



Union members gather to rally around child care equity issues



Author: Piccolo, Elisabeth
Publication Date: 27 Apr 2012
Source: The Ubyyssey

EXCERPTS:

Over half of UBC's childcare workers are forming a new Childcare Equity Caucus.

Early childhood educators at UBC are members of the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) Local 303. The equity caucus is a grassroots movement from within the union, consisting of 90 of the union's 150 members. The caucus will begin to establish its plan, to see that UBC childcare workers receive more "equitable" wages, at their first meeting on May 1.

"The real issue is childcare equity, and our goal is to have other union members talk about what the union does on our behalf," said Tom Kertes, a key organizer for the caucus. Kertes is a UBC early childhood educator and founder of the Liberation Learning Project, a BC-wide network of child care workers.

Kertes is dissatisfied with the wages currently paid to UBC child care workers. He would like to see UBC childcare workers receive more "equitable" wages, without raising fees or reducing childcare spaces. UBC child care workers are currently paid between \$17 and \$21, depending on their levels of education. Kertes was not willing to say what he considered to be an equitable wage before the caucus meeting took place.

While the caucus is a grassroots movement, its goals can only be accomplished by the union as a whole, through collective bargaining. "Everything is going to work within the union, so obviously, the union is our sole bargaining agent," said Kertes.

But the director of UBC Child Care Services, Darcelle Cottons, said the workers' wages are bound by the the province's net zero mandate, which says no wage increases can take place without decreasing employee benefits.

"Any savings we can find in our collective agreement could be turned into wages, if that were to be approved," said Cottons. "Even though child care places in the city are getting raises, we are stuck in the net zero trap."

Cottons said problems with Canada's child care system go well beyond the pay workers receive at UBC. "This is an employment equity issue," said Cottons.

Cottons also said she thinks the current government child care subsidy program is inadequate. At UBC facilities, child care can cost up to \$1405 per month, per child for full-time care, which cannot be fully subsidized even for low-income parents.

"Because the system runs on user fees," Cottons added, "a person's access to child care is based on their ability to pay."

"Our goal should be to achieve from grassroots a child care system that is affordable, accessible, and based on what communities need."

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Christina Hendricks, president of the Daycare Parent Council and a professor at UBC, has used UBC Childcare services for almost three years and is extremely happy with the care her son has received.

Hendricks explained that, although it is more expensive to care for infants than for toddlers, UBC child care programs keep things fair for parents of children of different age groups. "They balance out the cost, and charge the parents of 3-5 year olds a little more so the brunt of the cost isn't shouldered entirely by the parents of younger babies," said Hendricks.

UBC child care may be high quality, but it's also awfully hard to come by. A one-year-old can only make it to the top of the wait list if the parents signed up at the time of conception, and even then getting a spot is unlikely. Waiting lists for toddler care can be up to two and a half years long. New spots continue to be added, including a part-time care facility going into the new Student Union Building, but they're still unlikely to keep up with demand.

Hendricks just hopes childcare workers of BCGEU at UBC will continue to provide the care she has grown to rely on.

"It's fabulous. Great service, great people, great care," said Hendricks.

-reprinted from the Ubsysey

article

Entered Date: 30 Apr 2012

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