

Childcare Now! The Struggle for Quality, Universal Childcare

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In 1991, 20 per cent of childcare workers belonged to a union. This stands at 21 per cent today.[1] Despite their stated commitment to organize women in the wage ghetto of childcare, unions have essentially forsaken one of the most vulnerable, underpaid and undervalued female dominated workforces in this country.

Universal, quality, accessible, free, not-for-profit, childcare is the goal. But while unionization of childcare workers has increased marginally in a 25-year period, for-profit delivery of childcare spaces grew by 33 per cent in a 10-year period ending in 2014.

The childcare workforce deserves decent wages, benefits and good working conditions – they deserve a union. But, unions in Canada have been obviously reluctant to step up.

Fragmented Childcare Services

The current patchwork of fragmented childcare services grows out of a perspective on childcare as ‘women’s work’, which is accorded little value. It grew up as a private arrangement between parents and care providers. It grew out of a multitude of local efforts by desperate parents joining together to arrange for their children’s care – creating a patchwork of non-profit childcare centres across the country. It developed out of half-measures and piecemeal funding by reluctant governments.

It is this early history and these persistent attitudes that account for the ongoing patchwork of fragmented and under-funded services. It is these same attitudes that continue to sustain a wage ghetto for the childcare workforce and skyrocketing fees for parents. Today, thousands of small non-profit childcare centres across Canada struggle to keep their doors open and lights on to deliver quality programs for children.

There is no question that childcare workers need a union – but if unions are going to organize and represent these workers then they must devise approaches and strategies that are sensitive to the realities of this sector.

Unions need to seriously consider strategies that are truly responsive to the needs of a female dominated workforce; that are collaborative with parents and employers. New structures for organizing and representing these workers are needed.



Unions can offer legally recognized structures that can be used to create central or coordinated bargaining tables. And that could bring employers together to deal with systemic funding issues they have tried for decades to deal with on their own, without success.

The State of Childcare in Canada

The majority (70%) of childcare spaces in Canada are delivered by small non-profit childcare centres. These centres employ between five to fifteen employees and deliver between 35 – 100 childcare spaces. Some of the Atlantic provinces deliver the majority of spaces through small ‘mom-and-pop’ for profit operators. In 2014, for-profits delivered 30 per cent of spaces nationally, up from 20 per cent in 2004.[2]

Childcare centres rely primarily on parent fees and on inadequate piecemeal government funding in the form of fee subsidy for parents and wage grants for staff. A recent report shows that spending per childcare space in Canada has not changed in over six years – in fact when adjusted for inflation it has actually declined.[3] This left these small non-profit centres to deliver services on shrinking budgets and with increasing public expectations of the service.

Only 24 per cent of children 0 – 12 years can access a regulated childcare space. If parents are fortunate enough to land one they often face fees from a low of \$900 a month to a high of \$1,700 a month.[4] If they have more than one child costs are much higher.

Many families end-up on fee subsidy waiting lists, while childcare centres sit with full-fee empty spaces families cannot afford.[5]

Provincial childcare regulations (ratio of staff to children) determine the cost of childcare to a significant degree. Caring for and educating young children is labour intensive. Staff wages comprise about 80 – 85 per cent of a centres’ operating budget. Yet, despite the high cost for parents, the workforce has some of the lowest wage rates of any comparable occupation.

While employers struggle to attract and retain staff and provide good quality care for kids at a cost parents can afford, they have largely failed to act collectively to address low wages in the sector. Instead employers appeal to their staff to put the children and families first, perpetuating a persistent tension between parent fees and staff wages. Employers often forgo even modest wage grants so as not to increase parent fees. It is not uncommon for childcare workers to go without wage increases for years.

Gender Inequalities

“The childcare market model has been built on a foundation of gender inequalities. A model that fails both working mothers who have limited access to high quality care and the women who educate and care for their children.”

However, things are beginning to change. Over the past fifteen years, governments are increasingly acknowledging the benefits of childcare for children, families and the economy. A number of provinces are reviewing and modernizing their childcare services. Some have moved childcare out of ministries of social services and into ministries of education.

The federal Liberals came to power on the promise of a federally led initiative to work with provinces/territories and Indigenous communities on a [National Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#). This could be a positive step forward.

