

THE BLOOD DEMONSTRATION: TEACHING THE HISTORY OF THE PHILADELPHIA WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: Despite a growing body of scholarship that documents civil rights activism in the North during the 1950s and 1960s, college educators continue to rely on traditional understandings of African Americans' struggle for civil rights as being rooted in the South. Moreover, history professors continue to privilege a male-centered narrative that tends to define the civil rights movement through mass marches and protests. In an effort to challenge this pedagogy, this article describes a method for teaching the history of women's role in the struggle for social justice in the 1960s through their participation in the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO). Through the use of primary sources such as the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the PWRO's newsletter along with secondary sources such as Lisa Levenstein's *A Movement Without Marches*, this article offers a way to expand and complicate students' understanding of the civil rights and women's movements of the late twentieth century. Just as importantly, it assists teachers in stressing the significance of African American women's fight for equality in Pennsylvania history. Supplemental resources are posted on the journals' web pages.

*A*t 9:30 p.m. on a cool autumn night on Wednesday, November 8, 1967, a group of twenty-seven mostly African American mothers of young and school-age children quietly lined up at the Episcopal Hospital Blood Center in Philadelphia to donate their blood for

five to eight dollars a pint. A smaller number of local clergymen and social workers accompanied these women to stage what they described as a “Blood Demonstration.” These would-be donors were no ordinary women but leaders and members of the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO) who were determined to call attention to the insufficient money allocated for clothing by the state of Pennsylvania for mothers and children through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. The Pennsylvania State Department of Public Welfare’s refusal to increase the clothing allowance for women on relief, according to the PWRO, had forced the women to sell their blood so that they might provide clothing and shoes for their children.¹

To the chagrin of the women, the center rejected all but two of the twenty-seven women’s donations due to deficient iron levels in their blood. A medical technician on duty that night informed the women that this was most likely due to inadequate nutrition and recommended that the women eat vegetables and red meat. In response to this advice, PWRO chairwoman Hazel Leslie remarked, “When you don’t have money . . . you eat hotcakes and gravy, and fried potatoes, and stewed potatoes.”² Her comments underscored the PWRO’s arguments that their welfare grants provided insufficient means on which to live. Yet, despite the setback, the women had made their point. News coverage of the demonstration motivated city and suburban residents to make thousands of dollars worth of donations to the women over the following few weeks.³

The women of the PWRO were not alone in their campaign for higher welfare benefits and for recognition of the difficulties they faced as poor mothers. The PWRO’s blood demonstration was one of the earliest protests connected to the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO); it would be followed by other crusades, marches, and sit-ins to call attention to the plight of poor women and children across the nation. The quest for welfare rights developed out of the antipoverty activism and social policy of the early 1960s, typified by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” programs. Johnson’s declaration of “war” against poverty occurred in the midst of a set of established and emerging social movements, including the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, the women’s movement, and the activism of Students for a Democratic Society. These movements influenced and were shaped by welfare recipients’ struggle for recognition and for rights.

The blood demonstration and the story of the PWRO is virtually unknown to college students and is rarely taught, despite NWRO director George Wiley’s statement in 1971 that the PWRO was “the most dynamic local group in the country.”⁴ Ironically, the PWRO made such an impact

on politics in the 1960s that Laurence Geller, columnist and reporter of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, would pronounce in 1970, “the name of the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization (WRO) is well-known to everyone from ‘man-on-the-street’ down to the Governor of the State of Pennsylvania, and if they do nothing else from this day on their place in history is assured.”⁵ As prescient as Geller’s prediction may have appeared to him and his contemporaries, history has yet to find a spot for the PWRO.

As a historian of the modern United States, I teach the PWRO’s blood demonstration to undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania to create a place for the PWRO in the history of civil rights activism and the women’s movement. I often teach this topic in the second part of my African American history survey. In doing so, I make the history of the black experience in Philadelphia central to the larger narrative of African Americans’ quest for civil rights; the topic would also work well in women’s studies or history of social movements courses. Teaching about the PWRO broadens students’ understanding of activism and allows them to explore how the intersection of class, gender, and race generated specific types of actions focused on inspiring social change.

