

# Universal public services: The power of decommodifying survival

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One of the central insights emerging from research on degrowth and climate mitigation is that universal public services are crucial to a just and effective transition.

Capitalism relies on maintaining an artificial scarcity of essential goods and services (like housing, healthcare, transport, etc), through processes of enclosure and commodification. We know that enclosure enables monopolists to raise prices and maximise their profits (consider the rental market, the U.S. healthcare system, or the British rail system). But it also has another effect. When essential goods are privatised and expensive, people



'Public services are a common good,' reads a placard on the March 22 protest in Paris over cuts, labour rights and privatisation. Photo: Twitter/@commeunbruit

*Under capitalism, people are forced to work producing unnecessary things (using more energy, resources and ecological pressure) in order to buy things they really need.*

need more income than they would otherwise require to access them. To get it they are compelled to increase their labour in capitalist markets, working to produce new things that may not be needed (with increased energy use, resource use, and ecological

pressure) simply to access things that clearly are needed, and which are quite often already there.

Take housing, for example. If your rent goes up, you suddenly have to work more just to keep the same roof over your head. At an economy-wide level, this dynamic means we need more aggregate production—more growth—in order to meet basic needs. From the perspective of capital, this ensures a steady flow of labour for private firms, and maintains downward pressure on wages to facilitate capital accumulation. For the rest of us it means needless exploitation,



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insecurity, and ecological damage. Artificial scarcity also creates growth dependencies: because survival is mediated by prices and wages, when productivity improvements and recessions lead to unemployment people suffer loss of access to essential goods—even when the output of those goods is not affected—and growth is needed to create new jobs and resolve the social crisis.

There is a way out of this trap: by decommodifying essential goods and services, we can eliminate artificial scarcity and ensure public abundance, de-link human well-being from growth, and reduce growthist pressures.

This approach also has several other direct social and ecological benefits. For one, it can have a strong positive impact on human welfare. We know from empirical studies that public services are a powerful driver of improvements in life expectancy, well-being, and other key social indicators (here, here and here). Universal services would also end the current cost-of-living crisis, by directly reducing the cost of living.

We also know that countries with decommodified or otherwise universal public services can deliver better social outcomes at any given level of GDP and resource use (here, here, here, here and here). Universal services ensure an efficient conversion of resources and energy into social outcomes. Furthermore, as we will see, public control over provisioning systems makes it easier to achieve rapid decarbonisation in those sectors.

Finally, together with a second key policy—the public job guarantee—this approach would permanently end economic insecurity and resolve the current contradiction between social and ecological objectives. Right now it is impossible to take even obvious steps toward climate mitigation (such as scaling down fossil fuel production or other destructive sectors), because people in affected industries would lose access to wages, housing, healthcare, etc. No one should accept such an outcome. With universal services and an emancipatory job guarantee, we can protect against any economic insecurity and guarantee a just transition. There is no necessary contradiction between ecological and social objectives. The two can and must be pursued together.

By universal services here I mean not only healthcare and education, but also housing, transit, nutritious food, energy, water, and communications. In other words, a decommodification of the core social sector—the means of everyday survival. And I mean attractive, high-quality, democratically managed, properly universal services, not the purposefully shitty last-resort systems we see in the U.S. and other neoliberal countries. What does this look like? How do we get there?

**Healthcare and education.** This one is common: most European countries have universal healthcare and education systems, many of which rank as the best health systems in the world. The key principle is that healthcare should be free at the point of use, ideally through a public provider, without the intermediation of expensive private insurers. Similarly, public education should be tuition-free from primary school through university. Existing debts accrued for healthcare and education should be cancelled.

**Housing.** Housing costs constitute a large portion of household expenses. This is an essential good, as necessary as healthcare and education. Yet people often spend 30-50% of their wages on rent (for housing that is often woefully



substandard), and buying a house is in many places increasingly unaffordable to anyone who isn't rich. It's important to recognise a distinction between owning one's own residence (fine) and private control of rental units, which is where problems arise, particularly in the case of large corporate landlords that control dozens or even thousands of homes. The latter represents enclosure of a key resource that is fundamental for survival. We don't tolerate this for healthcare, but for some reason we regularly do when it comes to housing.

One effective intervention would be to simply limit the number of rental units that any individual or firm can own, and require the sale of surplus properties. The influx of housing into the market would drive prices down, making it more affordable for people to buy a residence, but also making it more affordable for city governments to buy units, expand the public housing stock and improve the quality of housing, which would be naturally integrated into the fabric of the city. Public rental units can then be available on an affordable basis, and any remaining private rental units would need to have rates low enough to compete with the public option. Vienna and Singapore offer a model for attractive, high-quality public housing that is enjoyed by 60-80% of the population. And such an approach can be used to achieve rapid efficiency improvements in the housing sector, including insulation, heat pumps and efficient appliances, thus helping to achieve rapid decarbonization.

*Transit.* Public transit should be available for free or very cheap. Barcelona provides a good example, where metro and tram journeys across the city's bright, clean and efficient system cost only one euro, and e-bikes cost a fraction of that. But nearly 100 cities around the world go further and offer free public transit. In places where existing public transit infrastructure is inadequate, it should be developed to the point where people do not need cars on a regular basis. High-quality public transit is critical to reducing demand for cars and reducing emissions from transport.

