State of the Union

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More than two hundred day care workers around the state of Massachusetts - teachers, cooks, office staff, coordinators, maintenance workers - are members of a union known as District 65, UAW. They work at ten different centers: Hampshire Community Action Commission, Northampton (an agency which includes a day care center, a Head Start program and a family day care system); Walden Sq. Children's Center, Cambridge; the Children's Center, Brookline; and the seven centers which comprise Associated Day Care Services, in Cambridge, Chelsea, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain and Dorchester.

Locally in the greater Boston area, the move to unionize day care workers began in 1973 with a group known as BADWU (Boston Area Daycare Workers United), which formed in 1973 "to share work experiences and offer mutual support and encouragement in order to improve conditions at our centers." * BADWU meets monthly, acts as an organizing committee for District 65, and produces the rainbow-colored BADWU News, "which combines political, legislative and union news with practical skill-sharing information." *

Contract negotiations are in progress at five other centers, and workers at about a dozen centers are currently conducting "union drives" to gather support and to gain recognition of the union by their administrator or board.

But what does all this mean? Stereotypes, doubts and confusion about unions abound. Did you say UAW? The United Auto Workers? Doesn't this mean going out on strike? Bitterness between two sides rather than working out problems peacefully? Outsiders hanging in, collecting dues and disappearing? Teamsters? Jimmy Hoffa? Outrageous money demands which a day care center doesn't have the budget to meet?

Or does joining a union mean instant change? A windfall of high pay and benefits? Professionalism, success, glory? Bringing the government to its knees? Day care for everyone?

Why a Union?

We talked to workers at several of the unionized centers to hear their reasons for taking this step. The responses were as varied as day care programs themselves are - different needs, sizes, policies, problems and strengths - but several themes occurred:

1) Decision making: Several people complained of having no written personnel policy or job descriptions at their centers before, and many felt they had not been offered a chance for involvement in setting policy or proposing changes. As a result, policies could change suddenly, or shift month by month, year by year; budgets were drawn up and passed without staff participation; staff could be fired or laid off without due process; grievances had no clearly constituted channels for resolution; hiring policies could be sexist, racist, or discriminatory in other ways; in some cases, staff were not even encouraged to hold meetings or become more knowledgeable about the center's operation.

2) Classroom/Working Conditions: It should be no surprise that many day care workers talk about stress and overwork: few or no breaks (lunch hour and naptime are not breaks!); working without substitutes when a co-worker is out; being asked to work with larger groups of children than is legal; having to choose between working overtime and letting things go undone to the point of chaos; working as aides or "lessers" in a hierarchy and receiving little respect or opportunity for growth; feeling caught between the expectation to be a professional educator and the more mundane realities like plunging the toilet and mopping the floor.

3) Wages and Benefits: One teacher said that she had not received a raise in five years. Even several who had received raises felt they were unpredictable, irregular and out of step with inflation. It is still typical for day care workers to be paid between minimum wage and $5 an hour. Some complained that administrative salaries were far too high in comparison with their own.

Many did not have health coverage, or had only partially paid coverage which they had to supplement out of their small paychecks. One teacher, a parent of two children herself, had been paying $6 a month for her family health plan (which is now paid by her employer). Others mentioned inadequate short vacations, or too few sick days compared with their exposure to illness.

*from the organizing leaflet available from BADWU/ District 65 UAW, 636 Beacon St., Boston MA 02116. (617) 262-6333
4) Political Goals/Unity/Morale: Significantly, however, many workers we interviewed stressed that they were not trying to pressure their individual centers to offer great monetary gains. Instead, they see the union as a long-range political ally whereby the day care community as a whole can more effectively advocate for better funding and expanded services. Day care staff, frequently expressed an awareness that administrators are trying hard to guide their agencies through an economic squeeze, and that parents too feel exploited and hard pressed to pay the cost of care.

For many workers in day care this long-range goal is connected with morale: how to upgrade the status of day care work, how to make it a career one can stay in for years, how not to burn out and give up. Many felt that unions had done just that in the past twenty years for public school teachers.

BADWU's leaflet expresses it this way: "Over time we came to realize the need for influence at the top — with the government agencies who control daycare funding. Together we reached the conclusion that the best way to gain influence, as well as the most direct method of improving conditions at our centers, was through the strength and unity of a union."

This long-range view meets with plenty of skepticism too — but the frequency with which it is expressed at unionized centers shows a good measure of cooperative spirit: organizing not simply in self-interest but for the sake of day care as a whole.

In 1978 BADWU (Boston Area Daycare Workers United) chose to pursue organizing work with District 65, an independent union based in New York. At that time 65's Boston office was primarily involved with clerical workers (its largest shop is Boston University), but 65's organizers expressed an interest in long-term involvement with day care.

BADWU members were impressed with several features of this union: its democratic structure (whereby rank and file members have a direct role in setting union policy, rather than receiving decisions from the top down); its tradition of organizing both small and large workplaces where no unions had ventured before (some unions are content with achieving a certain membership goal, and then sitting back); its progressive record in political struggles such as civil rights; and the benefits package it offers through its Security Plan.

In the spring of 1979 the staff of the Salvation Army Day Care Center in Dorchester became the first to win an election to unionize with District 65. Since then, ten other agencies have also joined, most recently Newton Community Services, which includes three day care centers and a family day care system. Newton workers voted 38-1 in favor of the union on May 13.

In 1979 District 65 affiliated with the United Auto Workers, mainly because members saw a need to combine forces with a larger union for more effective lobbying and political strength. Since the UAW is also a democratic union, 65 has been able to remain an "autonomous local".

