Caring for Rosie the Riveter’s Kids

Demanding Child Care: Women’s Activism and the Politics of Welfare, 1940-1971
By Natalie M. Fousekis
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At the height of World War II in the US, approximately 130,000 children in 47 states were being served in 3,000 child care centers each year. Mandated by the 1941 Lanham Act and funded by both federal and local dollars, the centers were established and operated by “war-impacted” communities. Six days after the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Truman administration announced the immediate withdrawal of federal funds for child care. In the midst of the victory celebrations, working mothers, now supposedly freed up for domestic duty, agonized over how they would support their families in a nation that no longer “needed” their employment. Speaking to a newspaper reporter, a San Francisco post office clerk, a widow and mother of three, explained, “Honestly I haven’t been able to sleep nights—wondering what I’m going to do ... I will be forced to apply for relief or see my children run loose on the streets.”

Demanding Child Care chronicles the role of mothers and early childhood educators in the rise and demise of the Lanham Centers. By mining archival documents and interviewing child care movement veterans in California, Natalie Fousekis unearths an important skirmish in another of America’s yet-to-be-won battles.

Fousekis begins her account in 1942, describing how, thanks to the rising demand for workers in war-related industries and the steady deployment of men overseas, women with young children were drawn into the labor force. Many of these women, the much-heralded “Rosie the Riveters,” had migrated far from home and family. While spending long hours in factories and providing other vital community services, they scrambled to find care for their children. Because California was so central to the war effort, it eventually became home to the largest number of Lanham Centers in the country—and to a strong child care movement spearheaded by labor and women’s organizations. Child care coalitions in New York, Washington, DC, and a handful of other cities pushed to secure wartime child care and to maintain some centers in peacetime, but only California’s grassroots activists, after an eleven-year struggle, succeeded in establishing a postwar, state-supported, educational child care program.

Most of Fousekis’s book, as its title suggests, is devoted to the California activists at the epicenter of the fight, and she brings to life the everyday struggles of the working mothers and teachers who created safe and nurturing space for themselves and their children. She begins her narrative by describing the ideological battles during the war and the grassroots players who pushed for support for working mothers. Both are key to understanding the movement that followed. Fousekis recounts how President Roosevelt faced strong objections from within his administration and Congress to enlisting mothers of young children to solve the wartime labor shortage. It would require enabling the women to ensure their children’s safety while they worked long hours away from home—a task made particularly difficult because of the nearly full employment during the war. Many lawmakers found the idea of government-supported child care objectionable, even though such nursery schools were already operating throughout the country: they had been created as part of the WPA to employ teachers, nurses, and nutritionists during the Depression and they were “shovel ready” to address the burgeoning demand for child care.

Reviewed by Marcy Whitebook
A broad-based, national coalition mounted a coordinated campaign for federally supported child care. Women's auxiliaries of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and other labor unions, chapters of the American Association of University Women, the Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Association, the League of Women Voters, the National Association of Nursery Educators (NANE), Communist Party members, industry representatives, and left-wing feminists came together to fight for the demand that child care programs be funded as a wartime educational program for children of all working mothers—not just a custodial one for the very poor who had used the prewar child care centers. The early-childhood educators and women's labor groups were particularly hopeful that the program would serve as the foundation for universal child care after the hostilities ended.

Central to the movement's strategy, Fousekis writes, was that "only women struggling to hold jobs and raise children could define their own child care needs." To persuade lawmakers and the public, they gathered statistics door to door, going "literally into the homes and neighborhoods of California's working mothers" and encouraging them to testify at well-attended public hearings. Typical were survey results from one Bay Area county in June 1943, which "identified 2,500 'uncared for and unsupervised children' of employed mothers; by October the figure had climbed to over 5,000." By 1945, it was estimated that 45 infants locked in one factory parking lot underscored the critical need for child care.

The movement secured a federal program for only a limited number of families, but it served children regardless of their mothers' income. Open eligibility challenged the widely held prevailing notion that the provision of day care "encouraged" women to abandon their child-rearing and homemaking responsibilities, and should therefore be restricted to "deserving" widows and the wives of the disabled men unable to support their families. As Fousekis notes, "The contradiction between wartime necessity and conventional gender arrangements led to a federal child care policy fraught with conflict, confusion and ambivalence."

Desperate to forestall the closures after the war, the child care advocates enlisted California Governor Earl Warren to persuade President Truman to extend funding while the state explored other options. The closing of California's 530 centers, Warren told the president, "would cause a great wrench in our community life," in a state "where we have had such an influx of people during the war." While advocates successfully secured temporary funding through March 1946, Fousekis points out that this emergency rationale "limited the arguments that advocates could make in the future."

Shortly after the war, Fousekis writes, "The strongest allies and best-resourced members of the child care coalition, namely labor and feminist groups and Communist Party members, faced accusations and suspicions of disloyalty that muted their political voices. These groups contributed statements of support but could muster little else." In the late forties and early fifties, as cold-war ideological battles heated up, more moderate groups such as the California League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women "were afraid of being associated with anything that could be labeled communist that they were very cautious in their advocacy after 1947,"

Fousekis explains. Teachers and mothers found themselves on their own, but Fousekis shows that they rose to the challenge. Modeling their efforts on the successful wartime strategies, they conducted surveys, wrote letters, testified at public hearings, and bombarded newspapers and state legislators with their stories. At first, they succeeded in keeping most of the original centers open on an annual or bi-annual basis; by 1957, in large measure because of their pressure, the state established the "children's centers" as ongoing full-day school programs for the children of working parents, staffed by educated teachers. Fousekis's moving account, often in the "dignified, forceful words of one working mother after another" reminds us that individual lives and communities can be transformed by collective action.

Fousekis is so focused, however, on championing this activism that she underplays its negative racial aspects, which have unfortunately been common to white working-class progressive movements. In 1947, a means test was instituted for center eligibility, and gradually all but the very poor were excluded from the centers, a policy that remains in effect today. Although hardly surprising given the conservative climate of the time, the primarily white working women Fousekis profiles sought to distance themselves rather than join with their poorer, mostly African American counterparts, fearing the stereotypes and "stigma of welfare."

Nor were the activists able to build a cross-class movement to support their vision of child care as a form of education that would enhance children's development, rather than as a merely custodial, publicly funded babysitting service. Even now, most publicly funded child care in the United States remains a far cry from the inspirational model of the wartime California centers, which were designed to meet both the educational and care needs of children with working mothers. Indeed, since 1979, California's expansion of publicly funded child care has been primarily welfare-linked and custodial. Educational programs operate for only a half-day, making them inaccessible to mothers who work full time. Except for a small tax credit, the women in circumstances similar to those of working mothers during the war are today on their own when it comes to early childhood education and child care. Fousekis gives only a passing nod to these developments, with little analysis beyond an implied call for renewed activism.

In California, the educational program that was hard won in the 1950s teeters on life-support after successive rounds of budget cuts, with some 200,000 low-income children on perpetual waiting lists. The progressive vision of state-supported, educational child care for all, regardless of economic background, is clearly articulated by the women activists profiled by Fousekis reminds us of the far-reaching consequences of a withered labor movement and the absence of a broad-based coalition fighting for child care. Alas, in its stead, lawmakers succeeded in restricting publicly funded care to the children of mostly very poor, working parents, leaving the majority of employed mothers (and fathers), for more than three-quarters of a century, scrambling for affordable, mediocre arrangements.

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