

“Jobs or Income Now!”:
Work, Welfare, and Citizenship in
Johnnie Tillmon’s Struggles for Welfare Rights

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INTRODUCTION

Under the banner of ending “welfare as we know it,” President William Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, terminating one of the most controversial antipoverty programs in the United States: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC had a long history as a crucial federal program geared toward supporting single mothers and their children. It was modeled on the mothers’ pensions during the early twentieth century, and became part of the public assistance programs in the Social Security Act of 1935 as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). Public assistance, particularly ADC (renamed AFDC in 1962), however, had also been attacked as an unworthy “welfare” program for what historian Michael Katz called “the undeserving poor.” It was sharply differentiated from social insurance programs, such as unemployment insurance and old-age insurance designed for “the deserving poor.”¹

As both insurance programs excluded agricultural and domestic workers, the majority of African American workers were pushed into public assistance programs. The Social Security Act was amended in 1939, and under the newly expanded Old Age and Survivors Insurance, widows were able to

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receive the benefits of male workers who had died. As a result, among the recipients of ADC, the percentage of widowed mothers decreased while the share of single mothers increased. The situation revealed that more and more African American single mothers were turning to ADC/AFDC as a last resort. Still severely restricted, the rapid increase in the ADC/AFDC rolls, along with the rising proportion of African Americans and divorced, deserted, or never-married women, created a furious backlash. Attacking ADC/AFDC recipients and the program itself, critics resorted to what Patricia Hill Collins has called “controlling images,” stereotypes of “lazy, promiscuous, dependent welfare queens.” These images became so prevalent that President Clinton did not think he needed to elaborate on what he meant by “welfare as we know it.”²

Erased from these discourses on “welfare mothers” are the powerful alternative visions asserted by the recipients. These individuals were far from passive in their responses to the dominant discourse of the 1960s. On the contrary, they actively challenged it, voicing different perspectives regarding issues of work, welfare, and citizenship.³ In fact, they were severely attacked by their critics precisely because they radically questioned the foundations on which U.S. welfare policies had been built. The concept of “welfare rights” became the centerpiece of their struggles, and it offered a framework for activists, lawyers, and scholars who subsequently engaged in critically examining the nation’s antipoverty policies and organizing the “poor.”

Even though the welfare rights movement provided the recipients with significant terrain on which to contest the nation’s welfare policies—in addition to generating a rhetoric that would continue to reconfigure political debates on rights in later decades—it has received much less scholarly attention compared to other related and overlapping social movements of the 1960s. According to historian Premilla Nadasen, it remains “one of the most understudied sociopolitical movements” of postwar America.⁴ Earlier studies were carried out by scholars who were themselves involved in the movement. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, who joined “discussions of strategy, in fund-raising efforts, and in demonstrations,” argued that the movement was a “rebellion by the poor against circumstances that deprived them of both jobs and income.” It was also a struggle by the “black masses for the sheer right of survival.”⁵ Guida West, who was a member of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) from 1967 through 1975 as a “friend of welfare rights,” provided a detailed overview of the movement’s origins and decline and laid the groundwork for future studies. Unlike Piven

and Cloward, she contended that the NWRO’s story could not be understood merely through the lens of class or race. Gender was also a major factor. Conducting over fifty in-depth interviews, West showed that although the organization was officially labeled as a “poor people’s movement,” in reality it was a movement of “poor women, mostly black.” West also demonstrated some other contradictions in the NWRO: it was a movement of the poor “led and supported by educated, middle-class liberals,” and, although it endorsed the principle of racial integration, in practice it turned out to be “overwhelmingly black and black controlled.” She argued that these contradictions led to internal conflicts and subsequent clashes between black and white, poor and middle-class staff members, and female welfare recipients and male organizers.⁶

Since the 1990s, several scholars have sought to shed light on the more complex and multilayered aspects of the movement. Martha F. Davis has explored the linkages between welfare rights struggles and the women’s movement, arguing that only when welfare mothers retained their leadership did an alliance between the two begin to overcome “the profound economic and racial differences” that had affected them.⁷ Deborah Gray White has shown that the NWRO represented a new kind of thinking surrounding black womanhood among individuals who felt “betrayed or unrepresented by both the black and women’s movements.”⁸ Nadasen emphasizes, as do West and White, that the welfare rights movement was a “powerful movement of poor black women on welfare, asserting their political and economic rights, shaping welfare policy, and demanding and winning a space at the table, at least temporarily.” Nadasen contends that their activism exemplifies a certain “multiple consciousness,” and that they were able to formulate a distinctive black feminist perspective created from a unique composite of race, class, and gender identities.⁹

More recent scholarship has focused on local stories, combining them with national debates. Felicia Kornbluh has closely examined the case of New York City, showing that stories of the Big Apple are in fact a “microcosm” of changes that occurred elsewhere. The welfare warriors contended that child rearing was a real form of “work” and that mother-work, not only by respectable white women but also by African American single mothers, deserved more respect and support from the government.¹⁰ Anne M. Valk pays attention to the case of Washington, D.C., exploring the “continuous and fruitful interactions” among those involved in second-wave feminism, the civil rights movement, the struggle for welfare rights, and other movements of the 1960s. She argues that many black women publicly endorsed

gender equality as a “central component” of racial justice.¹¹

In this article, I examine the case of Johnnie Tillmon who, in 1963, established one of the first organizations created by and for the nation’s welfare recipients: ANC (Aid to Needy Children) Mothers Anonymous. Following recent scholarship that explores local struggles, I choose Tillmon as the anchor for my study. I analyze how she expanded her activism from the local level to the national level, from ANC Mothers Anonymous in Watts, California, to the National Welfare Rights Organization in Washington, D.C. While Tillmon played critical roles, first as a chairperson and later as a director of the NWRO, her life and politics have not yet been fully explored. A close examination of her career—in addition to the discourse she produced—will enable us to see the complexity of the welfare rights struggle. It will shed light on the multiple forces that shaped the development of the NWRO and the dissension within it.

