



“The pandemic has revealed to many that care work is vital work”: A Conversation with Memphis Advocates for Radical Childcare (M.A.R.CH.) co-founder Phuong Nguyen

Posted on August 1, 2020 by Andrea Ringer

This is the last in a series of essays on “Higher Ed Wall-to Wall in Tennessee,” which will continue for the rest of this week. This series of posts highlights voices and union-led campaigns on higher-ed campuses across Tennessee. We offer both a picture of the challenges that we face and perhaps some organizing solutions, particularly to other higher education employees in right-to-work states, to help navigate the shifting academic terrain that we are experiencing in the face of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created several shifts across the labor landscape while exposing how piecemeal family care policies have left workers in precarious situations. The closure of schools at the end of the spring semester and uneven plans for reopening this fall have prompted questions about how a society and economy can function without sustainable

care work. In this interview with M.A.R.CH. co-founder Phuong Nguyen, we discuss what the Memphis-based organization has meant within the vibrant social justice scene and how developing care policies in a right-to-work state could impact the future of childcare movements, both in and out of academia.

Andrea Ringer: Can you talk about the work that Memphis Advocates for Radical Childcare ([M.A.R.CH.](#)) does for social justice movements?

Phuong Nguyen: Our vision is a Memphis where anyone—parents, caregivers, and their children—can fully participate in social justice work. We envision childcare as a political act that sustains and regenerates the social justice movement. Childcare is just as much a vehicle of solidarity that supports movement work as it is integral and radical organizing in itself. We view childcare as often invisibilized and gendered labor that is an essential component of the ecosystem of front-lines organizing. How else can families, mothers, and working-class caregivers, fully participate in strikes, protests, marches, or any form of organizing, without a space or support for their children and young ones? Movements for justice cannot be successful unless they are inclusive and intersectional, which means marginalized women, children, and all people are invited to bring their full selves into the work. This community care concept allows for social justice work to be sustained by a truly intergenerational and inclusive coalition that also centers the political education and participation of our children in the movement.



Revolutionary Mothering panel hosted by MARCH, Memphis TN, 2018

AR: How do your mission, vision and values work to support social justice?

PN: M.A.R.CH. partners with social justice and community organizations to provide free volunteer childcare for activist and community meetings, events, and actions. Often, there are no intentional family-inclusive movement spaces and many spaces discourage participation of children and their caregivers. M.A.R.CH. aims to lead and promote radically engaging, compassionate, and safe childcare. By supporting activists, working parents, and organizers with childcare needs, we seek to center people who would otherwise play a peripheral role given the burden of this essential labor. To a degree, childcare means engaging in reproductive, gender, and economic justice. Additionally, we advocate for the comprehensive availability of resources supporting the unique needs of parents, caregivers, and their children in our community. This means being proponents of universal and accessible childcare and supporting the creation of alternative childcare models and mutual aid networks for families.

We are part of a nation-wide network of childcare collectives (Intergalactic Conspiracy of Childcare Collectives) from Chicago, to New York, DC, and the Bay Area who are all engaged in continuing a legacy community care. Civil rights and social justice groups have long viewed the necessity of intentionally caring for children as part of social justice and revolutionary work, from offering free breakfast programs, facilitating the political education of children, to marches that involve children and families and actions that are directly led by youth.

However, patriarchal culture de-prioritizes the expertise, labor, and leadership of caregivers—especially low-income, working class, immigrant, BIPOC women and mothers, hence, narratives promulgating care work as crucial to movement work often goes unnoticed. M.A.R.CH. values the contributions and wisdom of these often-excluded folks and we are intentional about centering their experiences and practicing the values that we are advocating for. To us, radical childcare is being committed to anti-racist, feminist, and intersectional thought. It is a practice of collective responsibility, community support, mutual aid, and sustainable resource-sharing. It is intergenerational engagement, co-learning, and liberation. It is valuing our children's ability to understand and challenge oppression. It is a plethora of deeply held revolutionary principles and the embodiment of community resilience and interdependence.



Shelby County Schools protest, Memphis TN, 2020

AR: What inspired you to create this organization?

PN: [M.A.R.C.H.](#) began as an interest group of diverse organizations and community members who first gathered in January 2016. Many of us parents, the objective was to create a solution to the childcare need in the movement community, beginning with the childcare need of Fight for \$15 workers and other labor organizations. Among us were organizers from Fight for \$15, Healthy and Free Tennessee, CoreAlign, Worker's Interfaith Network, Memphis Single Parents Network, Planned Parenthood Greater Memphis Region, Center for Research on Women, Cooperative Memphis, H.O.P.E. Women and other members of the community. Together, we formed a collective that aims to sustain long-term movement work and build a healthier support community that respects, values, and shares caregiving work. But it all began with the Fight for \$15 April day of action that year. Ever since, we have partnered with SisterReach, Choices, MidSouth Peace and Justice Center, Southeast Immigrant Rights Network, United Campus Workers and more. We seemed to have a natural affinity for labor and reproductive justice organizations, however, we have partnered with an array of groups under the broad helm of social justice.

