



## CHAPTER 6

# BACK TO WORK

THE ECONOMICS OF LONG AND UNSTABLE HOURS IS PROPPED UP by a widespread belief in the inherent goodness of hard work. Sometimes market pressures and poverty are enough to compel us to work, or the brass rings of bonuses lure us into the office on the weekends. At other times, long hours seem to be a measure of who we are, and more work confers more status. When the market and ideology fail to commit us to the daily grind, we have policies in place that force some of us back to work, with hardly any pay, at the least desirable jobs. We are told this not only builds character, but reinforces a society-wide work ethic, which some of us have to learn the hard way.

Conflicts over the hours of labor take many forms. Throughout American history, a consistent if shape-shifting policy has argued that almost everyone owes society their labor time, even those with unavoidable scheduling conflicts, mental and emotional health problems, or unavoidable responsibilities to children or other loved ones. Policies that make aid conditional on working are called workfare to distinguish them from welfare, and are usually debated on the basis of their morality. But workers typically experience them as conflicts over time, not ethics. That's because the policies are designed to control and monopolize the time of workers who either need or wish to remain detached from



the paid labor market. To further understand the importance of workfare in a story about labor time today we need to brush up on some political background and dispel a few myths about welfare and those working for it.

Americans tend to view welfare and work as opposites, a clear demarcation separating the deserving (those who work or have worked) from the social parasites (those who don't). In reality, welfare and work are deeply intertwined. Welfare rolls expand and contract in response to labor market conditions, and policymakers routinely devise welfare policy to suit the needs of employers. Benefit levels are established at a low rate so as not to undercut regional labor markets, ensuring that work always seems like the preferable option. Workfare jobs aren't alternatives to the main labor market, but are deeply connected to it—the low wages and large supply of workers drag down standards across some major service industries. Since workfare replaced welfare, and a host of other work requirements have been tied to food, housing, and medical benefits, the boundaries of the labor market have been even more blurred. As a result, most welfare reforms today are directed at increasing potential workers' employability rather than offering poverty relief.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the contemporary attitude that regards work and welfare as discrete spheres has longstanding roots in our society. Early American colonists reproduced the workhouses of medieval England in the New World. British "poor laws" instituted workhouses in which poor people toiled in exchange for a pittance. Conditions were miserable by design to ensure that any job outside was better than ending up inside the walls of a workhouse. One report as late as the mid-nineteenth century said that workhouse workers were "reduced to sucking the marrow from the bones intended to be ground for fertilizer."<sup>2</sup>

In Massachusetts, Senator Josiah Quincy III argued that providing benefits to the poor would erode the work ethic by "destroying the economical habits and eradicating the providence of

the laboring class of society.” As an antidote, Quincy proposed “houses of industry,” where “work is provided for every degree of ability in the pauper, and thus the able poor made to provide, partially at least, for their own support.” Not far from where I live in Vermont there were “poor farms” full of the sick and disabled, who completed assigned work tasks to earn the right to reside there.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, a clear political goal of work-for-welfare schemes materialized in midcentury America that was almost as punitive, if not as crass, as the earlier incarnations. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on “the negro family” can be said to offer a modern conceptual starting point. Moynihan, a sociologist serving in President Lyndon Johnson’s Department of Labor, sought to “establish at some level of statistical conciseness what ‘everyone knew’: that economic conditions determine social conditions.” But he said the evidence he collected, showing a widespread “culture of poverty” within the black nuclear family, showed the opposite.<sup>4</sup>

The Moynihan report inverted a longstanding postulate on the left that capitalism, not individual behavior, is to blame for social ills. Over time this new behavioralism became dogma, and continues to shape public policy to this day. First, however, Nixon had to contend with rising discontent on college campuses, Martin Luther King’s marches, summers of love, and the discordant clamor of rock ‘n’ roll. As the decade drew to a close, Nixon was on the verge of passing the most progressive redistribution policy in history, a guaranteed annual income for all poor families of \$1,600 a year (about \$11,400 in 2019). Fearing blowback to anything that sounded like a giveaway, Nixon called it the Family Assistance Plan, or FAP.