I also describe how Tillmon transformed the concept of “maximum feasible participation” of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” into a weapon in the battle for welfare rights. In both organizations, ANC Mothers Anonymous and the NWRO, Tillmon struggled to establish a system that guaranteed women’s autonomy in decision making and controlling their own lives—whether they preferred working outside the house, remaining at home to devote themselves to child-rearing and housework, or both. Tillmon fought for both “decent jobs with adequate pay” and adequate income to support the lives of welfare recipients. By so doing, she redefined the concept of both “work” and “welfare.” Furthermore, I argue that, for Tillmon and her allies, welfare rights signified a series of entitlements as citizens, and that the welfare rights movement was thus a struggle for them to get recognition as fully entitled members of postwar American society.¹²

I. REVISITING BLACK LOS ANGELES IN THE 1960S

Tillmon was one of the black workers who left the Jim Crow South, and pursued her opportunities in the City of Angels. Between 1940 and 1950, 130,000 black migrants headed to Los Angeles. In 1950 the number of African American residents in Los Angeles County rapidly increased to 217,881 (5.2% of total population). Los Angeles became at the same time a much more highly racially segregated place in the 1950s. The African American population in Los Angeles County rose to 461,546 (7.6%) in 1960, with 334,916 (13.5%) in the city of Los Angeles alone. According to the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, in the city of Los Ange-

les, 93.7 percent of these residents lived in one of four districts. By 1970, the city of Los Angeles was rated as one of the nation’s most segregated cities, following Chicago and Gary, Indiana.¹³ And this residential segregation was renewed and reinforced in the Golden State when a fair housing act, which was made law on June 21, 1963, was overturned by the passage of Proposition 14 in November 1964.¹⁴

Whereas spatial segregation made it difficult for black Angelenos to find homes in the suburbs, black workers were also facing fewer job opportunities in and around their neighborhoods. In South Los Angeles, which includes Watts, Central, Avalon, Florence, Green Meadow, Exposition, and Willowbrook, the unemployment rate was markedly higher than in the city as a whole throughout the 1960s. According to an analysis prepared by the State of California, the unemployment rate for males in South Los Angeles in 1960 was 11.3 percent, while the rate for males residing in the whole city was 5.3 percent. More than one-quarter of all families in South Los Angeles, 26.8 percent, had incomes below the “poverty level” in 1965 (\$3,130 per year for a family of four). In the Watts area in particular, 41.5 percent of all families had incomes below the poverty level.¹⁵ Those statistics were marked not only by race but also by gender. The poverty rate was much higher among families headed by women. While 18.2 percent of persons living in families headed by a man had incomes below the poverty level, 58.9 percent of those in families headed by a woman were in poverty. Female-headed families formed an increasingly large proportion of all poor families.¹⁶

While poverty became increasingly pervasive in segregated South Los Angeles, residents there could not expect much from the “War on Poverty.” The “War on Poverty” was officially launched in August 1964 with the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act and the establishment of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The “War on Poverty” created and administered many kinds of novel programs, but the Community Action Program (CAP), designed to “help urban and rural communities to coordinate and mobilize their resources to combat poverty,” was its most important and unique feature. CAP required the involvement not only of representatives of public and private agencies involved in antipoverty programs, but also representatives of “the poor” themselves in policy planning and execution.¹⁷ The implementation of CAP became a major site of dispute for black and white politicians in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C.¹⁸ There were prolonged battles over the establishment of a Community Action Agency in Los Angeles, between Mayor Samuel Yorty, who attempted to

gain control of the antipoverty programs, and newly elected black politicians such as Augustus F. Hawkins, the first black Democratic member of the California State Legislature, subsequently elected to the U.S. Congress in 1962; and Thomas Bradley, a UCLA and Southwestern University School of Law graduate and former police officer, elected to the Los Angeles City Council in 1963. Whereas Yorty insisted that the Youth Opportunities Board (YOB) should administer the antipoverty programs, Hawkins and Bradley criticized the underrepresentation of the “poor” on the YOB board, stressing the significance of bringing the “War on Poverty” to the grassroots level and fostering local leadership. They created a new agency called the Economic Opportunity Federation (EOF) in September 1964, an organization that would compete with the YOB for “War on Poverty” funds. As a result, even though a year had passed since the enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act, Los Angeles was still without its own Community Action Agency. It was not until one of the nation’s worst urban uprisings occurred that the City of Angels could finally establish its own antipoverty agency.