AR: I first encountered M.A.R.C.H. at a LAWCHA-sponsored labor colloquium in 2017, where you talked about your early organizing in Memphis. What was the initial response when M.A.R.C.H. first came onto the social justice scene?

PN: M.A.R.C.H. was wholly embraced and welcomed given the childcare need that we all recognized and shared in the movement community. The response was overwhelming at first and we did not have the capacity to meet the demands and often said “no” to certain requests for childcare or partnership. This is an ongoing challenge as we are strictly volunteer-based and our membership is in constant fluctuation. However, at times there are opportunities when we receive donations that help incentivize volunteer engagement and fund our supplies. Partner organizations recognize the value of our work and have been donating whenever possible.

AR: How does M.A.R.C.H. operate within the community?

PN: We are a grassroots all volunteer-based collective. We have a small team of core members that meets bi-weekly and operate through consensus decision-making. Core members communicate with local organizations, receive requests, recruit and train new volunteers, fundraise, and coordinate childcare. In addition to the core, we have a team of childcare volunteers who are mobilized based on requests from partner organizations. Together, we form M.A.R.C.H. and provide free childcare at events, actions, and meetings. We work to empower organizations to create non-judgmental, compassionate, imaginative, and safe spaces for children and involve them in the social justice and community work that their parents and caregivers partake in.



Fight for \$15, Memphis TN, 2016

AR: United Campus Workers (UCW) is working on a state-wide campaign for paid family leave throughout campuses in Tennessee. It seems like an apt time, given Gov. Bill Lee's initial decision to support it in his last State of the State address. Within the last few years, the University of Memphis and Austin Peay State University have extended six weeks of paid parental leave to their employees. What do you think a fair paid family leave policy, particularly for working-class people, would look like?

PN: Given that we have community partners and core members who work in higher education, we are aware of the issue of family and parental leave and commend the small steps toward progress. We know the shortcomings of the Family Medical Leave Act federal legislation, which is limited and does not guarantee paid leave unless workers use their accrued sick or vacation time. Idealistically and based on practices in other western modern societies, paid family leave should be a right and instituted for much longer than 6 weeks and up to a year. We know that is aspirational, particularly in an "at-will" state where workers' rights are not recognized and undermined at every level. Still, as a radical childcare collective that acknowledges the value and need for universal childcare and fair labor practices that support working-class families, we believe parental leave is a right.

AR: Shifting to the current moment, COVID-19 has brought the issue of childcare to the forefront in new ways. What are your thoughts on these conversations happening around

the country?

PN: The pandemic has revealed to many that care work is vital work but often dismissed. When schools and daycares closed and government stay-at-home mandates and orders were implemented, suddenly, the importance and essential nature of childcare to the normal functioning of our economy were brought to the forefront. Employers were forced to reckon with the dependence that all sectors of the economy have on childcare and that our current social infrastructure was deeply lacking. A perspective and analysis on community interdependence that social justice movements have long had. Now, we have federal legislation (Families First Coronavirus Response Act) recognizing the impact the pandemic has on families and requiring that certain employers provide limited paid leave for families when schools and daycares are closed due to COVID-19. At the same time, we see employers practicing some flexibility with families struggling with the challenge of caring for children while maintaining their full-time jobs remotely from home. As the economy “re-opens”, we also see largely working-class families having no real choice but to take higher risks of COVID-19 exposure by registering their children to daycare and in-person learning because it is the only viable option to maintain their jobs. The conversations happening are highlighting the social disparities that adversely impact under-resourced and working-class families and bringing light to the social and economic importance of childcare.

AR: Tennessee recently announced that it would offer free childcare to workers that are deemed essential during the pandemic. What do you think about this decision and what does it mean for future conversations about childcare and working-class people?

The potential that these conversations are opening up is a good thing. Although the state subsidizing free accessible childcare through YMCA and other organizations to essential workers is a temporary emergency measure, this initiative also exposes the truth that we as a society can viably implement a universal childcare model. [M.A.R.C.H.](#) ascribes to the ideology of interdependent community care and this seems to open up that collective vision for families. Currently, that initiative has been expanded to include workers across different sectors including education. However, we also acknowledge that this expansion was largely motivated by business interests and rushed efforts to “re-open” the economy. We know that childcare workers being identified as essential during this pandemic means increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. Hence, now more than ever, we must advocate for sustained investment in our care infrastructure—the backbone of our economy— which includes fighting for the rights of our essential childcare workers and supporting a fair and living wage for all.

Author



• Andrea Ringer