

IF YOU FIGHT FOR IT

City Money For Nursery

In the last few years, many women have been starting nurseries in their apartments, storefronts, churches, community centers, basements - everywhere and anywhere there was space. The nurseries were kept running on a day to day, one crisis to the next, hand to mouth volunteer, and cooperative basis with money from the women's own pockets, their sweat and tears. Women, including myself, were willing to exert great effort and energy starting nurseries for our own infants and kids because there were no nurseries available and many women like myself were desperate for some relief. We were slowly going crazy taking care of our children alone in our apartments.

I and a few other women from my group heard rumors that nursery groups like ours could now get funds from the city on easier terms than ever before. Those of us who were excited about this possibility began attending meetings with women from nurseries all over the city. Getting the funds turned out to be possible but very difficult. First we began to meet with city officials and talk but we soon realized that talk was getting us nowhere. So with the power of all of all our groups (around 25) we began to battle. We blocked traffic and held a nursery in the streets to make our demand for day care publically known, and we sat in the office of Human Resources with our kids and demanded funds for all groups not just a few favored ones. After demonstrating together, we began to achieve some success. A new category of funds was suddenly discovered for us - "interim funds." Interim funds meant that our groups could get money for rent, equipment, renovations and staff, teachers assistants, bookkeepers, and a cook without conforming to the former rigid city requirements.

There unfortunately turned out to be a hitch to interim funding. We are only given the funds on a month-to-month basis, which means every month we have to telephone, beg, make trips to the Commission on Day Care, and demonstrate for every penny to keep going. While we are begging and fighting, the off track betting people, as you may have read in the newspapers, are getting \$800,000 supposedly on "loan" from the same Human Resources office just for the asking. Interim funding means our funds could be cut anytime and we can never be sure how long we will exist. We have money but we cannot plan ahead or guarantee we will always be around.

Some women in our group dropped out when we started getting funds. One felt that government money corrupts and that our centers would change and become bureaucratic and rigid once we became involved with city funds. Another woman felt most government public run services were lousy and the quality of child care at the center would deteriorate with funds. Those of us who stayed with the nursery felt that government funds do not have to mean government control if women are determined (that means ready to fight) to run and control the centers themselves. We wanted the money to give us some relief from the daily burden of keeping a center going out of our own pockets. Financial help could free some of us to put our energies into other areas and provide others of us with some paid employment. As a matter of fact, money has meant that the care the kids get is better, because we can get better equipment and pay



women a decent salary for working in the nursery and the salary makes them take the job more seriously and do the work better.

Many people do not see why women are fighting for day care at all, why aren't we content at home with our children. They know that taking care of children is a lonely gruelling 16 hour a day and often into the night 7 day a week job for which there is no pay or praise. It is hard physical and mental labor: bending, lifting, carrying, running, cooking, a constant changing of diapers, feeding, nose-wiping, bathing, cleaning, dressing and undressing, figuring out what your child is saying, answering a million questions, repeating answers over and over, reading the same boring books hundreds of times day in and day out, chasing the child, refereeing fights, trips to the supermarket, doctor, park with the strapling child on back or in carriage in rain or shine, curing and diagnosing ills, comforting, drawing, trying enthusiastically to play dull games - an all purpose slave maid, cook, laundress, seamstress, nurse, teacher, companion, and usually more. After all that, children grow up and rebel against mother. Teachers, psychiatrists and social workers blame anything the child does on mother, and nobody feels mother is ever doing enough.

A woman's work is never done and there is no vacation, unemployment, sick leave, or overtime pay. Anyone else doing cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children outside of a mother or housewife is paid for the work. This society, however, expects women to do this work for nothing. With a decent wage taking care of children could be more enjoyable and less thankless. Mothers might be more respected if they were paid by the state for their labor. Money talks, as they say.

Mothers get a lot of advantages from day care. They get to meet other women in their neighborhood and have some free time. Everyone should have this. (Rich women always have been hiring other women to watch their kids). Mothers can work, go back to school, talk to friends, shop, or work in the women's movement. Whatever it is she has always wanted to do. Mothers who enjoy working with kids or keeping books, or cooking can work in the nursery and watch the way their children act in another situation, get to know her children's friends. These mothers will be well paid as teachers, bookkeepers, and cooks. Day care provides women with jobs and trains women as well for the job.

If day care is so great for women, how come many women do not want to leave their kids in nurseries and how come there aren't more nurseries? Some women are against day care because they have heard it is bad for children. A lot of experts have made us women feel guilty about complaining of our exhausting child rearing job and have tried to tell women that they should want to be with their children all the time. All the scientific studies, however show that there is absolutely no damage to children who are not with their parents all day no matter how young. In fact, most of these studies show children are happier when the mother is doing something she is enjoying.

Day care is not only good for mothers, but advantageous for kids giving them a good head start. With a nursery, children are provided with larger physical space for running and playing about. Most New York City apartments are small. Parks are too cold in the winter, often far away, and the park equipment is seldom geared for infants or toddlers who usually just get in the way of the older kids. In a nursery, children get to meet other children in their neighborhood and make friends.

