

Ellen Reese

University of California, Riverside

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6th, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

But Who Will Watch the Children? Welfare Reform and Struggles Over Child Care

Welfare reformers' emphasis on putting welfare mothers to work created new political threats and opportunities for childcare advocates. Forcing thousands of welfare recipients into the labor market significantly increased the demand for childcare services, putting further strains on programs already stretched beyond capacity. Yet, it also increased political support for expanding publicly subsidized childcare programs within state and local governments. In California and Wisconsin women--including low-income mothers, childcare providers, and female policy advocates—played key roles in campaigns to improve childcare policies. Local chapters of Wages for Housework and other organizations led by women defended poor mothers' ability to stay at home and care for their own children and opposed work requirements for welfare mothers. These groups found few allies for their campaigns in either state however as few groups sought to challenge, or believed it was possible to challenge, the priority put on women's paid employment within welfare reform. More successful was the movement to expand and improve childcare programs, although it was weakened by racial, ethnic, and class divisions over goals. This movement was particularly influential in California partly because ACORN's and SEIU's efforts to organize child care providers in Los Angeles and other cities quickly flourished into a vibrant statewide campaign involving parents and children. Impending cutbacks in childcare funding in California also helped to forge greater unity among white, middle class policy advocates and child care providers, most of whom are black and Latina.