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Comparable Worth Proven a Failure

The evidence is now in. The concept called “Comparable Worth” is as wrongheaded and counterproductive as critics predicted when this feminoid notion emerged in the late 1970s. It is a relic of the Big Brother extravagances of the LBJ Great Society married to the feminist fantasies of the Carter Administration.

The essence of Comparable Worth is that some commissar (or might we say commi-czarina) of wages should use the power of government to make the wages of groups of jobs held traditionally by women equal to the wages of groups of jobs held traditionally by men. *Which* jobs would get raises of how much, and which would get any pay cuts and how much, would be within the subjective and arbitrary discretion of the bureaucrats making the decisions.

“Equal pay for equal work” has been the law of the land since the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and this principle has been repeatedly strengthened and enforced in federal law and by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Comparable worth, by contrast, demands equal pay for unequal and different jobs which some functionary decides are “comparable.”

Comparable Worth decrees that wages should be determined by “evaluators” instead of by the marketplace. Evaluators, like lawyers, are for hire, and they produce evaluations demanded by the bureaucrats who hire them.

Congress and most states, fortunately, refused to pass this feminist wage control, but it did take hold in one state: Washington. In that state, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) filed suit on behalf of state employees.

A Carter-appointed activist U.S. District judge at Tacoma, Washington held that Washington State had engaged in “sex discrimination” by not paying equal wages for entirely different jobs that one evaluator had alleged were of “comparable worth.” The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1985 overruled, stating: “We find nothing in the language of Title VII or its legislative history to indicate that Congress intended to abrogate fundamental economic principles such as the laws of supply and demand.”

Although the state of Washington defeated AFSCME in the courts, the state's wimpish politicians caved in and ordered Comparable Worth to be implemented anyway. In 1986, the state of Washington embarked on a new program of raising the pay of tens of thousands of the state's female employees by 5 to 20 percent.

But now these eager politicians and bureaucrats have discovered that the state has a much bigger problem! Washington State officials are expressing shock as the results, but it's hard to see why anyone is surprised.

When the state raised the pay of women in traditional women's jobs (such as secretaries, typists, and clerks), the women were very happy to remain in those "women's jobs." After all, why should a woman want to be a telephone pole repairperson, a highway ditch digger, or a prison guard if she could get the same pay working in a carpeted, climate-controlled office?

Under Comparable Worth, you wage is based on the "points" which some evaluator assigns to your job category. For example, a Washington secretary was awarded 197 points but a prison guard only 190 points, Now I ask you: If you were a female secretary, would you switch to a job as prison guard at the same or slightly less pay just for the satisfaction of fulfilling the feminist goal of moving women into "nontraditional" jobs?

Wages in some traditional women's jobs have risen proportionately more than the wages of their supervisors. This not only upsets the supervisors but is causing the women to refuse promotions. "Why take a promotion with all its headaches if I don't make significantly more money?", some ask.

The new pay equality system was rigged so that no one would have to take a pay cut. In order to afford the extra $400 million in pay increases to women, the state had to eliminate across-the-board cost-of-living pay increases to all state employees.

The result is that, in some traditionally male jobs, wages have fallen 30 percent or more below pay levels for similar jobs in private industry. Many men are leaving or rejecting state jobs and, in order to deal with acute shortages is some essential occupations, the state has to grant "special" increases outside of the Comparable Worth guidelines.

The state's personnel director told the press that he knows of no way to correct the program's anomalies without creating others. A spokesman for AFSCME, the

union which spent 13 years wielding its clout to force this albatross around Washington State's neck, admitted, "it needs a major look."

The Washington State politicians should have been able to learn a lesson from the failure of socialism all over the rest of the world. But they had to make their own mistake.