II. CONTESTATIONS OVER THE LOS ANGELES “WAR ON POVERTY”

On August 11, 1965, a white California Highway Patrolman asked Marquette Frye, a twenty-one-year-old African American driver, and his older brother, Ronald, a passenger, to pull their car over at 116th and Avalon near the Watts area. The officer suspected Frye of drunk driving. A scuffle involving Marquette and Ronald, their mother (who arrived on the scene), and the patrolman followed, attracting a large crowd. When three more policemen arrived on the scene and put Frye and his brother and mother under arrest in a violent manner, anger in the crowd escalated. Many started throwing rocks, stoning automobiles, and attacking a police field command post. These events sparked an uprising that continued for five days, spreading throughout the Watts area and beyond. By the time the smoke had cleared, 34 people were dead, 1,032 injured, and 3,952 arrested. Approximately six hundred buildings were damaged and \$40 million in property destroyed.

The Watts uprising was a watershed in the history of Los Angeles as well as in the history of the black liberation struggle. It showed that the civil rights movement led by middle-class African American leaders had failed to reach the ghettos in northern and western cities. As historian Gerald Horne has argued, it would also soon be the case that in the wake of Watts, black Los Angeles would face the “two sharply contrasted tendencies” of black

nationalism and a reactionary white backlash. The Watts uprising had a tremendous impact on the stalled Los Angeles “War on Poverty.”¹⁹ President Johnson announced the appointment of Deputy Attorney General Ramsey Clark to head a special task force to report on the causes of and solutions for the Watts uprising. Then, a week later, following the recommendations of the task force, Johnson authorized more than forty-five employment, health, education, and housing programs totaling \$29 million for Los Angeles.²⁰ On August 18, the president also dispatched Leroy Collins, undersecretary of Commerce and former governor of Florida, to resolve the dispute over a Community Action Agency in Los Angeles and get antipoverty programs started. Collins managed to get agreement on a twenty-five-member board, which would be known as the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency of Greater Los Angeles, EYOA. The OEO approved the agreement and announced that grants amounting to \$12,979,000 would be made in two weeks. The lingering contestation over the establishment of a Community Action Agency looked as if it were coming to an end.²¹

The Establishment of the EYOA, however, was just the beginning of another battle, a battle over the implementation of the antipoverty programs. There was one program in particular that emerged in the center of a great debate over the implementation of the Los Angeles “War on Poverty”: the Neighborhood Adult Participation Project (NAPP).²² Among the antipoverty programs administered by the EYOA, NAPP was the only one aimed at providing training and employment opportunities for adults. It was also one of only a few programs operated by an African American woman. A black female social worker, Opal C. Jones, served as the executive director of the NAPP from its inception in April 1965. Jones worked closely with African American leaders such as Hawkins and Bradley. With EYOA in operation, the Hawkins-Bradley group sought to increase the power of residents in poor areas through the implementation of each antipoverty program, with particular emphasis on NAPP.

Jones intended to bring the antipoverty programs closer to the people and to mobilize “poor” adults in their neighborhoods. As a “principal watchdog of the representation of the poor,” she vigorously demanded that the EYOA incorporate voices from the “poor” into the program. In fact, Jones was dismissed from her position as the executive director of NAPP in March 1966, precisely because she had become a political threat to the EYOA and city hall.²³

III. DECENT JOBS AND ADEQUATE INCOME: ANC MOTHERS ANONYMOUS

ANC Mother Anonymous was organized in 1963 by one of the black Angelenos who joined NAPP, Johnnie Tillmon. Tillmon joined Opal Jones's Neighborhood Adult Participation Project, serving on its board of directors. NAPP became a stepping stone to her career as a prominent activist for welfare rights.

Tillmon was born in Scott, Arkansas, in 1926. A migrant sharecropper's daughter, she moved to California in 1959 to join her brothers and worked as a union shop steward in a Compton laundry. Tillmon organized workers and became involved in a community association called the Nickerson Gardens Planning Organization, which was established in Watts to improve living conditions in that housing project. Tillmon became ill in 1963 and was advised to seek welfare. She was hesitant at first, but decided to apply for assistance in order to take care of her children. She immediately learned how welfare recipients were harassed by caseworkers who went to their apartments looking for evidence of extra support and who controlled how they should spend money. Tillmon later explained that she thought she had to do something for herself and her neighbors in the housing project: "I felt it was part of my responsibility for people not to get run around. I was seeing the women around me—their experience and hardship—not having a person to call, not having an organization to offer support, that gave an idea."²⁴ In order to fight against prejudice and harassment, Tillmon organized groups of women on welfare, and in 1963 she founded one of the first grassroots organizations, ANC Mothers Anonymous.²⁵

Tillmon and her allies used the term "anonymous" in their organization name to show the dehumanizing effects of welfare. She explained: "We understood that what people thought about welfare recipients and women on welfare was that they had no rights, they didn't exist, they was [*sic*] a statistic and not a human being."²⁶ After establishing ANC Mothers Anonymous, Tillmon interviewed women on welfare in the Watts housing project to see what they considered the most urgent issue facing them. She found out that most of the women wanted to go into training and find jobs rather than going on welfare. As a result, ANC Mothers Anonymous called not only for an adequate amount of AFDC/ADC payments, but also for decent jobs and training for women on welfare. Tillmon and her allies enumerated the following objectives for their organization: "to obtain decent jobs with adequate pay for those who can work, and to obtain an adequate income for those who can't work—an annual income to properly include the poor in our

democratic society.” Under this banner, the organization provided “information, legislative, and action service for the welfare recipients of Watts.”²⁷

