

building child-centered social movements

by sujatha fernandes

Eridiana Diaz was a 19-year-old sophomore at the City College of New York when she became pregnant. After her daughter Hailey was born, friends and family helped with childcare for a short time, but she soon found herself without support and unable to complete her studies. She earned only \$50 a week in a part-time job, so she was not able to afford the \$160 charged by her local daycare center. Since she was in a four-year college, however, Diaz didn't qualify for any government subsidies. She contemplated having to give up her studies and stay home until Hailey was old enough to start kindergarten. Luckily, there was a campus childcare center.



City College student parents march in front of the CCNY Administration Building on May 14, 2015. CCNY parents and students created a temporary childcare center on the lawn to symbolize what might happen if the Child Development Center was closed.

Diaz spent the summer of 2014 potty training her daughter and, in September, she enrolled Hailey in the City College Child Development Center while she pursued a major in early childhood education. Then in October, Diaz discovered that the administration was planning to shut down the Center, claiming that the building needed renovations. Between long days working a placement in a school, weekends caring for her daughter, and studying for exams, Diaz became part of a campaign that challenged the shut-down decision.

For Diaz and countless others, subsidized campus childcare was the only way to have quality childcare and a chance to complete a college education. Parents with dependent children

make up a quarter of the population of undergraduate students in the United States, or 3.7 million students, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). Currently, 16 of the 23 colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system have subsidized childcare centers, some open to the children of faculty and staff and many with waiting lists. These centers serve 1,600 parents—according to an IWPR estimate, at most 14% of the childcare needs of CUNY's student-parents. The national availability of campus childcare is even lower, meeting only about 5% of student childcare needs. Only 57% of four-year colleges and 49% of two-year colleges have on-site childcare centers at all, and those numbers have been dropping since 2007.

The City College Child Development Center was the first childcare center established at CUNY. It had its origins in a childcare cooperative founded after a 1969 occupation by Black

All photos of the City College of New York's Child Development Center and protests around its closure courtesy Marina Massarow.

and Puerto Rican students. The students seized and occupied 17 campus buildings for two weeks. The occupation ushered in a period of open admissions at CUNY and created supportive spaces for students. In the 21st century, though, as budget cuts have precipitated an era of tuition increases, pursuit of private donors, and casualization of the academic labor force, the administration has sought to take back the spaces established during the occupation. In October 2013, the City College administration forcibly shut down the Guillermo Morales/Assata Shakur Student and Community Center, a meeting space for campus community organizers named for two revolutionary freedom fighters. Many saw the 2014 proposed closure of the Child Development Center as a part of this assault on the hard-won movement spaces of 1969.

Diaz and other student-parents mobilized to defend the Child Development Center. They organized marches and rallies through the campus with three- and four-year-old children chanting on megaphones. The kids made the banners themselves. The student-parents organized childcare for all planning meetings and, like the '69 occupiers, they reimagined what child-centered social movement organizing might be.

The CUNY students' actions raised some interesting ideas: in less than 50 years, it seemed child-rearing and children themselves had become largely invisible within social movement agendas, but maybe the once-mighty mantra "the personal is political" could, in a contemporary era of cutbacks to social services and the privatization of tasks such as child care, regain its power.

occupation outcomes

Forty-five years earlier, James Small was a student at City College. He was a military veteran, a father of three, and a worker returning to school. Small was involved in the occupation of buildings in South Campus in April 1969. Like Small, there were a number of parents involved in the April takeover. One of them, Jackie Bullock, led efforts to take over the faculty dining room in Shepard Hall. They negotiated the use of half of the faculty dining room for childcare, but they had to stay there 24 hours a day, because if they left, the space would be taken back by security. So a group of students occupied the dining hall, together tending to the protesters' children during the day.

Following the occupation, in 1970, Small was elected president of the student body, and he negotiated with the administration to give over the President's house for the childcare collective. They used student government money to purchase furniture and paint, and they opened the first daycare service at CUNY. It was a struggle to protect and defend the student-run childcare collective that provided a positive self-image for Black and Latino children. Small said, "There were a lot of politicians at downtown City Hall who didn't want this Center because they felt that if you did it at this one campus you would have to do it at the other campuses." Indeed, City Hall and the administration succeeded in closing the collective after just two years. Campus



Courtesy Marina Massarow

Students in the CCNY Child Development Center, February 2015.

funding was cut off. But the daycare was reopened after a semester with new director Geraldine Price and funding through childcare grants from New York State. It began to operate with more faculty involvement and a paid staff, as well as continued student-parent participation.