African Americans in Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s

Many students enter my class without a clear sense of a history of African Americans in the northern United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. They often associate this time period with the struggles of African Americans in the South—a reflection, perhaps, of historical narratives that tend to emphasize the southern civil rights movement as the hallmark of the African American experience. Nevertheless, the history of the black experience in northern locales such as post–World War II Philadelphia is beginning to come into sharper view. Thus, in an effort to help students contextualize the PWRO, I briefly lecture on African Americans’ social condition in Philadelphia in the middle of the twentieth century.

In 1967, when the PWRO staged its blood demonstration, Philadelphia was the fourth-largest city in the United States.⁶ The PWRO women and other African Americans were becoming an increasingly visible segment of the city’s population as their white neighbors left Philadelphia for developing suburban communities surrounding the city. I inform students that Philadelphia, like other major American cities in the North, had long been a

place to which many southern African Americans migrated, both to seek new labor opportunities during the world wars and to flee Jim Crow racism. By 1960 African Americans comprised over half a million, or over 26 percent, of Philadelphia's population. Black residents of North Philadelphia, the location of the blood center where the PWRO staged its protest, made up 69 percent of the neighborhood's population.⁷

In my lecture, I establish that African American poverty was highly concentrated, making it extremely difficult for black Philadelphians to escape the limits placed on them, even as a small number of African Americans experienced post–World War II economic prosperity. The interlocking systems of race, gender, and class created particular hardships for African American women. The challenges faced by black women in Philadelphia who relied on welfare to care for their children, I tell students, were compounded by deindustrialization and an increase in racially exclusionary housing in the mid-to-late 1960s. The women of the PWRO were calling on Philadelphia and Pennsylvania welfare agencies to make changes that might address these social inequities for women and children.

African American Women in Philadelphia and Welfare

My students tend to enter this class with significant preconceptions about welfare and its recipients. Many assume that individuals who receive welfare lack a work ethic. As Kaaryn Gustafson observes, "Mention the word welfare in a room full of people in the United States and you can expect to see brows furrow and mouths tighten in disgust."⁸ Usually, one or two students will also admit that they associate welfare with African Americans in general and black women in particular. Together, students and I explore the roots of these associations. Students typically reveal that representations of welfare recipients in the media and popular culture often drive their beliefs about welfare. Scholars who research social attitudes regarding welfare echo students' comments. Marisa Chappell reveals that politicians used images of the "welfare queen," the stereotype of an African American woman who purposely has children to receive monetary benefits from state welfare agencies, to justify cuts to welfare programs.⁹

I find that the best way to challenge students' negative preconceptions about welfare is to assign the chapter "'Tired of Being Seconds' on ADC" in Lisa Levenstein's *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women*

and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia. This reading provides a brief but helpful overview of the history of welfare for students. Early forms of welfare in the United States were associated with local charity and relief organizations, which sought to alleviate poverty among members of communities. However, Aid to Dependent Children, or ADC (later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, in 1962), which originated in the Social Security Act of 1935, is the form of assistance that most Americans, including my students, associate with the term “welfare.” From the beginning ADC mainly provided federal grants to help states maintain their mothers’ aid or mothers’ pension grants, which forty states passed between 1910 and 1920. These laws mostly supported white, immigrant women with children and explicitly emphasized the idea that enabling mothers to care for their children was better than investing in institutional care via orphanages or workhouses.¹⁰

Levenstein also introduces students to the racialization of welfare in Philadelphia beginning in the late 1930s. By 1940, reports Levenstein, 62 percent of women on welfare identified as African American. This proportion increased to 85 percent in the early 1960s.¹¹ Contrary to the commonly held assumption, African American women’s increasing presence on the welfare rolls in Philadelphia did not stem from migration from the South. A one-year required residency in Pennsylvania actually made it quite difficult for new residents in the city to participate in the welfare program, and 65 percent of Philadelphia’s African American female welfare recipients in the 1960s reported living in the city for more than five years.¹² Students learn that structural conditions deeply steeped in racism, sexism, and classism compelled a growing number of African American women to seek ADC assistance.