Given that the lack of child-care provision was a major obstacle for women on welfare who wished to participate in job training, establishing child-care centers in Watts was one of their first priorities. When Martin Luther King Jr. General Hospital was created in response to the need for health resources in Watts after the uprising, ANC Mothers Anonymous persuaded the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to construct a child-care center at the hospital site. They argued that even if there were plenty of job opportunities, it would be impossible for poor women with dependent children to work at the newly established hospital without child care.²⁸ Within the hospital service district, 26 percent of the population (approximately 83,000 residents) were under ten years of age, yet only a total of 1,480 children were provided with day care. Furthermore, there were no facilities to care for children under two and half, and no facilities within the district were available twenty-four hours to meet emergencies.²⁹ ANC Mothers Anonymous played a central role in establishing a center. They developed an original proposal. In June 1972, they held a child-care seminar at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, in order to stimulate and develop interest among local residents. The pamphlet for the seminar explained:

Rarely has the Black Community been deeply involved at the point of conception of any ideas and plans for the satisfaction of it's [*sic*] needs. The Child Care Center, to be built at the Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital site, was conceived of and the original proposal written by ANC Mothers Anonymous, the forerunners of National Welfare Rights Organization. ANC Mothers Anonymous and other members of the community from various walks of life have been continually involved in all phases of the procedure which brought us to the point of organizing this seminar, for now our committee recognizes the need to stimulate massive community awareness and involvement in the balance of the planning along with the entire future of the Child Care Centers in Our Community.³⁰

For Tillmon, a child-care center at the MLK Hospital was a touchstone for the “maximum feasible participation” clause. It was imperative for local residents, especially women with dependent children, to get involved in the whole process and make their voices heard. Tillmon noted:

Community Action Agencies across the country seem to be under attack now from without and within, that's all a part of “Community Action.” Our primary

concern is to have full participation in the planning of the Child Care Center.³¹

Tillmon and her allies in ANC Mothers Anonymous maintained that day care should be one of the antipoverty efforts' highest priorities.³²

IV. FROM WATTS TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

Impressed by Tillmon's remarkable capacity to organize her neighbors in Watts, Jones urged her to attend a meeting of the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), to be held in Washington, D.C., April 13–14, 1966. CCAP, founded in October 1964, organized individuals dedicated to fighting poverty. It also aimed to combine the civil rights movement with the antipoverty struggle under the leadership of Walter P. Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers.³³ In order to promote the exchange of ideas among local activists involved in the "War on Poverty," CCAP invited sixty activists, including Tillmon, to its national convention. This convention was a watershed, both in the history of the "War on Poverty" and in the movement for welfare rights, since it vividly revealed an unbridgeable divide between OEO, which claimed to be the closest ally of the "poor," and delegates from "poor" neighborhoods who were ready to denounce the OEO for its inadequate funding and lack of impact.³⁴

The vast gap between the two parties came to the surface when Sargent Shriver, OEO director, gave a keynote address to the frustrated audience. While Shriver presented the delegates with the remarkable "accomplishments" of his agency, he was heckled and bombarded with questions by the audience.³⁵ Dismayed, he walked out right after his speech, despite requests for him to remain for questions.

For Tillmon, the CCAP convention turned out to be a crucial space in which to directly confront the OEO and make her voiced heard. She protested that the antipoverty funds were far from being enough and that they did not necessarily reach the "poor." Tillmon noted, "We're concerned over the big salaries paid to the people to survey our needs . . . the money isn't getting to the poor . . . the rich are getting richer . . . we are staying poor." She also did not forget to make an appeal to the audience to reinstate Opal C. Jones and declared that "our program director got fired last week because she wanted poor people on the board."³⁶ What Tillmon sought to draw attention to was that, in spite of its mighty pronouncements, the "War on Poverty" was woefully inadequate both in its appropriations and in the ways in which the programs were operated. She emphasized that it failed to help

most people out of poverty, and that “maximum feasible participation” of the “poor” had yet to materialize as a reality.³⁷

The Washington, D.C., meeting of CCAP proved to be a pivotal event both for federal antipoverty warriors and local activists. The OEO began to restrict the power of the poverty district representatives by deciding not to fund any more elections of the “poor” to antipoverty boards unless city officials approved it. At the same time, delegates began to steer themselves toward a movement for welfare rights under the leadership of George Wiley.³⁸ In fact, two and a half months after the Washington convention, Wiley, a former associate national director of the Congress of Racial Equality and a member of CCAP, helped to establish the National Welfare Rights Organization. With the formation of the NWRO, local struggles were linked to each other, and individual activists across the nation were able to fight for their rights in collaboration.

The convention brought to the forefront not only the economic deprivation of the “poor” but also the question of inequality, and particularly the lack of representation of the “poor” in the “War on Poverty.” A report prepared by Pamela Roby of CCAP reflected on this aspect of the event. “CCAP was talking about poverty while the real question which appeared indirectly time and again was one of inequality,” she wrote. She added that “the question of inequality or relative deprivation [went] deeper than raising people above a given income level.” She also noted that it seemed that “although the poor were to speak, they were to second the voice presented by the leaders of national organizations represented by CCAP.”³⁹ Her hunch was right, and at the convention, the delegates proposed the elimination of the ambiguous word “feasible” from the phrase “maximum feasible participation” in order to extend the involvement of the “poor” to the utmost. It should also be emphasized that the Washington meeting shed light on Tillmon’s ability to organize the “poor” and to sharply question the antipoverty “experts.” Tillmon was appointed a chairperson of the NWRO in August 1967, and she soon became a representative voice for the welfare recipients of the NWRO.

