

The coming fight for ten-dollar-a-day childcare ^[1]

Decades of activism paved the way for recent Liberal legislation, but the battle is far from won

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Source: The Breach

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Aug 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Fifty years of activism for affordable childcare is finally bearing fruit.

Last year, the federal government announced the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare Plan, designating \$30 billion to bring parent fees down to \$10 a day in five years or less. An additional \$8.3 billion in annual federal spending on childcare after the initial five-year period is also on the table.

Advocates welcome the new funding, but say Ottawa's plan falls short in crucial areas. A long decline in militant feminist and trade union organizing on the issue means pressure for accountability is notably absent.

After the Childcare Plan was announced, Justin Trudeau used it to shore up support for his minority government, hanging the prospect of losing accessible day care over voters' heads.

Trudeau would have the electorate believe his government designed this ambitious reform to support women's participation in the economy, while positioning himself as a global pioneer in gender equality.

Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Childcare Now, says the \$10-per-day child care is the result of a combination of factors.

She thinks the financial precedent set by the federal government's interventionist COVID strategy made it possible for Ottawa to allocate enough money to tempt the provinces and territories to sit down at the negotiating table.

Ballantyne notes that of late, the push for action on childcare has come from unexpected quarters, including the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the National Business Council. These strange bedfellows of the childcare movement likely want to reverse the pandemic-induced withdrawal of women from the labour force, knowing that if businesses can access a larger pool of workers, upward pressure on wages can be reduced.

But it wasn't just circumstance. Activism, according to Ballantyne, was crucial.

"I want to say it was 50 years of advocacy," Ballantyne, who has 30 years experience in public policy, told The Breach. "Without the advocacy, it wouldn't have happened, but without those other elements, it wouldn't have happened either."

A history of organizing for care work

Today's \$10-per-day childcare plan is a product of collective efforts by childcare advocacy organizations and women's organizations stretching back to the years following World War II.

During the war, daycares received federal funding to free up women with young children to staff roles vacated by soldiers. As veterans returned from the war, funding for wartime daycares dried up.

Toronto activists, operating through The Day Nurseries and Day Care Parents Association—in which women from the Canadian Communist Party played an essential role—led a high-profile campaign pushing the province and city to restore funding for child care.

With support from Communist aldermen, school trustees and other sympathizers, the Day Care Parents Association mobilized thousands to attend public rallies and demonstrations and hundreds to attend City Council and Board of Education meetings and deputations. These efforts were effective in pressuring the provincial and municipal governments in Ontario to continue supporting daycares without federal funding. But the federal government remained unmoved.

In 1966, the Committee for the Equality of Women (later the National Action Committee on the Status of Women), a coalition of 35 women's organizations, was created. Its goal was to pressure Lester B. Pearson's reticent Liberal government to appoint a Commission to investigate the status of women in Canada.

Only after CEW Chair Laura Sabia threatened to bring two million women to Parliament Hill in protest did Pearson's government launch the Royal Commission on the Status of Women on February 16, 1967.

Pearson didn't want the Commission to look too deeply into childcare, knowing many Canadians were still preoccupied with whether it was morally right for mothers to work for pay. But after hundreds of women wrote to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, the commissioners were forced to take on the issue of childcare. This led to the establishment of the National Daycare Act (1970), which transformed the discourse, positioning childcare as something all women were entitled to.

It was a vibrant and expansive women's movement—together with organized labour—that steered the national debate around childcare into the 1980's.

That's when childcare advocacy organizations joined trade unions and women's groups, to become a powerful force in the fight for publicly funded, comprehensive, high quality and universal childcare.

The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) emerged from the National Day Care Conference in Winnipeg in 1982. The CCAAC, which would become Childcare Now, pressured the federal government to intervene more substantively into the provision of childcare.

The organization relied on a two-pronged strategy of direct engagement with the government, submitting briefs to federal commissions and task forces, while also applying external pressure by mobilizing the public through petitioning, postcard campaigns, demonstrations, and lobbying MPs to keep a social democratic vision of childcare alive.

CCAAC activists were successful in getting childcare on the 1988 federal election agenda and working to scrap Bill C-144, which would have introduced new funding restrictions on childcare.

And the CCAAC wasn't alone. In Ontario, Action Day Care, a militant group of parents, teachers, day care workers, and trade unionists, campaigned against day care cuts.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, founded by the Ontario Federation of Labour, and the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, pushed provincial leaders to provide more funding and action on day care. They used direct appeals to governments and mobilized the public to take direct action when needed.

These groups were strengthened by the work of The Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU), overseen by Martha Friendly. Since 1982, the CRRU has produced research that supports a public childcare system, countering talking points from the for-profit childcare lobby.