Women are also afraid that if they put their children in day care, they will be forced to take outside work even if there is no job available that they want or which pays a decent wage. This is why it is so important that nursery schools be a free service for all children, whether or not their mothers work, like elementary and high school now. What we are demanding is that public education be extended to be available from birth.

Children learn a lot from other children and enjoy playing with them. They also get acquainted and make friends with other adults. Women who work in day care centers usually enjoy the work and therefore are apt to do a better job than most mothers are able to do in their own homes. The women who work in my child's center teach the children art, games, letters, numbers, reading and writing, and make learning fun. By the time children get to kindergarten, they are used to being with other kids and know a lot. Ample healthy food is provided and in some centers health care is made available; polio diphtheria, tetanus, typhoid, and small pox shots as well as diagnosing illness.

The way things are now, to get your kid in a city day care center, you have to undergo a detailed, personal investigation by a city social worker.

Schools Now Available

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Some men do not like the idea of their girlfriends or wives putting their children in nurseries because they want us home rather than free to do as we wish. Men say that they are afraid of what we will do in our free time. (Occasionally you will hear women too, women who want special powers from men - wondering what us wives will do with all our freedom). Some women in the day care groups have had to defy their husbands or keep it a secret that their kids are in day care. Some women rather than fight their husbands just keep their child home.

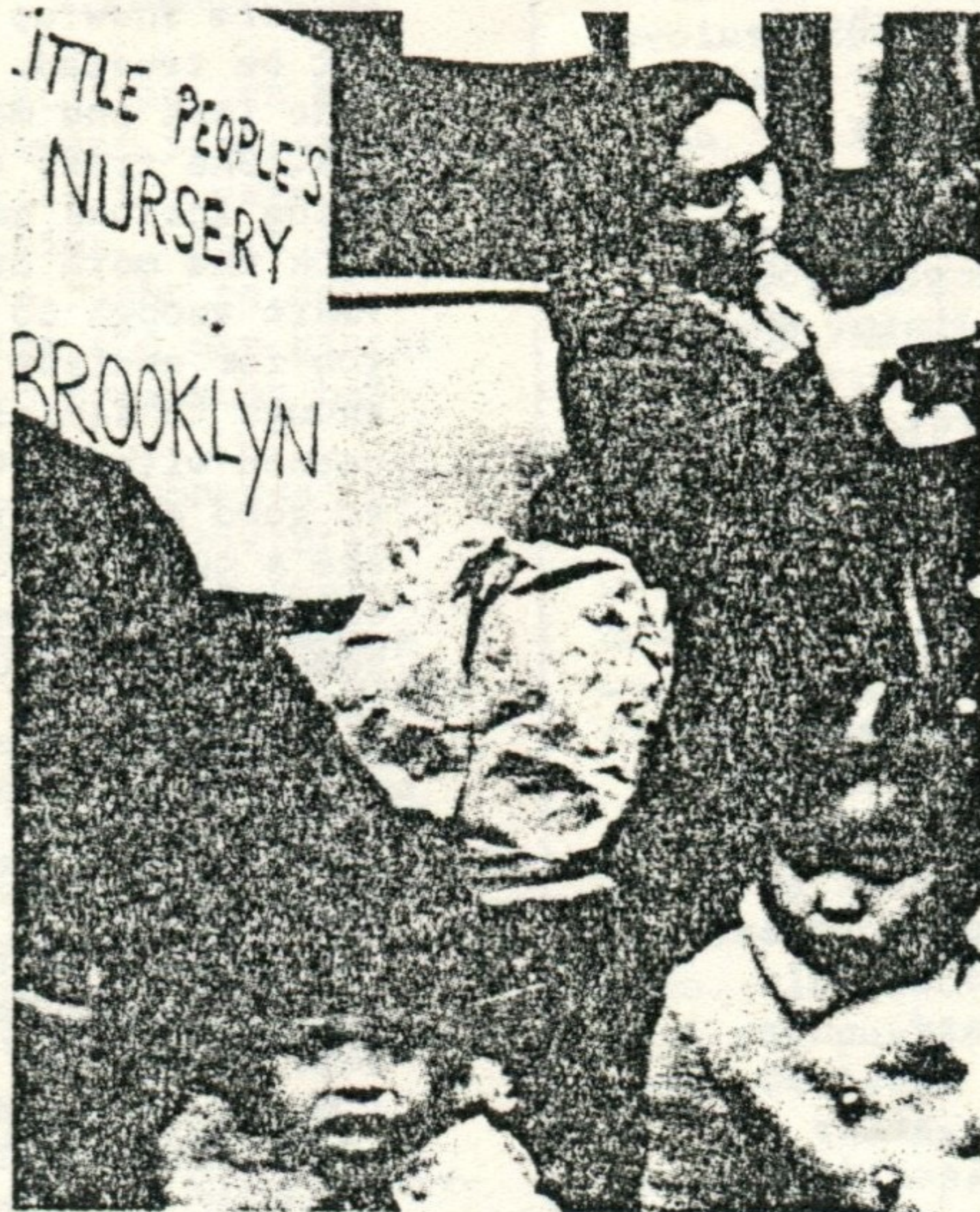
In the past, a lot of city run day care centers have been inadequate. The silly rules, snooping social workers and overworked teachers and inadequate facilities have given day care a bad name. Some women have decided to keep their children home because of this or with a baby sitter. Others, like myself, decided that even this mediocre set up was better than no day care at all. As a matter of fact, I took my child out of the "cooperative" day care center I had worked so hard on setting up and put him in a city center because the city center would take him from 9 to 3 in the afternoon and the other women in my old nursery insisted on keeping the center open only half a day.