Indeed, black women’s disproportionate numbers on welfare reflected that they were far less likely to possess assets—such as homes, automobiles, life insurance, and personal savings—that disqualified individuals from receiving assistance. Moreover, discriminatory and exclusionary labor forces kept African American women tied to domestic and seasonal work, which unemployment insurance did not typically cover. In essence, African American women found themselves seeking welfare because they had few or no other options.¹³ Despite this information, many students reveal in discussions that they view African American women as victims or African American families as dysfunctional. I also use Levenstein’s book to disrupt this tendency. The complexity of ADC recipients’ lives is revealed in her

analysis of a study of 239 Philadelphia welfare recipients conducted between 1959 and 1962 by Jane C. Kronick, a professor of social work at Bryn Mawr College.¹⁴ Levenstein's work allows students to hear the voices of African American women expressing their desire for gainful employment to care for their families. Students learn about black women's difficulties in finding work and how they were bound to low-skilled labor by their race, gender, and class. In other instances, students discover that the expense of safe childcare made working impossible for many women. If chronic underemployment and lack of childcare were not enough, students gather from the reading that disproportionate rates of poor health and injuries due to poverty also caused some women to resort to welfare to support their families.¹⁵

Levenstein argues that one of the most compelling reasons for African American women's decision to seek welfare assistance in the 1950s and 1960s was difficult interpersonal relationships with men who were former husbands and partners. Although 75 percent of the women on ADC indicated that they had been married at one point, many women had sustained broken and lost relationships by the time their names appeared on the welfare rolls. Women reported that the failure of these relationships strained already vulnerable financial situations and pushed them to apply for welfare. As single parents who often could not count on support from former husbands and partners, many African American women depended on ADC stipends to sustain themselves and their children. Even when black women found love, companionship, and support within their marriages, strict guidelines that forbade two-parent households from receiving assistance caused some couples to make the difficult decision to separate so that women and children could receive monetary support.¹⁶

The reasons for African Americans' disproportionate presence on ADC, then, were complex and often defy students' assumptions about African American women and welfare. To add greater emphasis to this point, I distribute a paper with quotes from Levenstein, such as "Women's status as single mothers enabled them to qualify for ADC, but it did not single-handedly push them onto welfare" (42), and "Women applied for welfare because they had exhausted all of their resources and ADC provided them with a more stable source of income than they were otherwise able to obtain" (46). I ask students to work in groups of three or four to discuss and list all of the ways that Levenstein supports these statements. Students find evidence from the book and cite page numbers for their classmates to refer to in the larger class discussion. Then, I ask the class to reconvene as a group

and discuss the quotations. As students identify support for Levenstein's statements, they become more informed about the historical discrimination that black women faced.

I also require students to read the introduction and chapter 4 of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) by then assistant secretary of labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The text, popularly known as the "Moynihan Report," helps students to understand that the evolution of the civil rights movement was accompanied by particular discourses on African American women, families, and poverty.¹⁷ President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 "War on Poverty," which included a set of laws dedicated to eradicating economic inequality in the United States, served as one of the driving forces behind the Moynihan Report. In the report, Moynihan argued that the demise of the black nuclear family was an emerging crisis that lay at the heart of the pervasive poverty found in heavily black-populated urban areas. High unemployment, low wages, and households headed by single women were, according to Moynihan, responsible for the breakdown in black family life.

I ask students to critically analyze the report's language and define terms such as "stable Negro family structure," "matriarchal structure," and "tangle of pathology"—phrases Moynihan employs in chapter 4. Having students engage with the Moynihan Report is crucial, as it helped to popularize stereotypes of African American single mothers on welfare—stereotypes that the PWRO's activism attempted to challenge. The Moynihan Report offers me an excellent opportunity to help students locate the root of the stereotypes they all can cite about welfare. Reading *The Negro Family* also encourages students to make connections to Levenstein's work and to consider whether the women and children she discusses are representative of the family structures described in Moynihan's report. Finally, I ask students to explore the sources of poverty in black communities that both Levenstein and Moynihan point to in their work. I encourage students to analyze the reasons both authors supply for the persistence of disproportionate rates of poverty in black communities in the 1960s by asking them to compare how their conclusions are similar and different.

African Americans and Civil Rights in Philadelphia

To prepare students to discuss black women's activism in the PWRO, I provide them with a broad overview of the history of African Americans'

struggles for civil rights in Philadelphia. As Matthew Countryman writes in the opening of his book *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*, “Philadelphia is rarely depicted as a significant place in the history of the modern civil rights movement.”¹⁸ However, an installment of the documentary series *Philadelphia: The Great Experiment* entitled “The Fight: 1965–1978,” which I show to students, highlights African Americans’ involvement in civil rights as a key component of the city’s history.¹⁹ The episode helps students understand how black women of the PWRO fit within a tradition of African American female activism in Philadelphia. Greater details of civil rights activism in Philadelphia in the 1960s are presented in Countryman’s essay “Why Philadelphia?” included in *Civil Rights in a Northern City: Philadelphia*, an online archive of over 1,500 digital primary sources.²⁰

