

The rise of the workfare state

Jamie Peck

The term »workfare« retains pejorative connotations in Europe, referring as it does to a hard-edged, American mode of welfare reform with distinctly punitive undercurrents. It remains something of a critics' term. Meanwhile, the general circumstances that the word denotes—a movement away from entitlement programs, an increased reliance on market-oriented social policies, a focus on the encouragement of work and work-related values, an emphasis on mandatory job-search and job placement for welfare recipients—have spread far and wide, even if their incidence remains far from universal. The argument of this paper is that the uneven diffusion of work-oriented welfare reform strategies, or workfare for short, represents an incipient systemic challenge to existing welfare settlements. While a coherent and reproducible »workfare state« has yet to eclipse the inherited structure of welfare states, the shift towards workfarism represents a significant political-economic tendency. This will not generate automatic or functionally determined outcomes, of course, because institutional systems vary in nontrivial ways and because decisions concerning welfare and workfare have always been, and remain, *political* decisions. There is increasingly strong evidence, however, of an international patterning to these political processes, such that we seem to be witnessing a kind of transition towards a range of locally-configured workfare regimes. Advancing this general argument, the paper is divided into three parts. First, the meaning of workfare is defined. Second, the character of workfare as a nascent mode of labor regulation is sketched. Third, the emergent economic logics of workfare regimes are briefly outlined. Finally, the paper is concluded with some comments on anti-workfare politics.

Workfarist rhetoric

Workfare is a social-policy neologism referring to mandatory work programs for welfare recipients or, more generically, to the process of work-oriented welfare reform. Coined in the late 1960s by the contraction of work + welfare, workfare has become a powerful signifier of the prevailing method and philosophy of welfare reform in the United States. Here, work-based or work-enforcing welfare policies have been favored by politicians of the right for some considerable time, bolstered by the perennial concern that »no strings attached« welfare entitlements erode the employment habits, job skills, and work ethics of the poor. Support for workfare-style policies widened during the 1980s, as centrist liberals became increasingly convinced of the argument for »tough love« approaches to welfare reform. The Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 would later crystallize this bipartisan commitment, replacing the federal entitle-

tions; in contrast, much of the resistance to workfare is defensive and localized. While the workfare advocacy movement has assumed an increasingly aggressive, generic, and transnational form, for the most part anti-workfare politics remain reactive, particularized, and locally-specific. Indeed, explicit objectives around the weakening, division, and localization of sources of political opposition are often reflected in contemporary welfare-restructuring strategies. It seems that once the national defenses of welfarism have been breached, the path is opened decisively to downscale residual welfare and emergent workfare functions. This involves reregulation not only at the state and local scales but also at that of the individual *bodies* of welfare recipients. The downloading of risks and regulatory responsibilities to the level of the individual is also evident in workfare's labor-regulatory functions, because as the epitome of supply-side policymaking it seeks to make a virtue of individualized, »flexible« labor relations.

Yet because workfare is prosecuted as a variegated strategy, the downscaling process is heterogeneous in form and uneven in effects. Crucially, this tends to render anti-workfare politics contingent on pre-existing and locally-variable capacities for resistance, primarily at the urban scale. Here, resistance typically comes through some form of coalition between labor unions, anti-poverty campaigners, social-service advocates, and community organizations, which tend to operate in different combinations—and in pursuit of different strategic lines—in different places. For example, in New York City, where workfare is delivered through public-sector placements, resistance has emerged in the form of unionization of workfare workers, drawing on the joint organizational capacities of public-sector unions and community groups, and political mobilization has also occurred through the associated *Workfairness* campaign. Meanwhile in Toronto, where workfare was introduced in the form of placements in the nonprofit sector, a network of social advocacy and welfare-rights groups, with the support of some of Ontario's industrial unions, have established *Workfare Watch*, a lobbying and campaigning initiative, while taking steps to prevent community agencies participating in the program.