On the morning in 1969 the president was to announce this plan, his adviser Martin Anderson, a devoted follower of Ayn Rand, handed Nixon a memo. What happened next, according to historian Rutger Bregman, was one of the most shocking twists

in public policy history. Nixon delayed his announcement and ordered his aides to do a study of an arcane eighteenth-century British welfare policy called the Speenhamland System. Much of what they found was written by Karl Polanyi in his classic *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi was a Christian and a socialist, but his conclusions that Speenhamland's generous entitlement program pauperized the masses by condemning them to sloth and indolence proved very useful to conservatives. To ease the concerns of congressional Republicans, Bregman shows, Nixon attached a provision to the bill that recipients of the basic income would have to register with the Department of Labor, a stipulation he thought would have virtually no effect. "I don't care a damn about the work requirement," Nixon said behind closed doors. "This is the price of getting \$1,600."<sup>5</sup>

The next day, in a televised speech, Nixon repackaged "welfare" as "workfare." But what Nixon considered a mere rhetorical concession turned out to be the fatal blow of his original bill. Most people, it turned out, did give a damn about the work requirement. Nixon's basic income bill was gutted, and workfare became the preferred conservative policy goal.

The failure of Nixon's plan is more significant than a quirky anecdote about a corrupt conservative advocating a progressive policy. It is possible, after all, to conceive of welfare as a radical promise to end work as we know it. What is a robust basic income grant if not an inflated welfare check? In fact, that was the position of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), the movement of mostly black women on welfare in the early 1970s. They insisted on a "right to welfare" on the basis that it provided not just a survival mechanism but also a way to guarantee them the time to focus on things that mattered more to them. They demanded comfort, not simply a livable wage, a way to live apart from the necessity to work. Their campaign for a more robust basic income puts them at odds with Nixon's plan, explicitly because of

the work requirement. Their protests, which were wrongly blamed for the legislation's failure, promised to "Zap FAP."

Given the timing of the legislation, the work requirement was touted as an empowering possibility for women's liberation, a perversion of second wave feminism's belief in the value of work. But the NWRO was opposed to the more middle-class feminist analysis. Journalist Judith Shulevitz quotes Catherine Jermany of the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization: "We thought white women were crazy to want to give up their cushiony Miss Cleaver life," she said. "We thought that was a good life." Whereas middle-class feminism saw welfare as preventing women from realizing their fuller selves in the labor market, working-class feminism understood the right to free time as the more radical potential.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless, by the time Reagan arrived in Washington, no one had any use for historical anecdotes or dog whistles. The right had won the argument. Lamenting the laziness of the lower classes, conservative scholar Lawrence Mead put it bluntly: "Low-wage work apparently must be mandated, just as a draft has sometimes been necessary to staff the military." There was no national emergency that required a reserve army of poverty-stricken workers. The unemployment rate had actually been declining for years when Mead wrote those words, and wages had risen as a result. The real issue is that work had become the price of citizenship.

Extending that citizenship requirement was not ultimately the job of the right. It was Bill Clinton who made it into a national policy.<sup>7</sup> In 1996 Clinton made good on his promise to "end welfare as we know it" by signing a cornerstone piece of Republican-backed legislation called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Colloquially known as welfare reform, the legislation was in reality welfare replacement. The act erased the New Deal-era Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created Temporary Assistance

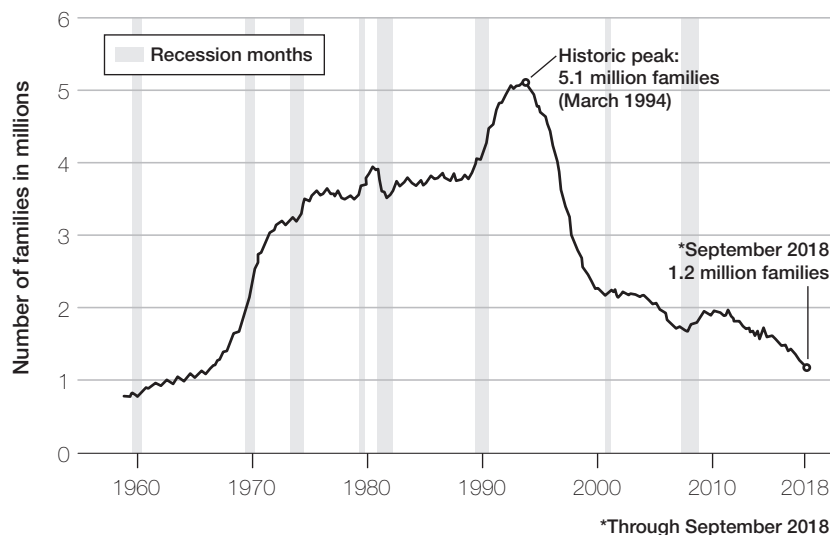
for Needy Families (TANF). Billed as a “reaffirmation of America’s work ethic,” the law required people to work in exchange for welfare benefits. With the stroke of his pen, Clinton transformed America’s safety net into a low-wage work program.