Countryman’s essay is illustrated with photographs of African Americans in Philadelphia involved in various forms of activism, including the Columbia Avenue riot in August 1964, which sparked looting and vandalism of predominantly white establishments in the heavily populated African American community, and the Girard College protest in 1965, which called on the school to desegregate. Both events, argues Countryman, challenge students to consider the civil rights and black power movements from a Philadelphia-centric perspective.²¹ While Countryman successfully chronicles key events in the history of civil rights activism in Philadelphia, his essay and the site as a whole still focus on a conventional civil rights agenda centered around the desegregation of educational and public institutions. The challenge I often face in teaching students about the PWRO is in moving beyond a conventional, male-centered view of civil rights history and inserting the PWRO into the history of African American social activism. I have found that the best way to do this is to ask students to comment on the photographs in Countryman’s essay and make observations about how activism is defined through the images. Then, I ask students to suggest other ways that struggles for social change might occur and who would be at the center of these battles. Focusing on the photographs accompanying Countryman’s work helps me transition to the history of the PWRO and the blood demonstration.

The Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization

Because the PWRO has yet to receive a full treatment in the scholarship on the welfare rights movement, I provide students with the history of

the organization. The drive for a national welfare rights movement reached Philadelphia with the incorporation of the PWRO at its founding conference on April 21, 1967. However, the PWRO had local roots that predated the national movement. Philadelphia's early push for welfare rights grew out of Crusade for Children, a coalition of clergy, social workers, and welfare recipients committed to increasing public assistance in Pennsylvania; the group was established by the Philadelphia Health and Welfare Council (HWC) in 1966. While the Crusade for Children was not the first organization to advocate for Philadelphia's poor, the HWC developed Crusade for Children in an effort to respond to the War on Poverty's premise that the poor should have a leading voice in antipoverty programs. Despite this, as Countryman has pointed out, the leadership of the Crusade for Children initially consisted of far more middle-class activists than welfare recipients. Two recipient-led demonstrations during the summer of 1966 would change this, however, and spearhead the development of the PWRO.

First, on June 8 1,000 impoverished mothers and children marched on the Pennsylvania state capitol to demand that legislators increase public assistance grants.²² Later that month, on June 29, 500 mothers and children, along with activists, held an all-night vigil in front of the Pennsylvania State Office Building in Philadelphia. Approximately 135 individuals picketed and carried signs to bring attention to the national effort to get the federal government to increase monthly welfare subsidies.²³ Two photographs from this demonstration depict African American women at the center of the demonstration. African American women's participation in the march challenged stereotypes surrounding poverty, blackness, and motherhood and asserted their right to state support to care for their children (Figs. 1 and 2).

I give students printouts of the photographs and tell them to write a caption for each based on what they see and what they have learned from their prior reading. This activity allows students to apply what they have learned and also serves as a way for me to evaluate their interpretive skills. The photographs also make it easier for students to understand how the Crusade for Children organization evolved into the PWRO in 1967. Swept up by the growing voices of local antipoverty groups across the nation, Philadelphia welfare recipients attended meetings in Chicago in the months following the June 1966 demonstrations to discuss the developing national welfare rights movement. That following spring, three hundred welfare recipients from ten chapters across the city and their supporters met at the opening conference of the PWRO.²⁴

THE BLOOD DEMONSTRATION



FIGURE 1: PWRO demonstrators marching, Broad and Spring Garden Streets, June 29, 1966. Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

I ask students to read an article from the *Sunday Philadelphia Bulletin* for a fuller picture of the organization. The article is striking in its detail and length; it serves in some sense as a history of the organization's early years. Predominantly made up of and led by poor and working-class African



FIGURE 2: PWRO demonstrators marching, Broad and Spring Garden Streets, June 29, 1966. Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

American women, the PWRO also included white middle-class activists serving in the John F. Kennedy Volunteers in Service to American (VISTA) program. Hazel Leslie, the first chairwoman of the PWRO, reported that the group welcomed anyone at their meetings and found that both men and women attended meetings to seek advice and support in dealing with public assistance agencies.²⁵ The organization charged between one and four dollars for yearly membership, which included a membership card and a subscription to the PWRO's monthly newsletter, *Straight Talk*.²⁶ Yet, with such low yearly membership dues, the PWRO required additional financial support to operate. Donations and associate memberships from middle- and upper-class city and suburban residents made up for the shortfall caused by the low membership rolls and affordable dues.²⁷

