

Norman Solomon: Uncle Sam Is Making the Wrong Choices

Written by Norman Solomon, PressDemocrat.com | Op-Ed
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On a recent day in Petaluma, two very different events spotlighted grim results of upside-down priorities from the federal government.

Upwards of 600 people gathered for an early breakfast at the Veterans Memorial Hall to raise money for the Committee on the Shelterless (COTS), a nonprofit organization that last year sheltered nearly 2,000 individuals, served more than 127,000 hearty meals and distributed 800,000 pounds of food to the needy.

We heard moving stories about — and from — people whose lives have been transformed by active compassion, generosity and their own hard work. But, as speakers lamented, COTS must turn away many who need help.

Charities and other nonprofits are struggling to cope with deep economic wounds that have been festering for years. The dire consequences are far more widespread than private agencies can possibly heal.

Only government has the capacity to provide economic remedies for social distress of this magnitude. But government is failing.

Across the North Coast, elected officials speak of wanting to create local jobs. But city, county and state budgets are going from very bad to worse.

Only the federal government can use the Keynesian tool of deficit spending to bring down

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unemployment. But Washington is paralyzed by ideology. Job stimulus funding, inadequate from the outset, has dwindled. And the momentum is moving in the wrong direction.

The threats to working people are now even coming from one of our great public institutions, the post office.

Hours after the COTS breakfast, I went across town to a public meeting about a proposal to close both of the regional mail-processing facilities in Petaluma. About 230 employees would be directly affected.

Although enveloped in public-relations fog, the presentation from U.S. Postal Service management was all too clear. This is a national directive. In the name of becoming more “competitive,” the Postal Service is moving to severely damage its quality of service.

Postal employees and the public will suffer. Many jobs will be lost. And millions of us who depend on first-class mail will discover that one-day delivery has morphed into two-day or even three-day delivery.

This approach is aiming to make unwise changes irreversible. So, Ukiah has been facing imminent closure of its beautiful, functional and historic downtown post office. Some people in rural areas are on the verge of losing the only post office within reasonable driving distance.

Meanwhile, nationwide, plans are afoot to eliminate Saturday postal delivery.

A bizarre accounting method, falsely portraying the Postal Service as insolvent, provides a rationale for slash-and-burn “remedies.” Congress has failed to overturn a five-year-old requirement imposed by Republican leaders that cooked the books — mandating the extraordinary pre-funding of more than \$5 billion every year for retiree health benefits.

This travesty is part of a pattern. While Wall Street flourishes, Main Street suffers — and

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powerful forces in Washington are opting for policies that normalize unemployment while undermining individuals, families and communities.

To the north of Sonoma County, economic distress is even more widespread. In Mendocino and Humboldt counties — whether visiting a health clinic, senior center, public transit agency, community college, student ecology project or veterans assistance center — I've seen ominous impacts of severe and protracted funding shortages that are tearing at our social fabric.

Uncle Sam is making bad choices. For instance, policymakers are squandering money — and taking lives — in a war effort that costs about \$1 million per year for each U.S. soldier now in Afghanistan. The failure of Congress to enact a proposed one-quarter of 1 percent transaction tax on Wall Street is depriving the U.S. Treasury of \$150 billion a year. And so it goes.

Our national funding priorities are out of whack. We must change them to revive our communities.

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