There is an important sense, then, in which local political struggles usually reflect—though are not *determined by*—the local form of workfare strategies. Where workfare slots are located in the public sector, the strategy is exposed to the threat of unionization; where workfare relies on nonprofit sector placements, then the obvious line of resistance is to choke off the supply of places through social-sector campaigning and lobbying; where workfare is oriented to wage-employment in the external labor market—in many ways its tendential form—resistance is rendered difficult due to the diffuse and individualized nature of this strategy, but may take the form of boycotts, unionization drives, or research-based campaigns. At the very least, different workfare strategies call for different forms of local political response; they are also differentially vulnerable to disruption, reform, and implementation failure at the local level.

So, the urban politics of workfare tend to be just as variegated as workfare strategies themselves. Downloading welfare/workfare functions often seems to mean downloading oppositional politics as well. Constructing generalized and effective opposition to workfare out of a series of particularized local struggles has proved predictably difficult, though there are some early signs of cross-locality network-

king and some attempts to develop cross-scalar campaigns, linking local to wider struggles. While at the present time resistance to workfare tends to be sporadic and localized, it is possible that recent developments in cities like New York City and Toronto will prefigure more generalized oppositional movements.

While it is critically important, in this context, to appreciate the scale and scope of the workfare offensive, this should not be allowed to breed political fatalism. Local resistance is important symbolically and materially, but pressure also has to be brought to bear on the extralocal rule systems that sustain workfarism. Certainly, simply to wait for the workfare regime to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions would be as politically complacent as it is intellectually arrogant. There has to be *engagement* with the politics and policies of workfare, both at the level of the minutiae of individual, local reform programs and at the level of ideological principle. In many ways one of the most pressing challenges facing opponents of workfare lies in the (re)connection of these levels: how to defend welfare rights without looking like apologists for a flawed status quo; how to engage in the process of policy formation without being dragged into some quasi-workfarist compromise; how to build bridges between local oppositional movements and to »jump scale« to the national and international arenas in which workfare policy conventions are being made; how to take on transcendent neoliberal rule systems as well as concrete programs; how to turn strategies of defense and resistance into progressive alternatives. It is both a sign of neoliberal *realpolitik* and a symbol of hope that these remain open questions.

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ment to welfare with a post-New Deal system of time-limited cash benefits, restrictive eligibility rules, and strict work requirements. Characterized by some as »welfare repeal,« the PRWORA could also be regarded as a »workfare settlement« in that it embodies a defining objective of helping-and-hassling welfare recipients into the job market, offering minimalist support for those who fail its work tests. Crucially, the underlying goals of such workfare regimes are no longer focused on poverty alleviation in a straightforward sense—since the fate of many of those leaving the welfare rolls since the mid-1990s has been *working* poverty. Workfare policies are instead addressed to the problem of »welfare dependency«—an alleged reliance on government handouts that afflicts not only particular individuals but also certain communities—the solutions to which are defined in terms of the encouragement or enforcement of work.

Concretely, the term »workfare« is applied to programs that require welfare recipients to work—either in public-sector jobs, private workplaces, or in community placements—in exchange for benefits. More generally, it has become associated with a wide range of policy measures designed to improve the »employability« and work orientations of welfare recipients, typically through job-training programs and job-search assistance. These measures are regarded as »workfarist« when they are used in the context of compulsion or strict benefit conditionality. Beyond these literal meanings, though, workfare is now recognized as a potent symbol of U.S.-style (or neoliberal) welfare reform. In its most abstract sense, the term »workfare state« denotes a virtual inversion of the principles the practices of the welfare state, as the notion of (social) rights and entitlements gives way to a new emphasis on (personal) responsibility and obligation (see Peck, 2001b). Where welfare stood for the principles of needs-based entitlement and standardized treatment, workfare stands for market-based compulsion, selectivity, and local discretion. Where welfare stood for passive income support, workfare stands for active labor market inclusion. And where welfare constructed its subjects as claimants, workfare reconstitutes them as jobseekers.