V. “WELFARE” AS A PREREQUISITE FOR CITIZENSHIP

After Tillmon moved her base from ANC Mothers Anonymous in Watts to the national office of the NWRO in Washington, D.C., she and her allies continued pursuing the same goal and struggled for “decent jobs with adequate pay for those who can work, and adequate income for those who

cannot.” For critics of “welfare dependency,” such as California governor Ronald Reagan, “welfare” meant public assistance only. He regarded this narrow definition of “welfare” either as a gift or a favor, thus justifying welfare cuts and workfare. In September 1967, Governor Reagan contended that welfare should no longer be considered as an “inalienable right” of the poor. He argued that welfare was “something of a gift granted by people who earn their own way to those who cannot, or in some cases even to those who will not . . . it is one government program whose success can only be measured by a decline in the necessity for continuing it.”⁴⁰ For Tillmon and the women of the NWRO, “welfare” included the right to work, and it was not a charity but a right—a prerequisite for citizenship. Tillmon and the NWRO argued that getting decent jobs with adequate pay and social security for those who were unable to work was part of their rights as “Americans to a fair share in the good things of our national life.”⁴¹ For them, “welfare rights” did not simply mean a right to public assistance. It embodied a set of rights as American citizens—adequate income, dignity, justice, and democratic participation.

While the NWRO was officially run by welfare recipients, a middle-class staff managed the finances and administered the national office under the direction of Wiley, thereby wielding great influence over the organization. Tillmon and her allies raised strong objections to Wiley and the middle-class staff (generally made up of white males paid through CAP or Volunteers in Service to America programs), who tended to give priority to securing jobs for unemployed males rather than mothers who received AFDC and who dismissed the child care issue. They criticized the (implicit) goals of “welfare for women” and “jobs for men” pursued by Wiley and his followers. Tillmon later explained the disagreements she had with Wiley regarding the goals of the NWRO. According to Tillmon, what mattered to Wiley was not to offer women jobs but to secure more money in their checks and a respectful treatment for them. For Tillmon, however, welfare was something that “you used . . . for whatever you needed it for, until you could do better.”⁴² As Guida West suggested, NWRO women fought for the “freedom of choice to determine whether to work in the home caring for their children or to work in the labor market or to do both.”⁴³ Tillmon forcefully argued that child rearing and housework constituted real work, yet poor women on welfare were always classified as “unproductive.” She emphasized the necessity of expanding the definition of “work” and “welfare.”⁴⁴

Through the NWRO, Tillmon struggled both for decent jobs with adequate pay and adequate income. When the Work Incentive Program (WIN),

the first mandatory work requirement for AFDC recipients, was added to social security amendments in 1967, Tillmon and the NWRO argued that it would deprive recipients of choices. Instead, it would force mothers to accept low-paid dead-end jobs and inadequate training or else be cut off from welfare. The NWRO argued that standard quality day care must be provided first and that recipients must continue to fight for decent jobs and training.⁴⁵

President Nixon proposed the Family Assistance Plan on August 8, 1969, which would guarantee \$1,600 a year for a family of four with no working members. It also promised that a family of four with an employed household head would receive benefits combined with annual earnings up to a total income of \$3,920. The NWRO contended that most AFDC families would get less money under this plan and proposed that a family needed at least \$5,500 in 1969 (\$6,500 in 1971) to get out of poverty. Tillmon argued that the Nixon plan was not a benefit for the vast majority of the poor, saying that it was “nothing but the same old soup warmed over.”⁴⁶

Tillmon also sharply questioned national policies that escalated the Vietnam War and expanded the warfare state. While rallying support to defeat President Nixon’s proposal, which she believed would leave the poor in poverty, Tillmon argued that “the fight [wa]s right here at home, not in Vietnam.” In fact, the theme of the 1971 NWRO Convention was “welfare, not warfare.” The NWRO activists urged the Nixon administration to change its priorities “from death and destruction to life and well-being.” By so doing, Tillmon and her allies in the NWRO contested the Nixon administration and the enormous amount of money it continued to spend on a growing war effort in Vietnam, all the while denying the nation’s poor the right to basic needs.⁴⁷

VI. “WELFARE IS A WOMEN’S ISSUE”

When the number of recipients rapidly increased and the NWRO was under fierce attack, the internal conflict between staff members and welfare recipients came to the forefront. While Wiley and his advisers attempted to mobilize and integrate the working poor—especially white blue-collar workers—into the welfare rights movement, welfare mothers led by Tillmon came to believe that such a direction would marginalize the needs of women and children as well as weaken their own influence within the national office.⁴⁸

As a result, Tillmon sought instead to align with the women’s movement

and gain support from feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). In 1972 Tillmon published an article in *Ms.* magazine entitled “Welfare Is a Women’s Issue,” which articulated how the welfare system controlled the lives of women on welfare and constantly placed them under the scrutiny of government authorities. She also contended that NWRO women were the frontline troops in the struggle for women’s freedom. Tillmon raised three questions in her article. First, she argued, once again, that mother-work was a full-time job. Tillmon commented:

If I were president . . . I’d just issue a proclamation that women’s work is real work. In other words, I’d start paying women a living wage for doing the work we are already doing—child-raising and housekeeping. Housewives would be getting wages—a legally determined percentage of their husband’s salary—instead of having to ask for and account for money they’ve already earned.⁴⁹

AFDC recipients, however, were classified as unproductive, and their child rearing and housework were considered to have no value. Tillmon called for expanding this narrow definition of “work.” She tried to broaden the horizon of the feminist movement by redefining poverty as a “women’s issue” and, by so doing, win the feminists over to her side.⁵⁰

Second, she demonstrated how race, class, and gender were intertwined in producing discourses of “welfare dependency.” Tillmon argued that the notion of the American “work ethic” possessed a double standard. It did not apply to all women. Tillmon said, “If you’re a society lady from Scarsdale and you spend all your time sitting on your prosperity paring your nails, that’s O.K. Women aren’t supposed to work. They’re supposed to be married.”⁵¹ She pointed out that affluent white women were free from the assumed “work ethic.” Poor women of color were the main targets for it, and they were charged with “being unproductive.”

