

Brenda Steward was an early WWT! activist and later a paid organizer for the group. When she applied for public assistance after being laid off from her job in a youth outreach program, she was given a WEP assignment. She excelled in her post, yet she was not offered employment:

“Well, they placed me in the Department of Social Services, in one of the IS Centers which is the Income Support Center. And I was doing clerical work there...Basically the majority of the people that were there were people that were on staff being paid a full salary and I worked alongside of those staff people. But after I was there for a few months, the director of the center was very pleased with the work that I was doing. I worked with a group of social workers, case workers, doing filing,

employees and therefore entitled to labor protections. But the Labor Department recanted that ruling after the 1996 changes in federal welfare policy mandated the creation of job-training programs. Under federal law, workfare participants were “trainees,” not employees. Therefore, they were neither covered by the National Labor Relations Act, nor were they permitted to form a union or bargain collectively.⁵

Organizing began in the summer of 1996 as representatives from the three non-profit groups began to visit work sites across the city. Regular visits were made to sanitation garages, where WEP participants gathered before they were sent to clean the streets with brooms and rolling trashcans; to public parks, where they maintained the grounds; and to municipal office buildings, where they emptied trash cans or performed clerical tasks. Unfair treatment was common, and WEP workers complained readily and forcefully. One WEP participant assigned to a Department of Sanitation garage explained why she tied her lunch bag to the handle of garbage can she used to collect trash:

“We don't have lockers, so there's no place to store anything... We're not treated like regular sanitation workers. We don't have uniforms. We don't have shoes. We don't even get training. This is the only place I have to put my lunch. Otherwise, I have to wait ‘til I get home to eat. I leave my house at 6 a.m. and don't get home again until after 3. If I don't do this I'm starved.”⁶

There was no contract, so workers were dependent on the personality and whims of their salaried supervisor. WEP workers who were picking up trash with no rain gear may have been allowed to shelter under an awning during a thunderstorm, or their supervisor may have driven by and ordered them back to work in the rain. WEP workers cleaning up debris in the park were not given gloves, but knew that a box full of gloves was available in the storeroom for salaried workers. WEP workers in clerical jobs were not allowed to use the mini-fridge to store their lunch. In one especially egregious case, a bathroom in a sanitation garage was marked with a “No WEP Workers” sign. These insults were compounded by the fact that WEP workers were doing the same work as salaried employees, but at a fraction of the “pay.” The WEP participants generally felt that in return for the hard work they did, they deserved full rights and dignified treatment. Significantly, their grievances all related to the participants’ experience as workers, not as public-assistance recipients. Although only a few organizers were working on the project, they quickly signed up almost 1,000 WEP workers and began holding bi-weekly meetings attended by over 50 participants. This group named itself WEP Workers Together! to convey unity, strength, and a worker identity.

As worker involvement grew, WWT! formed a Steering Committee of WEP participants and paid organizers and began a media campaign to raise public awareness of the program. Over a one year period, WWT! organizers and members gave interviews, issued press releases, and staged press-worthy events.

develop. While WEP participants might have identified as workers if they had had a consistent assignment at a regular site, the turnover rate made this impossible for the vast majority. Moreover, WEP workers continued to face the “ritual humiliation” characteristic of being on public assistance. Their required visits to welfare offices and with case workers reinforced feelings of passivity, and they often felt mistreated by the city rather than angry at their bosses. The union-like model faced legal barriers as well. Since WEP workers were not recognized as employees according to federal law, they were not granted NLRA protections, including the right to form a union and bargain with their employer.¹² After two years of an effective media campaign, high membership turnover, and numerous small demonstrations to improve working conditions, the steering committee decided to change tactics.

Since its inception, WWT! used the slogan “Real Jobs, Not WEP” in its fliers, pamphlets, buttons, and banners. In 1999 WWT! began a campaign that acknowledged the urgency of that phrase. It formed a broad coalition of seventy unions and community and church groups to draft legislation to create the Transitional Jobs Program, which would fund 10,000 WEP positions to become permanent jobs. The strategy of organizing around worker issues bore fruit because politically powerful unions got involved, including DC 37, which had dragged its feet on the WEP issue, and the carpenters union, traditionally a conservative union that stayed away from social activism. The unions were eager to support a program that would not undercut their members the way that WEP did.

The Real Jobs campaign was victorious. After a two-year fight the Transitional Jobs Program was passed by the New York City Council. Mayor Giuliani refused to enact the program and vetoed the legislation, but the labor-community coalition had political clout, and the city council took the unusual step of overriding the veto. Organizers had hoped that the Real Jobs bill would revitalize the workplace strategy, but focusing on job creation weakened other aspects of the organizing. Designing a jobs program, drafting it into legislation, finding sponsors in the city council, seeing the bill through the hearing process, and organizing to attract more sponsors and put pressure on the council leadership to move the bill is a multi-year and abstract process. Even when it is successful, it can seem arcane and alienating, making organizing around legislation tricky. Mobilizing to get a bill passed can help to strengthen a mature organization that has a stable core of committed activists, but it is not a good way to attract and retain new people, who are more likely to be motivated by quicker, more concrete

paid the same as city workers. Initial meetings were well attended and spirited, suggesting that the strategy was a sound one. However
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¹³ Survey of 234 parents carried out by the office of then-Public Advocate Mark Green. Reported by Brooke Richie and Robin Epstein, "Daycareless." *C y L* (August-September, 1997). <www.citylimits.org>

¹⁴ Brooke Richie and Robin Epstein, *í d* Brooke Richie, "WEP Moms "Lobby" Barrios-Paoli on Workfare Child Care." *C y L* (6/23/97).

¹⁵ As anthropologist Geraldine Casey has put it, class identity has to be "named, claimed and mobilized in the arena of social action." From *Bootstrap to Shoulderstrap: Women Secretaries and Class, Culture, and Voice in Contemporary Puerto Rico*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate Center of the City University of New York (2002): 6.

í ONAL LABO *í*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 31-37.
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