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CHILD CARE - AN IMPORTANT INDUSTRIAL ISSUE?

In Discussion Paper No. 2 we outlined a number of reasons why unions should be concerned about childcare and why they should take up this issue as a major demand. Some unions were already actively campaigning for childcare for their members; others had listed childcare in logs of claims or were involved in researching members' needs or in negotiating with employers for the provision of childcare centres.

In times of high unemployment such as the present some elements in the community deny the need for childcare and the rights of married women to paid employment. They argue that "a woman's place is in the home" and contend that if the money budgeted by the federal government for childcare were reallocated to pay women to stay at home most women with children would choose to do so, thus leaving more jobs available for men and school-leavers.

In 1973 there were in Australia 1,474,500 married women and 51,600 other females responsible for children aged 0-11 years.⁽¹⁾ The last federal budget for childcare provided \$73,300,000 for the whole of Australia. If this sum were reallocated to all the women responsible for young children each woman would receive about \$48 per year or 92 cents per week.

It is unlikely that this magnificent allowance would tempt many mothers to remain at home. To pay an amount which would enable them to have a real choice would cost those who remained in the workforce an enormous increase in income tax. It would also mean a great reduction in union membership and productivity. Since the number of mothers of children under the age of twelve who are in the workforce is several times that of all people seeking work and since two-thirds of the latter are women, the absorption of all unemployed men into the workforce would not redress the situation - even if the men were willing or able to do the jobs vacated by the women.

Whether we like it or not, women are an integral part of the workforce and without their labour we could not maintain our economy and our standard of living. Industry has always encouraged women to enter the workforce when there has been a shortage of labour but has done nothing to meet the problem of caring for the children of mothers whom the captains of industry regard as a "reserve army of labour" - except during wartime.

"The trade union movement supports equality of pay and opportunity for females" states an ACTU paper on Childcare Centres.⁽²⁾ "Once a child is born it should be viewed as the responsibility of both parents. A father has as much obligation to give up his job to care for his child as a mother has. However our society deems infant-rearing the responsibility of the mother . . . While such a view prevails in our society the lack of childcare provisions must be seen as a barrier to equality of job opportunity which is based on sex. It is important therefore for the ACTU to campaign vigorously for 'adequate' childcare facilities for children of working mothers."

The ACTU evidently accepts Childcare as an industrial issue. However when the Vehicle Builders Employees' Federation applied to the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in 1976 for fully equipped and properly staffed childcare centres to be provided by the employer, Commissioner Clarkson determined that childcare, in the form in which it was presented, was not an industrial matter. The VBEF argued that the car plant had a 'moral obligation' to provide childcare to the community supporting the operation of the plant.

Perhaps childcare would be accepted by the Commission as an industrial issue if a claim were made on employers to subsidize local community centres or payments made by workers for childcare; or if time off were requested for union members to discuss childcare questions and establish childcare co-operatives. After all industry is beginning to realize that daycare is a way of making the workforce more stable and more productive and of improving the company's image.

The Australian Labor Government, in its report "Project Care"⁽³⁾ states that the possibility of employers contributing towards the provision of childcare facilities should be explored. It suggests that employers could contribute funds to local agencies; they "might purchase places in commercial centres for children of their employees; or could join with other companies and establish a joint childcare service for employees". The report recommended that these centres should "not be run for profit but as a staff amenity and the service should not be withdrawn from an employee's child if the employee wishes to change jobs after twelve consecutive months with that employer. Parents using any service . . . should have a role in the management of the service as an effective voice in determining its service . . . Centres run for profit and dependent entirely on income from the fees paid by parents . . . do not ensure that a child's experience is happy and stimulating."

IS THERE A NEED FOR CHILDCARE?

Current community childcare facilities are inadequate to meet parents' needs. There are only about 45,000 places in commercial centres and about 20,000 places in government-subsidized centres throughout Australia. Although the government has recently stated that there are vacant places in private centres, welfare groups say that "commercial centres are being under-utilized because they are not located in areas of greatest need and in some municipalities they are not providing the standard of care being sought by parents. Some commercial centres were so badly run that local council staff and childcare workers would not refer parents to them."⁽⁴⁾ These centres are run for profit and parents have no say in how their children are cared for. The cost of keeping even one child at such a centre is beyond the reach of most working parents. Most centres are understaffed and provide little in the way of stimulation for the children.

In America there is growing concern at the increasing incidence of private companies which run chains of child-minding centres and franchise their operations just like a chain of fast food operations. Studies of profit-making centres have found that "*franchised daycare, chain daycare and all other large commercial enterprises could not (because of their need to return a profit) meet the needs for daycare services in a manner consistent with the public's need for the highest quality services at the lowest possible cost.*"⁽⁵⁾

The American Federation of Labor's childcare policy suggests that profit-making operators should be denied eligibility for federal funds.