Reflecting this increasingly generic usage, the reach and resonance of workfare has increased over time. Within the U.S. system, workfare has undergone a transition from a modest reform program within the welfare system through to an effective successor to that system. What began as a specific program reform within the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) system during the 1970s, acquired a wider significance during the 1980s when the Reagan Administration made resources available for a range of local »demonstration projects,« with the intent of propagating workfare-style initiatives. At this time, a distinction was drawn between »hard« and »soft« variants of workfare: the former emphasized strict sanctions policies and a no-nonsense approach; the latter were couched within a more supportive philosophy, seeking to build the human capital of welfare recipients through education and training investments. The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 represented a compromise between these two approaches, embedding the general principles of work-oriented welfare in the federal system.

The work program associated with the FSA, Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS), achieved no more than mixed results, its implementation being hampered by the slowing of the economy in the early 1990s and growing political impatience on the part of state governors. This was the context for Bill Clinton's

presidential campaign pledge to »end welfare as we know it,« a fateful slogan which would come to epitomize the accelerating workfarist drift in U.S. welfare policy during the 1990s. With the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, the language of welfare reform became more shrill, just as the attendant policy proposals became progressively more radical. In the lexicon of the Republican right, *welfare* has been associated with unambiguously negative terms like »decay,« »failure,« and »waste,« while *workfare* became constituted as an »optimistic, positive, governing word,« alongside »opportunity,« »moral,« and »hard work« (see Bernstein and Bernstein, 1995).

More than a war of words, the real battle in the mid-1990s was over the content, and likely consequences, of policy. In the wake of the passage of PRWORA, the responsibility for the new system passed to the fifty states and most adopted approaches that emphasized rapid »labor force attachment« or »work first.« In the context of generally buoyant job markets, unprecedented numbers of welfare recipients left the welfare rolls in the late 1990s, further bolstering the confidence of workfare advocates and adding to the allure of the »American model« in international policy debates (see Lodemel and Trickey, 2001). Yet the U.S. economic slowdown that began in 2001 raised new questions about the efficacy of an approach which is self-evidently predicated on the ready availability of jobs (see Peck, 2001a). While this faltering performance may have tarnished the image of workfare, the immediate prospects of a shift in policy remain remote. On the contrary, workfare has apparently become established as a social-policy counterpart to labor-market »flexibility« policies, both in the U.S. and, increasingly, in other OECD countries. In the context of a continuing trend towards short-term, unstable, »contingent« jobs across many national economies, workfare policies exhibit a primitive logic: they purposefully mobilize workers for (minimum) waged work, holding them close to the labor market in a persistently »job-ready« state. In a sense, they provide a forced (or »activated«) labor supply for the labor market's least desirable jobs. While the prosaic reality of workfare may be to replace poverty-on-benefits with poverty-in-work, advocates like Lawrence Mead (1997) continue to insist that a much deeper *social* and moral problem is being tackled—the post-industrial phenomenon of »worklessness.«

In these and other ways, workfarist currents have seeped into European debates around social exclusion and active labor market policy. Tony Blair has gone furthest in embracing the rhetoric, and some of the practices, of workfare, having enthusiastically assumed the mantle of a »welfare to work government« prepared to »think the unthinkable« in the reform of the welfare state. The Blair Government's (rather ironically named) New Deal program mandates participation in work experience, job search, and low-level training schemes for a range of unemployed client groups, premised on the assumption that deficits in »employability«—rather than localized shortages of decent jobs—are the fundamental causes of unemployment. As U.K. Chancellor Gordon Brown put it, »I say to the unemployed who can work—you must now meet your responsibility to earn a wage« (quoted in *Guardian*, 1 March, 2000: 2). In the rather more veiled language of the Third Way, this insistence that new opportunities offered to welfare recipients must be reciprocated by *mandatory* work requirements and strict participation rules finds its expression in the communitarian rhetoric of »rights and responsibilities.« There

are, then, many paths towards workfare. But beyond the idiosyncrasies of local reform efforts, what generic characteristics define workfare regimes?

