supporters<sup>1</sup> to Trump’s own boasts of sexual assault, his calls to punish individuals who have abortions, his pledge (already honored!) to appoint “pro-life judges” to the Supreme Court, and his efforts to slash rights and benefits for a largely feminized low wage workforce, Trump’s coalition has mobilized both traditionally paternalistic and more militant forms of misogyny.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, two of the big winners in Trump’s election, the mostly secular White nationalist Alt Right and the Christian Right are among the most misogynist organized forces in the country today.<sup>3</sup> (The prominence of Mike Pence’s Christian Right in Trump’s governing alliance is particularly perilous to gender and queer/trans equity.)

While not all of what Trump has on offer is new—one might instead observe that social and economic crises long visited upon stigmatized communities now imperil much larger and historically less-targeted populations—nonetheless

the magnitude of present threat to civil, constitutional, and human rights should not be underestimated. The rise of a nationalist demagogue to the presidency threatens democratic institutions and aspirations on a scale recalling the post-Reconstruction period of Redemption.<sup>4</sup> Today, an emboldened White nationalist movement openly courted by the Trump camp views his regime as a vital validator of its ideas and, they hope, a major step towards their Whites-only vision for the United States. (What is “Make America Great Again” if not a contemporary call to White redemption?) Women, immigrants, people of color, Muslims and other religious minorities, low-income people, and LGBTQ communities among others face a heightened set of antagonisms, including intensified discrimination and physical violence carried out or tacitly sanctioned by the state.

Even as progressives contest Trump’s cynical casting of racial and cultural diversity, we must likewise contest the misogyny integral to his ascent. An inclusive feminist resistance that speaks to the savage economic and racial inequalities of our times—like the one that asserted itself so beautifully in January of 2017 and 2018 in Women’s Marches<sup>5</sup> around the country and across the world—will be critical to any viable alternative to Trumpism, and to the fortunes of American democracy.

Of course, feminist resistance is not immune to our movement’s deep, unsettled divisions around questions of race and class, just as progressives during the 2016 electoral season failed to unify around an integrated analysis and strategy on race, gender, and the economy.<sup>6</sup> Toward the end of bridging some of these divisions and building the kind of social justice feminism<sup>7</sup> we desperately need, we begin by reviewing how the corporate and self-styled Christian wings of the U.S. Right<sup>8</sup> aligned their reactionary agendas and consolidated a base of power through attacks on racial equality, economic justice, and reproductive freedom. This alliance, built during the Reagan administration and greatly expanded since, deploys violence against women on a mass level through police brutality, incarceration, deportation, surveillance, and tacit encouragement of vigilante violence that terrorizes Black, brown, immigrant, Muslim, and LGBTQ communities. Rape culture and structural misogyny dramatically constrain the lives of even otherwise privileged women.

Social justice organizing today can succeed only if it, like the Right, builds more effectively across issues and communities. “We’re going to have to demolish this whole single-issue movement philosophy and mentality,” Monica Simpson, co-founder of the national woman of color reproductive justice collective SisterSong, told us in an interview. “It’s going to take that kind of cross movement building work that does take a deeper investment that does take time. But we have to do it.”<sup>9</sup>

At the important nexus of reproductive and economic injustice, the Right has targeted women of color with ruthless consistency. As Dr. Krystal Redman, director of SPARK Reproductive Justice Now in Atlanta, told us, “Our opposition [consists

of] legislation and policies that don’t support bodily autonomy and that center around policing of brown and black bodies.”<sup>10</sup> The work of understanding this opposition and how it can be combated has overwhelmingly been performed within women-of-color-led and queer-women-of-color-led movements and organizations from the Combahee

River Collective to Black Lives Matter to groups like SisterSong and SPARK.<sup>11</sup> Because BLM has “totally merged the idea of race and gender and economics,” as veteran feminist antipoverty organizer Suzanne Pharr puts it, “the language and the actions that come out of Black Lives Matter are far more feminist than much that is happening elsewhere.”

