

CHAPTER ONE

“Radical Feminism’s Misogynistic Crusade” or the Conservative Tax Revolt?

An account of feminism and reproductive labor has been conspicuously important to the conservative right in the United States, but in the opposite direction of what I have described: the right accuses feminists and feminism of not doing or caring about reproductive labor. For example, Stephen Bannon, President Donald Trump’s chief strategist and long the head of Breitbart News, famously described feminists “as a bunch of dykes from seven sisters schools.” He contrast them with conservative women “who would be pro-family, they would have husbands, they would love their children.”²¹ Feminists, in this account, are those who don’t do reproductive labor (or love their children)—only conservative women do. In 2012, Rick Santorum, running for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination, made the same point (even as gay sex columnist Dan Savage was trying to make Santorum’s name synonymous with that “frothy mixture of lube and fecal matter that is sometimes the product of anal sex”²²). Said Santorum, “Respect for stay-at-home mothers has been poisoned by ... radical feminism’s misogynistic crusade to make

working outside the home the only marker of social value and self-respect."³ Not employers, as Marx had it, but *feminists* think that only productive labor is worthy of value. In 2015 Fox News guest Gavin McInnes, founder of Vice Media, turned to a startled program host, Tamara Holder, and explained to her, "Look, you're miserable. You would be so much happier with kids around you tonight... Feminism has made women miserable. Women were much happier when housewives were glorified."⁴ Here, at least, he gets the narrative right—anti-feminism has offered a compensatory "glorification" of household labor (though not wages, support, or help), while feminists have offered an analysis of the exploitation or at least exhaustion inherent in the "double day" that suggests why an attorney and analyst like Holder might have to hold off on or decide not to have children.

This chapter argues that if we want to figure out who's to blame for the kind of stress storm that reproductive labor has become, we would not look to feminists. On the contrary, the politics represented by Trump's administration, Fox News, and Santorum (the man, not the gooey sex by-product)—the wing of the Republican coalition that has relentlessly pushed for lower wages and lower taxes—has a great deal more to answer for than feminism does about why it's become unimaginable for most caregivers to stay home with children or other dependents, or even be able to find a humane enough workplace where they can deal with family or community responsibilities without being afraid of being fired (or at the very least, expect they can successfully file a complaint if they are fired for being pregnant⁵). The capacity for any household (except for those with the highest-paid executives or inherited wealth) to afford a house, a car, food, and some middle-class consumer goods on a single income has all but

disappeared, and the problem of who is watching the kids is only a snow day or summer vacation away from near-crisis.⁶

The argument that “stay-at-home moms” are disappearing because of “working mothers” is structured by the same kind of magical thinking as the conservative gay marriage argument—if gay people marry, something bad will happen to heterosexual marriages—or the anti-immigrant one—if they have jobs, you won’t—and is just as flawed. Working mothers don’t actually *do* anything to those who would prefer to stay out of the workforce to do reproductive labor; the economy does. In fact, all reproductive labor—from caring for elders to building relationships across communities—is under severe pressure from the massive upward redistribution of wealth that began in the 1980s. By the 1990s, these politics had become the mainstream of the Democratic Party as well, especially under Bill Clinton and the South’s Democratic Leadership Council, which called for making the Democrats the party of business and white men again.⁷ It’s not feminists. It’s business and politicians. Rising conservatism in both parties and “business friendly” lower taxes in the eighties turned back feminist, labor, and racial justice activism for public benefits, affordable, high-quality day care, education, and decent workplaces that were safe and compatible with human reproduction. This was the real “war on women”—except it wasn’t just on women, or even those whose boring, repetitive, insecure jobs made them like women in the labor force. It was on impoverished people, the working class, and the middle class generally as they scrambled to figure out how to reproduce the species, care for those who couldn’t care for themselves, and enjoy their lives and leisure—while greedy jobs and stingy public support steadily eroded their ability to have those things.

This chapter explores how the activist movements on the left in the twentieth century fought for the time and space for reproductive labor. From the Popular Front and radical labor in the first third of the century to racial justice movements at midcentury and feminism in the late sixties and seventies, reproductive politics was crucial to left activism throughout the century, even if the only part of it that we seem to remember is the fights over abortion and birth control. Because this kind of activism made demands on business and government to give people time, sufficient wages, and, in a pinch, public support to keep their households afloat, Milton Friedmanesque, hard-right conservatives foundationally opposed these efforts. Instead, movements on the right to turn the mainstream of politics toward reducing the size of government was fundamentally about how far they could push the privatization of reproductive labor. The battles over this question had many names, including the forty-hour workweek (known on the right as the fight against paid overtime or raising the minimum wage); the Black Panther Party’s free breakfast programs for children, wages for housework, and subsidized early childhood education (or, as conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation preferred, “welfare,”) and workplaces that minimized people’s exposure to lead and other toxic substances (aka “excessive regulation.”). Some of the headline-grabbing names for these fights were welfare “reform,” immigration, gay marriage, and the politics of foreclosure, but we will turn to those in other chapters. This chapter will set the stage for the fights that began in the 1980s and ’90s over reproductive politics and neoliberalism by sketching, in broad strokes, the struggles over family, households, workplaces, and community survival that came before—and might provide some ideas for how we could organize for them again.