Parent-run childcare collectives had become increasingly popular during the late-1960s feminist movement. In this predominantly White and middle-class movement, women sought control over their bodies and sexuality. They refused their roles as housewives and their dependence on men. Many sought to distance themselves from "women's work" like housework and childcare. By contrast, Marxist feminists saw childcare, along with housework and other subsistence activities, as "social reproduction." These feminists reworked Marxian categories, distinguishing social reproduction from the wage labor of production and asserting that women's unpaid domestic labor subsidized the costs of paid labor for corporations.

Poor, Black women organized as welfare mothers led the first Wages for Housework campaign in 1975, which demanded that women, housewives, and those who engaged in the tasks of reproduction be compensated for that work. The scholar and feminist activist Silvia Federici describes how the Wages for Housework campaign, inspired by the International Wages for Housework campaign founded in 1972 in Italy and the U.S. Civil Rights movement, pointed to the economic values of reproductive labor and claimed that "welfare" was a woman's right. Black women receiving Aid For Dependent Children criticized the stigma attached to public assistance and asserted that

childcare was only recognized as work when it was performed by someone other than the child's parents. They talked about creating a new state agency called "Day and Night Care," paying women for their childcare labor and redefining the category of welfare, as these women would now be considered workers.

The Wages for Housework movement helped center the focus of feminists on questions of childcare and establish that childcare should be seen as a collective, rather than an individual, responsibility. It also helped to place this issue on the national agenda. If corporations and the state benefitted from women's roles in maintaining and reproducing the workforce for capitalism, the logic went, they should take financial responsibility for that labor.

The feminist focus on reproduction involved communal and collective reorganizations of housework, realizing "the personal is political" through everyday practices such as collective childcare starting in the late-1960s and early '70s. Feminists were inspired by the collectives and state-subsidized childcare they saw in socialist countries such as China and the Soviet Union, and many activists lived in forms of shared housing, as a model for open and supportive forms of childcare.

But as the grass roots feminist activism of the 1970s declined, the small, localized networks of communal living it had fostered started to disappear. The demobilization of the grass roots was due partly to a change in the political climate, as feminism and workers' rights were rolled back during the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was president. The feminist movement was moving into the mainstream and away from the local spaces of alternative culture. As the feminist movement became professionalized and feminists were incorporated into government positions, the legal establishment, and administrative work, some activists also abandoned their demands to make the state recognize reproductive labor as work and to take financial responsibility for it.



Courtesy Marina Masarow

Students in the CCNY Child Development Center, May 2015.

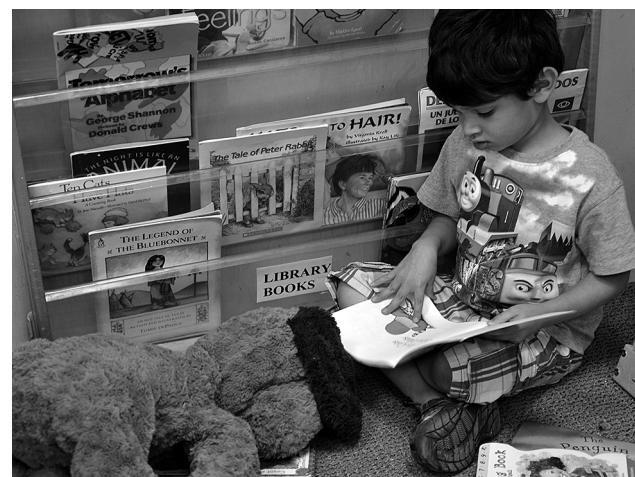
From the 1980s onward, politicians implemented many free market oriented policies that aimed to deregulate and privatize the economy by cutting the costs of labor production to achieve higher levels of profitability for companies. This free market ideology also led to cutbacks in public spending, including many publicly funded childcare programs and collectives. Similar policies were implemented globally. Large numbers of women from the global south migrated in search of work and became caregivers to children in the U.S. and other western countries. Given the devaluation of care work as a primarily female occupation, undocumented immigrant women workers were a source of cheap labor that allowed the state to reduce

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its already paltry investments in childcare. Immigrant women were underpaid workers in overcrowded daycares serving poor and working-class parents, nannies in the homes of middle-class and wealthy families, and often free labor for employers who were family members or who paid their tickets to come into the country to work for them.

