

About Women

Welfare or Workfare—What Is Fair?

By JANICE MALL

"It's absurd," said Karen Adams-Chinchilla. "The republicans want to buy me a rake and a bus pass. The Democrats want to pay me welfare and save the rake and bus money."

Chinchilla's family lives on Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), the largest federal welfare program. The Republican rake represents a program that is close to the Reagan Administration's heart, the idea that people on welfare ought to be put to work. Unr legislation—so far unsuccessful—that has been passed in Congress and in state legislatures, including California's, there would be a "workfare" program that would require welfare recipients to work without salary for public agencies—raking in the parks, as Chinchilla does it.

What Chinchilla regards as absurd is that she was working until a Reagan Administration budget cut forced her to quit her job. That cut decimated what was known as the working mother's budget, so called because nearly 90% of the people who receive welfare are women with young children.

Welfare Organizations' Study

The program allowed low-income workers to receive welfare supplement that enabled them to pay the expenses of working, such as transportation and child care. With severe cuts in the supplement early this year (many working poor people were cut off entirely), people like Chinchilla can't afford to work. By staying home with a full AFDC allowance, she can use her income for rent, food, clothing and other necessities.

While there are no figures as to how many people like Chinchilla quit their jobs, a study by the Coalition of

California Welfare Rights Organizations found numerous families who, when they lost their working mother's budget supplement, would have nothing left for food if they continued working with the attendant expenses. A national study by the University of Chicago also found that the cuts in aid for working poor people are "a systematic reduction in work incentives" and that the budget cut may be no cut at all if people who were working and receiving a small supplement must quit their jobs and go on full welfare.

However, the issue means more to women than the absurdity of forcing them to quit their jobs while attempting to make them do public work for their welfare checks. Said Chinchilla, "As a welfare mother I'm not threatened by workfare, by picking up a rake and working in the park. It is what it says about us all."

According to workfare opponents, among the things it says are that women ought to do assigned women's work rather than get jobs of their choice.

Workfare Opponents

Californians for a Fair Share, a coalition of poverty and welfare rights organizations, is one of the workfare opponents. In the past it worked on such issues as cost-of-living increases for welfare recipients. This year its top priority is opposing workfare and reinstating the working women's budget.

Chinchilla, who is with Welfare Action, is a leader of Californians for a Fair Share. Others are Cynthia M. Anderson of Las Familias del Pueblo, a Skid Row family center; Kristin Ockershauser of the Western Center on Law and Poverty; and Nancy Berlin of the Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition.

"We originated with Californians for Full Cost of

Living, an organization to lobby to get grants raised," Anderson said. "We got a 9.2% increase at a time the Legislature was trying to do away with it (cost of living increases). We realized we could do well if we organized poverty people, people who had been voiceless and had no power."

This year Californians for a Fair Share took up two workfare bills in California, one a constitutional amendment, and helped to defeat both. Attempts to reinstate welfare supplements for working poor people in Congress received wide support in the House but lost in the Senate. "We're going to try again," Berlin said. The group is also lobbying to get the state Legislature to pass a resolution recommending that the federal government reinstate the working mother's budget.

'Variety of Experience'

"Why the working women's budget was amazingly progressive was that it allowed a variety of experience," Berlin said. "A woman could work at any place she could find a job. It would be possible to work her way up."

"This is very different from workfare, where people must work where they're sent. It's the difference between allowing women control over their lives or funneling them into the kind of work they (legislators) think women ought to do. Workfare is a shelter workshop."

"A welfare concentration camp," said Chinchilla. In her opinion, the motives of conservatives for substitution of workfare for the working women's budget goes beyond keeping women in assigned mandatory jobs. Making it so difficult and demoralizing for women to be on their own is a way of telling women they should stay with their husbands no matter what, said Chinchilla, whose job was as a consultant to a battered women's shelter. "It says to women, don't leave the abuser. Don't leave the alcoholic. Stay with him where you belong. Women and children belong at home. We know Reagan feels that way."

That is Chinchilla's speculation. However, Reagan has consistently supported workfare and just as strongly opposed the plan to give supplementary assistance to the working poor. "The working women's budget came

in when Reagan became governor," Ockershauser said. "He was infuriated. He said the welfare nation is our No. 1 problem." It took a lawsuit to start operation of the working women's budget in California, she said. At the same time, Reagan started a small, pilot workfare program in one California county.

"Even then it was unsuccessful," said Ockershauser. (Administrative costs were too high.) "With this unsuccessful story behind him, he wants to make it work on a federal basis."

Problems for welfare recipients with workfare are that there is no allowance for transportation or child care, Anderson said. "And it's punitive. There are sanctions (reductions in the welfare grant) against women who can't come to work."

There are financial problems for the government too. One of the reasons Congress defeated legislation requiring states to have workfare plans this year was that the Congressional Budget Office studied the issue and found that savings are not significant. However, said Ockershauser, welfare "is such an emotional thing—people getting something for nothing—that sometimes the cost does not matter."

Network of Groups

"It (mandatory work) is a vendetta," said Chinchilla. "Nobody cares whether it works."

Another consideration in workfare is where the work will come from. In the view of opponents, workfare jobs are make-work. "One of the fears is that it would take away jobs from the lower paid state workers," said Ockershauser. The economy is throwing everything out of whack. It's crazy to make people work at something when men out there can't find jobs."

California for a Fair Share is working with women's organizations and trying to form a network of interested groups such as those concerned with welfare, child care and domestic violence. "Aside from the issue, we're bringing together people who have been voiceless," Berlin said, "and giving them the experience of seeing legislators."

They are also giving legislators the experience of see-

Please see MORE WOMEN, Page 5

MORE WOMEN

Continued from 4th Page

ing them. "The ignorance among legislators were abysmal," said Ockershauser. The state workfare bills had no reference to the fact that the people involved were women and children, said Chinchilla. "In Sacramento they talk about the *guys* on welfare as if they were all guzzling beer and watching TV."

Berlin said that even the liberals the group spoke to were surprised about the facts as to who is on welfare. People ask why women don't live on child support, Ockershauser said: "Because (in L.A. County) fewer than 20% receive it and the average amount is \$119 a month regardless of the number of children."

They tell legislators that 90% of the people receiving AFDC are women and children. More than half of the mothers are under 30 with young children; average number: two.

It is the view of Californians for a Fair Share that these welfare recipients want to hold jobs—real jobs, not workfare jobs—and the statistics would seem to support this. According to welfare statistics compiled before Congress eliminated most of the aid available to the working poor, 60.6% of all adults who received AFDC in California worked and earned income. No one knows how many can still afford to work.