The left demands for the time and resources for reproductive labor have been taken up again in recent years, powerfully transformed, as an activist politics of reproductive justice—an “approach that links sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements,” as Black women’s health activist Loretta Ross has written, “by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families, and communities,” particularly racially and economically marginalized communities, by insisting on the right not only to prevent unwanted pregnancies but also to parent children “with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government.”⁸ This approach is exemplified by calling the police shooting of Black youth a reproductive justice issue.⁹ These movements link the legacies of the Black Panther Party to the history of feminism in a powerful synthesis that builds out the often invisible legacies of the Black freedom movement’s reproductive politics and feminism’s antiracism and workplace activism. But that’s a long story, one that requires us to look at what activists argued about in the 1970s—and even the 1940s—and a reading of the conservative revolt against a redistributive economy and government that launched the current crisis of reproductive labor.

EIGHT HOURS FOR WHAT WE WILL: LABOR FEMINISM

Labor feminists fought for an eight-hour day and the health and safety of women and children in an important struggle that began decades before what we usually think of as feminism’s “second wave” in the 1960s and ’70s. Historian Dorothy Sue Cobble has called it “the other feminist movement” and argues that

these activists were foundational to the wave of (often young) women's activism that came afterward.¹⁰ A surprising number of women were in labor unions by the 1950s—about three million, with another two million in auxiliaries. Even in the 1950s and '60s, when "stay-at-home" was considered an unnecessary modifier for "mother" (because women's place was in the home), it was nevertheless true that a quarter of married women with children worked, a percentage that was conspicuously higher for African American women. Many women entered the workforce during World War II, and that number continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, the Ozzie-and-Harriet ideology of the 1950s notwithstanding.¹¹ It was labor feminists who called for and won what became John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, founded in 1961 to combat discrimination against women in employment, subsequently empowered with new tools after Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act legislated against sex discrimination.

Mid-century labor feminists drew on much older traditions of labor militancy by and for women that stretched back into the nineteenth century. They organized and advocated for a 40-hour workweek that would give women time to care for their children. Trade unionists had long demanded "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!"¹² Labor feminists organized for protectionist legislation, which required shorter work hours for women workers and specified things like maternity leave, not working nights (because children and the dangers of the streets), avoiding heavy lifting and prolonged periods of standing (thought crucial to protecting pregnant women), and avoiding certain dangerous jobs. Labor feminists argued for equality in the workplace *and* protectionism; they did not see these as contradictory. As Dorothy Sue Cobble

writes, “they refused to privilege breadwinning over caregiving.”¹³ Labor feminists argued that at least *women* needed an eight-hour day, conceding maybe more than they should have to the protectionist idea that women had delicate constitutions. As much as anything, though, in the pre-1970s era when reproduction was often difficult to control, they were thinking about the need to provide accommodations for younger women who (always) might be pregnant. The New Deal’s ending of child labor created a new crisis for industrial workers—if childhood was to be understood as an extended period of dependency and children could not enter the workplace, how were parents (mothers) to care for them? The eight-hour day and protectionist legislation took on a new importance.

Myra Wolfgang was a typical labor-feminist figure. She organized her first sit-down strike of sales clerks and waitresses at a Woolworth’s five-and-dime in the 1930s; in later years she organized the “bunnies” at a Detroit Playboy club, demanding longer bunny suits that covered more of their bodies, rules that prevented customers from touching the waitresses, and job protection as food servers aged and their “bunny image” declined. They also demanded pay in wages, not just tips. Wolfgang objected to the entire Playboy philosophy, which, she said, was a “gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard.” What began in the labor bastion of Detroit under Wolfgang’s charismatic leadership spread across the country, and ultimately all the Playboy clubs were unionized.¹⁴

While the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) became synonymous with liberal feminism in the 1970s, it’s important to listen carefully to the labor feminists’ arguments against it, particularly that the ERA would end workplace protections for women’s health and reproduction. In fact, even

