

Firing and the Left

Firing a worker is usually a serious harm. Sometimes it's devastating. But we can still wonder, "Is firing someone morally wrong – and if so, *how* morally wrong?"

If this puzzles you, ponder this: Ending a romantic relationship, too, is usually a serious harm. Sometimes that, too, is devastating. Yet few moderns attach much moral blame to someone who dumps their romantic partner. Even if you're married, we rarely claim anything like, "If you break up, your ex-partner will wallow in misery for years, so you have a moral obligation to stay." (Close family members might privately maintain otherwise if you have kids together, but even then...)

In my view, firing is morally comparable to ending a romantic relationship. In the absence of a formal agreement to the contrary, both kinds of relationships are – and should be – "at will." Yes, informed observers might have some grounds to morally criticize the termination. Ultimately, however, close relationships – whether professional or personal – are complicated, riddled with misunderstandings. Hence, outsiders should not only affirm that people have a *right* to unilaterally break up; they should practice the virtue of the tolerance by remaining impartial in thought as well as in action.

To repeat, that's *my* view. The normal view, in contrast, is that romantic and professional relationships should be governed by diametrically opposed standards. In matters of love, the heart wants what the heart wants. On the job, in contrast, governments should protect workers from employer abuse. And even if the law says otherwise, firing someone who's performing their job adequately is morally suspect.

While this "normal view" is now widely-shared, it's still closely associated with the left. Back when "freedom of contract" had more appeal, the left strongly argued that employers' "freedom to fire" was tantamount to "the freedom to oppress workers." Back in high school, my social science teachers often philosophized, "Sure, physical coercion is bad; but so is *economic* coercion. If your employer can fire you whenever he likes, you're not free." This outlook naturally inspired the left to advocate a wide range of employment regulations, especially anti-firing rules. While most non-leftists also favor such regulation, the left has long been more intense about it. Their attitude is more radical – and so are the regulations they seek.

Which makes sense. If you earnestly believe that firing a worker is a kind of economic violence, you're going to firmly support stringent legal scrutiny of this violence.

From this perspective, the rise of "cancel culture" is deeply surprising. Over the last decade, many leftists have not just moderated their former stance against firing. They

have become *enthusiastic advocates of firing people they dislike*. “He’s performing his job adequately, so you have no right to fire him” has strangely morphed into a right-wing view. If you don’t believe me, just start making insensitive remarks about race, gender, and sexuality on social media and see how your career goes. “I was perfectly civil at work; I only offended on my own time” is now a frail defense. Even if your boss and co-workers adore you, plenty left-wing activists will *still* pressure them to sack you.

Again, I have no principled objection to firing workers for their political views. Indeed, I’ve long defended the blacklist of Hollywood’s Communists; while I tolerate a *wide* range of opinion, totalitarians are beyond the pale. While we have no right to jail them, they don’t belong in polite society. But if, like most people, you embrace the view that firing a worker is “economic coercion,” the left’s newfound love of firing their enemies should disturb you. Consider: Their revised stance amounts to something like, “Firing a worker who’s performing his job adequately is a form of violence. And if anyone crosses us, we advocate – nay, demand! – that this violence be done.”

To be fair, many leftists have yet to revise their stance. Perhaps because they’re afraid of experiencing economic violence at the hands of the many other leftists who have.