

Private daycare workers stage day of protest in Montreal ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

MONTREAL - Zahia Krimat and Lila Basli, who both work at Garderie Magique on Gouin Blvd., attended by about 100 children, were part of a frustrated group of unsubsidized daycare workers and operators demonstrating Tuesday in front of Premier Pauline Marois's Montreal office on Sherbrooke St. W.

"We offer the same quality of services as in the public, subsidized system," said Krimat, 45, a daycare worker since 2007. "And even though we have the same level of qualifications as workers in the public system, we are paid \$3 or \$4 an hour less."

About 350 of Quebec's 700 private daycare centres closed their doors Tuesday, as owners and workers headed out to denounce the Parti Québécois's decision to exclude them from bidding on the creation of 15,000 new spaces, a move the province's ombudsperson, Raymonde Saint-Germain, described to La Presse last week as "unfair."

Not only is it unfair to prohibit them from bidding, said private-sector operators, there's little need to build new spaces of any kind. Out of the province's 35,000 existing private spaces, as many as 10,000 are vacant, making them immediately available for use, according to two groups of private, unsubsidized daycares, the Coalition des garderies privées non subventionnées du Québec and Alliance québécoise des garderies privées non subventionnées.

If the government were to convert these 10,000 private spaces into subsidized spaces rather than spend money to create new ones, said the groups, the government would save nearly \$260 million a year. The problem is not one of inferior standards or employees who lack the requisite training, they said. Private centres must meet the same standards of services and training as in the public sector, the private operators said. But faced with competition from the heavily subsidized public centres - parents pay \$7 of the estimated \$40 real cost - private centres are having to close, according to the Quebec federation of chambers of commerce.

Opposition parties weighed in Tuesday, with the Coalition Avenir Québec saying the PQ's approach to daycare expansion is too long and costly and driven by ideology. Québec solidaire, for its part, urged the government to be more flexible. Françoise David, co-leader of Québec solidaire, said that although the CPE system was better for children, parents and workers, private operators should be allowed to bid on the new spaces.

"The priority is on meeting families' needs," said David, adding that needs in the northern part of Quebec might not be the same as in Montreal.

Bruno-Pierre Cyr, political attaché for Family Minister Nicole Léger, said the government has decided that the bulk of the 15,000 new spaces - 85 per cent of them - will be in the form of CPEs because Quebec parents say that's what they want. Léger, who promised Tuesday to meet with private operators in the near future, launched the bidding process last week on the creation of 15,000 new spaces between now and 2016.

"The decision has been made," said Cyr when asked if the private sector's protests would carry any weight with the government. "There are a number of factors that come into play," said Cyr, including parents' desire for \$7-a-day care, the concentration of spaces in the greater Montreal area and demographic predictions across the province. "Eighty per cent of the private spaces in the province are in the greater Montreal region," he said.

"The ministry doesn't have data on the number of spaces that are not being used," Cyr said. "It has data only on the number of spaces for which it issued permits. It's not that we don't believe that there are empty spaces, but we don't have data on them."

-reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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