We draw the following connections between economic and reproductive injustice against women at a moment of profound national uncertainty. While both the corporate and Christian wings of the Right have consistently trafficked in racist rhetoric and policy, they long officially distanced themselves from an explicitly White nationalist sector of the Right that has grown up insidiously alongside them. Trump’s embrace of explicit racism and xenophobia is testing the meaning of such disavowals; even Trump adversaries within his party have become complicit with his unapologetic claim that the United States belongs to native-born White men. This essay will focus on what we can learn from how the corporate and Christian Right built power using increasingly coordinated strategies over the past several decades, and close with a consideration of the increasingly evident weaknesses of this coalition in the Trump era, and the opportunities for resistance these fissures present.

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***- Monica Simpson***

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## II. TRACING THE HISTORY AND CURRENT CONVERGENCE OF ECONOMIC AND GENDER INJUSTICE



Activists rally as the U.S. Supreme Court hears *Janus v. AFSCME* on February 26, 2018 in Washington, DC. Photo: Alex Wong / Getty Images.

### THE NEW RIGHT BUILDS ALLIANCES AND POWER

In the early 1970s, conservative strategists founded a political movement they called the New Right. Taking inspiration from Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, they sought to wrest control of the Republican Party from a moderate leadership that, though keen on protecting business interests, had hewed to the mid-twentieth-century liberal consensus—the widely held idea that the profits of increased economic productivity should be shared with working people—and that had supported some civil rights legislation and abortion rights. (Indeed, the Republican Party gave stronger support to landmark civil rights legislation than the Democrats, who were hampered by their southern, Dixiecrat caucus.) By mobilizing White racial anxiety and promoting the growth of militantly conservative Catholic and evangelical Christian movements, the New Right successfully transformed the party into a vehicle for rolling back the progress made by social justice movements over

much of the twentieth century, and for concentrating wealth and power to an unprecedented degree.<sup>12</sup>

From the start, the New Right excelled at mobilizing constituents across a range of issues: organizers, for instance, got religious conservatives politically involved with campaigns against school integration, then refocused their attention on attacking abortion rights.<sup>13</sup> The New Right gave rise to the contemporary Christian Right as a mass voting bloc that has so far chosen the GOP as its preferred political vehicle. At the same time, it created a coalition between the social conservatism of that bloc, which has resisted the gains of the civil rights, gay liberation, and feminist movements; and the fiscal conservatism that would soon find its champion in Ronald Reagan. Reagan's "trickle-down" economics—an early nickname for an economic program often referred to today as *neoliberalism* (aka austerity economics)—marked a coordinated strategy between business elites and the

political Right to redistribute wealth upward from working people to corporations and the wealthy.<sup>14</sup> Since this time, both major political parties have enacted neoliberal austerity policies backed by corporations and ultra-wealthy individual donors: they have deregulated corporations, cut taxes, shrunk and/or privatized government functions from schools to hospitals to prisons, and imposed “market logic” across many spheres of society—converting public service into private profits. At the same time, “free market” principles have played an outsized role in shifting public policy and changing attitudes about the proper role of government in regulating the economy. The neoliberal agenda has given rise to historic levels of wealth and income inequality, destroying upward social mobility for the working class and forcing much of the middle class into precarious, downwardly-mobile conditions. To take one measure often used by economists, in the late 1970s, the top 1 percent of families in the United States owned less than 10 percent of the country’s individually-held wealth; by 2012, it owned more than 20 percent.<sup>15</sup> The rising tide of inequality has undercut the mechanisms of democracy so deeply that, as the late political scientist Jean Hardisty argued, “we are increasingly not a democracy but a country ruled by an oligarchy.”<sup>16</sup>

