

These Women Were Dangerous, and Got Results

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The Legacy of the National Welfare Rights Organization

In a nation founded upon revolutionary ideals, why did a revolution in the socioeconomic front face rejection?

References →



Foundations of the NWRO

- The National Welfare Rights Organization was an advocacy and lobbying organization active from 1966-1975. Made up of poor whites and blacks, as well as intellectuals and social workers, it **campaigns for a Guaranteed Annual Income to be available to poor families** throughout the Nixon Administrations' reign.
- It emerged from the union of smaller welfare and women's groups, active in mid 20th century America.
- Key members of such groups, including Executive director George Wiley, and co-founder and chair Johnnie Tillmon, **saw opportunity to unite these groups to strengthen their power to demand welfare as a right for the poor to live, and end poverty.**

Tactics of the NWRO

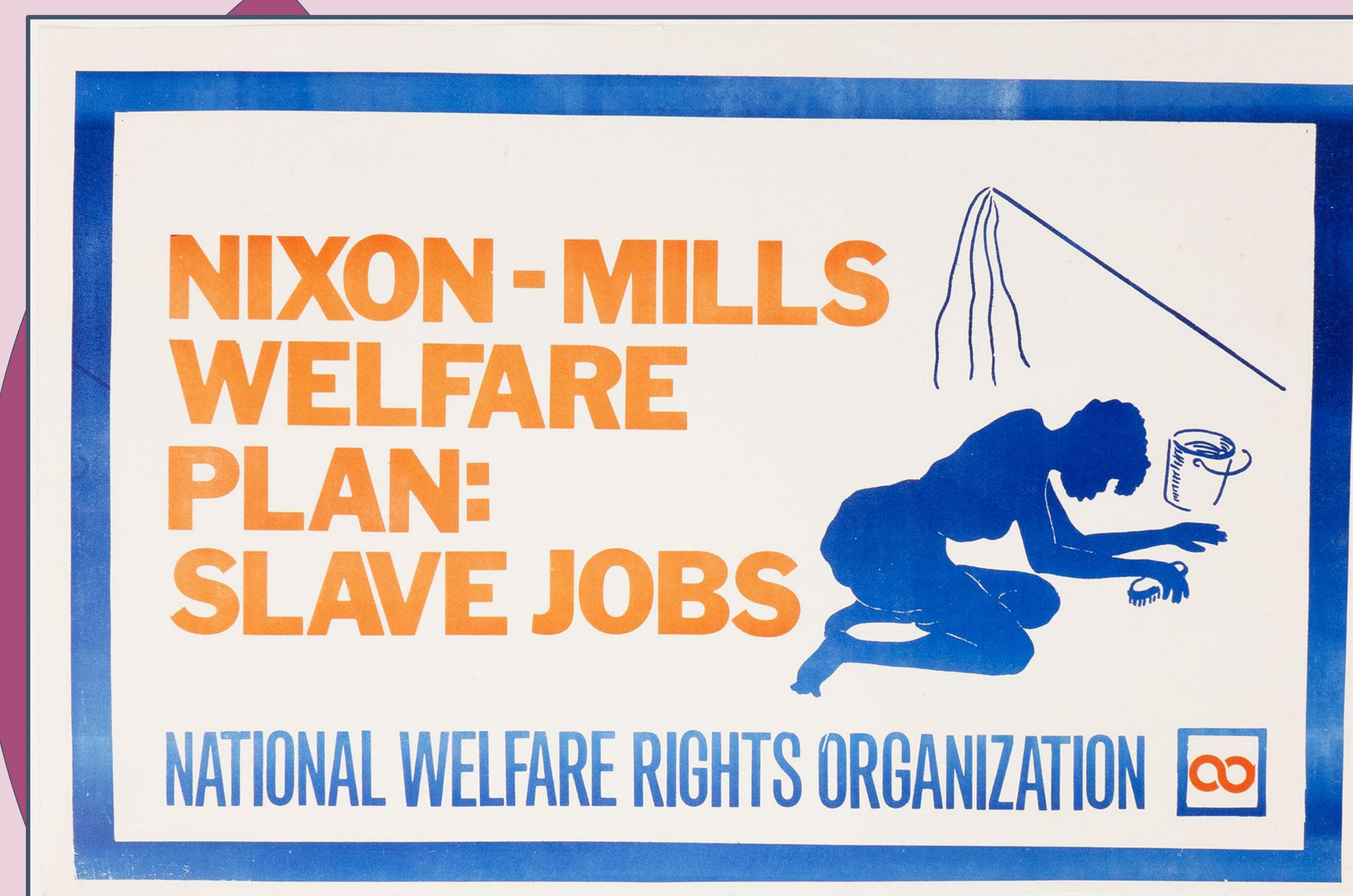
- Interviews of Executive members of the NWRO pointed to **“grassroots power”** and **“community control of welfare”** both a goal and a methodology in their fight for welfare rights.
- Slogans such as **“Mother Power”** emphasized the needs and positions of many members. Bringing a uniquely Black Feminist approach to their demands.
- In protests, marches, and demonstrations, members would speak on the realities of Black Women, aiding local welfare chapters while speaking and disrupting the existing welfare system to make their demands known.
- **In instances such as when a mob of mothers broke in to the Health Education and Welfare department in 1970, they understood their collective power despite the opposition they endured.**