*Food.* Our food system suffers from several problems. Many people cannot afford or access nutritious food, even in the world's richest nations. Supermarkets tend to be controlled overwhelmingly by a few large corporations, which prioritize profitable processed foods, with supply chains that rely heavily on plastic packaging and long-distance transport. This model is highly energy- and monoculture-intensive, with vast tracts of land appropriated for industrial meat production, which leads to deforestation, emissions, soil depletion and biodiversity loss.

A food justice program could ensure universal access to nutritious, regenerative, vegetarian food. Governments can fund the development of regenerative farms, as well as food gardens in urban and suburban areas, with produce sold at affordable prices through community hubs in every neighbourhood that can double as cafeterias serving vegetarian meals. These would be convenient and attractive places for anyone to shop and eat, providing high-quality foods covering all necessary nutritional needs, while facilitating conviviality and community engagement. Such a system would improve health outcomes and also help to dramatically reduce land use and the ecological impact of the food system.

*Energy and water.* These are essential to human survival. Energy and water should be run as public utilities, with a two-tier pricing system: a quota of energy and water should be made available for free to all households, adjusted for the number of residents, sufficient to meet basic needs. Additional use of energy and water beyond this quota can be charged at a progressive rate to disincentivize excess throughput—delivering yet further benefits for the environment. This approach tends to have strong popular support. The public energy system can be used to reduce fossil fuel use on a science-based schedule and prioritize a rapid transition to renewables, while rules governing the public water system



can be used to prevent over-extraction by private firms and ensure a stable and equitably allocated supply of water during droughts.

*Communications.* Internet access and mobile phone data are necessary for daily life and should be treated as public utilities. A basic monthly package should be available to individuals or households for free, with additional data and other services available at market rates. The public provider would be fully independent from the government, with cutting-edge data security to preclude any state censorship. Much like the postal service does not read the letters it delivers, a public data network should be designed to protect privacy.

*How to pay for it?* The traditional answer is that to pay for public services you first need more GDP growth: increase corporate production of stuff we don't need, then tax the revenues from that production to fund public production of stuff we do need. This assumption is so entrenched in the public imagination that it is completely taken for granted. It is leveraged by the right to claim that public services are somehow given to us by rich people (those who pay "the most" taxes, which of course is quite often not even true), so we should therefore be grateful to them and do whatever it takes to let them accumulate more. It is also ecologically dangerous. We urgently need things like public transit and renewable energy to meet our climate goals. If we need more corporate growth to "pay" for these things, it increases total energy demand and makes decarbonisation more difficult to achieve.

In reality, there is no reason that public production needs to rely on "funding" from prior private production (as if corporations somehow produce money, which of course they do not). Any government that has sufficient monetary sovereignty can mobilise public production directly, simply by issuing public finance to do it. As Keynes pointed out: anything we can actually do, in terms of productive capacity, we can pay for. And when it comes to productive capacity, high-income economies already have far more than they need. Deploying public finance simply shifts the use of this capacity from corporations to the public, where it can be used for democratically ratified social and ecological objectives, rather than for capital accumulation.

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*The job guarantee.* This same approach can be used to fund a public job guarantee. The JG would permanently end unemployment, and ensure that anyone who wants to can train to participate in the most important collective projects of our generation: expanding renewable energy capacity, regenerating ecosystems, improving public services, care work, etc.—urgent, socially-necessary production with living wages and workplace democracy. The JG would help reorient labour toward social and ecological use-value rather than servicing corporate profit. The program would have to be financed by the government, the currency issuer, but should be democratically managed at the appropriate level of locality, to determine what forms of production are most necessary to meet community needs. And of course a basic income should be available to anyone who cannot work or who for whatever reason chooses not to.

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This idea proves wildly popular in polls. And the additional power of the job guarantee is that it can be used to set standards for wages and working time (shortening the working week to, say, 32 hours) and workplace democracy across the whole economy, as private firms would come under pressure to adopt standards similar to the JG or otherwise risk



losing staff. Because if people can opt to do dignified, socially important work in a democratic workplace, then why would they agree to do meaningless labour under worse conditions for corporate firms whose primary goal is just to accumulate capital? They wouldn't.

The power of universal public services is that we can improve people's access to goods necessary for decent living, with provisioning systems that require less aggregate energy and material use and which allow us to accelerate decarbonisation. These outcomes can be further enhanced by ensuring strong democratic governance of public systems. Together with the job guarantee, economic insecurity is permanently abolished—accomplishing a goal that growth alone has never been able to achieve—and human well-being is de-linked from the requirement of ever-increasing aggregate production. This would change the political landscape, freeing us to pursue necessary climate action without any risk to employment and livelihoods, while improving social outcomes, reducing inequality and facilitating a shift toward a more just and ecological economy.

These policies should be core demands of a united climate and labour movement. Universal services, a job guarantee, living wages, a shorter working week—these are popular interventions that could provide the basis for mass political support. For the labour movement, we need to stop pretending that capitalist growth will magically end unemployment, ensure living wages and bring workplace democracy—which it never does—and instead fight to achieve these objectives directly. And for the climate movement, which is often accused of ignoring the material conditions of working-class communities, this approach addresses real bread-and-butter needs and creates cause for alliances with working-class formations. This is the political movement we need.

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