Working people across the board have been hurt by policies that have simultaneously made it harder to earn a living, and have slashed the social programs established earlier in the twentieth century to provide a safety net for people who are struggling financially. But some forms of employment and some social programs have been hit harder than others, and through these selective onslaughts, neoliberalism has particularly targeted women and people of color. One way it has done so is through unrelenting attacks on organized labor. Since Ronald Reagan took the White House in 1981 and declared war on unions, the corporate Right has ceaselessly pursued its assault on collective bargaining rights, decimating labor’s bargaining power and union membership, which fell from 20 percent of the workforce in 1983, to just 11 percent in 2015. Despite a popular image of union members as White men, unions are a major economic equalizer for women and people of color, helping to narrow both gender and racial wage gaps.<sup>17</sup> One major anti-union push from the Right has been an ongoing attempt to stop union

drives in low-wage service industries that are disproportionately staffed by women and people of color. Employers can act with virtual impunity in the actions they pursue to stop unions in their workplaces from forming, and often skate up to the line of illegality or cross it with tactics like firing pro-union workers and intimidating others. Using these methods, the corporate Right has been able to interrupt nearly all unionization efforts among the heavily female and African American low-wage workforce at fast food and retail chain

stores, and successfully blocked new regulations that would protect employees in industries dominated by women of color, such as domestic, restaurant, and healthcare workers.<sup>18</sup> The situation is compounded by the failure of a union leadership still dominated by white men to represent these excluded workers, or to fight for immigrant work-

ers in the face of nationalistic policy and rhetoric that uses them as a wedge. Long-term national campaigns have seen significant recent victories at the state and local level—and credit for these successes goes to worker’s centers and organizing led by women of color.

#### **FROM ATTACKS ON WORKERS TO THE EROSION OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

The corporate Right has also taken particular aim at public sector unions in which women and people of color make up the majority<sup>19</sup> of workers—often by slashing government jobs altogether. Although there is still much work to be done, the public sector had made progress toward closing the gender pay gap and providing good jobs for African Americans.<sup>20</sup> Now many of these jobs are imperiled. The economic recovery that followed the 2008 recession has entailed a seismic shift<sup>21</sup> from public to private employment.<sup>22</sup> The Right has done its best to shrink the bargaining power of those public sector unions that remain<sup>23</sup>—making a partial exception for the unions most likely to be populated by White men, like police and firefighter unions. This contest has reached the U.S. Supreme Court. On the first day of oral arguments in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31* Justice Kagan warned that ruling against the union would affect “the livelihoods of millions of individuals...all at once. When have we ever done something like that?”<sup>24</sup> The Court’s decision is expected by June 2018, and could profoundly affect the ability of public-sector

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***- Jean V. Hardisty***

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workers, 1.5 million who are Black women, to improve their wages and working conditions if it overturns the 1977 precedent of *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education*, in which the court ruled unanimously that “fair-share” dues can be collected from non-members, allowing all employees to equitably share the cost of negotiated benefits.

Finally, along with their assaults on workers in the workplace, the Right has done its best to erode public sector social services—from programs like Planned Parenthood, SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and child care subsidies to public utilities like water and transit—that have particularly benefited low-income, immigrant, women of color and other populations marginalized by the structural exclusions of the workplace. Many of these public goods have been privatized, turning the destruction of core infrastructure into a business opportunity for corporations and leading to devastating consequences like the loss of safe drinking water in Flint, Michigan, where governor-appointed “emergency managers” illegally cut costs by switching the city’s water supply to the polluted Flint River., exposing thousands to lead poisoning—a catastrophe that has in turn, in a classic case of what Naomi Klein has called “disaster capitalism,” created a new market for investors who want to privatize Flint’s water supply altogether.<sup>25</sup>

### **WEAPONIZING RACISM AGAINST REPRODUCTIVE AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

The assaults on women’s economic equality described above also limit bodily autonomy and reproductive destiny. Women—and, once again, women of color in particular—are bearing the load of unpaid labor, like running households and caring for children and the elderly. The harrowing effects of neoliberal policies have forced women to work longer hours for less pay, juggle multiple jobs, and go without secure benefits. (The ongoing efforts to repeal or otherwise dismantle the Affordable Care Act would press tens of millions more people into even more precarious livelihoods.)<sup>26</sup> In this situation, women may legally have rights to make decisions about sex, childbearing, and family structure, but in practice are so constrained by circumstance that these rights exist largely just on paper.