Finally, Tillmon drew attention to the fact that AFDC women were the nation’s source of cheap labor. Tillmon noted:

The president keeps repeating the “dignity of work” idea. What dignity? . . . There is no dignity in starvation. The problem is that our economic policies deny the dignity and satisfaction of self-sufficiency to millions of people—the millions who suffer in underpaid dirty jobs and still don’t have enough to survive.⁵²

She emphasized that the fundamental problem was that there were no jobs and that if some of the welfare recipients were lucky enough to find work, it was usually an intermittent low-paying dead-end job. They would never be

able to lift themselves out of poverty. While the critics regarded “welfare” as a notion diametrically opposed to “work,” for Tillmon, “to obtain decent jobs with adequate pay for those who can work” did not contradict “to obtain an adequate income for those who cannot work”—they were simply different sides of the same coin—of life with dignity.⁵³

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed how Johnnie Tillmon appropriated the principle of “maximum feasible participation” that had been the foundation of the “War on Poverty.” First, Tillmon contended that welfare recipients should get either “decent jobs with adequate pay” or adequate income to live decent lives. She insisted on the right of individuals to obtain jobs with wages adequate enough to lift them out of poverty, if they were willing and able to work outside the home. Then Tillmon argued that child rearing and housework were full-time jobs and insisted that mothers (and fathers) had the right to receive financial aid. By so doing, she contested what the dominant society assumed to be “work”—the presumption that enabled critics to cast welfare recipients as “lazy” mothers unworthy of support. Tillmon sought to construct a system where women on welfare could make a choice—whether they preferred working outside the home, or remaining at home and devoting themselves to child-rearing and housework. Through her struggles in ANC Mothers Anonymous and the NWRO, Tillmon contested the narrow definitions of “work” and “welfare,” the very premises on which the American welfare state had been built.

Scholarship on the AFDC and the U.S. welfare state must recognize the agency of welfare recipients like Tillmon, and locate them as historical actors in the formation of policy, as well as in the struggle over the meaning of citizenship. Furthermore, their stories cannot be fully explored without investigating their day-to-day experiences and the oppositional discourses they developed at the local level. Their visions were different from those of George Wiley and his predominantly white middle-class male staff, who focused on the two-parent male-headed family unit and set goals of “welfare” for mothers and “jobs” for unemployed fathers. Tillmon and her allies, by contrast, fought for women’s right to work and attain adequate payment to support their families.⁵⁴ Their approaches also differed from those of liberal white middle-class feminists in NOW, whose primary concern was to break off women’s links to the home and guarantee equal rights for them in the workplace. NWRO activists fought for a woman’s right to stay at

home—a right that low-income mothers had been denied—so that she might focus time and energy on mother-work whenever necessary.⁵⁵ Following that approach, these activists were able to develop a distinct perspective based on their status as AFDC recipients, offering a path to the creation of a black feminist thought that would come into full bloom in later decades.⁵⁶

For Tillmon and her allies in ANC Mothers Anonymous and the NWRO, “poverty” represented not only economic deprivation but also inequality based on race, class, and gender. It meant lack of representation and power in making decisions directly concerning their own lives and that of their children. “Affluence,” on the other hand, signified not only material well-being but also the right to participate in postwar America. AFDC recipients such as Tillmon made claims to citizenship in a nation that enjoyed postwar prosperity but denied the poor the right to be part of that affluence.⁵⁷ They challenged a cornerstone of the U.S. welfare state by problematizing its race-, class-, and gender-based exclusionary policies, by challenging its narrow interpretation of “work” and “welfare,” and, finally, by asserting the right of recipients to control their own lives and live with genuine dignity.

NOTES

¹ See R. Kent Weaver, *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt, and Marisa Chappell, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935–1996* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9–22; Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1.

² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 32; Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 1, 4; Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, *Welfare in the United States*, 3, 19–20.

³ Kazuyo Tsuchiya, “Contesting Citizenship: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Participation in the U.S. and Japanese Welfare States, 1962–1982” (PhD diss., University of California–San Diego, 2008), 281–82.

⁴ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xiv.

⁵ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (1977; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 265–66. Regarding the earlier studies of the NWRO, see also, Lawrence Bailis, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972); Nick Kotz and Mary Lynn Kotz, *A Passion for Equality: George A. Wiley and the Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

⁶ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981), xii–xv.

⁷ Martha F. Davis, “Welfare Rights and Women's Rights in the 1960s,” *Journal of Policy*

History 8, no. 1 (1996): 144–65. See also Martha F. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 212–42.

⁹ Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, xiv, xvii; Premilla Nadasen, “We Do Whatever Becomes Necessary”: Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare Rights, and Black Power,” in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 317–38.

