



MARGOT YOUNG

Labour and Early Learning and Child Care: An Ideal Union

Unionization is beneficial not only for the child care workforce but also for the children in unionized centres, their parents, and for the whole society.¹

For centuries, unions have played a pivotal role in putting the concerns of working people forward to employers and to governments. More recently, they have also been partners in social and economic policy development and advocacy on universal, accessible, affordable, publicly funded and accountable, inclusive, quality early learning and child care that supports children's development. Union involvement in advocacy has been crucial for moving early learning and child care onto the public and political stage and for improving daily working conditions, wages and benefits of those working in the sector.

In Canada the collaboration on early learning and child care policy between unions, advocacy groups, and professional organizations has been unique and has helped the issue of early learning and child care to remain vibrant in public policy debates despite the lack of action by most governments so far to develop a system.

This article is an examination of four key ways in which unions have contributed and continue to contribute to building a

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quality early learning and child care system: advocacy, sector professionalism, negotiation of wages and working conditions, and organizing. It also outlines some of the key struggles in the movement for publicly-funded, universal child care.

Advocacy

There are a number of reasons for the ongoing role of labour in the fight for a Canada-wide child care system: promoting a healthy work-life balance; enhancing women's equality; fostering social solidarity; and defending our public infrastructure. Many unions have active child care committees dedicated to moving early learning and child care issues forward internally among their members and in the public arena. Campaigns include: the ongoing effort at the national level to win an early learning and child care system; pressuring governments at the provincial level to establish and fund early learning and child care plans, increase grants and raise wages; and working with parents and boards of directors lobbying local governments to improve child care services and wages, and reduce parent fees.

Labour unions in Canada have been key partners advocating for developing a public early learning and child care system that meets the needs of today's families because such a system (along with other supports like maternity, parental, and family leaves) helps parents balance work and family.

Unions also recognize the pivotal importance of early learning and child care for women's equality, since mothers continue to bear the primary responsibility for children. More than 73% of mothers with children under six are in the workforce but there's only enough regulated early learning and child care for 15% of children 12 and under. Most mothers who work outside the home have to cobble together unregulated child care of uneven quality. A 2009 Statistics Canada study² shows that women pay a high price for having children: childless women earn 12% more than those with children. Additionally, the earning gap grows for women with university education.

Unions recognize that quality early learning and child care fosters social solidarity across the boundaries of class, ethnicity, race, culture, language, sexual orientation, ability and geography.

Unions representing workers in the early learning and child care sector advocate for the development of a system as a way of

gaining proper funding that helps guarantee the quality of the child care and the jobs in the field. Studies show that public/non-profit programs are higher quality as they put their resources into programs, involve parents, communities and governments in planning and tend to follow practices that support quality, such as hiring better-trained staff and paying them more. As well, advocacy groups and unions have pressed governments to ensure all new public funds for early learning and child care go to public/non-profit programs in order to stave off trade challenges that pave the way for “big box” commercial child care to move in and set up shop.

Professionalism

Labour has contributed to the professionalism of the early learning and child care field in many ways, including advocating for a public system that is accountable and regulated, through the collective bargaining process, and through participation in the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council.

Labour has consistently advocated for overall regulation of the child care sector, believing that this is important to fostering professionalism: only an estimated 11% of family and in-home caregivers that provide early learning and care services in Canada is regulated. Lack of regulation often means lower quality care levels and less training of caregivers. Lower fees charged by unregulated facilities can act as a downward pressure on wages in regulated child care which again results in lower quality.³

Collective bargaining is also fundamental to professionalism. Through collective bargaining, unions have pressed for improvements in professionalism of the early learning and child care sector by getting collective agreement provisions on education and training, staff development to remain current in the field, good pay for the high value of the work performed, and working conditions that support child care providers to do their jobs well.

There is significant evidence that supports the important role of labour in helping to develop and foster employee professionalism: the *Unionization and Quality*⁴ study showed that unionized providers overall have more access than their non-unionized counterparts to in-service training and off-site professional development. They are more likely to have collective agreement provisions for payment of registration fees, paid release time and

replacements to enable them to attend professional development sessions. It is also no accident that they are more likely to receive paid breaks, paid preparation time, and paid overtime.