Workfarist regulation

Workfare implies both a critique of, and a reaction to, the principles and practices of the welfare state. Indeed, it is partly defined by what it is against—entitlements-based welfare. Discourses of »welfare dependency,« which construct the causes of poverty and un(der)employment in terms of individual failings and which legitimate distinctively *antiwelfare* restructuring strategies, are fast becoming staples of political orthodoxy, particularly in countries that have taken a neoliberal turn. Meanwhile, new policy strategies center increasingly on work and work ethics, as the once-broad remit of welfare reform collapses into a narrow preoccupation with welfare *to work*. And crucially, the ideological »decentering« of welfarism often seems to be associated with an institutional analog in the form of devolution and localization of welfare/workfare processing and programming. Nationally-constituted welfare regimes are apparently giving way to locally-constituted workfare regimes, as uneven spatial development is established as an intentional, rather than merely incidental, feature of workfare program delivery and as local experimentation becomes a mainstay of the policymaking process. Under workfarism, geographic variability, »churning« of programs, and a restless search for local »success stories« ripe for replication, are all effectively normalized. Indeed, local-level policy experimentation is one of the typical ways in which a repertoire of workfare-style measures is developed and diffused (Peck and Theodore, 2001).

The workfare offensive has rather different inflections in different countries, reflecting political traditions and institutional structures, but in very broad terms a number of family resemblances are evident in terms of the underlying principles and objectives of policy. In its most generic form, workfare can be defined in terms of the following three dimensions:

- individually, it is associated with *mandatory* program participation and behavioral modification, in contrast to the welfarist pattern of entitlement-based systems and voluntary program participation;
- organizationally, it involves a *systemic* orientation towards work, labor-force attachment, and the deterrence of welfare claims, displacing welfarism's bureaucratic logic of eligibility-based claims-processing and benefit delivery with a more insistent focus on deflecting claimants into the labor market;
- functionally, it implies an ascendancy of *active* labor-market inclusion over passive labor-market exclusion, as workfarism seeks to push the poor into the labor market, or hold them in a persistently unstable state close to it, rather than sanctioning limited non-participation in wage-labor in the way of welfare systems (Peck, 2001b).

These workfarist principles diverge significantly from those of welfarism. Table 1 summarizes some of the sharp contrasts between established welfare structures and emerging workfare strategies.

Table 1: Welfarism and workfarism compared

| | Welfarism | Workfarism |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Ideological foundations | Statist/redistributional Entitlement Aid distributed on basis of need | Market-oriented/employability based Reciprocity and self-help Enforcement of work and work values |
| State-strategic objectives | Reducing poverty through income transfers Responding to manifest social need | Tackling welfare dependence through the promotion of work and employability Maximizing labor market participation |
| Macroeconomic rationale | Maintenance of wage/employment floor Automatic stabilizer of macroeconomic growth/development | Enforcement and low-wage dependence Naturalization of contingent work Normalization of income/employment insecurity |
| Labor regulation | Exclusion from wage-labor Socially sanctioned recipient groups defined on basis of ascribed/categorical characteristics | Inclusion into wage labor Market-determined treatment groups defined on basis of job readiness/cost of intervention |
| Regulatory practices | Passive income support Fiscal transfers: determining entitlements of passive subjects | Active labor market integration Work activation: interventionist case management of active subjects |
| Discursive practices | Need and entitlement Social work/bureaucratic codes and norms | Work, personal responsibility, self-sufficiency Business/employment service codes and norms |
| Delivery systems | Nationally regulated systems, typically delivered through local »outposts« Emphasis on bureaucratic even-handedness | »Hollowing out« of national regulation Increasing emphasis on local delivery, with increased discretion for front-line workers Emphasis on responding to localized labor markets |

Welfare and workfare imply alternative modes of labor regulation. While welfarism was fundamental to the stabilization of Fordist wage relations, to the regulation of incomes and demand, and to the reproduction of a gendered industrial laborforce, workfare strategies are being pursued in a very different kind of labor market. Most advanced industrial nations are witnessing sustained increases in low-wage, generally insecure employment, much of which is located in the lower reaches of the service economy. The rise of so-called »McJobs« implies a lowering of the floor of the waged labor market, creating a downward drag on pay and conditions. Workfare is a creature of these political-economic circumstances,

mobilizing and socializing workers for jobs at the bottom of the new economy. Under conditions of wage stagnation, growing underemployment, and job casualization, workfarism maximizes (and effectively mandates) participation in contingent, low-paid work by churning workers back into the bottom of the labor market (see Peck and Theodore, 2000). It constitutes its subjects as active agents, denying a stable mode of existence outside the wage-labor market to all but the irredeemably »unemployable.«