I also assign students to read the PWRO's "Summary of Goals" statement, which outlines different levels of the government's responsibility to support poor women raising children. The document reveals that the PWRO's

primary objective was to call on the state of Pennsylvania to increase public assistance grants to 100 percent of the minimum requirement established by the State of Pennsylvania; the state government should “Immediately allocate \$70 million more to increase Public Assistance Grants to 100% of the minimum standard of health and decency and establish annual adjustments for changes in the cost of living.” In 1967, Philadelphia’s AFDC grants were 71 percent of the Pennsylvania standard.²⁸ The government had, according to the PWRO, a responsibility to financially support poor women raising children.

The PWRO also argued for the need for welfare recipients to be treated respectfully and equitably by their caseworkers.²⁹ In the months preceding the blood demonstration, the PWRO filed a petition with the Philadelphia County Board of Assistance that listed thirteen complaints of mistreatment by caseworkers toward AFDC recipients. Approximately two hundred people staged a protest in front of the State Office Building to support the petition.³⁰ PWRO members saw their advocacy for radical systemic transformation as intricately connected to their protests against the regular slights and insults they faced in welfare offices across the city. As the “Summary of Goals” reveals, the PWRO believed that their “aim to improve the total welfare system at every level of government” would guarantee “Dignity—Full freedom, rights and respect accorded others.”³¹

Depending on the number of students, I divide students into groups and assign each group a section of the “Summary of Goals.” For example, I ask the first group to summarize the “Federal Government” section of the document and list the things the PWRO believes the national government should do to help them achieve their goals. After each group completes its section, I ask a group leader to report back to the entire class. I follow up by asking students if they believe the PWRO’s goals are similar to the ones established by civil rights movement groups. Students learn how the civil rights movement served as a model for other groups’ activism and organization, including the PWRO’s.

Another way I help students gain a greater understanding of the PWRO is to have them examine an issue of the organization’s newsletter, *Straight Talk*. While many of the PWRO’s calls for change were intended for state agencies and programs, direct protests to the federal government are also evident in the newsletter. The September 20, 1967, issue provides a list of activities the organization was involved in during the first year of its existence. An article on the first page reveals that members of the PWRO had traveled to Washington, DC, to support the national organization’s testimony against

an “anti-welfare bill” that would include a work requirement for welfare recipients, including mothers with small children, as well as stipulations that would freeze welfare rolls. The PWRO called on its readers to “send telegrams immediately” to their federal and state representatives. Other evidence of the PWRO’s involvement at the national level is evident in the newsletter’s account of six PWRO delegates who attended the first National Welfare Rights Convention.³²

Even more importantly, the newsletter documents the PWRO’s repeated attempts to advocate for special grants for poor children’s school clothing in the months prior to the blood demonstration. According to the newsletter, members of the PWRO met with the head of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare to propose that it not pay the maximum amount of rent for welfare families to the Philadelphia Housing Authority in order to supply the money necessary to fund the clothing grant for schoolchildren. The PWRO newsletter also noted that the organization was able to get the department to investigate charges of discrimination against welfare recipients applying for housing with the Philadelphia Housing Authority.

I ask students to read articles from local newspapers, which also document the PWRO’s activities. Doing so helps students understand that the most effective protest and advocacy tactics the PWRO developed involved highlighting the challenges faced by poor mothers who, through no fault of their own, could not work. PWRO members understood that stereotypes about African American women influenced much of the public’s perceptions about welfare. In order to overcome the stigma imposed on them, PWRO members disclosed personal details about their lives to stress their commitment to work and their high moral values. PWRO president Hazel Leslie revealed to a news reporter that a doctor ordered her to stop working for fear of complications arising from her diabetic condition. As a single parent to her nine-year-old niece and daughter, Leslie explained, she received less than thirty-eight dollars a week to care of herself and her child. Out of that amount, Leslie noted, she paid fifty-eight dollars monthly for housing.³³