Though delivered in Clinton’s folksy drawl, it was a radical piece of legislation, breaking with party orthodoxy. Slashing eligibility for cash assistance, the bill established new five-year term limits on benefits and enforced strict work requirements as a condition for receiving aid. PRWORA also exempted some legal migrants from federal support like food stamps and Social Security.

Welfare reform was either a good policy implemented poorly or a bad policy implemented with cold-blooded efficiency, and there’s far more evidence for the latter. If it was designed to mitigate poverty, it can surely be considered a failure. If, on the other hand, it was designed to end welfare, it was a smashing success. The graph below shows what happened. The welfare rolls expanded as the Great Society reforms attempted to contain mass unrest, plateauing during the onset of neoliberalism in the early 1970s, spiking again after the economic downturns in the late 1980s and the end of the Cold War. But Clinton’s reforms ended that long-term trend, and subsequent administrations have continued his policy. By 2015 the number of people on welfare had fallen from a height of thirteen million in the mid-nineties to just over four million.

Despite these significant drops in welfare spending, the government didn’t save any money. Instead, states redirected money from welfare caseloads to other programs, for education, infrastructure, and even to promote marriage. One report from 2014 shows that only about one quarter of total TANF dollars went to cash assistance; another shows that Michigan used TANF dollars to fund college scholarships while Louisiana spent it on “abortion alternatives.” Incentives on states to reduce their welfare caseloads had disastrous consequences. A report by the US

**NUMBER OF FAMILIES RECEIVING  
AFDC/TANF CASH ASSISTANCE, 1959–2018**



NOTES: Shaded areas denote months when the national economy was in recession. Information represents families receiving cash assistance from Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Figures for October 1999 through September 2018 include families receiving assistance from Separate State Programs (SSPs) with expenditures countable toward the TANF maintenance of effort requirement. Source: Congressional Research Service, with data from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Commission on Civil Rights found significant evidence that money meant for childcare subsidies was being rerouted to other programs, amounting to widespread racist exclusion that disproportionately harmed poor families of color.<sup>8</sup>

Most damning of all, welfare reform barely affected the official poverty rate, which has stubbornly hovered around 13 percent for decades. Although child poverty has been somewhat mitigated, poverty among the unemployed and working poor has deepened.

The number of those in extreme poverty, a classification defined by those who live on two dollars or less per day, has doubled since 1996. Sociologists Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer find this level of degradation “has been concentrated among those groups that were most affected by the 1996 welfare reform.”<sup>9</sup>

None of this was an accident or the result of a failed policy. Right after the legislation, Clinton’s longtime friend and assistant director of Health and Human Services, Peter Edelman, walked off the job with a terse two-sentence resignation letter to his staff. “I have devoted the last 30-plus years to doing whatever I could to help in reducing poverty in America,” he wrote. “I believe the recently enacted welfare bill goes in the opposite direction.”<sup>10</sup>

Clinton signed the welfare reform bill on a sunny summer day on the White House lawn. But it was the woman standing over his right shoulder, Lillie Harden, a forty-two-year-old black single mother from Little Rock, who made the moment so profound. Harden’s presence at the signing ceremony was no coincidence. Clinton had met Harden during a public discussion on workfare in Arkansas more than a decade earlier. After two years on welfare, Harden had secured a job at a local grocery store, and she had testified to the respect her job brought to her and her children, a theme she would repeat during her speech at the signing of the bill. Although some Democrats chastised Clinton for “caving” to Republicans by signing the legislation in 1996, he had actually been experimenting with similar programs for a long time in his home state.

This made Harden’s conclusion in her speech all the more convincing. Identified as a “former welfare recipient,” Harden introduced Clinton as “the man who started my success and the beginning of my children’s future.” Harden was the promise of welfare reform. By using her, Clinton cynically transformed Reagan’s “welfare queen,” a black unwed mother on public assis-



tance, into an archetype of individual striving, the proud black working mom—hustling, holding it down all on her own.

As Hillary Clinton argued, they're "no longer deadbeats—they're actually out there being productive." A lot of those deadbeats had children, and Hillary was especially adamant about expanding punitive sanctions for not just failure to work outside the home but also poor parenting. "I've advocated tying the welfare payment to certain behavior about being a good parent," she said. "You couldn't get your welfare check if your child wasn't immunized. You couldn't get your welfare check if you didn't participate in a parenting program. You couldn't get your check if you didn't show up for student-teacher conferences."