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, broad-based feminist groups regularly marched on Parliament and participated in disruptive campaigns. But that activism has largely disappeared, as key women's organizations were brought under the fold of federal funding, which began to taper off in 1998.

In 2006, the Conservative government barred groups who participated in advocacy from accessing Status of Women program funding, further constricting women's organizing.

Childcare advocacy groups, funded by trade unions and powered by a small but dedicated roster of longtime activists, have filled the gap left by a loss of momentum in grassroots feminist and women's organizing. Over the past couple of decades, these groups, including Child Care Now and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, have focused on influencing public policy, working with amenable governments, namely the Liberals and the NDP.

By developing childcare proposals, sitting on expert panels on early learning and child care, providing briefs and submissions to sitting governments, and directly lobbying all major federal parties, these groups have kept the vision of universal childcare alive, despite the loss of a fighting women's movement.

Issues with implementation

Although Trudeau's childcare plan is significantly stronger than Paul Martin's failed 2014 pledge, mostly because more money is on the table, the deal may still fail to live up to its promise. There are not enough childcare spaces and a workforce crisis caused by low wages and poor working conditions.

Nora Loreto, an activist based in Quebec City and the author of *Take Back the Fight, Organizing Feminism in the Digital Age*, is critical of the deal. She has pointed out there's an insufficient supply of childcare spaces to meet parent demand.

Loreto says the lack of pressure from a popular movement is preventing the structural change needed to guarantee affordable, universal child care.

"We don't have bodies on the street to make this an issue," Loreto told *The Breach*. She makes the point that, although imperfect, one of reasons the Quebec childcare system has remained affordable and with higher levels of coverage is because of ongoing mobilization by the women's movement. The absence of a militant, working-class feminist movement in Canada means we can expect continued issues around supply—and rising fees for families—over time.

Ballantyne, from Childcare Now, says the federal Liberal's focus on reducing parent fees is one step in what should be a multi-pronged approach to building an affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare system across the country.

Lowering parent fees, she says, needs to go hand in hand with expanding the number of licensed spaces that exist, while also improving quality. "The key to improving quality and expansion is to address the huge workforce problems in the sector," said Ballantyne. "Expansion is not going to happen if the workforce crisis is not handled and solved. Bringing down fees is the easiest part of the puzzle."

Except for Manitoba and the Yukon, both of which have established new and improved liveable wage floors for early childhood educators, most provinces are neglecting to develop a workforce strategy that would retain and attract new staff to make \$10-per-day childcare a reality.

While the Federal government's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework proposes an increase to the "number and proportion of providers with Early Childhood Education (ECE) certification and/or participating in professional development or training" to improve quality in childcare, staffing qualified workers in centres will remain difficult as long as wages remain low.

Without provincial guarantees like a liveable wage floor, the Childcare Plan will do little to improve their wages and working conditions. That's especially true in Ontario, where for-profit operators are eligible to participate in the program and receive public money.

Pressure from the labour movement will be essential for establishing a living wage for childcare staff, most of whom are not unionized.

In the absence of provincially mandated wage grids, unions need to actively unionize childcare centres, while supporting sector-wide action to place pressure on the government to increase funding for better wages and working conditions. Unionizing for-profit centres will be especially important to ensure public money is used for staff wages and not for profits, especially now that Ontario Premier Doug Ford has removed profit caps and reduced public oversight on operator spending to incentivize for-profit operator buy-in.

Creating enough childcare spaces to meet increasing parent demand will be a major roadblock as long as the majority of supply is dependent on provisioning through nonprofit and for-profit providers.

For-profit operator and co-interim director of the Ontario Association of Independent Childcare Centres, Maggie Moser, suggested the federal Child Care Plan came with too many strings for for-profit operators. "It's paternalistic, it's patronizing, it's insulting as a business to have to justify our expenses," Moser told The Globe and Mail.

Conflict over jurisdiction has been an ongoing impediment to adequate childcare supply with no level of government actively planning for and creating childcare spaces.

The federal government's inability to directly establish national programmes—including childcare provision—has been entrenched over time through ongoing decentralization, which relegated the federal government to a coordination role, rather than a leadership role, among provinces and territories.

Problems will continue to plague \$10-per-day childcare—lack of spaces, inadequate funding, labour exploitation and hidden costs for parents. In the absence of pressure from social movements and the support of organized labour, trade unions are the most promising source of energy and coordination necessary to animate feminist and childcare coalitions.

Broad-based advocacy will be crucial for ensuring the Liberal childcare plan doesn't fail to provide quality care for kids and a liveable wage for workers.

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