For several decades, the assault on economic justice has been even more intimately tied to the assault on reproductive justice than this analysis alone would suggest. The Right has not only inflicted violence on women of color through policies of social divestment but doubled that violence

by attacking the same women to justify the repeal of reproductive rights. As early as 1976, just three years after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*, Congress cut off huge numbers of women from access to safe, legal abortion by passing the Hyde Amendment, which—under the guise of preventing the misuse of Medicaid dollars—barred the federal government from providing funding for abortion care.<sup>27</sup> Selling the dismantling of public services and social programs to the American public took decades of coordinated work by the Right, which had to convince working people to vote against education and health care for all. A central tactic in the Right’s propaganda war to convince voters that they didn’t really want these things anyway has been to portray women of color as undeserving, pariahs sucking the resources of the state—a key move in the long, ignoble, and racialized history of the contemporary Republican refrain that America is divided into “makers” saddled with income taxes and “takers” who reap the rewards of government spending.

The Right’s vilification of poor women of color as lazy “welfare queens” under Ronald Reagan ultimately found another important champion in Bill Clinton, who in 1996 justified his administration’s attempt to “end welfare as we know it” by declaring “teenage mothers” the “greatest threat” to the nation.<sup>28</sup> Clinton’s so-called welfare reform bill was also tied to a campaign for “marriage promotion” launched jointly by the political and Christian Right in the 1980s. Framing “marriage as a means to lift recipients out of poverty,” Jean Hardisty wrote, federal marriage promotion programs “promote the nuclear family model and emphasize the father as the principal determinant of the success of both children and the family. Thus, the State is constructing marriage as the only acceptable means of family formation.”<sup>29</sup> Or, as Carol Burnett, founding director of the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative succinctly put it in an interview, describing attempts by her state to withhold subsidies from low-income women of color, “There is a lot of feeling that if these women were just married to men, the family would have enough money to solve these problems.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, conservatives use attacks on economic and reproductive justice for women of color to reinforce each other, by simultaneously creating a norm of who deserves to make decisions about reproduction, and helping conservatives to offload any responsibility to address income inequality.

The Right is currently engaged in efforts to defang *Roe v. Wade* to the point that, as is already the case for huge numbers of people, abortion rights

will exist in name only. “I think this is probably one of the scariest moments that I’ve ever seen in my lifetime for anybody other than White cisgendered men,” said Monica Simpson of SisterSong. “Everything that we have been fighting for in our movement is under attack.”<sup>31</sup> At least several additional factors complicate and add urgency to this situation. The current administration inherited an unusually large number of vacancies and has been filling those vacancies with conservative judges, such as Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. Vetted by the arch conservative Federalist Society, these nominees are overwhelmingly White (90% of nominations) males (80% of nominations)<sup>32</sup> with comparatively less experience than traditional federal appointments. As of March 8, 2018, there are a total of 146 federal vacancies<sup>33</sup> offering the current administration the opportunity to shape policy for decades to come. In a wave that reached its peak during the 2010-11 legislative sessions and has not abated, anti-choice groups and the politicians they support have pushed bills through GOP-dominated state legislatures under the heading of “Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers,” or TRAP.<sup>34</sup> The anti-choice movement claims these bills are intended to protect women from unsafe procedures; in fact they are designed to put abortion providers out of business and ultimately to eliminate abortion access, period.<sup>35</sup> As part of its strategy to justify these moves, the Right portrays women of color as incapable of making responsible choices about their bodies, and thus as undeserving of bodily autonomy. An inheritance from the justifications for sexual violence under chattel slavery, the same logic undergirded the myth of the welfare queen. Anti-choice politicians and prosecutors sometimes frame abortion restrictions as a necessary corrective to “bad cultural practices,” as Deepa Iyer and Gaylynn Burroughs put it in *Ms.* magazine, as with the mythical and debunked charge that Asian women engage in sex-selective abortion to ensure they have sons instead of daughters. If, as Iyer and Burroughs put it, “the choices and actions of Asian American women are viewed with suspicion,” then their health care rights and interests can be divided from those of other women. In two high-profile cases that exemplified this strategy, Asian American women in Indiana were tried for “feticide” for actions they took on their own bodies—a self-induced abortion in one case, and in the other, an attempted suicide—that resulted in the loss of their