A narrative such as Leslie’s undermined the pervasive idea that welfare recipients lacked initiative and drive. When students read the article featuring Leslie’s story, they gain a greater sense of the struggle she and other African American welfare recipients experienced. Students often remark on Leslie’s resiliency and clear rejection of stereotypes. At one point in the article, Leslie remarks in frustration, “It gets so exasperating sometimes . . . I wish I could get drunk.” Without missing a beat, though, she adds, “But that’s only

for respectable, rich folks.”³⁴ Playfully sarcastic in tone, Leslie’s comments highlight the role class plays in defining respectability. She understood that, as a welfare recipient, her alcohol consumption would be viewed as a moral failure whereas the drinking habits of her affluent counterparts would not. Leslie’s full disclosure of her private life and her critique of classism in American society helps spark a discussion among students about the rhetorical strategies that PWRO members employed to generate attention to their cause. The PWRO’s blood demonstration dramatized the gravity of welfare recipients’ situation even further and catapulted welfare rights into the eyes of Philadelphia residents.

The Blood Demonstration

Historians have barely discussed the PWRO’s blood demonstration, just as they have rarely touched on the history of the organization. To compensate for this void in the historiography, I ask students to read newspaper articles about the demonstration from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. The publications’ articles on the demonstration provide a frame for a comparative analysis of the blood demonstration with the nonviolent strategies of the southern branch of civil rights movement. Civil rights activists’ participation in nonviolent protest was effective in highlighting the injustice of racism and forcing the public to grapple with issues in American society, rather than fixating on violent resistance against discrimination. With this idea in mind, students might consider the following questions: Did the blood demonstration function in the same way as the nonviolent resistance tactics of the southern civil rights movement? What separates it from other civil rights activism? Who were these events designed to target? What is the significance of donating blood? Before students can begin to answer these questions, however, I provide them a brief overview of the events leading up to the blood demonstration to help contextualize the newspaper articles they have just read.

In September 1967, PWRO members met with Secretary Thomas Georges, head of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, to discuss their request to cover school clothing and supplies for poor children through one-time grants of seventy-five dollars per child for the school year. Welfare recipients’ small monthly stipends, as they regularly pointed out, could barely house and feed them, let alone provide for their children’s

school supplies. At the meeting Georges acknowledged that welfare recipients did not receive enough in their monthly grants to allow for clothing and other things needed for schoolchildren. Still, Georges recommended that the PWRO lobby state legislators to vote for the increase, despite its suggestion that Georges's office stop paying the Housing Authority maximum rate for welfare recipients' housing to make it possible to award the seventy-five-dollar grants.³⁵

Two months after the meeting with Georges, the PWRO learned that state officials had denied its request. To protest the state's decision and to bring attention to their circumstances, PWRO members developed a plan to sell their blood. PWRO leaders called the media to announce their plan, knowing they would need sufficient publicity to highlight their financial needs. Yet, as several PWRO members pointed out, the decision to sell blood went beyond a protest tactic. Many of the women intended to use the money earned from selling their blood to purchase clothing and shoes that the seventy-five-dollar grant would have helped them buy. One of the few women who passed the health requirements necessary to have her blood drawn happily remarked, in reference to the payment she received, "They'll buy a pair of shoes for my oldest son. . . . He'll have them first thing the morning. He's wearing sneakers to school now, and it's too cold for that."³⁶ The blood center's rejection of most of the women's blood due to health issues was a blow that struck the women as particularly painful. Although donations would make up for the loss of money for the majority of women who failed to sell their blood, Leslie, who expressed her gratitude, stated, "if people really want to help us in the long run, we are asking them to write to their Congressmen and help us change some laws."³⁷

After providing them with the details of the demonstration, I ask students to conduct a comparative analysis of the *Inquirer's* and the *Tribune's* coverage of the story. The *Inquirer* was considered to be a mainstream newspaper with a large white readership; African Americans made up the *Tribune's* main audience. Students should keep this in mind as they read the articles, noting differences in the way the articles present the story. While the *Inquirer* used the word "scheme" to describe the PWRO's actions, the *Tribune* heavily emphasized the PWRO's activism and reported the group's objectives and future plans for organizing. The headlines of the articles also played into the different depictions of the demonstration by the papers. The *Inquirer's* headline was "Can't Even Sell Our Blood," while the *Tribune* reported, "Mothers on Relief Sell Blood to Buy Children's School Clothing."³⁸

The variation in coverage is emblematic of how white and black newspapers covered civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s. White papers' coverage of civil rights activism was often less strident than black papers and depicted African Americans more often as victims than as actors.³⁹ Students are often surprised to discover that the *Tribune* featured the story on the second and third page of two issues, respectively, while the *Inquirer* published the story on the front page of both issues. The *Tribune's* regular and longstanding coverage of African American civil rights activism made the blood demonstration an important story but perhaps not a lead one, given much of the other civil rights and social activism occurring at the same time. Another idea I explore with students is whether black newspapers chose to not cover the demonstration on the front page for fear of reinforcing stereotypes about African American women and welfare.