THE RIGHT TO WORK

The availability of childcare is the most important factor in determining whether a mother with young children can join the workforce. Without childcare women who must work through economic necessity are often forced to leave their children alone or to use some form of inadequate care; i.e. "they patronize backyard child-minding centres where children are treated like battery hens".⁽⁶⁾

In effect lack of childcare facilities means that women are denied their right to work. In her study of women night-shift workers⁽⁷⁾ Linda Rubinstein found that the need to care for children during the day was the main reason why women worked at night. This problem was highlighted in 1976 when a couple were fired and threatened with gaol because they had left their small children alone at the time when their two shifts overlapped.

During May 1976 114,100 women throughout Australia were looking for work. Of these 8,600 were female family heads and 4,900 were unmarried women with dependent children.⁽⁸⁾

In November 1975 285,900 women responsible for children said they would like work if suitable childcare arrangements were available; 230,800 of these had children under five years of age.⁽⁹⁾ In a poor employment market it is doubly difficult for women with young children to travel to employment offices and prospective employers.

An ABS survey in 1973 estimated that there were 281,700 persons in the labour force who were responsible for children under 6 years of age. 98.4 per cent were women and more than half of these worked fulltime.

The same survey found that 44.9 per cent of the children of working parents were being cared for by friends and relatives (including older brothers and sisters) whereas only 10.3 per cent were cared for in a nursery, creche or care centre. Few school children had access to before- or after-school care facilities and in the holidays 28.1 per cent of persons responsible for children aged 4-11 years stopped work, took leave or worked at night. 8.2 per cent made no arrangements for their children to be cared for during school holidays.

NEEDS OF MIGRANTS

The CURA Report⁽¹⁰⁾ found that most migrant women would prefer non-institutionalized childcare. Australian and British-born women and those from Yugoslavia, Turkey and South America preferred professional persons to mind their children whereas more long-term resident Greek, Italian and Maltese women preferred parents and relatives as child-minders.

Another survey⁽¹¹⁾ found that 70 per cent of migrant mothers had no regular form of childcare at all and over 10 per cent of working mothers would prefer to give up work because of childcare problems, particularly in those ethnic groups where the husbands objected most to childcare.

Table I: PERCENTAGES OF MOTHERS WITH YOUNGEST CHILD UNDER FIVE
(a) Use of childcare; (b) would stop work because of childcare problems; (c) whose husbands objected to childcare

	(a)			(b)	(c)
	Kinder	Minder	No care		
Australian	9.0	18.0	73.0	6.0	23.0
Arabic	5.0	16.0	79.0	6.0	46.0
Greek	9.0	15.0	76.0	12.0	41.0
Italian	7.0	10.0	83.0	17.0	65.0
Spanish	13.0	41.0	46.0	5.0	66.0
Turkish	14.0	54.0	32.0	21.0	81.0
Yugoslav	5.0	14.0	81.0	6.0	20.0

OTHER NEEDS

While the need for childcare facilities for the children of working parents is obvious we should not regard childcare simply as a means of providing the economy with female labour. Supportive children's services are an essential when parents are ill or need to visit a doctor or just have a break from the continuous responsibility of caring for young children. Children also need the stimulation of playing with other children and contact with other adults. The increasing incidence of child abuse and neglect and the disintegration of the family is largely attributed to the isolation of the nuclear family.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO?

Turn the page.

The American Federation of Labor maintains that:

"Unions have always recognized that their commitment to a better standard of living and higher quality of life extends beyond the workplace to other needs of workers and their families. And union leaders have seen . . . that virtually every European country has a more advanced policy than the United States (and, we might add, Australia) toward services to children and families. (12)

In the United States a number of unions have sponsored their own daycare programmes. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America established their first community childcare centre in 1968 after the failure of attempts to get local employers to combine to set up a daycare centre. Following further negotiations a number of clothing manufacturers now contribute a percentage of their total gross payrolls to a jointly-operated health and welfare fund. *"This plan provides care for more children than any other private US organization . . . Union members whose children are receiving daycare benefits are brought closer to the union as they bring and pick up their children . . . (13)*

The union's aims are to:

1. Give members a choice as to what kind of care their children receive;
2. Relieve the parents from worry about what is happening to their children while they are working;
3. Ease the financial burden of the parents while giving children the finest care. (14)

It may not be feasible - or even desirable - in the present economic climate to demand that employers provide childcare centres but unions, if they would use their combined muscle, could demand that the government make more money available for a whole range of childcare facilities which would be accessible to the children of working parents throughout the community.

In addition individual unions could investigate the possibility of setting up childcare co-operatives run by the parents of the children using them and subsidized by employers and/or government.

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