



Child Care Connections  
Attracting and Keeping Qualified Staff in Child Care Project

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# The Union Advantage In Child Care: How Unionization Can Help Recruitment And Retention

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# The Union Advantage in Child Care: How Unionization Can Help Recruitment and Retention

By

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Mention unions and child care in the same breath, and many people in the sector will say the two don't mix. Unions might have a place in industrial settings, the argument goes, but they are not appropriate vehicles for determining workplace relationships in a non-traditional social sector. Unionization could jeopardize the collegial relationships between workers, centre management and volunteer boards, and dilute the commitment of providers to their jobs. What's worse, if a union comes in, a centre might have to shut down because it won't be able to afford the increased costs of higher wages and benefits. Who needs or wants all that?

Nobody, of course, and certainly not the unions themselves, as this paper will show. We will make the case that far from being a negative force, unions exert a positive influence in child care workplaces and in the sector generally. Furthermore, when the benefits to child care workers and services are taken into account, unionization emerges as an important strategy for dealing with recruitment and retention, two of the biggest challenges facing the sector in Canada today.

Overall, unionized child care workplaces contribute to higher quality programs and attract more experienced and more trained early childhood educators. Unions support a model of professionalism and workplace relationships that is inclusive, democratic and collective. They support professional development, affordable education and regulation of the service and the occupation. They are longstanding advocates for women's equality, and a publicly funded child care system. All of these aspects are important in and of themselves. But they also speak to some of the broader, interrelated issues that have affected the sector's ability to attract and keep qualified early childhood educators.

Until recently, there was little information about the impact of unionization on the sector. However, a new study<sup>2</sup> exploring the influence of unions on wages, benefits, working conditions and quality in child care centres provides some valuable insights into this issue. The study, *Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Settings*, used raw data collected from two of the three *You Bet I Care! (YBIC!)*<sup>3</sup> studies to do a statistical comparison between unionized and non-unionized child care centres. Much of the information used in this paper draws on the findings of this study, whose principal researcher was Dr. Gillian Doherty, one of the authors of the *YBIC!* series.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the new name for the Child Care Human Resources Round Table, which became a Sector Council in the fall of 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Doherty, G. (2002). *Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Programs*. Ottawa: Canadian Union of Public Employees and Visions (Social Development Partnerships Division of Human Resources Development Canada).

<sup>3</sup> One of the studies looked at the wages, working conditions and practices in child care centres. Another looked at quality in child care centres across Canada.

## Workforce and quality issues

Most child care workers want a job with decent pay, benefits that provide some long-term security and good daily working conditions. They also want to provide a quality service and, very importantly, desire respect for their work.

Unionized centres provide a way for the child care workforce to achieve these goals and have delivered concretely on many of them. The *Unionization and Quality* study shows unionized centres pay substantially higher wages than non-unionized ones (8.3% higher for child care teachers). Unionized centres are more likely to provide benefits that have a positive impact on the daily working lives of child care providers, such as paid preparation time, compensation for meetings held after hours and a staff room. A higher proportion of unionized centres provide staff with benefits such as disability insurance, extended health care, life insurance, employee top-up of Employment Insurance maternity leave benefits and pensions. These benefits can make a big difference in a child care provider's life.

Pensions, for example, affect the longer-term financial outlook of workers. As the child care workforce ages, its members become more concerned about their financial security upon retirement. Recently, unions have made some important achievements to increase the accessibility and coverage of pensions for child care workers.

For example, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents about 15,000 child care workers across Canada, is developing a multi-sector pension plan specifically intended for negotiation by small workplaces such as child care centres.

But the most significant success has come in Québec. The Confédération des syndicats nationaux, the major union representing child care workers in Québec, and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec recently negotiated a pension plan for all centre-based employees with the provincial government and employer groups. This is a meaningful breakthrough that affects more than 20,000 child care workers in the province. Pension coverage will undoubtedly make it easier for these workers to view their occupation as a long-term career. The resulting increased rates of retention of qualified staff flowing from this bargaining victory will in turn contribute to higher levels of quality child care services.

Given the financial and qualitative improvements that unions bring to child care workers, it's not surprising that the *Unionization and Quality* study also found that unionized centres had an easier time finding and keeping good staff:

- Turnover rates for early childhood educators (ECEs) were lower in unionized centres.
- More unionized providers said they expected to still be working in their centre in a year and to still be working in the child care field in three years.
- Centre directors reported an easier time recruiting and retaining staff.