Despite these telling contrasts, workfarism is not yet so much a fully-coherent regulatory logic as a dominant regulatory strategy, an emerging tendency rather than an achieved structure. It must be understood not as some monolithic transformation, but instead comprises a series of interconnected and mutually-reinforcing reforms, often at the local level. In fact, workfare makes a virtue of geographic differentiation and subnational devolution. It implies divergence, differentiation, and the proliferation of workfarist reform paths and strategies. The landscape of workfare is a restless one, as policies and programs are deliberately churned and persistently rolled over, just like the »clients.«

This is one of the many ways in which the logic of workfarism differs fundamentally from that of welfarism. There is a form of coherence in the emergent workfare regime, but it is not reflected in the kind of integrative, coordinating institutions that characterized the welfarist era. In place of the directive, top-down, command-and-control strategies of the welfare state, workfare regimes are associated with fluid, unstable, and multiscalar regulatory configurations. At the national and international level, various kinds of policy intermediaries and advocates—from private consultancies to think tanks and evaluation houses, from reform-minded welfare administrations to transnational agencies—are assuming a much greater significance as agents of fast-policy transfer. More often than not, they are engaged in spreading messages and learning lessons, rather than delivering policy in the tradition of conventional welfare administrations. At the local level, front-line offices are now themselves engaged—often in a very self-conscious fashion—in the process of policy development. No longer just the territorial outposts of a centrally-managed system, they now have a role in making policy as well as implementing it.

The rise of workfare regimes, moreover, does not imply a simple »deregulation« of the labor market or a unilateral act of state withdrawal. Rather, *new forms* of state intervention are licensed. Workfarism implies extensive intervention in contingent labor markets and in the moral economy of the poor. As wages have polarized, working conditions have deteriorated, and as labor market insecurity has become endemic, the socialization and integration of contingent workers has assumed the significance of a fundamental regulatory dilemma. Under welfare settlements, benefits were extended to those who found themselves between jobs, the intermittently unemployed, and those—like lone parents or the disabled—with a socially-legitimate claim on a non-wage income. Under workfare regimes, the orientation is toward intensifying competition on a generalized basis in the low-wage labor market, rather than offering »shelters« or protections to designated groups. Dependence on unstable, contingent work is reinforced as the rule, rather than the exception for those in the bottom third or so of the labor market, whoever they are. The logic of »employability«—in which the market determines who

should be employed and how much they are worth—structures programs, which minimally socialize participants for this fate. With all kinds of entitlements under attack, those who might be considered »job-ready« are simply turned away from welfare offices, while those that cross the threshold are subjected to a strict regime of state-administered market triage. Minimal repairs (or »reorientations«) are carried out where necessary, so that others can join the swelling ranks of the job-ready, while the »unemployable« find themselves bumped into the recesses of an increasingly mean-spirited and grudging system of residual welfare.

In a fashion analogous to prisons, workfare systems normalize and naturalize contingent employment and working poverty; they both effectively individualize the causes of, and the supposed remedies for, under-employment, poverty, and social breakdown; they each tend to reproduce segmentations in the job market and in the sphere of social reproduction based on gender, class, and race; they both cast a long shadow in the sense that they enforce codes of behavior not only within but considerably beyond their own institutional boundaries, punishing miscreants in unambiguous and often invasive ways; and prisons and workfare systems both also license, even in this self-proclaimed era of »small government,« surgical applications of state power in pursuit of these ends. Functionally, prison and workfare regimes mesh together to form what Wacquant (2001) calls a »carceral-assistential complex,« dedicated to the management of surplus and contingent labor in the context of an ostensibly »deregulating« labor market.