In an age of privatized care provided by individual nannies, it became much harder to make the argument for more publicly funded childcare, let alone collectively run cooperatives funded by the state. Many cooperative preschools cost more than private daycares, making them inaccessible to the poor and working-class families that had started the cooperatives in the first place.

In 2014, the City College Childcare Center campaign made demands for public funding a key focus. The Center was funded largely by grants from federal, state, and local government, and the administration's proposed renovations would use a 2012 grant of \$1.6 million from the office of then local councilman Robert Jackson. At the entrance to the Childcare Center, there was an



Courtesy Marina Masarow

enlarged photo of Councilman Jackson handing over the check to the Center's director, LaTrella Thornton. Now, rumors swirled that the renovated space might be used as a hub for campus security, or the administration might install a Starbucks there. The administration refused to give any particulars.

When the campaign to save the Center began, the administration responded with a plan to give partial subsidies to eligible parents to attend a local private daycare for one year after the Center closed. The renovations were slated to take 26 months. All of the parents openly rejected the plan, saying that a temporary relocation that kept intact the structures of public funding would be preferable to shutting down the Center, which would mean loss of jobs for the staff who had been there for decades, and the loss of the original Center with its strong commitment to minority children that was grounded in the struggle of the 1960s. After the student-parent campaign attracted the attention of local legislators and council people, the administration specifically promised to renovate the space as a childcare center. It's still possible that they could privatize it, leasing out the space to a non-profit childcare service or private daycare center. But, as Thornton said, with public money, at least students and parents can demand accountability. If the Center was funded with private money, there would be no such accountability.

children in social movement organizing

If you entered the City College Childcare Center in the spring of 2015, you would see the legacy of the '69 student-

What can this campaign teach us about how childcare might be made central to a social justice agenda and how children may be a part of movements to fight for it?

parent occupiers and their vision for childcare centered around political organizing. The wall in the main playroom contained portraits of civil rights leader Rosa Parks and Puerto Rican independence leader Pedro Albizu Campos alongside leaders from the American Indian movement. These kinds of images were intended to foster a sense of identification for minority children by featuring figures of Black, Latino, and indigenous resistance. As the children in the center became more diverse, the wall expanded to fit icons from India, Ghana, Tibet, and other places.

In the science room, a wall read "Black contributions to science, energy, and technology," in the large, rounded handwriting of a child. The names of Black scientists and inventors



City College student parents march on February 23, 2015. Three-year-old children take the lead, chanting, "Whose school? Our school!"

Courtesy Marina Massarow

were also carefully handwritten on the wall by the children: Garrett Morgan, Lewis Latimer, Granville Woods, and Benjamin Banneker, along with pictures of their inventions and contributions. Building positive associations and role models for minority children had been a part of the mission of the Center since the early days of the 1969 occupation.

When the campaign to save the Center first began in October 2014, by contrast, the student-parents were advised by a former parent coordinator to disassociate themselves from this history and legacy, so as not to antagonize the administration. They were told to just focus on telling their own stories of hardship in trying to finish a degree while caring for small children. But the student-parents chose to explicitly tie their campaign to the earlier student occupation, highlighting the

idea that the space was won through student struggle. They formed alliances with the Morales Shakur Center and its student director, Alyssia Osorio. By invoking their shared connection to the '69 occupation, the Childcare Center campaign powerfully demonstrated the links between two generations of student-parent organizers.

What can this campaign and the practices of the Center itself teach us about how childcare might be made central to a social justice agenda and how children may be a part of the movements to fight for it? As a result of the defeats faced by the political left and transformations in the work of reproduction over the past few decades, issues of childcare have become invisible within social movements once again.

Michael Lardner, the acting director of the Marxist Education Project, lamented to me the change in the culture of the left in the U.S., which used to so often provide childcare at events such as teach-ins and fundraisers. He asked, "How did this necessary aspect of day-to-day life leave the culture and infrastructure of

building a left?" In socialist and other egalitarian movements of the 1970s, women had challenged the commitment of the left to gender equality and brought issues of childcare to the forefront. Children were often present at organizing meetings, and they formed part of the culture of a vibrant left. Next to their parents, children learned about how to fight the injustices of the world at strategy sessions and by being involved in the work of making placards and banners.

