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SHOULD UNIONS BE CONCERNED ABOUT CHILDCARE?

Most union members are parents at some time of their lives. Many unionists, particularly women with young children, are unable to participate fully in union activities because of family responsibilities. Unions should be responsive to their members' needs. It appears to us that one of the most pressing needs is for childcare.

TODAY'S FAMILY

Today's nuclear family is unable to provide full care and developmental experiences for its children because:

1. Most families are small, two-generational and live in separate houses or flats on busy or dangerous streets;
2. Most families do not live near relatives or friends who "in times gone by" would have shared child-rearing with parents;
3. Many families have little interaction with other families living near by with whom they could develop mutual support;
4. Many people have to travel long distances to their work and are away from home for long periods each day.

WHO CARES FOR THE CHILDREN OF WORKING PARENTS?

A survey conducted throughout Australia in May 1973 revealed that:

- * 35% of persons responsible for children under 12 years of age were in the labour force (9,700 males, 528,600 females);
- * of employed persons responsible for children under 6 years of age
 - 44.6% were usually absent from home for eight hours or more on the days they worked;
 - 28.6% worked at home or were usually absent for less than five hours;
- * of persons in the labour force responsible for school children aged 4 to 11 years
 - almost one in eight reported that they had made no after-school arrangements for childcare;
 - more than one in three worked during school hours or at night;
- * of 365,500 children under 6 years of age who were the responsibility of employed persons almost one in three remained at home in the care of relatives or friends and about one in ten attended nurseries, creches, homecare centres etc.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics Ref. 17.11)

In the terms of this survey "responsible" meant working mothers and males with the sole responsibility for children and it is evident from the survey that most of the children of these parents have inadequate care while their parents are at work.

In the past childcare has not been admitted as an issue which vitally concerns workers and their unions because it has been assumed that workers are men (with wives at home) and single women. Whether we like it or not, this is just not true and it is morally wrong to ignore the needs of 35% of the workforce.

WHAT SORT OF CHILDCARE IS NEEDED?

In considering the most appropriate ways of caring for the children of working parents the main consideration should not be the needs of employers or of the economy but the needs of the children.

Children need care which develops them intellectually and socially and which keeps them happy and healthy. Working parents need childcare which is readily accessible, available at all hours when needed and staffed by people who are responsible and interested in the children's welfare - not just in making money out of the service.

The Working Women's Centre believes that community-based childcare caters best for these needs. Every community should have a wide range of childcare services including institutionalized preschools, play groups, family daycare, occasional care, before and after school care and, in particular, neighbourhood community centres which create focal points where people with similar needs and interests can meet and work together to achieve what they want within their communities.

According to a book issued by the Australian Government Social Welfare Commission called "Project Care", "The needs of migrant and minority children will be best met by the provision of integrated community services with additional family support services to be provided at the local level and specialist migrant advisory services at the regional level."

Parents who share in the planning and running of a community childcare centre will have confidence in the type of care received by their children. A local or neighbourhood centre in which the parents can participate ensures a stable environment for the children in the event of a mother changing her job and thus losing access to work-based care.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

Adequate childcare should be a community responsibility subsidized by the Australian Government. However where work-based childcare centres are established the Working Women's Centre supports the ACTU policy that these services should be under the full control of the workers concerned.

Childcare on the job does have serious disadvantages, particularly as it is generally tied to the mother's job. Employers are only interested in maintaining a supply of cheap labour and women will stay in an underpaid job through fear of losing the childcare facilities provided by the employer. This creates a Catch 22 situation where women are afraid to take industrial action in case it jeopardizes the continuity and stability of childcare and reinforces the traditional assumption that childcare is primarily the mother's duty instead of being the shared responsibility of both parents and the community.

EFFECTS OF LACK OF COMMUNITY-BASED CHILDCARE ON UNIONS

Women with children are wary of joining unions because:

- * they fear being called upon to support industrial action which may result in loss of work-based childcare;
- * they cannot attend union meetings which are held out of work hours when they are expected to care for their children.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO TO ATTRACT FEMALE MEMBERS?

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1. Research the needs of female members. The Working Women's Centre would be happy to assist in this if required.
2. Remind male members that female members who pay the same union dues as men are entitled to the same job opportunities and that men should therefore support their sisters and not allow employers to play one sex off against the other.
3. Provide more information to members about how the union works and the responsibilities and rights of members. At present women need positive encouragement in this area as, because of past assumptions that childcare is mainly the responsibility of women, they have tended to leave industrial affairs in the hands of men.
4. Pressurize the Government to provide -
 - (a) community-based childcare (as distinct from preschool centres);
 - (b) tax deductions for childcare.
5. Provide childcare facilities at union meetings and conferences or hold meetings during the day when people with family responsibilities can attend.
6. Press employers to provide:
 - (a) alternative working patterns such as flexitime, part-time work and job-sharing;
 - (b) maternity and paternity leave.