

Hanes: The unloved labour of daycare workers ^[1]

A strike by early childhood workers reminds us that often the most important jobs in our society are the most difficult and the least valued.

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EXCERPTS

A row of little potties used to sit along the back wall of my daughter's daycare classroom back in the day, one for each kid.

Behind each, a piece of paper was posted with the child's name and a list of which "functions" they were capable of doing on their own. There was also a rigorous schedule for when the group of two-year-olds was supposed to sit on their little thrones, like before bundling up in their snowsuits to play outside and prior to nap time.

Toilet training one toddler is tough enough, but eight? At the same time? Yet my daughter's superhuman early childhood educator managed to make it look easy. When I commended her on her amazing efforts and organizational skills, she said she'd rather start them early on the potty than have to change diapers all year.

This is just one small example of the kind of thankless, challenging and back-breaking labour that takes place in Quebec's Centres de la petite enfance day in and day out. And it sprang to mind as unionized staff at more than 400 CPEs walked off the job Wednesday and launched a general strike.

Some 44,000 families who depend on this critical service have been left in the lurch after arduous negotiations with the government failed to result in a deal. But however inconvenienced, many parents understand that the kind, devoted, hard-working people they entrust their children to have been undervalued for far too long. A Léger poll, conducted for one of the unions over the course of a series of rotating strikes held over the fall, found 44 per cent of respondents are sympathetic to their child's caregivers.

Parents know that raising the next generation is a labour of love. But it's one thing to make sacrifices for your own kids. It doesn't mean those who make a career of nurturing the littlest Quebecers should be underpaid. Working with children may be a calling, but it deserves fair compensation.

Much like those who toil in crucial caregiving professions dominated by women, including teachers, nurses or orderlies in homes for the elderly, early childhood educators have long been neglected. Despite the economic advantages of Quebec's 25-year-old publicly subsidized childcare system to both the state's coffers and parents' pocketbooks, wages have stagnated in recent years.

Now, in the midst of a labour shortage, dearth of available daycare spots, and an ongoing pandemic where they are called upon to put their health at risk, many educators are quitting the profession entirely. There's easier work to be found than wiping noses and quelling tantrums. Crafts, storytime and singalongs — the fun parts of the job — are emotional labour. Dispensing hugs and soothing tears can eventually lead to exhaustion or cause even the best educators to burn out.

This perfect storm has finally forced the government to acknowledge that it can't take the labour of daycare workers for granted any more. It now realizes it needs to do more — much more — to retain, recruit and recognize the importance of staff in CPEs.

Its last offer included salary hikes of 23 per cent to early childhood educators, bringing their wages up to \$30 an hour, Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel said in the National Assembly on Wednesday. After years of unions struggling to wring a little more money out of the public purse, this is significant progress.

The sticking point that triggered the strike, however, is that the proposal to other staff, like cooks, cleaners and administrators, was far less generous. So educators — who know that feeding kids, sanitizing toys and overseeing operations is also overlooked under-valued work — took to the picket lines in solidarity.

The government of Premier François Legault also announced unprecedented incentives this week for those willing to train for hard-to-fill, in-demand jobs in Quebec to address a growing labour shortage. The \$3.9-billion plan offers up to \$475 per week in stipends and scholarships to attract people to study and eventually work in several priority sectors — among them Quebec's daycare network.

The enticements may help lure new recruits to get their diplomas in childcare. But reasonable wages will be needed to keep them there

long afterwards. That may be another factor in the wage hikes put forward to early childhood educators.

The pandemic has exposed the often difficult working conditions and paltry pay of those we depend on to do some of the most important work our society. If we care about our precious children and vulnerable elderly, we must also care for their caregivers, treat them with respect and show how much we value their efforts.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

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