Through the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, labour participates on many key studies, projects and initiatives that advance professionalism in the early learning and child care field. Some of the council's projects include looking at issues such as occupational standards, a training strategy for the child care sector, pathways to credentialing, career promotions and recruitment strategy, labour market information research agenda, and addressing workforce shortages. Unions have a great deal to contribute to these discussions because of their experience in human resources issues and, furthermore, because of the stake their members have in each of these subject areas.

Wages and working conditions

Despite Canadian and international research confirming the importance of wages and working conditions to the quality of the early learning and of child care programs, Canadian society continues to pay lip-service only to the value of childhood educators. Consequently, working conditions and pay levels of child care workers remain at very low levels.

Wage levels are influenced by a number of factors including: the individual's position; employment status; level of ECEC education; length of experience in the child care field; years of experience at their current centre; the centre's auspice (non-profit or commercial); the jurisdiction in which the centre operates; whether the centre receives government operating grants; whether the centre receives free or subsidized space and/or utilities; and the level of fees charged by the centre. The *Unionization and Quality*⁵ study used regression analysis to examine the influence of unionization and each of these factors on teaching staff wage levels. When all other variables were accounted for, teaching staff in unionized centres earned 8.3% more than employees in non-unionized centres. Furthermore, unionized child care settings are more likely to provide benefits such as supplementary health care, life insurance, employer top-up on maternity and parental and other benefits.

Because unionized centres contribute positively to the quality of early learning and child care programs, these centres conse-

quently have lower turnover rates, find it easier to recruit and retain good staff, support quality programs, and rate higher on program quality than non-unionized centres.

The effects of unionization on wages and compensation have been far-reaching. Québec has the largest percentage of unionized child care workers. Unionization has delivered a province-wide wage scale with consistent increases and a provincial pension plan. In Ontario, municipally-operated programs are highly unionized. Their comparatively higher wages and benefits have become the benchmark for compensation in the community programs.

Organizing and bargaining structures

Union membership for public sector female-dominated occupations is strong. More than 77% of nurses are members of a union and over 86% of teachers are union members.⁶ Teachers and nurses are strong advocates for their field and their profession but also see unionization as a method for advancing issues for their sectors.

However, in spite of low wages and poor working conditions, unionization has been difficult to accomplish in the early learning and child care sector. Even when unions make organizing in the sector a priority the results haven't been universally successful. As a result, only about 23% of the regulated child care workforce belongs to a union,⁷ compared to a 30% overall unionization rate for women. (In the public sector the unionization rate for women is almost 73%.) More analysis and evaluation of union organizing campaigns needs to take place to find out the elements for success. Unions with experience in the early learning and child care sector could work together to evaluate and develop strategies for successful approaches to bargaining and organizing.

Not only do unions need to make organizing child care workers a priority, labour must also explore organizing and representation approaches that fit the needs and culture of the sector. Much work is still to be done to understand how to approach organizing in this female-dominated workforce. A further challenge is to discover ways to deal with the issue of representing small bargaining units.

More examination needs to take place on how to increase the strength of child care workers through coordinated and central

bargaining for unions representing child care workers. Coordinated and central collective bargaining processes and structures can support staff, employers and parents in jointly influencing funding levels and policy direction, as well as finding shared solutions to workplace issues.

Challenges

Growth in child care spaces slowed after 2006 when the federal government cancelled agreements with the provinces and territories. Even though a public opinion poll showed that almost twice as many Canadians said that setting up the national early childhood education and child care program is preferable to a monthly allowance of \$100, there has been no federal policy to develop such a program.

Canada's current approach relies on the market to build spaces and on parents to pay most of the operating costs. For the most part Canadian governments have failed to provide families with access to quality, affordable child care services. Multiple international studies confirm that Canada has one of the lowest levels of public investment in child care in the developed world.

The market approach to child care simply doesn't work. In the current global economic crisis Canadian governments need to develop public early learning and child care services that support children, their families and the country's economic recovery.

Unions are committed to building a quality early learning and child care system. Labour recognizes that building broad coalitions and supporting our social partners such as the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada is essential to make early learning and child care a reality for Canadians. We will continue to promote early learning and child care issues and advocacy among our members and join with child care advocates in campaigns to win policy and funding for a quality public early learning and child care system.

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***Margot Young** is a Research Officer at the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and a long-time advocate for a Canada-wide system of publicly-funded child care.*

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