Workfarist rationalities

The regulatory project that is workfare is not simply about replacing welfarist institutions and conventions with a parallel set of fully-coherent and functioning workfarist ones. Workfare is not some *deus ex machina*, lowered into place spontaneously to solve the contradictions of welfarism, flexible labor markets, and urban social dislocation. Rather, workfare ideologies and strategies have emerged unevenly and iteratively, the outcome of years of institutional experimentation, policy reform, and political struggle. And still, what we have come to understand as workfarism remains unstable and contradictory. While it may not yet be truly hegemonic, workfare certainly represents a dominating strand in international policy discourse, one of the key coordinates around which reform strategies are plotted. In more concrete terms, workfare has become the institutional codification of work-oriented welfare reform—and as such must be understood as *both* a reactive, reform strategy *and* a would-be successor to the welfare state. Part critique, part alternative, workfare's international allure is to some degree rooted in the fact that it is a policy which appears to »fit« the current political, social, and economic climate.

In this context, workfare strategies are becoming normalized as a means of enforcing labor-market participation in a climate increasingly dominated by underemployment, low pay, work insecurity, and low-grade service employment. This raises the prospect of a medium-term regulatory accommodation between activating forms of social policy and flexibilizing labor markets. These two developments—which do not have a unifying, overarching, »functional« logic in any simple sense, but exhibit distinctive origins and dynamics—may be on the way to becoming mutually reinforcing. More than just a theoretical possibility, this logic

of mutual reinforcement is evident at the level of policy development and advocacy. Workfare strategies appear to make sense when the labor market is generating large numbers of contingent jobs, since these provide the »positive outcomes« that all successful workfare programs require. It is the presence of such jobs that facilitates the deregistration of welfare recipients, which in turn means that the policy is perceived as successful. Never mind that the argument is circular, that the jobs are unstable and poorly-paid, that the programs are clumsy and often ineffective, the overall picture continues to appeal to politicians as an alternative to »welfare dependency«.

The effects of workfare programs are not confined to participants, or even past participants, but extend deep into the »deterred« population (and those, in turn, with whom they live and/or compete in the labor market). Moreover, just as the workhouse cast a long shadow across the working poor in the nineteenth-century, the very presence of workfare programs contributes to the climate of strict, market discipline in contemporary labor markets. The result is that employers—whether they are hiring current or former workfare workers or not—find that they are able to access a »flexible« pool of employees who have no alternative but to accept what is on offer. Workfarism is a strategy for policing the boundaries of the labor market. As workfare advocate Lawrence Mead explains:

»The main task of social policy is no longer to reform society but to restore the authority of parents and other mentors who shape citizens. Government has no easy way to do that, but the best single thing it can do is to restore order in the inner city. Above all, it can require that poor parents work ... The source of bondage for today's seriously poor is no longer social injustice but the disorders of their private lives. For these Americans, the way forward is no longer liberation but obligation.« (Mead, 1997a: 15)

Workfare is playing a part in shaping norms of labor-market socialization and participation. Where practicable, welfare is effectively removed from the option set of »employable« individuals, rendering them effectively dependent on (low) waged employment. At the very least, the experience of welfare claiming is sufficiently destabilized so as to induce a persistent »chill« around the process. In turn, the very existence of this induced labor supply is likely to further erode pay levels and working conditions at the bottom of the labor market, the mechanism that Mead (1992: 87) refers to when describing how a pool of »willing but underemployed workers« can in effect »create its own demand.« Workfare strategies therefore contribute to the social reproduction, over a relatively short time period, of the kind of contingent labor supply which is ripe for exploitation by bottom-feeding employers. In this respect, workfare may be playing a part in the proliferation of contingent work. A perverse kind of equilibrium might be in evidence. In contrast to the welfarist dynamic, in which the establishment of a »floor« of welfare standards effectively set (and raised) standards at the bottom of the labor market, the workfarist dynamic pulls in the opposite direction, drawing down conditions in the lowest reaches of the labor market, as uncommodified shelters from wage-labor are closed off and as former welfare recipients are compelled to accept whatever the market makes available to them locally.