Betty Friedan, who by the 1970s was virtually a symbol of the ERA (Wolfgang called her "the Chamber of Commerce's Aunt Tom"¹⁵), had in the 1950s fought for a different kind of feminism, based in the most radical of labor unions. Historian Daniel Horowitz has told us about Friedan's clandestine past working in the labor movement in the forties and early fifties in the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers Union (UE), which had ties to the Communist Party (CP) and was not welcome in the mainstream of the AFL-CIO in the McCarthyite, anti-Communist decades from 1950 to 1980.¹⁶ There, as the young Betty Naomi Goldstein, child of Russian immigrants, Betty Friedan had worked as a labor journalist and in fact had written a thirty-nine-page pamphlet, "The UE Fights for Women Workers," in 1952 that argued for equal pay for equal work and described the appalling conditions of Black and Latina factory workers. She wrote for *UE News* about food prices, housewives' boycotts, and the "double task of housework as well as shop work."¹⁷ She was, in short, part of the lively crowd of writers and artists of the Popular Front, many of them Jewish, who, in the first half of the twentieth century, kept company with the CP and wrote in the context of an important radical tradition about the entwined issues of race, gender, and labor.¹⁸

This longer tradition of feminism and labor on the left was what gave birth to what some went on to call second-wave feminism. The birth control movement and Margaret Sanger came out of the Socialist Party and her arrests, exile, and radical insistence on birth control as a strategy for the working class's liberation from wage slavery in the years before World War I. While McCarthyism forced people like Sanger and Friedan to choose between continuing their work in explicitly left movements or working through an autonomous feminist movement, we lose a lot

when we forget that feminism was foundationally bound up with radical labor and the 40-hour workweek. Especially after the past half century of conservative, pro-business activism that has eviscerated the time and wages necessary to support households with dependents, it might be time to reactivate that memory.

SURVIVAL PENDING REVOLUTION

The racial justice movements of the twentieth century were also concerned with what we might call reproductive politics, concerned as they were with the well-being of children and households: issues of community survival, stopping sexual predators, and demanding an end to unjust policing and imprisonment. The Harlem Renaissance, Black colleges and churches, the Popular Front, and the Communist Party fostered a specifically Black radical tradition with respect to reproduction and reproductive labor throughout the early twentieth century.¹⁹ For example, in the 1940s, iconic civil rights figure Rosa Parks was engaged in an anti-rape campaign with the Popular Front, demanding respect for Black women and an end to white men’s sexual assault and racial-sexual terrorism.²⁰ Ella Baker, who in the 1960s would found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and support the activism of women and young people in a civil rights movement that often valorized messianic male leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., spent the 1930s and ’40s teaching workers about Black and labor history, leading the Young Negroes Cooperative League and building black economic security through co-ops, and working with the Popular Front’s campaign to defend the Scottsboro Boys from unjust charges of raping two white women. Baker, who has sometimes been heralded as one of the key people who midwived women’s liberation out of SNCC,

brought to her activism a fundamental commitment to the reproductive labor of building strong Black communities.²¹

By the 1950s, the Black freedom movement was organizing explicitly for reproductive justice. SNCC fought bills in the Mississippi state legislature calling for the sterilization of Black women, which were proposed every year from 1958 to 1964. Desegregating public schools was also central to the movement and its opposition; in fact, it can be argued that civil rights was above all a fight over children, from the children's crusade that brought down Bull Connor in Birmingham to the legal case that ended the lawfulness of segregation in public accommodations, *Brown v. Board of Education*.²² Fannie Lou Hamer, a delegate to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that sought to run white supremacists out of the state Democratic Party, spoke often about the sterilization of Black women in Mississippi, including on national television at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In 1973, the Southern Poverty Law Center and National Welfare Rights Organization brought a lawsuit on behalf of Minnie and Mary Alice Relf, 12- and 14-year-old Black sisters who were sterilized without their or their family's consent under a federal Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) program.²³

Although few remember the Black Panthers as having anything but a negative relationship to feminism, their community survival programs were fundamentally about a vision of how a just society would treat communities, families, and children. They provided clothing, health clinics, and the free breakfast program that eventually shamed states into feeding children in the morning in schools and day care programs and gave rise to the only substantial and long-lasting free early childhood education program in the United States, Head Start.²⁴ The breakfast program was designed to demonstrate to children what the Pan-

thers were fighting for: Black people’s legitimate demands for survival by virtue of their simple humanity. One activist recalled a transformative moment for a hungry child found filling his pockets with food. She told him he wasn’t stealing, that the food was his—did he want a bag? Joan Kelley, national coordinator of the Panthers’ breakfast program said, “We try to teach the children not so much through indoctrination but through our practice and example about sharing and socialism.”²⁵ While they are remembered for their advocacy of armed resistance and responses to police violence (and the police and FBI surveillance of them through COINTELPRO, including infiltration and harassment up to and including murder),²⁶ a local group had to do only two things to become a chapter of the Black Panther Party, neither of which had to do with police or guns: they had to provide a breakfast program for children and a health clinic.²⁷

