This talk explores the relationship between massive unemployment and welfare policies. Based on archival documentation, it reconstructs the history of direct relief and public work programs in Chile. This was a history of encounters, conflicts, and negotiations. Influenced by ideas of gender, class, and family, the state and welfare professionals responded to unemployment and separated the employable from the unemployable. In response, working families challenged public and elite notions of work and non-work, demanding the expansion of social assistance.

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