I continue this line of thought as I instruct students to examine the *Inquirer's* and *Tribune's* photographs of the blood demonstration to help them gain deeper insight into the event's ability to bring about social change and challenge stereotypes of welfare recipients. The *Tribune's* photograph depicts a group of PWRO members before they entered the blood center to make their donation (Fig. 3). The women's stance and powerful gaze into the lens of the camera defies the stereotype of the shiftless mother that has come to dominate the discourse around welfare. I ask students to recall Levenstein's book and compare the *Tribune's* photograph with the women featured in her work or Moynihan's portrayal of African American women. The *Inquirer's* photograph offers another way for students to consider how these women were depicted. A picture of a woman with a small child was accompanied by a caption that revealed that the woman in the photograph was caring for the child of a mother who was waiting in line to sell her blood. The *Inquirer's* photograph indicates that the PWRO's activism depended not only on individual women's initiative but also on support networks—for example, women willing to care for other PWRO members' children while they engaged in activism. I encourage students to develop analyses that demonstrate how the two photographs work together to construct a historical record of an event and how both can be interpreted very differently.

The articles and photographs reveal to students that PWRO members claimed and used their status as mothers to demand state assistance as a right. At the same time, their tactics shamed Philadelphia residents and created awareness of poverty in the city. PWRO members, as largely black and poor women, redirected public attention from negative stereotypes and recreated a



THE "BLOOD DEMONSTRATION"
sponsored by the Welfare Rights Organi-
zation last Wednesday as they move on to
the Episcopal Hospital Blood Center to

"sell" blood. The mothers complain that
they do not receive enough money for
clothing for their children from the State
Department of Public Welfare.

FIGURE 3: Mothers participating in the blood demonstration and their children. *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 11, 1967. This image is courtesy of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, America's oldest historically black newspaper and the Greater Philadelphia region's largest newspaper serving the African American community. Digital images produced by ProQuest LLC as part of ProQuest® Historical Newspapers. <http://www.proquest.com>. Digital facsimiles of the articles are published with permission of ProQuest LLC. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.

sympathetic portrayal of welfare recipients.⁴⁰ Students are often disappointed to learn that even after the blood demonstration, the state welfare department did not award PWRO members a special clothing allowance. I help them understand, however, that the demonstration nevertheless assisted the PWRO in establishing a tradition of innovative protests and lobbying activism. Newspaper coverage reveals that the group, just one week after the blood demonstration, picketed the Pennsylvania State Office Building in Philadelphia to protest the proposed cutbacks to the "Operation Alphabet" program, which provided welfare recipients with allowances for childcare, clothing, and transportation expenses so they could attend school and develop skills that would make them more competitive in the labor market.⁴¹

The PWRO would also picket landlords who refused to rent to welfare recipients or leased them substandard housing, campaign local department stores to extend credit to PWRO members, and lead eight hundred welfare recipients to march on the state capitol to call on the state appropriations committee to approve the governor's proposal to raise welfare grants from 71 percent to 90 percent of the minimum family requirement.⁴²

Conclusion

As we move further away in time from the modern civil rights movement in the United States, it is important to develop alternative and diverse narratives of African American activism. Educators must make it difficult for students to view African American activism as solely a southern movement with figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. at its center. This hardly means that traditional narratives of civil rights activism must be eliminated. Indeed, educators can help students open up critical and analytical spaces for the coexistence of multiple histories about African Americans' quest for equality and rights.

Teaching students the history of the Philadelphia Welfare Rights Organization holds great potential for broadening students' understanding of the centrality and significance of social movements in the 1960s and the ways they inspired other movements for change. Perhaps more importantly, teaching about social change through the actions of poor African American women shows students how power does come from below.

NOTES

1. Alfred Klimcke, "Can't Even Sell Our Blood," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 9, 1967, 1, 25.
2. Ibid., 25.
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