Latinx and Native communities also organized around reproductive politics. Mexican American women organized against coerced sterilization in the 1960s and ’70s, culminating in a suit against the Los Angeles County Medical Center–USC in *Madrigal v. Quilliam*.²⁸ Puerto Rican women on the East Coast organized even earlier against sterilization, forming CESA, the Coalition to End Sterilization Abuse, under Helen Rodríguez-Trías, while the militants of the Young Lords Party also called for abortions under community control.²⁹ Native people and communities fought the taking of children to Indian Boarding Schools and in adoptions, and involuntary sterilization in Bureau of Indian Affairs hospitals.³⁰

Racial justice movements, feminism, and labor have long, deep, and intimate links—including failure and betrayal but also support, solidarity, and, especially because of the many people who worked simultaneously in all of them, inextricable

interconnection. Above all, what I want to call to our attention is the ways they were all about reproductive politics—imagining a just society that would see that children were fed, fighting to limit the overreach of business and the long workday, trying to halt involuntary sterilization and sexual assault, and ensuring communities, families, and households had the resources to safely raise healthy children and care for others who could not work. We’re good at naming the ways that feminism was embedded in reproductive politics when that movement demanded birth control and abortion rights, but it was much broader than that.

FROM WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK TO WELFARE RIGHTS

In the 1970s, feminists inaugurated a Wages for Housework movement that focused on demanding support for reproduction and reproductive labor and acknowledging it as equally significant as and necessary to production. Activists sought free birth control, abortion on demand, and free day care as unwanted pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing were increasingly being identified as sources of women’s oppression. Indeed, they came closer than most of us remember to winning affordable, high-quality day care. In 1971, in the wake of feminists’ campaign for 24-hour-a-day child care centers to meet the needs of working mothers, no matter what shift they worked, Congress passed the Child Development Act, which would have established a federally subsidized network of community child care centers, with the initial support of President Nixon. These would have been available to families on a sliding scale of payment, enabling low-income people to afford high-quality child care (which wasn’t all that unimaginable in the 1970s—only thirty years earlier, during World War II, the

Lanham Act actually had established on-site day care centers at defense plants³¹). While President Nixon initially said that the bill had his full support, a coalition of evangelical Protestants and John Birchers mobilized against it, calling it an attack on the family. Conservative columnist James Kilpatrick argued that it was a plan “to Sovietize our youth.... This bill contains the seeds for destruction of Middle America.”³² Nixon vetoed the bill. (Here’s what happened instead: in the decade after 2010, care for an infant in a day care center was more expensive than tuition and fees at a public university in half the states in the United States, yet day care workers were still severely underpaid—on average, they would have to pay more than 80 percent of their wages to put their own child in a day care center.³³)

Wages for Housework groups also demanded an end to forced sterilization, as awareness was growing about the HEW program that sterilized the Relf sisters. The New York Wages for Housework Committee also demanded the right of women to stay home with their children, framing it as “the power to refuse the double shift of a second job,” following the feminists of the decade from 1910 to 1920, who had demanded and mostly won “mothers’ pensions” for widows, laying the groundwork for ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children).³⁴

Meanwhile, other socialist feminists were theorizing the ways that “leisure time” for women was anything but, and they demanded that men in heterosexual families do more housework. A widely circulated pamphlet from the New York women’s liberation group Redstockings was called “The Politics of Housework.” Written by Pat Mainardi, it detailed the arguments between her and her husband about his doing half the housework. He agreed in principle but dragged his feet in fact, a dynamic others described over and over. She concluded:

Participatory democracy begins at home. If you are planning to implement your politics, there are certain things to remember.

- (1) He is feeling it more than you. He’s losing some leisure and you’re gaining it. The measure of your oppression is his resistance.
- (2) A great many American men are not accustomed to doing monotonous, repetitive work which never issues in any lasting, let alone important, achievement. This is why they would rather repair a cabinet than wash dishes. If human endeavors are like a pyramid with man’s highest achievements at the top, then keeping oneself alive is at the bottom. Men have always had servants (us) to take care of this bottom stratum of life while they have confined their efforts to the rarefied upper regions.³⁵

This was also a period when there was a lot more housework than most of us do now. Most people ironed sheets and vacuumed curtains. Birth rates were rising, reversing a long trend, and mothers were caring for three, four, five, and more children. White women—including the newly “whitened” Jews, Poles, Italians and other “ethnics”—were increasingly likely to be in the newly built suburbs, far from family and the old neighborhood, and mothers were having their first child at younger ages.³⁶ Husbands were gone for long hours, taking the family car on their long commutes from the suburbs to the city. Mothers kept up with passels of little ones alone and isolated; doctors spoke of “tired-mother syndrome.”³⁷ The laundry was ever-present, and in the era when most clothing was cotton, everything had to be ironed. Floors needed to be washed and waxed. Fast food or prepared food meant canned vegetables; everything else had to be cooked from scratch, and eating out was rare for all but the very wealthy. Rising consumer prices in the seventies meant working hard to stretch food budgets, clipping coupons, watching for sales, collecting Green Stamps, wishing children didn’t grow out of shoes and clothing so fast. Bills had to be paid

and yards tended. Sick elders and family members were mostly cared for at home. Labor-saving devices like washing machines and dishwashers notwithstanding, housework was hard labor, and women in heterosexual families did nearly all of it.