### The quality connection

The study also showed a direct link between unionization and quality child care. It found that unionized centres act in ways and have characteristics that support high quality programs, including more trained staff and slightly better child:staff ratios (most often negotiated by the union into the collective agreement). Unionized centres also have higher ratings on actual overall program quality compared to their non-union counterparts. The study concludes that "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. (p. ii)"

What is not as apparent as the quantitative results from the statistical study is the reason unionized centres have been able to make these workplace and quality improvements. This is particularly true for those outside of Québec, where no coherent government family policy exists. After all, unionized centres have similar funding bases as their non-unionized counterparts.

There are several reasons for the unionized centres' ability to make progress. First, more attention is paid to workforce issues in a unionized setting simply because unions exist to help workers collectively improve their lives. Second, unions have been front and centre in the push for badly needed government funding to child care, and, together with other child care advocates, have achieved some successes. Third, unions representing public sector workers believe part of their mandate is to preserve and improve services. Political and legislative activism is a way to target and reach these goals. But unions also believe that a complementary and fundamental approach to improving services is to ensure that the workforce is treated fairly and well supported, and thereby able to do a good job.

Thus the unionized environment leads child care workers to look at their occupation and workplace from both the perspective of the provider and the best interests of the child. Unionized providers will analyze issues such as workload, health and safety and other necessary supports that help them function well in their jobs. (A concrete illustration of this might be change tables. A unionized centre would try to ensure that these tables are safe for infants and toddlers, and find ways, such as adjusting the height, to minimize the health risks to providers who are repeatedly lifting children.) The collective agreement and the collective bargaining process provide the means and opportunity to devise solutions to improve working conditions that are also directly related to better service provision. A child care provider with a manageable workload and health and safety protection is working in an environment that supports her to do a good job.

### **A way to gain power**

Individual child care providers generally cannot affect their working lives to such an extent, and many may feel they lack the ability to make changes. Unionization provides child care workers with a vehicle to have a voice and some power to influence what happens at work. Without unions, there is no way to ensure that child care providers are able to bring forward issues such as wages and working conditions, and resolve them with employers.

Unionized status gives providers the right to demand to be heard and recognized. This holds true both in the workplace and in the union, which is accountable to its members and has an obligation to represent their interests. Unionization, then, is a way for child care providers to gain some control over their working lives and not feel like the victims of others' actions or lack of action. This sense of empowerment is an important aspect of being able to carry out strategies to improve the economic status and general recognition of child care workers. It's especially helpful in a female-dominated sector, where the work is also not highly valued by society.

### **Professionalism**

Professionalism has often been used as a counterpoint to unionization in the child care sector. Unions have at times felt marginalized from discussions around professionalism because of a prevailing view that labour opposes it. In fact, unions believe professionalism has a role to play in supporting and

recognizing skilled workers who are doing the important work of providing high quality care to children, and in maintaining high standards of service provision. For labour, unionization and collective bargaining are central to achieving the characteristics of professionalism for all who work in the sector. Collective agreements, which stipulate work provisions and benefits, help workers to do their jobs well and recognize the value of every worker's contribution. In this way, unionization fosters and supports professionalism.

### **Professionalism and regulation**

Labour has consistently advocated for overall regulation of the child care sector. Regulation of the sector covers a broad range of issues, including standards, staff-to-child ratios, requirements of the physical workplace, funding and minimum qualifications of staff. Child care is probably the only social/quasi-public service that is not substantially regulated, and unions would argue that this is one reason the service and those who provide it are not valued. For labour, regulation of the service is the top priority. Legislated regulation of the profession would flow from this, but would not necessarily come first. This is because a majority of the workforce is found in the unregulated, informal part of the sector and would therefore remain largely unaffected by professional standards if the service itself is not regulated. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to organize professional associations (and unions, for that matter) in a largely unregulated sector.

### **Professionalism and bargaining**

A number of important factors are included in labour's definition of professionalism in the child care sector:

- ◆ Education/training to achieve credentials
- ◆ On-going staff development to remain current and able to provide high quality service
- ◆ Good pay for the high value of the work performed
- ◆ Working conditions that support child care providers to do their jobs well

The contribution of labour to these issues through collective bargaining—another form of regulation—has been very concrete. For example, it is no accident, as the *Unionization and Quality* study shows, that unionized providers overall have more access than their non-unionized counterparts to in-service training and off-site professional development; or that 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 now sits on the Canadian Child Care Federation's training committee, which is looking at issues such as occupational standards, distance education, accreditation, certification and Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR). Unions believe that they have some valuable insights to contribute to discussions around these issues because they have some experience with them and their members have a real stake in them.