These sanctions are heavily gendered, which is interesting given that they came from one of the most powerful liberal women in the country. But it's not surprising. Welfare reform targeted women, those who worked the least and, it was implied, could stand to work more. "Goodbye welfare queen, hello working mom" was a common refrain, signaling the racist and sexist language that characterized support for welfare reform. For much of American history, however, women, especially white middle-class women, weren't expected to work outside the home. Doing so, in fact, often brought its own kind of rebuke for violating traditional standards of womanhood. Welfare reform was predicated on the opposite assumption, that women were just as capable and willing to work as men. How did that premise come to be?

One uncomfortable answer is that the ideological groundwork for welfare reform was laid by midcentury feminists, who popularized the notion that women weren't truly free unless they could realize their full potential in the world of work. In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*, "Women as well as men can only find their identity in work that uses their full capacities. She cannot find it in the dull routine of housework."

In a 1987 interview in the *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd asks Daniel Patrick Moynihan, seated amid a collection of rare books, “Why is it essential in the current crop of proposals to make mothers work?” Moynihan’s response is shocking.

When the original welfare program began, the family was seen as an arrangement where the husband went out to work and the woman stayed home and kept house and raised the children. It was before washing machines and refrigerators and vacuum cleaners. So long as that assumption lasted, if you suggested that welfare recipients should work, you were suggesting that they be treated differently—and in some sense punitively—because you were saying, “All right, you are going to have to do what no self-respecting woman has to do.” But then you looked up one day and women were working. Once it became a self-respecting thing to be in the work force, that changed the possibilities of discussing child support in a mode that would include the income from the mother as well as the father.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Moynihan thought that the middle-class feminist ideal of freedom through work had an unintended consequence. It implied that women not only could work, but it was good for them to do so. Had feminists unwittingly sent the shock troops that were used to justify workfare? Decades later, Moynihan’s hunch seems confirmed by the cunning of history. Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser argues that as second wave feminism arose alongside neoliberalism, their ideological messages became inextricably entwined. “Feminists watched helplessly as Bill Clinton triangulated their nuanced critique of a sexist and stigmatizing system of poor relief into a plan to ‘end welfare as we know it,’ which abolished the Federal entitlement to income support,” she writes. As middle-class women moved decisively into paid employment in the seventies and eighties, American bosses faced a new landscape and a new opportunity. Policymakers

slowly realized that it was okay—even feminist!—to put women to work in the paid labor market.

Over the next three decades working mothers were dropped from the welfare rolls, but they did not rise out of poverty at corresponding rates. Today, one-third of children are raised in single-parent households, which are predominantly headed by women. And about one-fifth of low-income moms remain “disconnected,” the term researchers apply to those not in the labor force or receiving benefits. Yet as this demographic has exploded, the funds to support them have dwindled. A study by the Urban Institute found that these single mothers survive by relying on informal social networks to manage their precarious lives and take care of their children.<sup>12</sup>

If women should work, why not children? Such is the logic that has occasionally gained popularity among the defenders of workfare programs. While on the road to his losing bid for the Republican Party’s nomination for president in 2012, Newt Gingrich unveiled his plan to replace unionized adult janitors with young schoolchildren, calling laws prohibiting child labor “truly stupid.” “The kids would actually do work, they would have cash, they would have pride in the schools,” he said. The plan was intended to indoctrinate poor youth into a world of work, which, even by Gingrich’s own admission, conferred no status and wasn’t worth it in economic terms. It was the inverse of the meaningful work discourse explored previously. “Get any job that teaches you to show up on Monday,” he said, “any job that teaches you to stay all day even if you’re fighting with your girlfriend . . . the whole process of making work worthwhile is central.” These policy proposals weren’t taken very seriously, but they underscore the fact that workfare was designed less to provide opportunity than to “teach” about the value of work.

Lessons from Lillie Harden’s story are far more important. After a stroke in 2002 left her unable to work, Harden asked the *New York Times* writer Jason DeParle to “ferry a message back

to Clinton.” In *American Dream*, DeParle recounts how Harden wanted Bill Clinton to help her receive Medicaid, which she had gotten while on welfare but had recently lost. As her monthly prescription drug bills reached \$450, she needed extra help. She said of the job she got after welfare, “It didn’t pay off in the end.” When another journalist sought to interview Harden for a feature on the twentieth anniversary of PRWORA, he learned she had died the year before at the age of fifty-nine in North Little Rock, a community where more than one-fifth of the population lived in poverty, just across the Arkansas River from where Clinton first began experimenting with workfare as governor.