Of course, much of the conversation about “wages for housework” and “leisure” time skirted another real issue: in the United States, as in Europe’s colonies, there had long been a reservoir of unfree women who did reproductive labor for others. Housework was not just unpaid because women did it or because family was a category of “private” work—but also because there was a group of racially minoritized women who could be forced to do it for very low pay or no pay. Black women tended white children and households during and after slavery (which, it bears remembering, is still a longer period of U.S. history than freedom). Native girls were trained in boarding schools to do housework and often spent their summers—and more—in nearby towns doing that work for free. In Phoenix, for example, where Indian School Road is still part of the morning traffic report, many older residents recall when having an “Indian girl” to do the housework was common. For immigrant girls and women, household labor was often the only work available, often live-in, with all that suggested about vulnerability to rape and other sorts of abuse, and the wages were slight indeed (a situation that has changed little for many immigrant women now).³⁸

The movements to change the gender politics of housework and waged labor in households and in the United States at large had mixed success. One snapshot of families in Berkeley, California—surveys conducted across the 1980s and published as a book, Arlie Hochschild’s *The Second Shift*—found limited change. Men in heterosexual families were still fighting to do less housework, just as Pat Mainardi had recorded in 1970. Women

were still coming home from work and putting in a “second shift,” primarily responsible for children, food, and housekeeping. In one particularly poignant vignette, “Evan” and “Nancy,” after years of negotiation in which his share of domestic chores somehow never got done, settled into a bargain where she was responsible for the “upstairs”—cooking, cleaning, laundry, bills, shopping, and most of the child care—and he was responsible for downstairs—car, garage, his workshop, and the dog. They seem to believe that this was a fair and even division of labor. “Evan won on the reality of the situation; Nancy won on the cover story,” writes Hochschild.³⁹ One of Hochschild’s intriguing and suggestive findings is that working-class households seemed to fare better, often with less egalitarian gender ideologies composing their “cover stories” but with more shared housework in reality. While her study is too small and local to draw broad conclusions from, it’s intriguing to think of this finding in light of the feminist labor movement leaders who fought for maternity leave and shorter workdays to care for children. Perhaps the ideology of the home not as a site of work but also a respite from hard and alienating jobs persuaded men as much as women that this work was sweeter, even if it was the responsibility of women. Or perhaps, as Mainardi’s account might imply, some men were less likely to think that boring, repetitive, and never-finished work was beneath them because that’s what their paid jobs were like, too.

The most interesting account of household labor and remuneration in the United States in the early 1970s came out of the Black freedom movement in the form of a welfare rights movement—welfare being the only time that anybody really did pay wages for housework (and child care), although on the most hostile and stingiest terms imaginable. Johnnie Tillmon, a

former labor union leader who was forced onto welfare by a back injury, wrote a famous manifesto for the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, “Welfare is a Women’s Issue.” Tillmon’s group, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), emerged out of the feminist wing of the long Black freedom movement. Wrote Tillmon: “Welfare’s like a traffic accident. It can happen to anyone, but especially it happens to women.” She wrote about the stigma attached to welfare (AFDC) and argued that it was this stigma that kept some women in bad marriages and others working for ninety cents an hour.

Welfare is like a super-sexist marriage. You trade in a man for The Man. But you can’t divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce you, of course, cut you off anytime he wants. But in that case, he keeps the kids, not you. The man runs everything. In ordinary marriage, sex is supposed to be for your husband. On A.F.D.C., you’re not supposed to have any sex at all. You give up control of your own body. It’s a condition of aid. You may even have to agree to get your tubes tied so you can never have more children just to avoid being cut off welfare. The man, the welfare system, controls your money. He tells you what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost. If things—rent, for instance—really cost more than he says they do, it’s just too bad for you. He’s always right. If I were president . . . I’d start paying women a living wage for doing the work we are already doing—child-raising and housekeeping. And the welfare crisis would be over, just like that. Housewives would be getting wages, too—a legally determined percentage of their husband’s salary—instead of having to ask for and account for money they’ve already earned.⁴⁰

In the 1970s, Black women like Tillmon asked why AFDC was organized and funded in unfair and unequal ways and dependent on racial exclusions, ensuring that some of those who were entitled to benefits were not getting them.⁴¹ One of the

ways Southern and Western politicians denied women welfare was by creating enforcement rules that encouraged child welfare workers to take children—Black and Native children in particular—and put them in foster care.⁴² The NWRO and similar groups worked closely with lawyers to demand fair treatment and receive the benefits they were entitled to (everything from getting benefits at all and keeping their children to filing lawsuits to prevent social workers from trying to catch a man in the house). As we will see in chapter 2, by the 1990s, destroying welfare became the linchpin of the conservative effort to destroy state support for reproductive labor. First, though, we need an account of the rise of conservatism, how “free markets” became common sense, and how this was a movement to make reproductive labor so much more difficult.

THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH AND THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Unfortunately, the 1970s feminist and racial justice movements’ agitation ultimately failed to ease the burden of women’s double day because the economy pushed mothers into the workplace and the business sector refused to treat reproductive labor as more than an annoyance and a problem. By 1980, the majority of mothers worked. Despite limited experiments with subsidized day care, overwhelmingly, parents of children under six either relied on family or other informal caregivers or they paid (a lot) for day care. Parents of school-aged children fared only somewhat better, dealing with a 180-day school year and a 250-day work year (if you had a 5-day-a-week job); school days that ran from 9 to 3 when they weren’t half days; and programs for kids with disabilities that were even shorter (or, before 1975, often nonexistent). Despite soci-

etal condemnation of the mothers of latchkey children (those who came home before their parents did and had to let themselves into the house), there were few all-day school programs or affordable, high-quality after-school programs.

Neoliberalism was a social movement that arrived with a vengeance in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although its major ideas had been kicking around for generations—that government support was the road to serfdom and people just wanted to be free from state interference, to paraphrase Friedrich von Hayek, one of its intellectual architects—it had to wait for a crisis to capture the imagination of those who operated economic policy institutions in the United States.⁴³ The palpable concerns about inflation that ran through feminist writings globally in the 1970s represented the early traces of the profound changes that were to come, but in the opposite directions from those that feminists sought. Inflation was to provide a rationale for the brewing conservative revolt against taxes on the wealthy and business. The Keynesian consensus of the postwar period—that large-scale government spending and investment in human capital like education and health care provided steady growth and stabilized the economy—was collapsing. The “stagflation”—or rising prices (inflation), stagnant consumer demand, and declining employment—of the early 1970s provided the proximate cause. Few could claim in the early 1970s that Keynesian economic policies provided any recipes for repairing the economy—lowering unemployment rates suggested an expansion of government spending, while inflation demanded its reduction.

Advocates of a renewed, intensified (“neo”)liberalism, including libertarians and other conservatives, had never liked Keynesian liberalism, with its support for governmental investment in communities, including impoverished ones, and they seized the

moment to break the power of unions and transform government. These were not people who liked civil rights or feminism, either. This was a radical conservatism by those who felt that public schools were socialism, to paraphrase one of the beacons of the new economics, Milton Friedman. In the United States and globally, the conservative backlash had begun. Although there was a strong argument that much of the economic misery in the United States could be laid at the feet of conservatives—Nixon’s decision to go off the gold standard in 1971, the massive cost of the Vietnam War, and conservatives’ political support for Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War to prevent Syria and Egypt from retaking the occupied territories, resulting in retribution in the form of an OPEC oil embargo that stalled the economy—“tax and spend liberalism” was cast as the villain. Conservatives—including an unruly mix of economists associated with the Mont Pèlerin society; intellectual fans of Ayn Rand; evangelical anti-Communists, whose forces were symbolized by the rapid political rise of Billy Graham; racist John Birchers; white suburbanites in California who loathed property taxes and school desegregation; and especially big business lobbies—advocated for lower taxes and more laissez-faire, less government, and neoliberalism: a free market fundamentalism and the crushing of the power of organized labor.

At least three measures rapidly and dramatically ended stagflation and ushered in the current conservatism and neoliberalism that have crushed the “family wage,” which had enabled some people to stay out of the labor force and gave others 8-hour workdays. These measures were carried out by Democrats as well as Republicans, and they sharply increased the misery felt by those at the bottom. First, Jimmy Carter’s Federal Reserve board chair, the cigar-chomping Wall Street insider Paul Volcker, promised to end stagflation by sharply tightening the

money supply. The “Volcker shock,” as it was known, stabilized the business climate but tripled interest rates, crashing employment in whole sectors of the economy—small farmers, for example, who relied on borrowing for seed to stay afloat. In a massive public protest, farmers drove their tractors to Washington, DC, to blockade the Eccles Building, the home of the Federal Reserve. (The protest was fruitless; a massive wave of farm foreclosures ensued, giving rise to the current consolidation of factory farming.) The Third World, which had been encouraged by the United States and Europe to borrow heavily to finance Western-orchestrated development, went into economic convulsions as its debt load doubled and tripled overnight.