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pregnancies.<sup>36</sup> In another version of such tactics, in 2010 anti-choice groups paid for an infamous series of billboards around Atlanta, later expanded to cities across the United States, that attempted to shame Black women for their reproductive choices by claiming, “The most dangerous place for an African American child is in the womb.”<sup>37</sup>

Once again, these recent moves by the Right on reproductive issues are entwined with the movement’s economic agenda. Even as TRAP bills were being introduced in newly Republican-dominated statehouses, social conservatives tried to get the government to defund Planned Parenthood and Title X family planning clinics, and to “regulate” the private insurance industry by barring Affordable Care Act state exchange plans from offering abortion coverage.

A major recent tactic in the corporate Right’s long game, in this regard, has been to work with the Christian Right on securing religious exemptions to employers’ legal obligations to provide workers with health care coverage—exemptions long sought by the latter as a way to avoid paying for contraception and other reproductive health care costs. In 2014, the Supreme Court handed the U.S. Right a major victory in *Burwell vs. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* when it decided that Hobby Lobby, a national craft store chain run by a powerful Christian Right family, could—as a corporation—claim a religious exemption from requirements under the Affordable Care Act to provide its employees with health insurance coverage for certain kinds of contraceptives that the company falsely claimed were abortifacients. The ruling subverted the First Amendment protections against the establishment of religion, and its guarantee of the free exercise of conscience for Hobby Lobby employees. In doing so, it expanded the legal meaning of corporate personhood, a doctrine beloved by many on the Right as a means for expanding corporate power by extending to corporations the constitutional rights guaranteed to people. In October 2017, Trump issued an executive order on religious liberty, prompting Attorney General Sessions to draft religious liberty guidelines<sup>38</sup> for all federal departments, allowing religious employers “to employ only persons whose beliefs and conduct are consistent with the employers’ religious precepts,” which would permit federal contractors to discriminate against LGBTQ people or restrict access to reproductive healthcare.

The court’s infamous decision in *Citizens United*



had expanded corporate free speech protections, and thus the right to make nearly unlimited campaign contributions. Its *Hobby Lobby* decision took this logic further by claiming that a large corporation (albeit a private, closely held one), could have rights of religious conscience, as an extension of the religious views of the owners. Implicitly, the ruling also meant corporations could (at least in some cases) impose those religious beliefs on their workers.<sup>39</sup> The Right has wasted no time in filing lawsuits that seek to expand on its victory in *Hobby Lobby*. The Trump administration has proposed that employers be granted the right to refuse insurance coverage to workers whenever “objections based on religious beliefs or moral convictions” arise.<sup>40</sup>

In a related attempt to extend the broad legal exemptions enjoyed by churches and other houses of worship to business and nonprofit enterprises, some conservative Christians characterize their non-church operations as “ministries.”<sup>41</sup> Focus on the Family, the Colorado-based Christian Right powerhouse that spawned a national network of state-level policy institutes, and spun off the national lobby group Family Research Council, has declared itself to be a church, thereby avoiding a requirement that it file public tax documents.<sup>42</sup> A number of such initiatives currently threaten individual rights and economic opportunity in favor of powerful institutions both for-profit and non-profit.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from *Hobby Lobby*, North Carolina’s HB2—the so-called “bathroom bill”—offers perhaps the clearest recent expression of the Right’s strategy of smuggling attacks on decent wages and working conditions into rulings and legislation that more obviously limit bodily autonomy, in this case, of trans people. In 2016, Christian Right groups including Focus on the Family, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Alliance Defending Freedom joined the Corporate Right (embodied here by self-proclaimed libertarian conservative industrialist Art Pope) in lobbying North Carolina politicians to pass HB2, which dictates that transgender persons must use the public restroom for the gender they were assigned at birth rather than the one consistent with their gender identity. But while HB2’s assault on trans rights dominated headlines, the new law was in fact an omnibus bill that also contained explicit attacks on workers. It restricted municipali-

ties and county governments from enacting wage and hour laws; prevented workers from suing over racial, religious, and other forms of discrimination in state courts; and banned local enactment of higher minimum wages, paid sick days, or other measures that would materially improve the lives of low-wage retail, manufacturing, service, and health care workers throughout the state. Feminist advocates must understand that measures like HB2 aren’t introduced only because of anti-trans bias or “hate,” but also to advance the long-game efforts of the Christian Right and powerful business interests to consolidate their power and to profit from the mobilization of such bigotries.