Today North Little Rock is significantly more impoverished than the national average. I spent time there interviewing workfare participants when 2019 legislation expanded the work requirements for those receiving aid. Arkansas had recently become the first state in the country to mandate a work requirement for healthcare benefits. Other states had tried, but the Republican-controlled legislature there had moved the Trump administration policy through rather smoothly. Arkansas quickly became the leader of a conservative movement to further eviscerate welfare and force people to work.

On April 1, 2016, Donna, who wished to be identified only by her first name, went to a North Little Rock grocery store to shop with food stamps, as she had for years. But her electronic card was denied. “I knew it was no April Fool’s joke,” she said. She marched out of the store and walked miles back to her friend’s house, where she was staying, and didn’t leave for three days.

Donna was one of 18,000 food stamps recipients who lost their benefits for failing to meet new state work requirements. In subsequent months, during which time she went without the vital benefits she needed to avoid long bouts of hunger, she was able to restore her benefits after proving she actually had been meeting the work requirement all along. The requirement is, in many ways, a reporting requirement, as most food stamp recipients already

work in paid employment. Donna didn't work regularly, but she cobbled together what she could. A few shifts at Walmart, the state's largest employer, was usually supplemented by other informal jobs. She'd worked at laundromats and, as an animal lover, volunteered at a humane society shelter. But a lack of affordable or dependable public transportation—she usually walked, hitchhiked, or got rides from neighbors—made it difficult to commute from North Little Rock. She found it hard to hold down a job, though she did not have a diagnosed mental or physical disability that could have excluded her from the population of able-bodied adults who had to meet the new work requirements.<sup>13</sup>

Meeting the work requirement was difficult for Donna, but the state also had trouble administering it. A 2018 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that transforming healthcare into a work program proved exceedingly difficult. Medicaid clients who lost their coverage had either not heard of the work requirements, and therefore failed to comply, or were in compliance but could not accurately report their work hours.<sup>14</sup>

Internet access is limited among low-income rural Arkansans, but initially the only way to log your work hours was online. Tomiko Townley, a social worker at the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, recalls talking with Medicaid recipients who had met the minimum work rules but couldn't properly report them. Even those with internet access sometimes had trouble because the online form clients used to report their hours was mysteriously unavailable between 9:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. The government actually made it difficult for people to meet its own reporting requirement, which, at the time, was the only mechanism to ensure continued access to healthcare. But the most damning part of the report was that work requirements only intensified the stress, anxiety, and fear that already course through the lives of the impoverished. "The new requirements are not incentivizing new work or other activities in which enrollees were not already engaged, but are layering on one more thing to deal with in

enrollees' already complex lives and causing added stress because no one wants to lose their coverage," the report concluded.<sup>15</sup>

"It's a cure for a disease that doesn't exist," Townley told me. "And it will only exacerbate the problem." The disease that does exist, poverty, is in desperate need of a cure, and is on quick display throughout Little Rock. The problem I encountered while there was not that people don't work or don't want to work. Even those with myriad physical, emotional, and mental health problems report desperately seeking work hours to stay alive, keep their medication, or support a family member.

The free breakfast at River City Ministries—old pizza, piles of chicken cutlets, baked ziti, and watered-down coffee—attracted a group of early birds even before the doors opened at 7:30. Townley, who was there to register people for food stamps, has just informed Stacy Eslinger of a ray of hope. A federal judge had struck down the state's work requirement for Medicaid the day before, arguing that the state hadn't "adequately considered whether the program 'would in fact help the state furnish medical assistance to its citizens, a central objective of Medicaid.'" Eslinger had fled to Little Rock after escaping an abusive husband in Texas, saving her life and the lives of her two kids, she said. But the move hardly solved her problems. An unrelated violent altercation between her and the police landed her in jail for seven months.

"No one's hiring me after that," she said. She left jail sick, destitute, and without any social connections. Sometimes she panhandled for money as tourists walked across the Clinton Bridge to get a panoramic view of the city. She works informally—odd jobs, off-the-books eldercare, and some housecleaning for a man she affectionately referred to as Grandpa. "I was working forty hours," she said. "Just not the right kind of work, I guess." Eslinger lost her medical coverage not because she wasn't working, but because she had no idea how to report her hours. Penniless, she had no way to get to and from her

house, on the outskirts of Little Rock, and a job or an interview unless a neighbor drove her.

And reporting complications were the main obstacle to her qualifying for aid in the first place. For the 18,000 people already kicked off Medicaid, social service workers know the process to get them back will be made purposefully difficult. When I checked, the website that receives applications didn't even mention Medicaid on its home page.

