

# Sectoral bargaining for child care workers would help fix staffing shortages <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

### Excerpts

Many Canadian families are now paying 50 per cent less for child care than they were in 2020 with the rollout of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements (CWELCC), otherwise known as \$10-per-day child care. But affordable and high-quality child care is still a luxury many parents do not have access to because of a lack of available spaces at licensed child care providers.

In fact, Canada needs between 243,000 and 315,000 new child care spots to meet demand—and an additional 32,000 educators to staff these spaces.

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A 2023 Statistics Canada report on Canadian centres serving children aged 0 - 5 years reported that the average hourly wage was \$21.40-per-hour for staff with an ECE credential and only \$17-per-hour for staff with no ECE credential.

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Knowing this, child care advocates, unions, and the public should push for provincial and territorial governments to legislate sectoral bargaining for the child care sector. This would give unions the ability to bargain to establish competitive wage grids and improved total compensation for all child care workers across the entire industry, instead of worksite by worksite.

### **It is difficult to unionize child care workers**

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In 2007, only approximately 23 per cent of regulated child care workers were members of a union.

This is partly because of the high rate of attrition in the child care sector.

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Some are also hesitant to join a union because they worry that parents may think that they are only in the field “for the money”, rather than because of their passion for caring for children.

According to labour studies experts such as Charlotte Yates of McMaster University, unions need to overcome this hesitancy by supporting workers’ relationships with families. This can be achieved by continuing to stress that higher wages for child care workers will also benefit children and their families by increasing quality of care.

### **Child care workers need sectoral bargaining**

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While sectoral bargaining is not common in Canada, where a workplace-centric model of collective bargaining dominates, it does occur in some industries and sectors, including in the public sector and in the construction industry in most jurisdictions.

Notably, Quebec unions used centralized bargaining in 1999 to win average raises of over 35 per cent and a commitment to establish a pension plan and do a pay equity evaluation for all child care staff working in licensed centres, including non-unionized workers.

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### **New Zealand’s Fair Pay Agreement (FPA)**

Canadian researchers Sara Slinn and Mark Rowlinson, have already proposed New Zealand’s Fair Pay Agreement (FPA) as a good model for expanding sectoral bargaining in Canada.

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Child care workers, in this model, would have two pathways to initiate sectoral bargaining under the FPA. The first involves unions winning the right to bargain for workers by passing a representation test where unions demonstrate support from 10 per cent of the sector or 500 workers. Unions have already reached this threshold in certain provinces, including Saskatchewan and Ontario, based on union coverage.

Alternatively, child care workers could become eligible via a “public interest test.” This alternative pathway would allow sectoral bargaining to commence if workers in the sector experience low pay and one other factor related to low wage growth or unfair compensation practices.

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This alternative pathway would be useful to initiate sectoral bargaining for child care workers in provinces and territories where the unionization rate is very low, such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories.

### **Government needs to participate in sectoral bargaining**

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Governments provide the bulk of funding to child care centres and licensed in-home providers signed on to CWELCC.

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This situation can be contrasted with some successful examples from the U.S. where state governments participated in collective bargaining. Unions representing home-based child care providers were able to win health and dental benefits in Washington and a \$40 million training fund in California because of this dynamic.

### **Mandate government participation in sectoral bargaining**

The FPA requires that government be involved in sectoral negotiations if the proposed sectoral agreement includes at least one employee of a public service agency or the education service.

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Australia’s multi-employer bargaining model is an even better model for enforcing government participation. The ‘supported bargaining stream’ option in Australia’s multi-employer bargaining model requires government to participate in negotiations if they are primary funders of a sector and/or occupation.

This mechanism better recognizes the responsibility government has to support workers in sectors and industries it funds—including the child care sector, where most workers are directly employed by nonprofit and for-profit child care centres which receive significant government funding under the new child care agreements.

In June 2023, 12,000 early childhood educators across 64 centres in Australia used the ‘supported bargaining stream’ to win the right to bargain for pay rises up to 25 per cent with government sitting at the bargaining table.

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**Related link:** Measuring matters: Assessing Canada’s progress toward \$10-a-day child care for all<sup>[3]</sup>

Characteristics of child care centres serving children aged 0 to 5 years in Canada, 2021 to 2022<sup>[4]</sup>

Bargaining sectoral standards: Towards Canadian fair pay agreement legislation<sup>[5]</sup>

Childcare workers could be set for a substantial pay rise as multi-employer bargaining begins<sup>[6]</sup>

**Region:** International<sup>[7]</sup>

**Tags:** staff shortage<sup>[8]</sup>

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#### **Links**

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