

Daycare workers demand pay action [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

About 150 daycare workers led a candle-lit march down Ste. Catherine St. last night to decry provincial government's inaction on pay equity and establishing a pension plan for them.

As employers scrambled to reach pay-equity agreements with their employees by yesterday's deadline, unionized daycare workers protesting across Quebec said their real employer - the government, which funds the province's \$5-a-day centres - has walked away from negotiations.

"We've been waiting 20 years for the government to recognize our value in Quebec society and we won't wait any longer," said Veronique Lapierre, president of the Syndicat des Travailleuses en Garderies de Montreal (affiliated with the Confederation of National Trade Unions), which represents about 1,200 unionized daycare workers in Montreal and Laval.

Lapierre said the last time daycare workers demonstrated in Montreal in 1999, the Quebec government agreed to work on pay equity and a retirement plan with daycare-owners and workers.

Pulled Out

But almost three years later, the workers complain, the minister for family and children, Linda Goupil, has pulled out, leaving it to each individual daycare to work out pay equity on its own, and putting off pension-plan negotiations until June.

The government is playing Ping Pong with the workers to save money and allow for tax cuts instead, said Arthur Sandborn, president of the CNTU's Montreal regional council.

"The government adopted the pay-equity law but it seems they never intended to apply it to their own staff," Sandborn said. "It doesn't want to have to foot the bill."

Yet only the government has the means to resolve the issue, Sanborn said, suggesting that to work out a proper salary it should compare daycare workers with those in other "para-public" institutions like hospitals and universities.

"Quebec decides everything, from how many children per worker to how much daycare should cost parents, then says it's up to local daycares to figure out salaries. But it makes sense for the government to decide on this. We're not dealing with Toys "R" Us but with our whole social system."

Lapierre, who has worked at a daycare centre for 12 years, says progress was made in 1999, when the threat of a strike prompted the government to establish a set wage for daycare workers, pushing it up from an average of about \$12 an hour for someone with 10 years' experience to about \$18 today.

But there is still work to be done. Some of those who have worked in day-care for 15 years still have no retirement plan whatsoever, and until 1999 were not able to save much because of their meagre salaries, Lapierre said.

'Have to Be Recognized'

"We believe in our work as educators and we love our work. That's why we do it for so long. But we have to be recognized," she said.

The CNTU has an "action plan" to increase pressure on the government to resolve both issues, possibly culminating in a strike early next year if nothing else works, Lapierre said.

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Region: Quebec ^[2]

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