The criminalization of Black girls within the education system is yet another example of how the Right has mobilized assaults on women of color that also benefit private interests. African American girls are the fastest-growing population in juvenile detention nationwide.<sup>44</sup> A 2015 report for the Schott Foundation by Kimberlé Williams

Crenshaw, Jyoti Nanda, and Priscilla Ocen analyzed Department of Education data and found that Black girls were suspended from school six times more frequently than White girls.<sup>45</sup> Researchers say that school officials and those in authority tend to penalize Black girls, especially

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those with darker skin, more harshly than lighter-skinned girls for subjective reasons, including the perception that they are “unsophisticated, hypersexualized and defiant,” as Jamilia Blake, associate professor of educational psychology at Texas A&M University, told the *New York Times*.<sup>46</sup> Once again, not only are women of color’s bodies subject to disproportionate and draconian policing, but this policing in turn becomes a growth opportunity for private companies at the expense of vulnerable public institutions, in this case by providing fodder for efforts to replace public schools with charters (which often single out kids of color even more for punishment or expulsion<sup>47</sup>) and driving business for private prisons and juvenile detention facilities, where girls may land after being expelled.

When the anti-choice Christian Right and the anti-labor corporate Right succeed at linking their goals this deeply, how can we forge stronger ties of our own to defeat them?

### III. RESISTING THE RIGHT



Women's March on Washington, January 21, 2017. Photo: Mobilus In Mobili / Flickr.

A right-wing coalition between free-market champions and religious conservatives has given us decades of targeted attacks on women's economic and reproductive justice. Such attacks, already devastating, continue to escalate. But the coalition that created them is also newly vulnerable under the pressure of a rising nationalist movement. The global neoliberal order has created conditions of such extreme economic inequality that liberal democracies around the world globe faces growing crises of legitimacy. Consistent with right-wing populist insurgencies in Europe and elsewhere, the Trump campaign lashed out against the economic insecurity confronting Americans—defined in highly exclusive racial, ethnic, and religious terms—and offered a largely racial explanation: dangerous and undeserving dark-skinned people from outside our borders are freeloading on services and overrunning the country. The strength of Trump's commitment to this vision of America is evident in the political cover he offered to murderous White nationalists in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017<sup>48</sup>, and in his use of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program as a bargaining chip to secure funding for a southern border wall and changes to our authorized immigration program that would preference Europeans and discourage immigration from Global South countries.<sup>49</sup> This posture has emboldened White nationalists and shocked liberals and even economic conservatives within the governing coalition who do not share Trump's explicit commitment to White dominance. Both developments

create organizing opportunities for progressives.

As reflected in its tax overhaul<sup>50</sup>, the Trump administration's economic policies seem certain to increase economic inequality rather than to materially improve the lot of most Americans—including most Trump voters.<sup>51</sup> What Trump can (and therefore must) deliver are tangible contributions to White, male, and conservative Christian social and cultural domination. What might this look like? No student loan relief, but the revocation of guidelines for redress of sexual assault on college campuses and measures to deny access to higher education for Black and brown students.<sup>52</sup> No return of manufacturing jobs, but a fortification of police and court crackdowns on "Black Identity Extremists" and Latinx communities along with a nod and a wink to murderous neo-Nazis and their fellow travelers. No reining in of Wall Street excesses, but a steady drip of antisemitism.<sup>54</sup> No increase in health care services for your dollar spent, but denial of comprehensive reproductive health services for poor women and women of color. And so on.