¹⁰ Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), ix, 187.

¹¹ Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 3–4.

¹² “Profile of a Welfare Fighter, Johnnie Tillmon,” *Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 7 (August 1971): 3.

¹³ Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, *Population and Housing in Los Angeles County: A Study in the Growth of Residential Segregation* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, 1963), 1–5; Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, *Patterns of Social Change: Los Angeles County, 1960–73: A Statistical Review* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, 1974); Lonnie G. Bunch, “A Past Not Necessarily Prologue: The Afro-American in Los Angeles,” in *20th Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict*, ed. Norman M. Klein and Martin J. Schiesl (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1990), 115–20; David M. Grant, Melvin L. Oliver, and Angela D. James, “African Americans: Social and Economic Bifurcation,” in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, ed. Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), 381–82; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 176–81; João H. Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁴ “Vital Questions and Answers on Proposition 14,” in *Materials on Proposition 14*, comp. University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA), School of Law (Los Angeles: UCLA, School of Law, 1964); *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 71, no. 1 (1964): 25; Thomas W. Casstevens, “California’s Rumford Act and Proposition 14,” in *The Politics of Fair-Housing Legislation: State and Local Case Studies*, ed. Lynn W. Eley and Thomas W. Casstevens (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1968), 237–84; Raymond E. Wolfinger and Fred I. Greenstein, “The Repeal of Fair Housing in California: An Analysis of Referendum Voting,” *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3 (September 1968): 753–69; Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (1995; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 224.

¹⁵ U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, *Examination of the War on Poverty*, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 12 May 1967, 3778–93; Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott, “Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11–17; Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 176–81.

¹⁶ *Examination of the War on Poverty*, 3783, 3785–87.

¹⁷ The Economic Opportunity Act consisted of six sections: Youth Programs (Title I), Urban and Rural Community Action Programs (Title II), Special Programs to Combat Poverty in Rural Areas (Title III), Employment and Investment Incentives (Title IV), Work Experience Programs (Title V), and Administration and Coordination (Title VI). 78 Stat. 508. Office of Economic Opportunity, *Catalog of Federal Programs for Individual and Community Improvement* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965); Office of Economic Opportunity, *Community*

Action Program Guide: Instructions for Developing, Conducting, and Administering a Community Action Program, as Authorized by Sections 204 and 205 of Title II-A, Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 7.

¹⁸ “Los Angeles Report based on trip, February 26–27,” undated (1965), file “Los Angeles (EYOA), January 1965–March 1965,” box 8, entry 74, RG 381, National Archives; J. David Greenstone and Paul E. Peterson, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics: Community Participation and the War on Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 275–78; Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 56–58; Horne, *Fire This Time*, 295–98.

¹⁹ The Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots [McCone Commission], “Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?” in *The Los Angeles Riots: Mass Violence in America*, comp. Robert M. Fogelson (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969); Robert M. Fogelson, “White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission Report on the Los Angeles Riots,” in *The Los Angeles Riots: Mass Violence in America*, 113; Nathan E. Cohen, “The Context of the Curfew Area,” in *The Los Angeles Riots: A Socio-Psychological Study*, ed. Nathan Cohen (New York: Praeger, 1970), 41; Horne, *Fire This Time*, 3; Robert Alan Bauman, “Race, Class, and Political Power: The Implementation of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles” (PhD diss., University of California–Santa Barbara, 1998), 150; Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).

²⁰ Memo, Ernest C. Friesen, Jr. to Lawrence E. Levinson, 4 October 1965, Ex HU2/ST5, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin; Horne, *Fire This Time*, 281–87.

²¹ The EYOA consisted of twelve public-agency members, seven community representatives elected by the “poor,” six private-agency members, and two nonvoting members from the L.A. Chamber of Commerce and League of Cities. It was nothing but a compromise between the YOB and the EOF. While the YOB side was satisfied, since the new plan would give public-agency members dominance in voting power on the board, the EOF side also succeeded by having community representatives be elected by the “poor,” rather than appointed by government officials. See Tsuchiya, “Contesting Citizenship,” 129–40; Memo, LeRoy Collins to Sargent Shriver, 23 August 1965, Ex HU2/ST5, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin; Memo, Sargent Shriver to Joseph Califano, Jr., 23 August 1965, EX HU2/ST5, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin; “Los Angeles: Help from U.S. Task Force,” *Hu Angeles Times*, 29 August 1965; James W. Button, *Black Violence: Political Impact of the 1960s Riots* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 30–31; Horne, *Fire This Time*, 281–85; Bauman, “Race, Class, and Political Power,” 168–77.

²² See Kazuyo Tsuchiya, “Race, Class, and Gender in America’s “War on Poverty”: The Case of Opal C. Jones in Los Angeles, 1964–1968,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 15 (2004): 213–36.

²³ “Los Angeles Report based on trip, February 26–27,” undated (1965), file “Los Angeles (EYOA), January 1965–March 1965,” box 8, entry 74, RG 381, National Archives.

²⁴ Johnnie Tillmon, interview by Sherna Berger Gluck, February 1984 and Spring 1991, Special Collections, California State University–Long Beach (hereafter CSULB).

