

Unions in child care?

A growing number of child care staff and family child care providers are joining unions to push for better pay and working conditions

By Jean Tepperman and Jessine Foss

Former child care center director Denise Dowell now has a different job: union organizer. In the mid-nineties she was part of a movement to unionize child care workers in Philadelphia, because “everybody was looking for a way to fix the staffing crisis,” she says. “Something needed to be done about wages and benefits.”

Some child development programs have had unions for years, mainly those run by school districts with teachers’ union contracts. But in the last several years, Dowell’s union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) have both stepped up efforts to organize child care workers and family child care providers. The California Federation of Teachers (CFT) is also developing a child care organizing campaign.

All three are lobbying in Sacramento and DC against cuts to funding for early care and education.

Unions in family child care

“We looked for ways that family child care could have more control over decisions that impact us,” says Santa Rosa family child care provider Melanie Rincon—issues like licensing regulations and pay rates for subsidized care. So several local family child care associations in California recently affiliated with the United Child Care Union (UCCU), part of the American State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

As members of UCCU, family child care providers have been visiting legislators calling for “no cuts to child care” and “to make rates more fair and reward high quality,” says Rosie Kennedy, president of the San Francisco Family Child Care Association. Lobbying as AFSCME members gets legislators’ attention, says Rincon, “because it’s a powerful union and because they’re seeing that we’re organized.”

In January, SEIU began its own campaign to organize family child care providers.

The United Child Care Union is part of a coalition pushing for SB 1897 (Burton), which would allow family child care providers to negotiate contracts for state subsidies as a group and “purchase benefits [like health insurance] collectively,” says AFSCME organizer Marie Monrad.

Why unions?

Head Start workers in Merced County joined the SEIU because “we wanted assistance in being able to stand up for ourselves,” says teacher Margaret Moony. “We wanted fair treatment in the way decisions were made,” such as assigning workers to particular sites or shifts.

Tom King, a Yuba City Head Start teacher, felt there was “favoritism” in work assignments and pay rates before he and co-workers joined the SEIU. Other workers say they wanted basic rights like pay for overtime and enough staffing so they can take breaks, meet with parents—and keep the right child/adult ratio.

“Yes, there’s a staffing crisis,” says SEIU field director Josie Camacho, but unionized workers can say “let’s sit down and figure out what [solutions] will work for both of us.”

Union members know that to get higher pay, their best strategy is lobbying for more public support. Meanwhile, though, they sometimes bargain with their employers for pay increases.

More money in the system

“We agree staff salaries are inadequate,” says Pam Sorlagas, director of the L.A. Child Care and Development Council, a state-subsidized child care program. But the state only pays “X number of dollars to serve X number of children.” Paul Miller, director of Kidango child development centers, says he couldn’t meet unions’ “legitimate requests [for pay raises] without bankrupting the agency.”

“It’s not in our interest to bankrupt these agencies,” responds Mary Grillo, executive director of SEIU Local 2028, “but workers want a say in how the money is spent.”

“We’ve never said the employer is the problem,” Dowell adds. “It’s an industry problem. We need more money in the system.” Unions, she says, bring experience and power to advocacy for more public support.

Steps to union organizing

1. A group of employees meet with a union representative.
2. Those workers ask others to sign cards saying they want the union to bargain for them with the employer.
3. If a majority of workers sign the cards, the employer can accept the union right away or ask for a federally supervised election.
4. If the union wins the election, it is recognized as the “bargaining agent” for the workers.
5. Then the employer and a committee of workers and union staffers negotiate a contract.



United Child Care Union members at the Capitol with Assemblymember Mark Leno (D, SF)

Management reactions

When workers launch a campaign for a union, says Moony, “you’re fearful about how the administration is going to react.” Although some child development directors support union efforts or remain neutral, many try to persuade workers to reject the union.

Federal regulations require Head Start agencies to be neutral in union drives. It’s illegal for any employers to punish, threaten, or bribe workers to keep them from unionizing. But some unions say employers have illegally retaliated against workplace union leaders with harassment or even firing; employers deny it. Some employers charge union drives with creating tensions; unions counter that the tensions were already there—organizing gives the staff a say in dealing with them.

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—Margaret Moony, teacher

Life with a union

With a union, “now we have something in writing about the amount teachers are supposed to be paid, by seniority,” says Kelly Nelson, an SEIU member at San Joaquin County Head Start. Moony says workers at her center won a “better system of performance evaluation,” a seniority system for job assignments, and “the right to be part of the budget process” in deciding how to spend cost-of-living increases and federal grants.

Sometimes it’s hard to agree—the L.A. Child Care and Development Council has been negotiating with its union for two years, with the union insisting on a pay increase and management insisting it doesn’t have the money. Child care workers at San Diego’s Neighborhood House Association are fasting and holding press conferences to try to get their

employer to the bargaining table (NHA declined to be interviewed). Meanwhile workers at Children’s Services International in Monterey County have staged several protests against that agency.

Negotiating a first contract can be “intense,” says Dolores Meade, deputy executive director at Options, an L.A. child development program, because “the union and the agency are laying out the relationship they’re going to have.”

Unions say they prefer to cooperate with employers. “Partnership gets you farther than an adversarial approach,” says AFSCME organizer Marie Monrad, “although we will get adversarial if workers’ rights are threatened.”

Once a contract is signed, if employees feel there’s a problem—from too many children in a classroom to unfair treatment of an employee—they can call a union representative to meet with them and the administration. When workers at one Head Start program felt the agency was assigning too many kids to each classroom, they and their AFSCME representative met with managers to work out a solution. Workers say union support also protects them from unfair treatment. “Now the employer has to prove that [an allegation] is true,” says Mexican American Opportunities Fund (MAOF) provider Judy Vega.

But dealing with a union also creates more work for management, says Martin Castro, CEO of MAOF. And administrators may avoid union opposition by just “keeping people who are incompetent or not good with children,” says Miller.

Still, Nelson says, “I think [unionizing] was worth it. Because without the union, we wouldn’t have the option of negotiating with management about the issues. They’d just decide.”

For more information:

- United Child Care Union/AFSCME, 866-236-4444, www.uccunion.org
- SEIU child care campaign: Josie Camacho, 510-568-2500, www.seiucal.org
- California Federation of Teachers, 510-832-8812, www.cft.org