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THE ARKANSAS SITUATION is profoundly dispiriting. And although workfare programs have long provoked animosity, unrest, conflict, and protest, only in New York City has that energy translated into concrete reforms. As anomalous as it is, the story of how those reforms came to pass could serve as a model for other states looking to reverse their workfare laws too.

In the late 1980s a throng of putrid fish called mossbunkers began washing up dead on the shores of Long Island beaches in Larchmont, Mamaroneck, and Rye. No one knew where the fish were coming from or why they were dying in such large numbers. But some smelled an opportunity.

Mary Glass, commissioner of social services in Republican-controlled Westchester County, devised a plan to dispatch welfare recipients to clean up the mess. To ensure compliance with the work requirement, she also enlisted a small army of case managers to ferret out those who were trying to escape work by lying about their address or hiding stashes of cash to appear impoverished. If welfare recipients didn't show up, their benefits were cut. If they called in sick, the county had a doctor examine them to see if they were lying. Eligibility requirements were also raised. A routine door-knocking schedule by case managers ensured that able-bodied adults were living at their stated residence.

But the program to surveil and litigate alleged fraud was so cumbersome and expensive that the mossbunkers rotted on the

beach. Caseloads dropped precipitously, and the policing bureaucracy increased to the point that there were either not enough eligible people to clean up or enough city officials to oversee the work. Nonetheless, the Pride in Work program, as it was known to the public, or Operation Mossbunker, as Glass and her colleagues called it privately, inspired New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to expand workfare across the entire city a few years later.

The fish problem was old news by then. But the city's parks were awash in crack pipes and heroin needles, detritus from the ballooning drug epidemic. Who better to clean them up than welfare recipients? Giuliani hated welfare. He thought it undermined the industriousness of the city's base, prohibiting recipients from realizing, as he put it, the "self-worth that comes from having a job." To stimulate that entrepreneurial spirit, he gave welfare recipients the worst jobs in the city and barely paid them. He called it the Work Experience Program, or WEP. These jobs were not intended to lift WEP workers out of poverty. They were intended to discipline workers by controlling their time. More time at work meant less time for drugs and other forms of bad behavior, so the logic went. Giuliani distinguished WEP workers with special uniforms and occasionally restricted them from using the same bathrooms and cafeterias as regular employees. To safeguard the careers of corrupt union leaders, who viewed WEP workers as second-class citizens, Giuliani agreed to segregate WEP and non-WEP work crews on public projects, even though both did the exact same work.<sup>16</sup> Strict work rules and higher eligibility requirements conspired to eliminate a significant number of welfare recipients from the rolls. Relief dropped precipitously, from 1,160,000 in 1995 to 437,500 in 2005, a 63 percent decrease.

Tyletha Samuels was one of those eliminated. When she was fifteen, her mother dragged her to the welfare office to pick up their check. She didn't like going there, finding it undignified



and chaotic. Tyletha can't remember a time when her mother was not on welfare. Still, there was always a degree of confusion about how to apply for and receive the assistance her family needed because the rules were always changing. On this occasion, they had been back to the same office for three consecutive days trying to submit the necessary paperwork to qualify. That day, after being refused service by the social service clerk, an argument started about her family's eligibility, and it seemed they were going to leave empty-handed again. A supervisor was called to mediate, which had the opposite effect.

"The welfare lady called my mama a 'B,'" Tyletha explained. "So I picked up a credenza, and I hit the lady with it." Such was her fury that battering someone with furniture qualifies as a fond memory. The office erupted in a brawl. The police arrested Tyletha but released her later that day with no charges, plus a complimentary order from Burger King. Over the next few years, Tyletha said she went back to the office looking for that same social service worker, seething with vengeful rage. "I thank God I never saw her again," she said, adding, "She should too."

Tyletha's anger wasn't uncommon, even if acting on it was. Dispatches from welfare offices often suggest a simmering discontent that threatens the veneer of bureaucratic civility surrounding the administration of poverty relief.

Twenty-five years later, instead of fighting for her welfare check, she was working for it, answering phones and filing paperwork for Medicaid clients as a WEP worker. Welfare reform meant that Tyletha's family went from receiving assistance to giving their labor. Whereas society once viewed them as deserving a little something for their bad luck (Tyletha herself is disabled), the new rules meant that she owed the rest of us her most precious resource—her time. Workfare is a policy to fill up the time of the poor with pointless jobs at poverty wages. That, policymakers allege, teaches the value of hard work. It's the kind of thing that's not supposed to happen in a capitalist economy. For half

of the twentieth century Americans had criticized their communist rivals for make-work jobs that existed merely to ensure “full employment.” Yet with the Cold War scarcely over, a Democratic president in the wealthiest country in world history set about ensuring no one was allowed to survive without giving over their time. It was as cruel as it was ineffective.