I became involved in the struggle to defend the City College Childcare Center in Fall 2014, and found an environment conducive to my own needs as a parent. There was always childcare available at all meetings. The organizing meetings were at the end of the workday, at 5pm, but ended by 6pm so that we could return home to feed the kids and get them to bed. We involved our children in all aspects of the campaign, having them paint the banners for our protests, make the signs for our rallies, learn the chants, and lead the demonstrations on megaphones.

On May 14, 2015, I worked with the student-parents to organize a protest on the lawns outside City College's Willie Administration building. We were planning to occupy the lawns for the afternoon and set up a temporary childcare center. The children and teachers had spent many weeks preparing signs, props, banners, and placards with the help of student-parent leader and photographer Marina Massaro.

When the group of about 30 student-parents, teachers, children, and supporters arrived on May 14th, we found large metal barricades installed around the whole front perimeter of the administration building. There was a heavy police presence. It sent a strong message to passers-by and workers in the building to see a group of small children facing the police and the barricades while chanting, "Whose school? Our school? Don't close our school!"

We spent the warm and breezy May afternoon on the lawns. One of the student-parents, José Fernandez, talked about how, before he found the Center, he used to commute three hours a day to drop his daughter at a daycare and get to campus. There were speeches by CUNY union representatives, student organizers on campus, and former parents of the Center. We had a large sign reading "Temporary Childcare Center" at the entrance to the lawns. We set up a library center, a family room, a creative art room, and several boards with paintings and drawings by the students. One of the teachers read stories to the children, and, in another area, children did hand painting on a large piece of canvas.

Some local council people attended the rally. Afterward, the parents delivered a petition to the administration: 1,050 signatures protesting the closure of the Center. One month later, several council members, their chief of staff, and the Manhattan Borough President met with the City College administration to put forward the students' demands. Although the meeting failed to make progress in creating a temporary space for childcare relocation, the council people did insist on the transparency and accountability of the administration going forward. In a

subsequent meeting that included the student-parents, council members also supported the demands to give student-parents a role in decision-making.

moving forward

On June 30, 2015, the City College Childcare Center was closed. The staff of the original Center was fired and public funding was cut off; the Center established by the '69 occupation is gone. Renovations are scheduled to take two years, after which the administration has stated that it will reopen a new childcare center. In the meantime, the 2014-2015 childcare campaign mobilized a new generation of City College students and their children, it raised issues around the need for publicly funded childcare, and it put pressure on the administration to be accountable for its actions.

Unlike the creative and far-reaching reforms of the 1970s movements, many childcare movements today are defensive pushbacks against repeated attempts to privatize and roll back publicly funded childcare and community-led educational programs that focus on minority children. By keeping our vision on the utopian possibilities envisioned—and realized—by earlier activists such as James Small and his fellow occupiers, we can make reproductive work visible again, thinking imaginatively about how it might be restructured to support our communities.

recommended resources

Martha Biondi. 2011. "'Brooklyn College Belongs to Us:' Black Students and the Transformation of Public Higher Education in New York City," in Clarence Taylor (ed.), *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*. New York: Fordham University Press. Provides a history of minority students' struggles for Open Admissions on CUNY campuses in the 1970s.

Sara Evans. 1979. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York: Vintage Books. An account of the links between the feminist movement and the civil rights movement, and how the personal became crucial to the politics of women's liberation.

Silvia Federici. 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA: PM Press. A Marxist analysis of social reproduction, which provides a helpful account of the Wages for Housework movement and how it raised issues of unpaid labor.

Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, eds. 2002. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. Explores the global division of labor and how immigrant women from the global south came to meet needs for childcare that are not met by a downsized neoliberal state.

Ruth Sidel. 1972. *Women and Childcare in China: A Firsthand Report*. Baltimore, MD: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. Analysis of the Chinese childcare arrangements and cooperatives put in place by socialist authorities to reduce the burden of social reproduction on women.

Sujatha Fernandes is in the sociology department at Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Her latest book is *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation*.