The feminist movement thus stands at a crossroads: we can cede the critique of neoliberalism to a misogynist administration committed to White redemption; or we can present the alternative of a genuine social justice feminism that rejects austerity economics and acts as a bulwark against nationalism, misogyny and the growing specter of authoritarianism. Our democratic institutions and fortunes hang in the balance. How, then, should we approach this vital demand?



**Below we offer ten considerations as we move forward in this fight.**

- 1. Expose the work of the Right, identifying its strategies and vulnerabilities.** Inform your resistance; know thy opposition. Feminist constituencies—including economic justice and reproductive rights groups—are frequently fighting a common foe (or foes). By working collaboratively to show how the Right attacks communities across the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class—and to locate its weaknesses—these and other constituencies can build increasingly coordinated strategies rather than dividing their energies or, worse, risk being pitted against each other.
- 2. Build across social justice movement silos to engage and lead on the most significant issues of the day.** These include crushing wealth and income inequality, structural racism, state violence, and the policing of gender roles and identities. Feminist movements are strongest when they can connect to allies who also contend with the wrath of the Right. “We are going to have to get back to the old school way of doing this work,” said Monica Simpson. “We don’t need more conferences! We need more opportunities to do strategic thinking, strategic partnership, and deeper collaboration.”
- 3. Reach beyond our core constituencies.** The Right’s regressive tax agenda and dismantling of the social safety net (including food, housing, and health care) materially disadvantages millions of people beyond the immediate ranks of social justice organizations, affording many opportunities to build an ever larger “we.” As part of forging new majorities with viable paths to power, social justice feminists should seek common ground with communities beyond the usual coalition suspects. Examples include faith-based movements (e.g. social-justice-oriented Muslims, Catholics, and evangelical Christians) and White working class people who reject the racism, xenophobia, and misogyny that are on offer from the so-called Alt Right and its more mainstream imitators. By boldly challenging the failure of neoliberal policies on offer from both major parties, social justice feminists can compete with the false economic populism of Trumpism.
- 4. Invest in women of color leadership and organizing.** Women, and particularly women of color, are already the principal agents driving many progressive movements in the United States. Women of color are a powerful force in electoral politics, with enough clout and numbers to sway major races at the state and local levels.<sup>55</sup> This is just one more reason that conservatives are doubling down on their efforts to strip women of this power to make political change, ignoring and erasing women of color and the issues that matter to them from their policy agendas. Likewise, it is partly because women of color have been such effective builders of progressive movements that the Right has spent decades targeting individuals from ACORN’s Bertha Lewis to civil rights attorney Lani Guinier to the actor Leslie Jones for harassment when they appear in leadership positions. Women of color leadership (including transgender and gender non-conforming women) must be recognized and elevated by the feminist movement as a whole.
- 5. Unequivocally call for bold public investment in female-headed families of color who have been at the center of attacks.** Rather than perpetuating the ongoing crisis of evictions and convictions—incarcerating men and evicting women of color, a pattern that places families and children at huge risk—we should be investing in women of color who are heads of families, offering safe supports and care for them to be able to choose how to engage in the housing and labor markets. Women of color must occupy a central role. As Dr. Redman states, “When you continue to allow women of color to speak about their bodies and their challenges, you don’t lose focus of the story and the policy that should surround it. You center the real issues in the work.”
- 6. Invest in local and state level fights.** At these levels (unlike within a dysfunctional Congress) legislating continues apace, and social justice constituencies have greater ability to influence outcomes. The Right has demonstrated how states can be building blocks toward a national strategy on policy issues; social justice feminists must do the same.