Tyletha earned a \$68.50 welfare check every two weeks, a standard workfare rate, in addition to food stamps and a Section 8 housing subsidy. But her coworkers on either side of her desk made a decent salary for the exact same job. Her job in the Medicaid office opened old wounds as well, as she was suddenly forced to confront the denial of benefits to needy people in ways that reminded her of her childhood. “You had people coming there who couldn’t afford toilet paper, with children, working full time on WEP, being told they weren’t going to receive any extra help. I hated every minute of it,” she said.

Soon after the WEP started, Tyletha began fighting it. She was connected to Community Voices Heard, a grassroots organization in New York City, through a friend. For the next two decades it became a home base for her, a launchpad for the anti-workfare movement. Though she began by fighting the new Republican regime of Rudolph Giuliani, Tyletha recalled that it was Democrats who proved to be savvier opponents. “At times you really couldn’t tell the difference on this issue,” she said. “They were just as bad.”

Despite there being fewer people off welfare and more at work, the percentage of impoverished New Yorkers has only recently declined. In 2003, Action for a Better Community and the city’s Department of Human Services conducted a study on the status of former welfare families a year after their cases had closed. The study found that the majority of the families did not earn enough to put their household income above the federal poverty level. The average respondent had three children and worked thirty-four hours a week at a job that paid \$9.80 an hour, or

\$17,327 a year. The WEP also had the effect of driving down the wages of nonwelfare workers too. By 1997 there were more than 38,000 WEP workers who needed to fulfill a work requirement to receive benefits. But they were legally owed only two dollars a day, making them highly desirable for city contracts. Quickly, Giuliani began to replace high-paying union jobs with WEP workers.<sup>17</sup>

Workfare supporters stressed that work requirements entailed the classical Republican values associated with full citizenship—liberty, freedom, responsibility, dignity, civility, etc. But the jobs that WEP workers landed had hardly any hope of providing those virtues. City officials maintained a distinction between workfare workers and regular employees, referring to WEP workers as “participants,” denying them even rhetorical inclusion in a community of laborers.

Studies found that the Giuliani administration circumvented due process rights, which led to a lawsuit that found the city’s workfare program in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In *Citizens and Paupers*, sociologist Chad Goldberg compared WEP to the Freedmen’s Bureau, established by Lincoln during Reconstruction. “Just as the bureau sought to remake its clients into self-disciplined workers fit for citizenship in a free-labor society, the WEP aimed to instill a ‘lost’ work ethic in clients who were overwhelmingly people of color.”<sup>18</sup>

This helps explain what Tyletha was doing in 2009 in Union Square, dressed as an American plantation slave, with a chain gang of welfare recipients in tow. Tyletha and a group of Community Voices Heard activists were dramatizing what was by then a common refrain among critics of the program—workfare was modern slavery. “I looked like Harriet Tubman or Aunt Jemima,” she said, laughing, though it was clear her rage was real. “They called it the Work Experience Program,” she said, stressing the irony. “Nobody was getting a work experience the way regular people get it. This was a slave-type experience.”

At New York City's 1997 Labor Day Parade, WEP workers came together for one of the first large demonstrations opposed to workfare. Almost immediately the activists seized upon their misclassification as "welfare recipients" or "participants," rather than as full-fledged workers, as their primary grievance. Forming a coalition of grassroots groups from across the city, they called themselves WEP Workers Together, and sought recognition on the basis of their status as deserving, contributing, socially useful citizens. It was the expectation that work, not the right to welfare, offered them a route to full social citizenship. Therefore, they argued that city officials should finish what they started. "They wanted us to work, so we said, 'Treat us like workers,'" Tyletha said. "And while you're at it, pay us like workers too."

By 1998 more than 17,000 WEP workers had signed union cards collected by ACORN, a progressive community organization. But the votes were routinely rejected by courts and labor relations boards across the country, which held that workfare participants had no right to collectively bargain with the state, upholding the legal limbo that industrial workers suffered under until the New Deal.<sup>19</sup>

ACORN's efforts did, however, spur unions to get involved in organizing WEP workers once they felt the nonprofit had encroached on their turf. District Council 37, the largest municipal union that had initially engaged in some backroom deals with Giuliani to avoid WEP replacements, discovered a newfound interest in representing all the city's park cleaners, not just those on the official payroll. DC37's efforts inspired the AFL-CIO to take up workfare organizing more seriously in an effort to "change the traditional definition of who is a worker."<sup>20</sup>