NWRO Members' Experiences:

- The need for this unity came from the harsh experiences of welfare recipients, particularly for poor Black women and mothers.
- Women were largely excluded from the workforce, and **earning one's income was what made an individual a “good citizen”** (Sherwin)
- Since the period of chattel slavery, African Americans were stereotyped as submissive and simple by white enslavers, and these images persisted. They would manifest in suspicion and low paying jobs from employers.
- Members chose to demand that everyone, not just the white middle class, deserved to live

“They were worried about us. That day was the greatest satisfaction of my life.”

– Ruby Duncan, Welfare Rights Activist, on 1971 Las Vegas demonstration



Poster for the NWRO, which promoted a welfare system without forced work

“The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”
– Kimberlé Crenshaw

They tied their campaigns for economic security to their desire for autonomy as women ... their struggle represented a unique brand of feminism emerging in the 1960s.
– Premilla Nadasen



Members of the NWRO march in Boston Massachusetts 1969

Activism was not simply pursued by welfare recipients as a means to be able to stay home, but as a genuine source of strength, pride and accomplishment in its own right.

– Wilson Sherwin



Beulah Sanders giving her testimony before the joint economic commission

Goals of the NWRO

Adequate Income, Dignity, Justice, and Democratic Participation.

- Adequate Income: **The Nixon Administration's Family Assistance Plan (FAP) would set a standard of \$1,600** to be a minimum income for a family of 4. The NWRO attacked this plan as the **poverty level was around \$4,200. The NWRO would campaign against the FAP and for a guaranteed annual income of \$5,500.**
- Dignity: The NWRO fought to ensure welfare recipients were treated with respect. Events such as the Children's March on March 30th, 1971, expressed these views. Women and children demanded to **“Let us live like people”** as protesters rallied and chanted that in **“Welfare Cuts - Children are the victims”**
- Justice: Members of the NWRO and other welfare recipients worked in conjunction to fight for change in the courts as they did in the streets. Two victories facilitated by the NWRO were the supreme court cases of **King v. Smith (1968)** which overturned the “Man-in-the-house” rule which cut off female welfare recipients if they had relations with a man. **Goldberg v. Kelly (1970)** required due legal process to occur before a recipient lost benefits.
- Democratic Participation: Using their collective power, and embodying their other goals, **leaders and members of the NWRO would testify** in hearings such as the 1968 hearing before the Joint Economic Committee of the Senate that it was right to **“Give people the money they need”** to meet a standard of living, rather than subjecting them to “workfare”.