The real reason there is not much day care for children is because the men who run our country have always placed women and children's needs last. Men decided that because women bear children they naturally liked staying home with kids and made any woman who complained look like an "odd ball." Now with the Women's Liberation Movement and women daring to speak out the truth, women can finally say that childrearing although fun at times, is a gruelling job and we want a break.

There are however, lots of dangerous trends in day care to watch for. One is attaching day care to work. Many companies like the telephone company that is having difficulty keeping women at low paid dull jobs are starting day care centers on the jobs. Day care centers are much better when they are in the neighborhood rather than on the job. If day care is provided by a job, women aren't as free to leave the job because if they do they will lose their day care privilege. Most corporations starting day care centers are also charging money out of the women's salaries and these centers are not run or controlled by the women. Lugging young children on the crowded subway or bus in rush hour would not be too appetizing either.

Another trend is large corporations setting up day care with the help of government funds just to make money or to

sell their products. These corporations realize women have a desperate need for day care and the government is going to finally give money and they are going to take advantage of women's needs and make a profit. Many of these day care centers are franchised, set up in chains like Chicken Delight. Some of the chains are called Humpty Dumptikins, Kinder Care, We Sit Better, or Child Minders. Other types of corporation day care are set up by toy companies to push their products. These companies claim their products are necessary to the child's growth and try to rope the parents into spending money



on them. Good nurseries will never be "profitable." Education costs a lot (the government estimates that it costs \$2,600 a year per child in day care). These corporate run day care centers have to cut corners to make profits, so the care the kids get is worse than poor. The "chain" nurseries are overcrowded, understaffed, and the staff is underpaid and the parents have to pay \$20 to \$40 per week per child, also parents have no say in the running of corporate day care.

Another trend to watch out for is hiring men to work in newly funded centers. For several years women have been working as volunteers in these centers and now that paying jobs are available, men are suddenly getting in on this. Sometimes women say they want men around their children, and that paying men as teachers would be one way of accomplishing this, but paying men would take jobs away from women. Right now jobs for

women is a higher priority than getting men involved in teaching. Eventually child care should not be considered "women's work". As this association of child care with women has been one of the ways we have been oppressed. At present, we are demanding men help, but as volunteers in the centers as women have been doing for years. At the center where my child used to go, a male head teacher was hired. The mothers are now sorry they hired him because he is acting like a big boss and taking over the center that women started. Right now when men are given any power or authority they tend to use it against us women.

Who is going to pay for this day care? The money for day care must come out of corporation taxes. Corporations are richest and benefit most from the future labor of our kids and therefore should bear the burden. Taxes to pay for day care should not come from sales tax or wage related taxes as these taxes come most extensively from working and poor people's pockets.

But we must control the day care centers. We, meaning, the mothers children involved and those men who will work as equals, instead of insisting on being superior.

Parents should determine the hours of the center, that is, if parents want their children in the centers 24 hours, say they work nights or need nights free, then the centers should be open at night. 24 hour child care does not mean mothers have to leave the child in the center 24 hours a day. If parents only want their children in the nursery half a day or for a few hours this should also be possible.

Money for equipment and training should be given to the parents directly rather than have a day care commission decide who shall do the training or what equipment children need. Centers should take children age one month to 5 years. Now most centers turn away children younger than 3. Public schools do provide Head Start and Pre Kindergarten for kids 3 years and up although there aren't nearly enough of them and more must be built. Just as important and totally neglected is infant care. Special facilities have to be built for infants and this is a demand often opposed and therefore we women must put up a special fight for this right.

The day care fight has just begun. Finally our demands for day care have gotten powerful enough to force the government to begin to act as if they are interested in day care. But if we want parent controlled day care for all women, we are going to have to join forces and work together. by Rosalyn Baxandall

For information about existing day care centers call or write Debra Ensign Women's Center, 36 West 22nd Street, 691-1860 or 691-1811; or the Department of Health, 125 Worth Street, New York 10013, 566-6145.

If you are interested in starting a center or working in one and need help or want information or booklets, call Committee for Community Controlled Child Care, 427-7468 or call Bank Street Day Care Consultation Service at the Bank Street College of Education, 610 West 112th Street, New York 10025, 663-3162 or 663-7200.