²⁵ “Biography of Mrs. Johnnie Tillmon,” n.d., Records of the National Welfare Rights Organization [the collection is unprocessed, 11/01/2004] (hereafter NWRO Papers), Manuscript Department, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC. See also West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 92; Sherna Berger Gluck in collaboration with Maylei Blackwell, Sharon Cotrell, and Karen S. Harper, “Whose Feminism, Whose History?: Reflections on Excavating the History of (the) U.S. Women’s Movement(s),” in *Community Activism and Feminist Policies: Organizing across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy A. Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998), 31–56; White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 19–20, 224–26;

Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 19–20; Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, 28; Tsuchiya, “Contesting Citizenship,” 192–202.

²⁶ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 224.

²⁷ “ANC-Mothers Anonymous, Fact Sheet,” NWRO Papers.

²⁸ “Preliminary Proposal for Child Care and Development Center at Los Angeles County–Martin Luther King, Jr., General Hospital,” n.d., NWRO Papers.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 92.

³⁰ “Program: ANC Mother’s Anonymous [*sic*] Child Care Seminar,” 17 June 1972, NWRO Papers.

³¹ Memo, Johnnie L. Tillmon to Barbara L. Jacquette, 20 April 1972, NWRO Papers.

³² In 1974 their tireless efforts bore fruit. A child care center was finally opened. West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 92.

³³ Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 190; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 389–90; Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, 36.

³⁴ Nan Robertson, “Shriver Defends Program to the Poor, but He Is Booed,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1966, 1, 21; Nan Robertson, “Shriver Explains Convention Boos,” *New York Times*, 19 April 1966, 44; Penn Kemble, “Report on CCAP Conference: Problems of Anti-Poverty Coalition,” *New America*, 22 April 1966, 3; Kotz and Kotz, *Passion for Equality*, 185, 187; Noel A. Cazenave, *Impossible Democracy: The Unlikely Success of the War on Poverty Community Action Program* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 157–58, 176.

³⁵ Memo, “What Happened at the Convention,” folder “Annual Meeting CCAP, April 13–14,” box 1, Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty Papers, 1964–1970, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

³⁶ Pamela Roby, “Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty, Second Annual Meeting, April 1966, Report I,” folder “Annual Meeting CCAP, April 13–14,” box 1, Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty Papers, 1964–1970, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

³⁷ Penn Kemble, “Report on CCAP Conference: Problems of Anti-Poverty Coalition,” *New America*, 22 April 1966, 3; Memo, “What Happened at the Convention,” folder “Annual Meeting CCAP, April 13–14,” box 1, Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty Papers, 1964–1970, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

³⁸ Kemble, “Report on CCAP Conference: Problems of Anti-Poverty Coalition,” 3.

³⁹ Pamela Roby, “CCAP, Comments—I Maximum Feasible Participation?,” folder “Annual Meeting CCAP, April 13–14,” box 1, Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty Papers, 1964–1970, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

⁴⁰ “Public Welfare System a Failure, Reagan Says,” *Washington Post*, 20 September 1967.

⁴¹ The NWRO in cooperation with the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, “Six Myths about Welfare,” 14, NWRO Papers.

⁴² Johnnie Tillmon, interview by Sherna Berger Gluck, February 1984 and Spring 1991, Special Collections, CSULB.

⁴³ West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 86–92. See also White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 237–39; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 125–55.

⁴⁴ While Tillmon and her allies in the NWRO fought for the right to be recognized for their work as mothers, they were different from the so-called “maternalists” of early twentieth-century America in that they challenged the discourses that portrayed single mothers as cultural deviants. They called into question the dominant and traditional “two-parent family” model. Instead of calling on single mothers to find partners to support them, they fought for their right to obtain “decent jobs with adequate pay” and “adequate income” so that they

could support themselves. See Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 140–46.

⁴⁵ “The 1967 Anti-welfare Social Security Amendments Law: A Summary,” *NOW!: Publication of the National Welfare Rights Organization*; Johnnie Tillmon, “Where We’ve Come from . . .,” *Welfare Fighter* 1, no. 1 (September 1969); West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 87.

⁴⁶ “Hard Hitting Speeches from Chairman and Director,” *Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 2 (November 1970). See also “NWRO Raps on Nixon Plan (Family Assistance Plan),” *Welfare Fighter* 1, no. 1 (September 1969); “NWRO Adequate Income Plan,” *Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 5 (February 1971).

⁴⁷ “April 15th Rallies Support Adequate Income,” *Welfare Fighter* 1, no. 8 (April 1970); “NWRO Convention ’71,” *Welfare Fighter* 2, no. 7 (August 1971); John A. Andrew III, *Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1998), 83.

⁴⁸ “Power to Recipients,” n.d., NWRO Papers; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 126–30.

⁴⁹ Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare Is a Women’s Issue,” *Ms.* (Spring 1972): 11–16; Repr., *Ms.* (July/August 1995): 55.

⁵⁰ West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 89–92.

⁵¹ Tillmon, “Welfare Is a Women’s Issue,” 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ When Wiley resigned in December 1972, Tillmon was chosen as the new executive director of the NWRO. The funding for the organization, however, had become depleted by the time she became the director. After the NWRO folded in 1975, Tillmon returned to Los Angeles and continued her struggle for welfare rights at the local and state levels. In 1995 Tillmon died at the age of sixty-nine. “Welfare Rights Pioneer Tillmon-Blackston Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 October 1995.

⁵⁴ West, *National Welfare Rights Movement*, 86–95.

⁵⁵ Davis, “Welfare Rights and Women’s Rights in the 1960s,” 151–52.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of black feminism, see, for instance, Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000). White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 223, 230; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 229–30.

⁵⁷ Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*, 184, 187.