Workfare should not of course be seen as a spontaneous response on the part of the state to the social-reproduction needs of a flexibilizing labor market. Nevertheless, flexible labor markets and work-oriented welfare reform strategies did, histo-

rically speaking, evolve together, each influencing the other in a symbiotic fashion. It was perhaps only in the 1990s that it first became apparent that these might have begun to evolve a shared, conjunctural logic—as developments in one sphere began to rationalize, legitimize, regularize, and naturalize developments in the other. The persistence of, and structural expansion of, contingent labor demand in a sense facilitates and validates workfarist strategies, especially those focused on rapid employment entry for those deemed job-ready. This does not mean that workfare strategies are economically determined or driven, but it does mean that they are economically contingent. More than this, in fact, they certainly impact the labor market—shaping screening, recruitment, and employment systems, influencing job design and workforce management strategies, normalizing conventions of flexibility and market discipline, and so forth.

One way of illustrating these impacts is to consider the specific job-market consequences of »work-first« programming (see Peck and Theodore, 2000). This represents the cutting edge of workfarist regulatory reform in the United States, while quite clearly being the ascendant policy-of-choice at the international level. In terms of the interface between the labor market and workfare programs, work-first approaches function very »close« to the job market, aspiring to channel welfare recipients down the shortest and fastest route to employment. They variously assist, pressurize, and accelerate employment (re)entry, exploiting the short-term turnover of vacancies to bring about exits from welfare. Both philosophically and organizationally, these programs are, as Mead (1997b: 72-73) puts it, »suffused with the work mission.« The dominant social relations, allocation systems, and dynamics of work-first programs are therefore closely intertwined with the labor markets in which they operate. This represents a highly dynamic form of »embeddedness,« in which programs aspire to read and move with the market.

The work-first mechanism is one of the principal means by which localized workfare systems are being trodden down into local labor markets, resulting in a melding of institutional and market dynamics. So, the screening, selection, allocation, and discrimination systems associated with the lower end of the labor market are reflected in the organization of work-first programs (a. k. a. »employability«), while the operation of the programs themselves subsequently serves to restructure and reinstitutionalize channels into employment. While in some senses it is accepted as a self-evident fact that job-market rules and disciplines should shape workfare programs—after all, this is central to their rationale and philosophy—it has been less clear, until recently, how workfare programs are beginning reciprocally to condition labor markets.

Several quite distinctive labor-market effects of work-first programs can be identified. First, a defining characteristic of such programs is that they direct participants into low-grade, high-turnover jobs. The methodology of work first emphasizes the achievement of job-readiness in the context of currently-available vacancies. This close tracking of vacancy flows means that these programs interface with the labor market in very particular ways. On the demand side, because contingent job vacancies turn over more frequently than those in the more stable, »primary sector« of the labor market, coupled with the fact that primary sector jobs tend to be comparatively scarce in areas of concentrated poverty and underemployment, the profile of employment opportunities available to most program participants is hea-

vily skewed toward contingent employment. Given that constant pressure is exerted on participants to enter jobs at the first opportunity, the typical pattern is for most to enter the »secondary« labor market. On the supply side, the prevailing social and labor-market characteristics of the client group tend to reinforce and even rationalize this subordinate mode of labor-market entry: most former welfare recipients have personal attributes which render them »at risk« in the labor market, being vulnerable to racial and gender discrimination, or having caring/domestic responsibilities which define them as »marginal« workers in the eyes of employers; most will have low levels of educational attainment and formally-recognized vocational skills; and most will have discontinuous work histories, often including previous periods in low-paid, unstable work (see Eden and Lein, 1997).

Second, work-first methods, and the majority of workfare programs more generally, tend to privilege the *initial* transition into the job market. Overriding priority is placed on securing the first job after welfare, on the (optimistic) presumption that this will provide a »stepping stone« to better-paid, more secure employment. For the most part, the experience of former welfare recipients does not square with this notion of progression. Most former welfare recipients remain trapped in low-paid, secondary employment, while many others return to the welfare rolls following job loss. Yet because work first defines the initial transition into work as the decisive moment of intervention, these problems tend to lie outside the frames of reference of workfare discourse and evaluation. The vision of policymakers and the practical orientation of programs is instead on the first destination after welfare, the systemic logic of work-first workfare being to *activate* such transitions (rather than necessarily to sustain them).