The second measure devastated efforts for racial equality. In California, conservatives strangled redistributive government itself: Proposition 13, designed to limit property taxes, passed as a ballot measure in 1978. A response to rising taxes in the state, it followed a state supreme court decision that for the first time had promised equality of opportunity to all children—Black, white, Latinx, and Native. The court had found that it was unconstitutional to fund public schools with property taxes from a single community, which ensured that those living in wealthy suburbs would always have a better education; instead, it required that property taxes be distributed across the whole state. In a fiercely contested campaign, white suburbanites and business revolted and sharply reduced property taxes, succeeding in maintaining separate and unequal school systems in California, in contrast to the East Coast, where southern (and northern) protests against busing had failed. Within two decades, the California public school system had gone from the best in the nation to one of the worst.

The third measure was directed at organized labor, which had been the unacknowledged but real partner in the feminist

movement: in 1980, in one of his first acts as president, Ronald Reagan fired striking members of PATCO, the air traffic controllers’ union, risking public air safety to break the back of unions.⁴⁴ Two decades later, it was clear that this effort too had succeeded: union membership was at historic lows; real wages had stagnated at pre-1980 levels, forcing more people (including, conspicuously, women) into the workforce to keep households afloat and fueling a massive expansion of consumer debt to keep standards of living up; and work had bifurcated between part-time underemployment and unemployment on the one hand and jobs that required brutally long workweeks on the other. Between 1979 and 2000, the proportion of men who worked more than 50 hours a week rose from 21 to 27 percent, and for women, from 5 to 11 percent.⁴⁵

For feminists and racial justice activists, these three neoliberal moves—the changes in financial policy, taxation, and the sudden, sharp decline of the power of labor—meant not only an explicit defense of better schools for white children but also the crushing of the revolt against the second shift and the absence of resources for reproductive labor that I’ve been discussing. The wages-for-motherhood welfare rights movement stumbled into an emerging sector of angry white men: neoconservatives, former Democrats who had bailed from the civil rights movement, who hailed the emergence of a Nixonian call for “law and order,” and blamed Black women—“matriarchy” and single mothers—for the crime and lawlessness that the Black community was increasingly being tagged with. The redistributive state imagined by the socialist wages-for-housework campaigns, or even that envisioned by liberal feminism’s more limited but still crucial demands for free birth control and day care, was increasingly being beaten back. The labor movement was brought down as a policy-setting voice for the working class, further marginalizing

the demands of labor feminists. (More than a decade later, Bill Clinton sponsored and signed the Family Medical Leave Act, which enacted the stingiest possible version of labor feminists’ demand for parental leave, along with leaves to care for an elderly parent or a gravely ill family member.) In the 1970s and ’80s, businesses welcomed mothers’ labor—especially because they could pay women less—but they were not about to pay higher taxes to subsidize day care and preschool or, except in limited experiments, to fund day care centers of their own (fewer than 1 percent of employers had on-site child care in 2015).⁴⁶

PRIVATIZING DEPENDENCY:
JOHNSON CONTROLS

In the 1980s, a legal case answered any remaining questions about whether business had a responsibility for being “family friendly” in the emerging neoliberal order. Johnson Controls, an automobile battery manufacturer, began in 1982 to tell women that they weren’t eligible for any jobs producing batteries unless they could show medical certification of sterility. These were good, high-paying union jobs; the exclusion of women was not trivial. The jobs also exposed workers to high levels of lead, known to cause harm to fetuses at low levels and to be stored in body tissues for a long time after exposure. A woman who became pregnant even months after holding the job could still have a dangerous lead level in her system. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson Controls had simply not hired any women at all. From 1977 to 1982, after such overt discrimination became illegal, Johnson Controls had not excluded women from battery production—they had advised women of the danger to fetuses, asked them to sign a release from legal liability, and had

monitored blood-lead levels of both male and female employees for poisoning. A worker whose lead level rose too high was supposed to be transferred to other jobs, with wages and benefits partially protected.⁴⁷

The real insult of the 1982 Johnson Controls policy was that it reduced women to their fertility status—and it considered women potentially pregnant up to the age of seventy. Having to discuss your fertility or infertility with your employer or potential employer is humiliating, but being denied access to a job because you are (always) potentially pregnant is something else again. On its face, it seemed that the policy should be illegal—Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on sex (as well as race, religion, or national origin). After 1978, it also prohibited discrimination based on pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions. Women who said they were not intending to have children were still banned from the lead-using parts of production.

Labor and feminist critics alike insisted that the policy was never in fact about children's health. The United Automobile Workers union (UAW) charged that what the company was really concerned about was *liability*: while workers are generally prohibited from suing companies over unsafe conditions, a growing antiabortion movement was pushing judges and lawmakers to consider a fetus as a third party who could take a company to court. The UAW insisted that levels of lead that are dangerous to fetuses are dangerous to adults as well—women and men—and that the company was concerned only because of the possibility of stronger protections for fetuses than for workers. While by the 1980s the company had installed air systems that were supposed to draw lead-saturated air away from workspaces, and some workers had masks that blew air into their nose and mouth, nevertheless, fine particles of lead were everywhere.