- 7. Prioritize the South and southern leadership.** The South, home to the majority of Black Americans as well as a laboratory for racist and sexist policy-making and economic deregulation of all kinds, had until recently been all but given up as a lost cause by liberal electoral strategists and progressive organizing at the national level since the success of the Republican Southern Strategy—to our moral and strategic peril.<sup>56</sup> The work of groups such as Southerners on New Ground (SONG), Highlander Center, SisterSong, SPARK Reproductive Justice Now, the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative, and others provide excellent models for how groups led by working class women and people of color can build grassroots coalitions and infrastructure for change across the South. These groups are building networks of activists, both across regions and deep within communities, to challenge the most serious injustices and attacks from the Right. Organizing under these conditions holds lessons for the country and any strategy to build power at the national level must break the Right’s hold on the South.
- 8. Build the case for activist government.** The Right’s argument for small government is rooted in racist and misogynist ideas about who is a real/deserving American. This dynamic was glaringly evident in the push for welfare reform during the 1990s, which legislated major changes to the Social Security Act by campaigning against “teenage mothers”—code for young, poor women of color. The 2016 election cycle showed strong support, among both progressives and some conservatives, for restoring the welfare state—at least for purportedly “deserving” Americans. Social justice movements that use a feminist analysis can play a major role in building on this support and creating programs that enhance the lives of the majority instead of the elite.
- 9. Defend democratic institutions** that—despite their systemic failures to guarantee rights and opportunities for all—provide critical checks against the consolidation of aggressively chauvinist nationalism and the specter of authoritarianism.<sup>57</sup> The integrity of the judiciary, the press, and the vote are all under tremendous pressure from this administration and, despite their many inadequacies, must be defended and fortified. Voter registration is under attack, particularly after the Supreme Court’s *Shelby County* ruling in 2013 and its gutting of the Voting Rights Act, both decisions that made voters of color far more vulnerable to discrimination at the polls. Many grassroots organizations are fighting back. Women of color-led reproductive justice organizations are working deeply in communities to mobilize voters, and women of color have carried elections for progressive candidates and pivotal ballot initiatives (as when Latinx voters stopped a municipal twenty-week abortion ban in Albuquerque).<sup>58</sup> Yet the role of money in politics continues to limit the voices of any but the very rich. Feminist movements can help challenge the power of corporations to influence policy in both parties, create greater transparency and accountability, and thereby create more space for a vision of a just society that connects economic justice to racial and gender justice. Similar investments should be considered with respect to shoring up a robust and independent judiciary and news media.
- 10. Center social justice feminism in the resistance and alternatives to the Right.** The trends that we have identified in this paper—the long-term coordinated strategies of the corporate and Christian Right, their attacks on women and communities of color, the particular challenges facing women and communities of color in the South—are prologue to the next phase of grassroots resistance and collective struggle. Women, people of color, and their advocates and those who fund social justice work are facing a moment of decision and of opportunity: the chance to confront the attacks from the Right and formulate a coordinated strategy that centers social justice feminism in the resistance—and alternative—to neoliberalism, White nationalism, and patriarchy. By elevating alliances across race, class, and gender, social justice feminists of all gender identities can compete with and overcome the Right’s destructive formula of race, nation, and patriarchy.

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- Redemption violently and systematically dismantled gains towards racial democracy and secured the former Confederacy's particular leverage in the modern U.S. political system.
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- Another prong of the Right's strategy is targeting unions' finances. The capstone of this approach is the passage of "right to work" legislation that weakens unions by forcing them to represent non-dues-paying workers. Now on the books in twenty-five states, these laws comprise one of several tools that the Right uses to weaken unions financially by interrupting the way they can charge or collect dues. Without robust income streams to fund their bargaining work and without membership rosters that reflect a healthy majority in the workplace, unions lack the leverage to bargain for better pay and working conditions.
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Mariya Strauss** is a community and labor activist and writer based in Baltimore, Maryland. She is a former economic justice research analyst at Political Research Associates and a former guest editor for *The Public Eye* magazine. Her current focus is on food justice.

**Tarso Luís Ramos** has been investigating and challenging the U.S. Right for 25 years. Under his leadership as Executive Director, Political Research Associates has launched major initiatives on Islamophobia, antisemitism, misogyny, authoritarianism, White nationalism and the Alt Right, and other emerging threats to democracy. He collaborates closely with immigrant and racial justice groups, social justice feminists, LGBTQ advocates, and worker organizations to provide analysis and strategic advice. Ramos is currently an activist in residence at the Barnard Center for the Study of Women and a Rockwood Leadership Institute National Yearlong Fellow for 2017-2018.



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Political Research Associates  
1310 Broadway, Suite 201  
Somerville, MA 02144-1837

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