Third, work-first programs tend to exacerbate, rather than counteract, »churning« in the lower reaches of the labor market. By inducing a constant, mostly one-way flow from welfare into entry-level jobs, work-first programs intensify competition for work on the supply side of the labor market, while (in the short term at least) the number of job openings is likely to remain largely fixed. This leads to endemic problems of displacement and substitution, where program participants obtain jobs at the expense of other (secondary-sector) workers (Solow, 1998). Employment rates may be increased marginally through this form of intervention, as work first effectively reduces access to »stable« welfare, while concomitantly increasing the level of dependency on contingent employment. More generally, however, the aggregate effect of work first may well be to further destabilize contingent employment by increasing the substitutability of labor at the very lowest wage levels. Perversely, then, work first may achieve its short-term goals of raising employment rates for designated groups at the expense of long-run job security, or indeed by detaching other groups of workers from waged employment. It represents an effective subsidy to marginal employers—who are relatively more dependent on »market supplies« of labor and who recruit from the market more frequently—while also acting as an accelerator of churning.

Fourth, by pressurizing rapid transitions into employment, work-first programs constitute a forced labor supply for jobs in the lowest reaches of the labor market, which in turn generates a »drag« on pay and conditions. In the medium term, some employers may expand their use of contingent workers in order to take advantage of this new labor supply. Moreover, the limited bargaining power of

those currently in contingent jobs stands to be further eroded by the constant flow of former welfare recipients into the labor market, especially as these »new« workers are compelled to accept jobs as rapidly as possible, irrespective of pay and conditions. As the work-first mantra has it, »any job is a good job« as far as this client group is concerned. The policy-induced crowding of low-wage labor markets consequently engenders a downward pull on wages and regulatory standards.

Fifth, an important aspect of the »market-following« methodology of work first workfare is that programs tend to work with the grain of prevailing market criteria concerning the social distribution of work. Eschewing positive actions to tackle inequality and discrimination, these programs accept as given established conventions concerning recruitment and selection, while seeking to accommodate employers' definitions of job-readiness. Typically, this entails a strong emphasis on the correction of »inappropriate« attitudes amongst program participants. Employers' definitions of »employability« consequently permeate the internal structures of work-first programs, such that most will tend to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of labor-market inequality. It follows that labor-market inequalities are variously anticipated, mirrored, and sometimes amplified by programs' internal streaming and selection procedures. Work-first programs are invariably hierarchicalized in accordance with the degree and forms of intervention deemed to be required by different participants. The programmatic focus is on guiding the most employable down the shortest—and least-cost—route to a job. And although policymakers always resist such characterizations, residual provision is usually made for »sink schemes«, the function of which is to absorb those participants who have been unable to access employment (on terms determined largely by employers).

The dominant function of work-first workfare is to compel program participants into accepting—and learning to live with—contingent jobs in the context of prevailing conditions in local labor markets. Work-first systems forcibly attach welfare recipients to the lower end of the labor market both by eroding welfare entitlements and by actively managing the transition into an initial job. In contrast to the welfarist logic of providing temporary »shelters« *outside* the labor market for designated social groups, this workfarist logic dictates that targeted social groups are driven *into* the labor market, where they are expected to remain, notwithstanding systemic problems of under-employment, low pay, and exploitative work relations. Work-first programming itself plays a role in naturalizing these conditions. It is consequently associated with a perverse form of the orthodox adage that supply creates its own demand. Under workfare, an expanded and persistently-insecure contingent labor supply, actively driven into employment, serves to undercut existing conditions, while creating a situation favorable to further expansion in the (relative or absolute) size of the contingent sector. So, workfarist measures do not so much raise the level of employability across the labor market as a whole as increase the rate of exploitation in its lower reaches.

Conclusion: workfarist resistance?

For all the signs of incipient regulatory accommodation, politics still matter in the era of workfare. Yet at the present time these politics are seriously asymmetrical: workfare advocates have the upper hand, together with favorable structural condi-