Many workers suffered symptoms of lead poisoning. Some were sent home with pay for five months until their lead level declined as the law required; others were just laid off and called back five months later when their lead level was lower. These were dirty, dangerous jobs, and the union believed that Johnson Controls would keep workplaces only as clean as federal regulation or the fear of liability (to fetuses) made them. Furthermore, the UAW brief argued, “fetal protection” policies were implemented only when women were a minority of a workforce; nurses in hospitals and farmworkers were also exposed to chemicals dangerous to a pregnancy, but there was no talk of protecting the fetuses of women farmworkers, nurses, or nurse’s aides.⁴⁸

The parties to the suit had come a long way since the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The union was using an argument for protective legislation for women *and men* alike. It insisted that while the science was underdeveloped, it clearly indicated that men experienced reproductive harm from lead—that sperm was also susceptible to damage from toxic substances.⁴⁹ Feminists in NOW and labor leaders had come around to the same position: that “women-only” protective policies and laws were not a social good. NOW president Kim Gandy explained, “They protect women right out of the good jobs.”⁵⁰

In 1991, the Supreme Court held that Johnson Controls’ fetal protection policies were illegal. “Decisions about the welfare of future children must be left to the parents who conceive, bear, support and raise them rather than to the employers who hire those parents,” wrote Justice Harry Blackmun for the majority.⁵¹ “The bias in the Johnson Controls’ policy is obvious. Fertile men, but not fertile women are given a choice as to whether they wish to risk their reproductive health for a particular job.”⁵² This was a sad victory for labor, feminist, and civil liberties groups

that a decade earlier had argued for a shared social responsibility for the work of home and children. Six of the nine justices, those who signed the Blackmun opinion, also suggested that there was no tort liability—that fetuses harmed by lead in the workplaces could not later sue the company if they became people who had been born with disabilities. The justices suggested instead that mothers would be negligent if they either became pregnant or kept a pregnancy while working at a job like that. So, as the *New York Times* headline had it, "Court Backs Right of Women to Jobs with Health Risks." The case was anything but a mandate to clean up the workplace.⁵³ It just gave women (and men) a "free market" right to enter into a terrible bargain with employers, to work in an environment dangerous to them and any future generations of their children.⁵⁴

The *United Automobile Workers v. Johnsons Controls* case made it clear just how privatized responsibility for pregnancy and children was going to be in the context of the neoliberal revolution, as labor and feminists were pushed into ever more defensive positions. It stands in striking contrast to *Muller v. Oregon*, a 1908 Supreme Court that said: "[By] abundant testimony of the medical fraternity continuance for a long time on her feet at work, repeating this from day to day, tends to injurious effects upon [a woman's] body, and as healthy mothers are essential to vigorous offspring, the physical well-being of woman becomes an object of public interest and care in order to preserve the strength and vigor of the [species]."⁵⁵ While *Muller* insisted that there was a public interest in reproduction that government and business were bound to respect, *Johnson Controls* put the responsibility for healthy people and healthy pregnancies on individuals. It may have been better for workplace gender equity that fetal protection policies were defeated, but it is still true that parents, chil-

dren, and all workers lost in that case. Cleaning up the workplace to make it compatible with human life and its reproduction was not what courts demanded, and it reminds us, painfully, of what was lost. The idea that we have a shared responsibility, as feminists argued in the 70s, to provide day care for parents who work or support for those who stay home with their dependents was pretty much off the table. The courts had found, in effect, that industrial workplaces were free to poison fetuses, children, women, and men. From a position like that, how would you argue that workplaces had to change to make them compatible with reproduction? You can’t. But for some reason, through the nineties and the new millennium, it was *feminists* who were tagged as not caring about mothers, households, reproductive labor, and children.

A long feminist and racial justice tradition had sought a different approach to reproductive politics for much of the twentieth century—an insistence on public support for children and elders, households, families, and communities. It tried to make household labor more egalitarian. Because a lot of things that are typically public benefits in the social democratic tradition of Western Europe are employee benefits in the United States (like health insurance and parental leave), the feminist movement in particular sought to challenge workplace benefits and the space for reproductive labor. Despite decades of gains, by the 1990s, a great deal had been lost, and *Jobson Controls* was typical. Not only were workplaces never going to provide on-site day care, shorter workdays, and pay the taxes necessary to ensure a robust system of public benefits, they couldn’t even be legally compelled to make the workplace safe from poisoning human bodies—fetal or adult—with lead. While feminist and racial justice activism for reproductive freedom never went away, and

indeed has continued to be a significant voice, these movements slammed into a wall of organized opposition in the neoliberal moment. It was never “radical feminism’s misogynistic crusade,” but business’s and government’s that made it impossible for any member of a household to stay home and do reproductive labor, much less do paid work and still have the time, space, and resources to care for dependents, households, and communities.