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I'm going to talk about the NYC women's child care struggle, but there were women's liberation day care centers all over the US and many at universities. What is interesting is that these child care centers and movements are excluded from many feminist histories and the media, NYC is special in that in the 1970s NYC had a 1/5 of the child care centers in the country.<sup>1</sup>

For some women in the feminist movement child care became a political issue and a means to achieve social and economic equality in a class society, for other community mothers it became a center to care for their children and an important female social support network and neighborhood resource. In NYC, mainly mothers with some help from dads and teachers set up their own unlicensed, underground child care centers for children six months to four. Most of the centers hired parents and community women, often without a high school degree. The city rules required licensed teachers and social workers

Day care became a national concern in the late 60s, due to government bureaucrats concerned with rising welfare rates, the rise of single mothers, educators concerned with early childhood development, a strong civil rights movement calling attention to the needs of African Americans, a Poor People's Campaign, a women's

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<sup>1</sup> *Battle Acts*, August- September 1972, Vol.2 #3 "Wanted Quality Child Care for All", 5.

liberation movement and women concerned with a need to work. Organized, inexpensive, neighborhood child care was needed and desired, but unavailable.

The states and federal government refused to provide child care. Therefore, local communities and working class families were on their own, and individual black and Hispanic and feminist mothers took the initiative in New York City. This lack of child care from another initiative and the lack of child care became a strength. Creative child care centers all slightly different grew untended like beautiful weeds and rare flowers. The neglect fostered a freedom and independence that lead to ingenuity and then a concerted battle to preserve them.

On the whole, those who visited the centers like community people, newspaper reporters, politicians and even the Division of Day Care people found the children were cared for by loving, concerned mothers, community activist and all the centers had big waiting lists. Another show of the centers' strength was the enthusiastic mothers ' who fought hard to preserve them, and eventually make them legal. Among most professional educators and social workers, parent controlled day care connoted anarchy, confusion and abuse and trespassed on the territory of professionals. Parent controlled meant that basic decisions, cost, who qualified, who taught, and the curriculum would all be decided by the parents, the real experts about their children.

Beginning in the 1960s New York City feminist and community activists rented vacant storefronts, usually for under a hundred dollars a month, fixed up them up on a shoe-string, charged small fees and

parents and the community were invited to participate. Most started as coops, parents, mainly mothers providing the labor. Most went along merrily with constant money problems, until the conservatives Republican and southern Democrats fought to erase universal child care and provide only compensatory child care for the neglected and poor. The informal centers saw child care as an entitlement for all and valued the cross class, racial and ethnic diversity.

A few radical and feminist day care centers experimented with nonhierarchical and democratic organization. Many of the centers with a strong feminist presence challenged sex role stereotyping and encouraged girls to play sports, work with tools and become more assertive and encouraged boys to verbalize thoughts, express feelings and learn interpersonal skills. Having men work at the centers also confronted the mommy /mother daddy/ worker bifurcation. Some centers favored toys that could be used by a few children like wheelbarrows, wagons and rocking boats over tricycles. A few centers encouraged self-reliance, so that the materials were accessible to the kids and within their reach, many involved the kids in washing dishes and picking up and taught boys and girls to do it correctly. Many had collective projects like murals and tie dying. Some created alternate socialist cultures and celebrated May Day, International Women's Day and Bastille Day. Dramas, skits and songs also enforced cooperative endeavors. In some centers artists, musicians and poets volunteered to do special projects. Many centers were bi lingual.

Some centers did become alternative families. We prefigured

new forms of relationships. Children slept over at each other's houses and parents, especially single mothers, like many of us were, helped each other out, regularly and in crisis.

By the late 60s, many of the mothers were experiencing burn out keeping the centers funded and working in them. With inflation most of the mother volunteers needed paid work. Permanent funding was now offered through government funding, but the stipulations were rigid. New York City was fortunate because Mayor Lindsay was open enough to hear the community and mothers complaints, and respond to the demonstrations about the stringent rules and need for more childcare. Dozens of the community controlled centers called a meeting to try and fight for government funding on their terms. As a result of the first meeting the Committee for Community Day Care was formed to fight for quality community run day care funded by the city in 1969.

In the spring of 1970, the members of the committee demanded immediate funding for all community groups operating childcare programs. The money would be used for repairs, equipment and to pay decent wages and health care benefits to those working in the centers, and to provide on site training to parents. In order to publicize these demands parents and community activists, from seven centers, blocked traffic in the streets in front of Children's Storefront, a feminist center.

After more demonstrations and sit -ins at City offices in the fall of 1970, the city granted the community centers "interim funding," stipulating that the centers meet the requirements within two years.

There were other hitches with “interim funding’. Funds were given on a month-to-month basis, which meant every month you had to beg, make trips to the commission and demonstrate and fight for every penny to keep the center going. Individual centers managed to get extensions, over the two years, but not without struggle. By 1971, 164 centers out of more than 300 received permanent public funds, 75% from the federal government and 12 1/2 % from the state and city. These centers were open from 8am to 6pm and had a ratio of one adult to 5 kids and a few centers had Saturday sessions.

In the spring of 1971 the city informed all its centers that a new state fee scale would go into effect. The new fee would force the working poor and middle class out of the centers and try to make the centers for mainly welfare families. The city estimated that 25% of the families now served would be forced out and 30% would have to pay higher fees.

Faced with more resistance, demos, sit -ins with children and leafleting, the city made a clever concession, a grandfather clause . All parents presently enrolled in the centers would not be affected. About a week later Rockefeller, the Governor, backed off and suspended the fee scale and promised to come up with another scale. A few weeks later, after Nixon had been elected, he came up with a new one, worse than the original, in that the centers were only for the extremely poor.

Even though we demonstrated from 72 to 79, by the 1980s a large proportion of the slots at the day care centers were for welfare mothers and the rest were on a sliding scale, with only a few paying

the full fee. Most centers began to be run by a small board and the director. Once state control is accepted there is a loss of control. Now the city oversees how funds are spent and sets wage scales for teachers, which are pathetically low, far lower than grade school teachers or zookeepers.

The protest and Community Controlled Day Care movement made the parents problems visible and part of the economy, not the private world, but the struggle has continued only sporadically. The original parents secured jobs and moved on. The times changed. Is this a happy ending? The schools continue, but in a diminished form. Eligibility is now stringently controlled and parents must be working, looking for work or in job training or certified by a doctor to have a special need for care. It's not like years ago when you could get day care because you wanted your child to have a education, but most of these centers we built still exist and some are bi lingual and some adhere to a variation of feminist principals.

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