There is no turning back. The case for childcare has been made. The question remains, will we get a system that continues to rest on this foundation of gender inequality?

The Workforce

The majority (96%)[6] of the childcare workforce are women. The latest childcare workforce study found that 25 per cent of the workforce earned below \$14 an hour and 25 per cent over \$22 an hour. In the Atlantic, where the majority of childcare is delivered by small for-profit centres, wages range from just above minimum wage to a high of \$19 an hour.

As with wages, extended health and other workplace benefits are uneven across the sector. Three quarters of the workforce have access to sick leave and only slightly over half have access to health benefits. A fraction have any form of retirement plan.

In Ontario unionization rates are higher and local governments have established directly operated (public) municipal childcare centres, both of which have had an upward pressure on wages in the province. The average wage in municipal centres is about \$30 an hour. In unionized centres wages can be as high as \$23 per hour and in non-unionized centres as low as \$16 an hour. But wages in Ontario, like the rest of the country are all over the map, reflecting the tremendous fragmentation in the sector.

However, wage gains in Ontario are under attack as small centres try to manage changes brought about by the Province's Full Day Kindergarten and Child Care Modernization Act (doing more with less). Many small employers relied on their preschool programs (4-5 year olds) to cover the higher cost to deliver infant and toddler programs. With Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) these employers struggle to keep services affordable to parents and at the same time attract early childhood educators, who are leaving the non-profit sector for better paying jobs in the Province's FDK.

Municipalities are responding to these provincial changes by shuttering higher cost, directly operated centres. In 1998 municipal childcare accounted for 11 per cent of all spaces but only 2.5 per cent of all spaces today. Historically these centres set the benchmark – for quality services and for wages and benefits. Municipal workers were the “Pay Equity” comparators for workers in the broader childcare sector. The closure of municipal centres and the concurrent loss of higher paid Early Childhood Education (ECE) jobs are having a downward pressure on wages in Ontario. Wages that were once benchmarks are now seen as a threat to viability.

Organizing and Representing the Childcare Workforce

Only 21 per cent of the childcare workforce is unionized.[7] However, though wages are low and the working conditions difficult, unionization is not the first thing that comes to mind for childcare workers.

This is in part because the majority of ECEs work in small non-profit centres, which generally foster more intimate work relationships. In many instances centre directors work alongside their employees. Also, childcare workers care for the children of parents who often sit on the

centre board of directors. Childcare workers are sensitive to the fact that a wage increase for them means a fee increase for parents.

Yet, despite these reservations, unionization does have a very positive impact on wages and other workplace benefits. Unionized centres provide better wages, extended health coverage, paid sick leave, pension plans, paid time for program planning and access to designated staff rooms. Unionized settings do set benchmarks for the sector.

While unionization is good for workers, it does pose challenges for small non-profit centres. These employers are in a constant state of crisis as they deal with systemic underfunding board-by-board, centre-by-centre.

If there is to be any success in improving the working lives of childcare workers then unions need to find strategies that will bring these small employers together to negotiate improvements for their staff and better public funding from governments.

There are examples of unions thinking outside the box and finding unique strategies for organizing and representing childcare workers. Quebec offers a Canadian example of what is possible. Unions in Quebec brought employer groups from small non-profits to a common table to negotiate with them and the Quebec government. While not easy, nor quick, it proved successful for making significant improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions across the sector.

In the United States a number of unions have joined forces to organize in the childcare sector. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) worked with its affiliates, the Service Employee International Union (SEIU), and the United Auto Workers to bring home childcare providers into unions. Another affiliate of the AFSCME, the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees supported the establishment of the United Child Care Union (UCCU).

The UCCU developed a unique approach that brings workers and their employers together under the same umbrella. While this approach runs counter to the idea of unionization it recognizes that parents, employers and the childcare workforce share common interests in winning the best conditions for children, for workers and for employers.

What makes these organizing drives unique is that these unions understood the need to work in collaboration with employer groups and to connect their organizing drives with political advocacy. They also recognized the need to use legally recognized union structures to effectively bring workers, employers and users of service together to address their common needs.

Childcare employers in Canada in the not for profit sector are an amalgam of municipalities, parent cooperatives, charitable organizations (like the YMCA). The provinces need to provide funding to enable collaboration on system building and collective bargaining in partnership with unions.

