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## Working Women Left in Lurch

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From: *Madison Capital Times*

Date: 12/3/2001

This week, to don Chinese rhetorical garb, we hope to finish our Long March through the Five Big Changes that have largely defined America's, and Wisconsin's, political economy over the past generation. So far we've considered stagnant or declining wages, rising inequalities of income and wealth, and the transformed nature of employment relations and work. This week we consider changes in households, and lived space and the environment.

**Households:** The "traditional" American family - defined by the presence of a single male breadwinner and a wife at home with the kids - has largely disappeared over the past generation. Once the overwhelming majority of American households, celebrated in countless "Leave It to Beaver"-style TV sitcoms, this structure now describes only a quarter of American households. And its share keeps shrinking. Among younger families, the percentage is closer to 10 percent, or about the same as that of another threatened institution: private sector unionization. But unlike the labor movement, which at least in theory could make a big comeback, the forces eroding the traditional family seem more or less irreversible. Women are certainly not about to leave the paid labor force in droves.

The labor force participation rate of women with school-aged-or- older kids now stands at about 80 percent, indistinguishable from that of men. The rate among women with kids under 6 is now 65 percent, really not that much lower and better than twice its level of only 30 years ago.

But while women's labor force participation has changed fundamentally, two things have not. One is men, whose contribution to household work (of which women continue to do 70-80 percent) increases on average only 10 minutes a day with a wife's assumption of a full-time outside job. The other is American public policy, which continues to be among the least supportive of working women in the developed world. Nationally, we have no affordable system of quality child care or elder care, no paid family leave, and of course no universal health insurance. We also have the fewest holidays, longest working hours and longest commute times. One result is a palpable time squeeze for working women, who are increasing stressed by the joint demands of work and family.

**Lived Space and the Environment:** The past generation was also the one that saw suburbs overtake cities as the place where most Americans live. Also, an even more dramatic change has been the population shift from rural areas to such "metro" ones. Still, there is no denying the political reality that a certain suburban politics, deeply hostile to the cities on which their residents feed, has increasingly dominated public policy, and the sprawl that is the antithesis of urban development has come to be defining of most of our physical landscape.

If sprawl is the signal change in our national physical space, the signal conclusions of our use of the global environment include global warming, accelerating species extinction, poisoned oceans, disappearing fish, mad cows, drug-laden meat, and other signs of pretty fundamental disturbances of nature. These are the sorts of things many worry about as they drive their SUVs through snarling traffic in the mornings and late afternoons, commuting to work from their residence built on former farmland. They suggest a politics, both domestically and internationally, that can recognize, but not address, an uncomfortable relation between our settled lifestyles and production systems.

**Politics:** Finally there is politics. Here the great change over the past generation is that organized money has largely replaced organized people as the driver of conventional politics. While there are still interest groups, there are few organizations, at least outside labor, that can actually move the bodies of members in political action.

The disappearance of the public is both consequence, and cause, of the change in political technique. It is vastly more efficient to shape the message, communicate it via polling and mass media, and mobilize voting on an individual basis - e.g., direct mail - rather than on a group basis. But most of these techniques are highly capital intensive, reducing the relative need for organized people and creating a desperate need for cash. This fundamental change in how we do mass electoral politics is yet another fact both familiar and apparently unshakeable. Everyone knows that it makes politics a "rich man's game," with obvious adverse effects on the working class.

All pretty bad news this: falling incomes and rising inequality; a work more insecure and uncertain in content than ever; stressed families and kids raised on TV; a dying planet, abandoned cities, and never-ending commutes; money-corrupted politics. All pretty bad news, but still, we were told in the 1990s, all of this was largely irrelevant to our welfare, since an ever more fundamental change was afoot - a "New Economy" that promised riches finally enough to drown the sorrows of the recent past. This will be our topic next week.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. COWS is sponsoring "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin.