



Working Women's Information Service

The Working Women's Centre, 258 Flinders Lane, Melbourne 3000. Tel: 654 1228

ISSN 0159-3846

Bulletin No. 80/3

July, 1980.

CHILD CARE: AN INDUSTRIAL ISSUE (I)

Child Care isn't solely the responsibility of women. Unions working to gain child care for their members will be improving conditions for all members - men and women.

But, as the A.C.T.U. Charter for Working Women acknowledges, "until such time that male and female workers have equal responsibility for domestic duties and child rearing", work by unions in such areas as child care is directed towards ensuring women equality in the workforce. Until good quality child care is freely available women cannot take an equal place.

HISTORY OF CHILD CARE IN AUSTRALIA

It becomes clear when looking at the history of child care in Australia that children's services have been provided largely to meet the needs of industry and the economy rather than the needs of women, children and families.

Kindergartens were first established in New South Wales in the 1890's. They were set up by well intentioned middle-class women with philanthropic motives, for children whose parents were referred to in the Sydney Morning Herald, 1898, as being from "the lowest strata of society".⁽²⁾ Their aim was largely educational - to remould the values of these children. But working-class parents then sent their children to these kindergartens motivated by a need for child care. However, kindergartens only offered morning sessions.

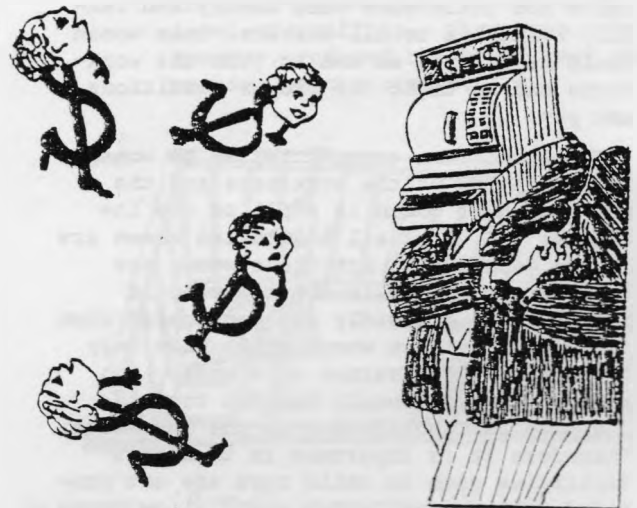
In Sydney and Melbourne day nurseries were opened for extended hours and took children from a few months old. Their establishment coincided with the development of secondary industry in the suburbs.

In reality, the effect of these services was:

- (i) to provide some child care which freed women for industry, and
- (ii) to work consciously to develop and inculcate middle-class values and attitudes in the children being cared for.

In December 1921 the Prime Minister Billy Hughes, speaking at the Carlton Free kindergarten, said that:

"The kindergarten took children whose circumstances ... were not moulded to develop the best habits of human nature ... it took the neglected weeds in the garden of humanity, and, encompassing them with love and kindness enabled the State to reap all that was best in them".⁽³⁾



By courtesy, RIVPLS, Community Child Care

In other words they attempted to mould children to the values which would make them excellent workers for the developing industry.

During the Second World War there was a massive increase in the number of married women responsible for young children who entered the workforce. The Federal Government funded day nurseries to provide care for the children of these women.

"In March 1943 the Federal Labour Minister for Health announced that creches for children of mothers engaged in war work would be established in all states, and that the existing pre-school organisations would be accepted and subsidised by the Government". (4)

The hours of the creche were to be changed from 9-3 to 7-7, the minimum age of the children was lowered and preference was to be given to children of munitions workers. However, as soon as the war ended subsidies were withdrawn.

Since the early 1970's there has been a massive increase in funding for child care. This coincides with a remarkable growth in the number of married women in the workforce and particularly the number of women in the workforce who are responsible for children under twelve.

It is important to note that at no time, not even during the war, have children's services ever adequately covered the needs of families, if only considering the children of working parents. This is very significant. If maternity leave, parental leave and child care were freely and readily available to all workers, then women would be as free as men to join the workforce and to fight for proper conditions and pay.

The Australian economy relies on women making up 36% of the workforce and the proportion of women is still on the increase. 44.7% of all Australian women are in the workforce. But these women are still concentrated in the lowest paid positions in a rigidly sex-segregated workforce. On average women still earn only 66.5%(5) of the average male wage. The industrialists clearly benefit from the divisive sex segregation in the workforce. Therefore it is important to them that facilities such as child care are not provided to an extent which would allow women to become free from the pressures and

anxieties which make them a more obedient and manipulable workforce than they otherwise would be.

Without statistical validation it was claimed that the rate of juvenile delinquency had increased during the war, and its increase was attributed to the lack of full-time mothering although women had no choice during the war. The implication was obvious enough - after the war women must become full-time mothers.

John Bowlby, the author of "Child Care and the Growth of Love", was a theorist on the importance of mothering whose ideas took strong hold. He argued that the early attachment between a mother (or mother substitute) and her child was vital if proper attachment was to take place and that if proper attachment didn't take place the child would be incapable of forming relationships. His theories got a lot of coverage even though his methodology was open to question. His research was based on studies of children in war-time residential nurseries which were coldly efficient, but where children had little opportunity for continuous relationships with adults. He makes a big leap from this situation to draw conclusions about the effects of day care on a child's relationship with its mother. The credence given to someone like Bowlby, despite the weakness of his methodology, indicates that prevailing child care rhetoric does relate to economic pressures.

Eva Cox argues that:

"Child rearing practices as with most other social constructs reflect the values and needs of the society that spawns them". (6)

This can be expressed with a slightly different emphasis: that is to say that the currently expressed values and practices reflect the needs of those who most benefit from the economic processes - that is the owners of industry rather than the needs of the whole society.

With regard to child care, the ideas selected by the press for coverage and the kinds of services funded by government in reality do seem to be intimately connected with the needs of the economy for a segregated, poorly paid and obedient workforce of women. It is not surprising then that in any study of the field of children's services in Australia, you are struck by examples of the trivialisation

of women's work and the question of female oppression. Carole Deagan points out that:

"The fact that many women who spend time and energy on and with young children are not visible is its own measure of the ways in which this work is invalidated".(7)

The work done in caring for children is barely acknowledged and has little status. Therefore in Australia, even where child care is provided, it is often done at the expense of exploitation of child minders. To give some examples:

- (i) In a survey of Footscray workers(8) it was discovered that in almost every case the workers were relying for their child care on either neighbours or close relations who were often paid very little and sometimes nothing for their services.
- (ii) Salaries of child care workers in day care centres reflect the sex segregation and discrimination against women in the paid workforce. In Victoria the gross award salary for an unqualified worker is \$129.50 - take home pay would be approximately \$95 - this is the lowest legal rate payable to an adult.(9) The Hospital Employees Federation is currently campaigning to unionise these workers and to improve their wages and conditions of employment. In some other states the award rates of pay are much better but still well below the average rate for an adult worker.
- (iii) Family day care schemes have mushroomed in Australia in the last several years. These formalise private child minding arrangements and guarantee minimum standards as well as payments to the care givers. Leaving aside questions about the merits or otherwise of family day care as a care scheme, but with reference to the conditions of work of the care givers:-
 - the level of pay in no way relates to salary scales in the paid workforce,
 - the workers enjoy none of the conditions of paid sick leave, holidays, tea or lunch breaks, overtime rates, etc. of their equivalent workers in child minding centres and bear all capital and depreciation costs.

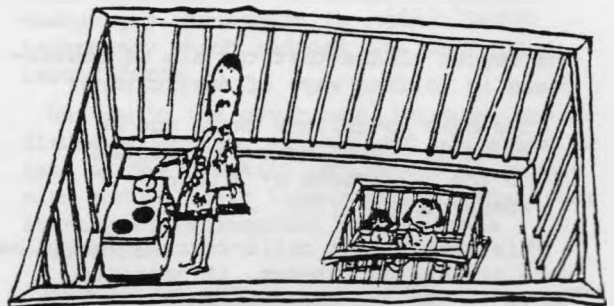
This has been justified by many on the grounds that minding children is not "work" like, say, working in industry - a woman has more freedom, etc. It is open to question whether women minding up to four children, other than her own, under five, have much freedom. But, anyway, what union would agree that because of her conditions of work a woman should accept a wage rate below the minimum level payable to an adult and none of the benefits which workers have won?

In this society levels of pay relate very much to the value placed on the work done. While Family Day Care can be dismissed as "women's work" in the home, the time and labour involved will never be acknowledged. Family Day Care is a form of outwork. And as such the workers suffer similar exploitation to other outworkers. Unions should insist on proper pay and conditions for these workers.

- (iv) The problems of funding lead to incredible pressures towards exploitation. Currently the level of government funding is not adequate to maintain a good quality day care service without:

- charging fees which would exclude all but high income earners, or
- relying on co-opted volunteer (i.e. unpaid) labour, or
- reducing the standard of the service.

There are centres operating in Victoria where staff have reduced the hours of work for which they are paid in order to maintain an adequate level of staffing. They have not, however, reduced the hours they spend working at the centre.



by courtesy 'RIPPLE', Community Child Care

We have seen then that until now:

- children's services have been provided and withdrawn in response to the needs of business,
- theories about child-rearing practices have reflected this response,
- child care services have never been provided adequately to meet the needs of workers, and
- child care services are currently provided in a way which reflect the trivialisation of women's work.

What can be done to change this situation?



by courtesy "RIPPLE", Community Child Care

CHILD REARING - A PRIVATE OR PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The Social Welfare Commission's Report, "Project Care: Children Parents and Community", chaired by Marie Coleman, states that:

"Anthropological evidence shows that in virtually all societies the young child's social development is rarely the sole responsibility of its biological parents. The ways in which this responsibility is shared varied from culture to culture". (10)

Nevertheless, in our society the most strongly held view is that if possible children should be at home with their mother (except perhaps for a pre-school session). It is assumed that there is a father out at work to support the family.

An example of this is expressed in the Federal Department of Education "Report towards the Establishment of Standards in Child Care:", which states that:

"there is no ideal substitute for home and family life for the young child". (11)

The report claims that the aim of researchers is to find ways of duplicating:

"the best conditions which may be found in normal home life allied to the conditions of a good kindergarten". (12)

This theory that child-rearing should be done at home by mothers, if possible, works to isolate parents and places responsibility on individuals alone.



In the survey of workers in Footscray it was very clear that workers strongly believed that child care was their personal responsibility and not a right. When they were unable to find appropriate care they felt inadequate and guilty.

People argue for this view of child-rearing in terms of parents' freedom and control. One expression of this philosophy is the proposed voucher system for education which it is claimed will allow individual parents the right to choose the most appropriate kind of education for their children, though it does not clarify how such education will be established and maintained. Such freedom is posited against the idea of society taking responsibility for child care because the model sets up as opposites social responsibility versus individual parent's freedom. Public responsibility is seen as intervention. This model depends on the view that society is separate from the people in it. On the other hand you can take the view that society is people and families together. In this view, if society accepts responsibility for child-rearing, this would not imply reducing the power of individual parents. Their isolation and powerlessness would be reduced through sharing and working together to establish the children's services they need, whose management and control is in their hands.

It is always important to explore the implications of prevailing philosophies. Why in Australia today does "normal" mean two or three children at home with mother during the day when in fact close to 50% of all women work and 65% of married women work and 10% of all families have only one parent. By May 1977, 40% of people responsible for children under 12 were in the workforce. (15)

How can the definition of "normal" prevail in the light of these facts when it serves to drive a wedge between working and non-working mothers. Non-working mothers defend their isolation and feel threatened by women in the workforce whilst working women feel guilt that they cannot provide properly for their children. It justifies the emphasis in child care funding which is repeatedly placed on provision for the underprivileged and/or working-class parents. That is government or public responsibility is acceptable only for those who are seen as unable to fully shoulder their own private responsibility.

The privatisation of families and child rearing is of significance in keeping women isolated and anxious about working, so that sex segregation of the workforce is more easily maintained and so that women will more easily be pressured to go quietly from the workforce if the level of demand for their labour is reduced.

To protect the rights of their female members to a place in the workforce and in order to establish full and adequate children's services unions should demand that these be seen as a public responsibility - in the way that education is now accepted as a public responsibility.

MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES

The Footscray survey revealed that the best situation for workers and their children was one which they could control and which they could have trust in. Parents will not willingly use services which do not reflect their views of good child rearing practices.

To protect the rights of their members who are users of children's services, unions should insist that management of the services is in the hands of the users and the staff.

It has been argued that this question of user control is a middle-class concept but inappropriate for workers who are too exhausted to take control of their own lives. There is a difference between being co-opted for extensive time-consuming and exhausting volunteer labour in the name of parent management and having services where decision-making processes and philosophy allow parents to feel that the service or centre is theirs. Unions could work to gain for their members the right to take time off to be involved in the management of child care services.

CHILD CARE AS A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

In the early '70's there was a call for free child care. You almost never hear this now - people have all been convinced that child care is an expensive service that this economy can't afford. (This begs the question of whether we can afford not to afford it.)

Let's consider this argument. Even the most conservative economists are uncertain about what is the most appropriate way to deal with the economic crisis facing western industrial economies today.

We should be very clear that decisions for one economic strategy or another are political decisions reflecting certain sets of values.

Our present government has taken the view that to reduce inflation and improve employment it should reduce the deficit in government spending.

BUT the government has increased spending on concessions to business. To achieve this - a cut in government spending on the one hand but an increase in expenditure on business concessions on the other - the government has cut back on spending in health, welfare and education.

In the same period:

- * company profit levels have increased,
- * government assistance to companies through the investment allowance has increased, and
- * the percentage of profit paid by companies in taxes has been reduced.

Therefore, the government's current economic policy decisions definitely benefit business interests. This might be valid if it reduced unemployment and increased the share of national wealth going to all people. Instead, the investment allowance encourages investment in labour-saving technology which reduces the need for a labour force.

Why can't the government increase expenditure on health, welfare and education to take up the slack in employment as companies reduce their labour force? These are strategies recommended by reputable economists.



by courtesy A.C.S.P.A. seminar booklet
"Child Care: An Industrial Issue"

UNIONS AND CHILD CARE - FROM NOW ON

This paper has argued that in the past the provision of children's services has been closely linked to economic requirements. This being so, we must be wary, for today we are facing changes in the economic patterns. It seems likely that the introduction of technology will reduce the places for unskilled labour in the workforce.

Young, female school-leavers experience the highest rate of unemployment. In December 1979 the rate was 21.5%. (14)

In this context an interesting quote (when considering the future of children's services), comes from an article on child care written by Kenneth Davidson and published ten years ago in *The Australian*:

"There are plenty of precedents in the past twenty years of Liberal Government in which policies put forward as essentially welfare measures, have in fact been not too subtle methods of redistributing income from the poor to the rich". (15)

And in the same article:

"On purely economic grounds there is probably a case for the provision of creches going to women who are highly paid and therefore can contribute most to the economy; and depending on which way Mr. Gorton's vague pronouncement is given this is exactly what could happen". (16)

When considered in the light of the current levels of funding to subsidized child care services we find that the funding is so low that centres are heavily pressured to charge high fees and thereby exclude many low income earners.

If the need for women in the sex-segregated workforce declines antagonism might well develop against the provision of child care services.

Thus to protect the rights of women in the workforce, to defend their rights to equal opportunity and to defend the rights and conditions of all workers these moves should be strongly resisted. In this time of high unemployment we must be particularly aware of the need to ensure that old values are not resurrected and women are not forced out of their jobs by a lack of child care facilities.

Now more than at any other time, child care must be seen as an industrial issue which affects all workers - unions must meet this challenge to protect their members' accessibility to the workforce. Child care must become a public responsibility.

WHAT UNIONS CAN DO

- * Make clear public statements that they regard child care as a right for their members, a pre-requisite of the right to work.
- * Document the specific needs of their members to ensure that services developed are appropriate to workers' needs.
- * Ensure that their members are aware that the union is taking an active interest in the child care issue. Members will know then to approach the union for help regarding child care.
- * Try to have inserted in their awards:
 - parental leave when children are sick, and
 - time off on a regular basis for parents to attend management meetings of their children's child care service.
- * Bring pressure to bear on the government and employers to provide an adequate level of funding for the development of children's services.
- * Demand that the conditions and pay of child care workers, at home and in child care centres, should be adequate and fair.
- * The union movement should oppose child care for profit.
- * Demand that child care is accepted as a public responsibility.

NOTE: The A.C.T.U. Working Women's Centre child care co-ordinator, Katherine Henderson, is available to assist unions in developing programs to establish children's services for their members. Unions should feel free to contact her at the Working Women's Centre.

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