### **Professionalism: an alternative model**

Unions would agree with others in the sector who maintain that child care as an occupation does not fit a traditional model of a profession—that an alternative model needs to be developed. In this alternative model, there should be no room for exclusivity, where one group is elevated above others. For example, support staff in child care (such as cooks and cleaners), who do not have training in early

childhood education and care should also be valued for their contribution to quality service provision and receive appropriate training for their jobs. As well, non-credentialed workers in the sector who have acquired the skills and experience to do their jobs well should also be recognized, not just those with formal education credentials. In an inclusive professionalism model, there might well be a professional body representing early childhood educators alone, but the work of everyone in the sector would be acknowledged and appreciated. This approach fosters collegiality and reduces divisions among workers. It also promotes more democratic, inclusive decision-making about issues that affect the workers.

The ways that unions work speaks to a more progressive professionalism model. These include the collective bargaining process, where members decide together on the issues that need to be put forward, as well as efforts in-between bargaining to promote more collective approaches to solving problems.

An alternative professionalism model should also promote a more equal and personal relationship between child care teachers and parents, rather than a more impersonal one of “experts” relating with their clients. Parents have valuable insights and knowledge to offer in the care and development of a child, and their experience in this regard should be appreciated. In addition, a more progressive model should preserve the value of the caring aspect of child care, while still recognizing the key developmental and educational role child care providers play in children’s lives.

It stands to reason that providers will be more likely to want to go to work and remain in a workplace that promotes collegiality and respect among staff, includes them in making the overall decisions that affect their lives, fosters good relationships with families and encourages the value of both the educational and caring components of the job.

## **Training and education**

Unions favour minimum standards of education/training and ways for providers to have access to appropriate training. *Unionization and Quality* points out that unionized child care centres tend to demand and attract workers with more training and experience. They take on a higher proportion of staff with two years or more of ECCE and a lower proportion of untrained teaching staff. They also more often act as field training sites for ECCE students.

More broadly, unions have a strong record of championing affordable, high quality post-secondary training and education<sup>6</sup>. Affordable post-secondary education is critical to recruiting full- and part-time students to ECCE programs. Labour also fought for and supports Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), which is a way to acknowledge and value the experience early childhood educators have and allow them to complete their education in a shorter period of time.

## **Advocating for better child care**

Long-held conservative social attitudes about child care, and the resulting public policy and lack of secure funding that reflects these beliefs have had a detrimental effect on recruitment and retention of child care workers. In every instance, unions have been actively involved in trying to change these attitudes to improve the lives of unionized child care workers and bring about the goal of a universal child care system.

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6. Kass & Costigliola/ *The Union Advantage in Child Care: How Unionization Can Help Recruitment and Retention / Attracting & Keeping Qualified Staff in CC Project/ Connections*, 2003

Labour believes all children have the right to quality child care. Child care is also considered a social and economic good which provides benefits to children, families, mothers (particularly, but not exclusively, those in the paid workforce and students), employers and society as a whole. Providing children with quality early childhood care and education and raising them to be good workers, citizens and neighbours is seen by labour as a shared social responsibility. It follows that parents should not have to bear the financial burden alone. Furthermore, child care workers (overwhelmingly women) should not be expected to subsidize the service through their low wages. This is discriminatory and a disincentive for people to enter into and stay in the occupation.

Unions see quality, affordable child care as an important family support for many of their members because it helps parents (especially mothers) enter into and stay in the workforce. Internally, unions have consistently taken steps to increase awareness of their members about the need to advocate for quality child care and a public system in Canada. Consequently, support is high among union members for accessible, high quality services that allow workers who are parents to be on the job with peace of mind.

Many unions have policies that state child care should be publicly funded, universally accessible, of high quality and regulated to ensure a way to monitor quality. These aren't just words on paper. Several unions have child care committees or other bodies that are responsible for moving child care issues forward internally and in the public arena. Labour also has representatives on the Council of Child Care Advocates of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and on the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. This means that labour's experiences around child care are becoming more integrated into key debates in the sector, and that unions are also reaping the benefits of working with and hearing about the views of other parts of the sector.