Childcare Workers Deserve a Union – How to Make it Happen

Outside of Quebec, Canadian unions have largely forsaken workers in the non-profit childcare sector. This goes for the broader non-profit voluntary sector as well. There are literally hundreds of thousands of workers (mostly women) working in small community-based services across this country that will never know the benefit of a union. And that is

because unions have failed to devise organizing strategies that take the realities of the broader non-profit sector into account.

Unions are reluctant – they are nostalgically committed to plant-gate organizing strategies that don't work well in this sector. And they are not prepared to invest in organizing and representing workers that they feel will provide little in the way of “a return on their investment.”

✖ Unions have been loath to commit the resources needed for an organizing strategy that would mean approaching potentially tens of thousands of workers, working in thousands of small workplaces and then having to negotiate a first collective agreement with cash-strapped employers. Unions just don't see the benefit to them – even though there is plenty of talk about the injustice of womens' underpaid and precarious work.

If this is ever going to change then unions must reassess the benefits to them when they collaborate. Unions must overcome the natural tendency in a capitalist economy to compete against one another for members.

Instead they might see that collaborating and pooling resources for sustained organizing drives is the only way to increase union density and to effectively represent the childcare and other marginal workforces. This approach could offer a model for organizing more broadly in the voluntary non-profit sector. Creating a common front organizing strategy will be more effective for organizing than unions working in isolation to organize and represent workers one centre at a time.

A successful strategy will also need to include structures like a council of trade unions (such as exists in the construction sector) that would bring employers together to deal collectively with issues that have plagued the sector for decades. Bargaining centrally is one way to ensure that employers are working together to get the funding increases they need to improve wages and to reduce costs for parents.

A common front approach would be much more effective for organizing and representing a very fragmented sector with little political clout. This logic applies equally to the homecare and other sectors, which are female dominated, racialized and currently largely excluded from the benefits of unionization.

Unions must move beyond an antagonistic model that pits the interest of workers against the interest of parents and children. This approach has not proven effective in the childcare sector.

In addition to working cooperatively, to make real inroads in this sector unions need to integrate into its organizing and representation of childcare workers, the fact that the workforce, parents, children and yes, even the employers, all share a common interest – the need for increased core government funding of centres to reduce (and eventually eliminate) fees for parents, to increase wages and benefits for staff and to provide good quality programs for children.

Why Unionization in the Non-Profit Sector is Important

Unions have been central in the call for universal, affordable, accessible quality childcare for over 40 years. They have worked with community allies to demand that childcare be understood as a child's right – similar to public education.

Unions have been at the forefront calling for equal pay and decent wages, pensions, maternity and parental leave and work and family balance. They have been active in the fight to end gender wage discrimination because they know firsthand the inequity it creates for women and the impact of wage discrimination in old age. Unions understand equal pay for equal work as a basic human right.

The research is clear – non-profit childcare consistently delivers better quality care than does private for-profit. High quality care is best achieved when all monies are ploughed back into programs, instead of being syphoned-off to profit. When the central mission is profitmaking or generating a return on shareholder investment, quality is inevitably compromised. Squeezing money out of programs, rationing food, equipment and supplies, paying staff less, having fewer qualified staff and charging parents more are the hallmark of the for-profit sector.

Leaving childcare in the marketplace as a private arrangement between parents and care providers perpetuates a model of service built on a foundation of gender inequality. Leaving childcare in the market where childcare workers' wages are pitted against parent fees will never achieve the goals and aspirations for high quality childcare. The kind of care and education that is good for children, affordable to parents and where childcare workers can make a living.

Wall-to-wall organizing in the non-profit sector could provide effective structures for breaking out of this decades-long dynamic where wages are pitted against parent fees – both of which impact on the quality of services provided to children. Reversing this will require unions to search for new methods and models of organizing and working more closely with our allies to fortify our organizing drives.

The not-for-profit childcare sector is the essential building block for the not-for-profit, universal, free, accessible, comprehensive childcare system, which has been a goal of progressives in Canada for generations. It is this sector which should be the foremost priority for organizing by unions.

It is time for a collaborative strategy to organize the great majority of the childcare workforce who work in the non-profit childcare sector. Then we could use that capacity for a strong push by the exploited childcare workforce for a truly universal system and for decent conditions of employment.

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Notes

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