This activism was familiar to Steven Banks. As head of the Legal Aid Society, he sued the government six times on behalf of the city's homeless and poor. Lawsuits alleged that the Human Resources Administration (HRA) had illegally denied people lifesaving benefits like food stamps and Medicaid, a violation

of its own charter. An in-depth examination by the nonprofit news organization City Limits argued that the HRA assumed “the main reason that so many New Yorkers were poor was that they were lazy,” which meant that “the very agency tasked with lifting New Yorkers out of poverty all-too-often pushed them deeper into destitution.”<sup>21</sup>

Today, as HRA commissioner, Banks finds himself at the helm of the institution he once attacked. Banks is soft-spoken and humble. When we met, he waved his hand toward the stunning view of Lower Manhattan from a conference room at the HRA, an apologetic gesture that indicated he was uncomfortable in such swank environs. Banks was appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio in 2014 to attend to the problems that Tyletha and others experienced. He estimated that approximately one-third of the clients HRA placed in a job were back on the rolls a year later, a persistent problem in desperate need of a solution. But instead of merely attending to that deadlock, he solved the larger problem. In 2016 he quietly ended the Work Experience Program and replaced it with a robust social safety net.

Banks’s phaseout of the WEP required hundreds of legislative changes to the social services for poorer New Yorkers. The new system replaces a work-or-nothing plan with a variety of supportive programs—an expanded job-training program in coordination with the City University of New York, more than triple the number of contracts with employers, and the ability to attend a four-year college without losing benefits. Moreover, for the first time in twenty years, unemployed New Yorkers no longer have to work for food stamps, a policy change that will help tens of thousands of hungry residents, according to activists. And although workfare has been eliminated, there are now far greater services available to help people find and keep jobs, including services tailored to youth, gays and lesbians, and those with criminal records. The most significant change is that welfare recipients who are seeking employment are now funneled into union-wage

jobs through a partnership with District Council 37. Critics said welfare rolls would go up if the WEP was ended, but Banks proved them wrong. The latest data has shown virtually flat welfare enrollment annually. “I’ve been doing this a long time,” he said. “People don’t respond well to punishments and sanctions. . . . If you want to get people back on their feet, then help them. That’s what we’re doing.”

Ending the WEP was a heroic effort. Yet it happened very quietly, because Banks and others wanted to experiment with a new modus operandi while provoking as little backlash as possible. And just as Banks received very little public credit for doing it, he was quick to point out that neither did people like Tyletha. All these changes mean that the assessment of clients is now far more comprehensive and individualized. Banks admits the new system is more complicated to administer, but the complexities of peoples’ lives aren’t easily managed by a one-size-fits-all model. “We take each case seriously now. You know why?” he asks, smiling wryly. “Because cases are people.”

“WEP ended because we didn’t quit,” Tyletha told me. She noted Banks and a few others “get it.” They understood how bad the system was and had some ideas about how to transform it. “But the ones who ‘get it’ usually got their hands tied,” she said. “This time was different. Hallelujah.”

The discourse of workfare was ingenious because the champions of the policies could be seen as giving us more of something we already liked—work—and removing the free ride and idle hands associated with welfare. Resistance to it has been consistent over time, even though the outcome of Tyletha’s story is anomalous. But she’s hardly alone. It’s time to examine those leading individual and collective struggles to win better jobs and take back their time.

## CHAPTER 7

# WE CONTROL THE CLOCKS

WORKFARE LAWS ENSURED THAT LOW-WAGE JOBS REPLACED THE old social safety net. In the private sector, the gig economy is the new social safety net. There's nothing glamorous about being pushed into long hours for below-poverty wages, fulfilling a requirement imposed by the government. But the gig economy comes replete with the high-tech functionality of app-based labor and the oft-repeated promise that you can be your own boss. If managerial power is, as I've argued, a major impediment to control over one's time, the gig economy, with its myriad scheduling possibilities, seems to offer a ready-made solution. Work when you want, at the pace you want, and regain control over your life. Childcare conflicts? Just work when they sleep! Already have a low-paying job with short hours? Pick up the slack after work, before work, or on the weekends, with a side hustle. The choice is yours.

The superficial modernity of app work actually harkens back to a past when workers had no rights. Even the central promise of flexibility isn't as tangible as the industry advertises. The sociologist Alexandria Ravenelle points out that TaskRabbit's workers have to respond to clients' emails within thirty minutes and agree to do at least 85 percent of the gigs they are offered to maintain good status on the platform. Likewise, many