### **The union record**

Unions have a long record of involvement in child care advocacy activities, locally, regionally and nationally. Labour is keenly aware that core public funding is required to ensure high quality services, and decent wages and benefits for child care providers. Research has clearly established that caregivers are the most important factor in quality child care and that adequate compensation is needed to ensure a stable, skilled workforce.

Current funding arrangements that rely heavily on parent fees to fund the system pit the need for better wages and benefits against parents' ability to afford or access services. It is for these reasons that unions have embarked upon joint campaigns with parents to lobby governments for budget increases and wages grants that address the need for increased wages and benefits while protecting parent fees.

Several coalition campaigns with significant labour involvement have been aimed at persuading the federal government to make child care a funding and policy priority.

Provincial campaigns have run the gamut from active opposition to child care cuts in Ontario and British Columbia, to pushing for operating grants in Manitoba and creating a model for other provinces and territories to follow in Québec<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> At time of writing (June 2003), the newly elected Liberal government in Québec had announced plans to review the \$5-a-day universal child care program in spite of strong public support for the program.

In 2001, for example, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and CUPE launched the Stepping Up for Child Care campaign, which brought together parents, child care workers, and child care and social service activists in a public education campaign. The campaign raised awareness about the negative effects of the provincial government's funding cuts on child care and the government's refusal to put any federal early childhood development dollars into the sector. In Québec, the unions were instrumental in bringing about a government family policy of \$5-a-day child care, and increases in public funding for the sector that far surpass those in any other province or territory.

In 1999, the Québec unions won average raises of 35.1% over four years for all centre-based child care staff in the province through centralized bargaining, plus a commitment to negotiate a pension plan and to do a pay equity evaluation. The same year in British Columbia, unionized child care staff succeeded in getting increases and improved benefits (since rolled back by the Campbell government), as part of a larger campaign by unionized community social service workers. The two major unions representing child care staff in Manitoba and the Manitoba Child Care Association spearheaded a worthy wages campaign which secured increased funding for wages from the newly elected NDP government in 2001. In Saskatchewan, public sector unions joined with other community-based organizations and advocates to campaign for job equity and wage increases in community social services, including child care.

Unions have also been active on the legislative front, and recently achieved a huge pay equity victory in Ontario that will affect 100,000 female public sector workers, including child care workers. The out-of-court settlement stems from a Charter challenge against the provincial government by five unions: CUPE, the Ontario Nurses' Association, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, the Service Employees International Union and the United Steelworkers' of America. The unions had accused the government of perpetuating gender discrimination by refusing to fund pay equity adjustments beyond December 1998. The government has now agreed to fund up to \$414 million in adjustments over three years. Without the unions backing this challenge, it is highly doubtful that there would have been such a positive outcome.

### **Anti-union myths die hard**

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, many people in the sector still view unions with skepticism. We began this paper by noting the fears about what unionization in child care might do to the real or imagined collegial workplace dynamic on which the sector prides itself. Many people also feel unionization would weaken a provider's commitment to her job.

So let us debunk these myths. Findings from the *Unionization and Quality* study show that unionized child care workers are just as committed to their work as their non-union counterparts. Even though a greater proportion of unionized centres provide paid preparation time, unionized teaching staff still donate about half a day per week to their centre (unpaid overtime). The study also notes that unionized staff have high levels of pride in their centre and high levels of satisfaction with their relationship with other teaching staff. Most tellingly, the study also finds very little difference between directors in unionized centres and non-unionized centres with respect to their feeling that they and their staff work well together as a team.

And what about unions forcing centres to close? While we have no statistics on this issue, we do know that the danger of closure has been used by certain for-profit operators as a means to thwart



organizing efforts. If a union does succeed in becoming certified, negotiations for a first contract can be protracted and difficult, particularly if an owner, board of directors or operator wants to try to break the union. However, in centres where management has worked with the union to improve the wages, benefits and working conditions of staff, the results have been very positive for everyone, and the working relationship has become stronger. Indeed, it seems far more likely that a center would close because it lacks a stable funding base rather than because of the unionization of its staff.

