

Birth Strike

The Hidden Fight over Women's Work

Jenny Brown

When House Speaker Paul Ryan urged U.S. women to have more children, and Ross Douthat requested "More babies, please," in a *New York Times* column, they openly expressed what policymakers have been discussing for decades with greater discretion. Using technical language like "age structure," "dependency ratio," and "entitlement crisis," establishment think tanks are raising the alarm: if U.S. women don't get busy having more children, we'll face an aging workforce, slack consumer demand, and a stagnant economy.

Feminists generally believe that a prudish religious bloc is responsible for the protracted fight over reproductive freedom in the U.S. and that politicians only attack abortion and birth control to appeal to those "values voters." But hidden behind this conventional explanation is a dramatic fight over women's reproductive labor. On one side, elite policymakers want an expanding workforce reared with a minimum of employer spending and a maximum of unpaid women's work. On the other side, women are refusing to produce children at levels desired by economic planners. By some measures our birth rate is the lowest it has ever been. With little access to childcare, family leave, health care, and with insufficient male participation, U.S. women are conducting a spontaneous birth strike.

In other countries, panic over low birth rates has led governments to underwrite childbearing and childrearing with generous universal programs, but in the U.S., women have not yet realized the potential of our bargaining position. When we do, it will lead to new strategies for winning full access to abortion and birth control, and for improving the difficult working conditions U.S. parents now face when raising children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Brown is a women's liberation organizer and former editor of *Labor Notes*. She was a leader in the grassroots campaign to have "morning-after pill" contraception available over the counter in the U.S. and was a plaintiff in the winning lawsuit. In addition to *Labor Notes*, her work has appeared in *Jacobin*, *Huffington Post*, *Monthly Review*, and *Alternet*, and she is coauthor of the Redstockings book *Women's Liberation and National Health Care: Confronting the Myth of America*. She currently writes, teaches, and organizes with National Women's Liberation.

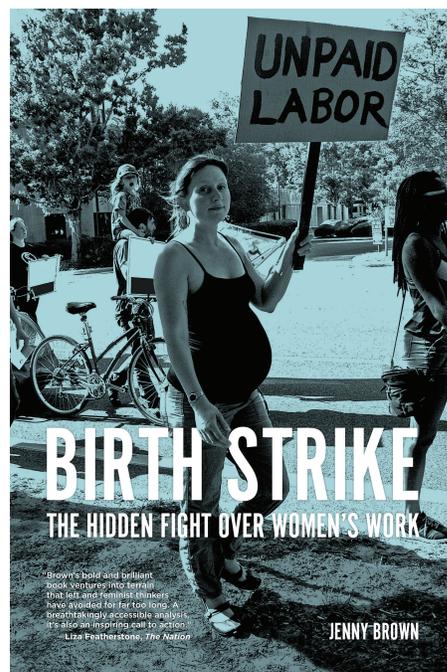
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"Jenny Brown compellingly explains the low U.S. birthrate: those primarily responsible for the labor of bearing and raising children (women) are responding as one should to lousy working conditions—by going on strike! Brown's bold and brilliant book ventures into terrain that left and feminist thinkers have avoided for far too long. A breathtakingly accessible analysis, supported by riveting and intimate testimonials, it's also an inspiring call to action."

—Liza Featherstone, *The Nation*

"Jenny Brown's rational and forthright answer to what the abortion struggles are about will surprise American women on both sides of the issue. Hint: it's not religion or politics."

—Peggy Dobbins, author of *From Kin to Class*, WITCH founder



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