

BIG BOX OPERATOR EYES CANADA'S CHILD CARE

The world's biggest child care corporation appears to be embarking on a Canadian buying spree – a development that threatens the future of a public, non-profit child care system.

In recent months a corporation called 123 Busy Beavers Learning Centres has approached for-profit child care centers in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, asking if they would be interested in selling. Despite the home-grown name, 123 Busy Beavers is linked with huge Australian multinational child care corporation ABC Learning Centres.

CUPE research helped uncover information showing the close links between 123 Busy Beavers and ABC Learning, through a child care corporation called 123 Global. It's a few short clicks from 123 Global's main page to a form for potential sellers, including Canadians.

This major development in the privatization of child care could seriously harm years of work towards a universal, public, non-profit system of early learning and child care. Big box expansion into Canada will divert public funds into private corporations, erode regulations and quality, increase user fees and trigger restrictive international trade rules.

CUPE and the Code Blue for Child Care coalition are mobilizing to stop the spread of multinational big box child care through federal, provincial and municipal action. All working families have a stake in this fight. The issue hit CUPE's convention floor last week, where child care workers connected the fight with CUPE's broader anti-privatization campaign.

KIDS DON'T BELONG IN BIG BOX CARE

Canadian child care advocates have been monitoring Australia's experience with for-profit care for a number of years. In 2005, CUPE helped bring child care advocate Lynne Wannan from Down Under on a tour highlighting the serious problems with commercialized care. Before 1991, Australia's child care system was 70 per cent not-for-profit. Then the government opened up funding to the for-profit sector. Within a decade, that proportion had flipped, with ABC now owning about 25 per cent of the country's child care supply.

The quality, accessibility and affordability of Australian child care, along with the working conditions for child care workers are all significant concerns for CUPE members – parents, child care workers and child care advocates.

The ongoing Canadian story made headlines this week in Australia, where CUPE was quoted in Brisbane's Courier-Mail. ABC Learning quickly denied any connection with the corporate buyouts underway.

CORPORATION MOVING FAST

The pace of acquisitions appears to be rapid. The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of British Columbia has sounded the alarm, connecting the buying spree with a recent BC government announcement making child care capital funding available to private companies for the first time in the province's history. This change in public policy makes BC particularly attractive to large multinational child care chains.

The coalition reports that a member who is a child care operator received a buyout offer from a firm connected with 123 Global earlier this month. She reports being told the sale could be completed in “as little as three weeks”.

News reports from Calgary also suggest that some sales are pending or may already be complete. Letters have been mailed to child care centres across Ontario but so far, there is no hard evidence that they are ready to launch centers under their name as quickly as they are in Alberta.

OUTLAWING FOR-PROFIT EXPANSION

The state of Australian child care was the backdrop for CUPE’s presentation on Bill C-303, the NDP’s *Early Learning and Child Care Act* last May.

Bill C-303 is expected to return to the House of Commons for a decisive vote on November 20. The bill limits expansion of for-profit child care, a move that protects Canada from international trade disputes and ensures the highest quality care. CUPE’s brief provided warnings from Australia’s experience with for-profit care and pointed to the solid evidence linking higher quality care with non-profit delivery.

In addition to concerns about the proliferation of large commercial child care centres focused on shareholder returns instead of quality, foreign-owned child care centers create other problems under international trade agreements.

In 2004, as the federal government was negotiating federal-provincial child care agreements, CUPE released a legal opinion highlighting the dangers of for-profit expansion. Those dangers are now on our doorstep.

123 Global is supporting an extensive child care empire in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. It isn’t too late to keep Canada off their map.

Watch cupe.ca for updates on this important story – and ways you can take action.

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