## **Union challenges**

Nonetheless, while unions are a good fit for child care, they still have a lot of work to do to fulfill their potential for making meaningful inroads for workers in the sector. Here are some of the challenges unions need to take up:

### **Better and more concerted organizing strategies.**

Only a small minority of child care workers belong to unions and they are almost exclusively in the regulated sector, which in itself represents a minority in child care.<sup>5</sup> In spite of their low wages and poor working conditions, child care workers do not automatically look to unionization as a way to deal with their workplace problems. Unions need to make organizing child care workers a priority and develop strategies to convey the union advantage to those working in the sector. Labour must also consider organizing and representation approaches that are more sensitive to the needs and characteristics of the sector, for example, feminist approaches that are responsive to the overwhelmingly female composition of this workforce. Moreover, unions need to look at organizational or structural ways to deal with the issue of representing small bargaining units. Some unions don't put a high priority on organizing in the child care sector because of the time and resources involved in organizing small workplaces.

One example of a union that has made organizing in the sector a priority is the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU), a component of the National Union of Public and General Employees. The MGEU has developed a long-term, comprehensive organizing strategy for child care using an organizer who comes from and knows the sector. An important feature of the union's strategy is to work with centre boards of directors to get the government (which controls the funding) to agree to be party to a common provincial bargaining table.

Another key concern is organizing family child care providers, who are generally excluded from labour laws because they are considered independent contractors or self-employed. These providers desperately need better compensation and benefits, as well as ongoing support and training to develop their skills and lessen their isolation. In this regard, Canadian unions can look to alternative models in Europe and closer to home in Québec, where a landmark Labour Tribunal decision has given family child care providers the legal right to organize and bargain collectively. However, it should be noted that the Québec government has introduced legislation to prevent this from happening.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the sector study, *Our Child Care Workforce: From Recognition to Remuneration*, there are an estimated 330,000 child caregivers in Canada. About 276,000 caregivers are in the unregulated sector, while the rest are mostly found in child care centers or school boards providing pre-school and school age care, and in licensed family child care.

## **Moving forward in bargaining**

Despite a number of bargaining inroads, the fact remains that making significant wage and benefit improvements for child care workers is very difficult. This is mainly due to the funding restrictions under which centres operate, and unions will no doubt continue their efforts to change this situation. But there are also organizational issues at play. The majority of child care centres are unconnected to one another and work in isolation, making collective bargaining more difficult for employers and unions alike. Unions need to consider pursuing models of coordinated bargaining (such as employer councils or coordinated groupings of child care employers), that make the bargaining process more workable and breakthroughs more realistic.

## **Advocating for increased recognition**

While unions have done a great deal of advocacy work around child care policy and funding, they could do more on the issue of recognition. Unions see recognition of child care workers as directly related to the low wages and benefits in the sector, as well as to society's lack of respect for what has traditionally been considered "women's work." But training and education requirements, and professionalism also have an impact on recognition, and labour needs to consider whether it should make a concerted effort to become more involved in these areas.

## **In this together**

This richly diverse social sector called child care has a good chance to make real progress by pulling together to work in a collective manner. Already, there are many positive signs. In recent years, unions representing child care staff and other parts of the sector have increasingly shared experiences, learned from each other, and joined forces to further the goal of a comprehensive public child care system in Canada that provides fair remuneration and recognition for its workers.

Unionization was identified by *Our Child Care Workforce: From Recognition to Remuneration*,<sup>6</sup> as one of three key strategies to improve the wages and working conditions of child care providers and thereby increase recognition. (The others were advocacy and professionalism.) The *Unionization and Quality* study findings point to unionization as good way to deal with recruitment and retention problems in the sector. The study concludes: "Advocating, organizing and bargaining [three main union activities] are inter-connected strategies. . . that could be used to address the current staffing crisis in child care and the lack of affordable, accessible, quality child care for parents in most jurisdictions. . . Without improved wages and benefits, it may become impossible to recruit and retain sufficient people to provide regulated programs. (p.43)"

Unionization may not be the only strategy for solving recruitment and retention problems in child care. But it certainly has proven to be a very effective way to get measurable results to improve the lives of child care workers and the quality of services for children. Unions in child care are here to stay. The challenge now is for the sector and labour to find ways to work together to move forward on the critical issues in child care, especially recruitment and retention.

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<sup>6</sup> Beach, J., Bertrand, J., and Cleveland, G. (1998). *Our Child Care Workforce: From Recognition to Remuneration: More Than a Labour of Love. A Human Resource Study of Child Care in Canada*. Ottawa: Child Care Human Resources Steering Committee, c/o Canadian Child Care Federation.

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<sup>i</sup> Many community college instructors, including most ECCE instructors, are unionized.