Two other unions have also been involved in Boston-area day care, but to a lesser extent: 1199 (hospital employees' union) and 925 (a union targeted mainly to women clerical workers). Both these unions have organized day care workers who came to them, but neither has expressed an interest in actively reaching out to day care.

Experiences and Gains

Naturally, many day care workers first became interested in the union primarily in hopes of better pay and benefits. A stumbling block for some is the question of paying 1-3/4% of their gross income as union dues. Is it worth it? Has the union made a difference in "real dollars and cents"?

Many people we interviewed answered "yes" without hesitation. Staff members at HCAC/Northampton pointed to pay increases from $3.93 to $5.50 an hour in the past year. Others admit that financial gains have been small, because their day care centers are tied to a precarious funding system and cannot necessarily find "extra" money in their budgets to give to workers. In general, however, unionized workers felt that a contract guaranteed them more opportunity to be involved in their center's budget process, and that financial questions would now be decided more openly. Greater participation has frequently led to higher morale.

Probably the most tangible gain for many 65 members has been in health care. Some had no health coverage at all before; others had a plan partly paid for by their centers; still others had full health plans before but preferred the 65 Security Plan. Many mentioned health care as a strong motive for unionizing.

The Security Plan is fully paid by the employer; health costs cannot be partly passed on to employees. Depending on the health care package bargained for in the center's contract, the employer pays between 8-1/2% and 12-1/4% of each worker's gross pay. At the maximum rate workers and their families are covered for full medical and surgical care, hospitalization and disability, as well as some coverage for psychiatric care, maternity, dental services, prescription drugs and eyeglasses. Members can choose their own doctor, and unlike many plans, there are not separate rates for individual and family plans.

One teacher pointed out that with her family health coverage she was saving about $90 a month. She felt that now it was much more likely that she could continue working in day care; before then, ironically, the day care field has never offered her much encouragement or incentive as a working parent.
For many, the non-monetary advantages of belonging to a union have been important too. Especially for workers who previously had no written job descriptions or personnel policies, a negotiated contract has made expectations clearer and roles more definite. A contract guarantees that policy or staffing changes, extra workloads, or other "surprises"—a frequent complaint among day care staff—cannot happen without workers' involvement. In matters of center policy, not only in budgeting, the staff often has a greater sense of leverage, a sense of being able to speak with a more unified voice—and a confidence that "management" will listen.

One center, which had never had a written grievance procedure, drafted one into its contract soon thereafter, when a serious staffing dispute arose and the grievance procedure worked well in resolving it, workers felt relieved for having a clear policy rather than a middle of unwritten "tradition".

There are a few problems, of course, that have not been solved so readily. Among these is the question of who fits into the "bargaining unit" at a given workplace, and who does not. Each workplace negotiates a definition of its bargaining unit in the contract, and in some programs part-time workers (cleaners and cooks, for example, as well as teachers) are not union members, or do not receive full benefits, because of their limited hours. In addition, some directors have purposely hired substitutes or temporary workers specifically to avoid the need of paying union wages and benefits.

Another case is that of the "sub-contracted" worker; for example, in family day care systems which have unionized, the central staff are members of the bargaining unit, but not the family day care providers themselves. This has caused some disappointment among providers who thought they were going to be able to join the union.

Related to this issue is the decision each workplace makes about whether union membership for all staff is a choice or a requirement; i.e. an "open shop" in which each staff member chooses individually whether or not to join, or a "closed shop" in which everyone is required to join. (Note that all eligible staff at a unionized program receive the same benefits whether they join or not.) This issue has sometimes created tension, or feelings of being coerced.

One successful solution for several centers has been to opt for a "modified shop", in which the present staff chooses whether or not to join, but all staff hired thereafter automatically become members. One teacher mentioned that at first she had felt very hostile toward the union; she felt pressured, and she refused to join. After a few months, however, she felt that unionizing had brought positive changes—and she didn't feel right about receiving the same benefits as everyone without paying dues—so she became a member.

Some Administrators' Views

In talking to five administrators of unionized centers and agencies, we received a wide range of opinion about the union's role and its effects on the operation of their programs.

One felt that the experience had been primarily negative because of tensions among the staff, not between staff and administration. He considered the contract negotiation process "amicable", and felt the union had been very responsible in its financial demands. For him the negative experience was that pro-union staff had become "intolerant" over the issue of "control of the agency". He also considered it naive to think that the union could help the agency in its advocacy efforts; that on the contrary, "cost-effectiveness is what the state will look for in awarding contracts."

Two other administrators responded quite positively to unionization. One felt that a union contract had helped her agency negotiate for a better rate in its DSS contract, and hoped that the union would take an active lobbying role with state agencies. Another felt that "over the next couple of years the union will really help the agency run more smoothly; it's already helped in pulling people together."
One woman we spoke to was the administrative coordinator of a cooperative center, and since she did not have sole authority in hiring and firing, she too was in the bargaining unit as a union member. She has found this a very difficult role to maintain: trying to represent both staff and parents impartially. She also feels that she and the three other office staff have not been well represented in negotiations, which have focused more on the needs of the 23 teachers. An unresolved issue at her center is whether administrators should be paid more than teachers; meanwhile, she feels victimized because her benefits have not gone up much by comparison with the rest of the staff. She is now considering not being a union member, although she stressed that she still strongly supports unionization for the staff.

One director talked at length about the more formal definition of roles in the agency which unionization had introduced. "Collective bargaining," he said, "by definition means an adversarial process between two parties - 'management' and 'labor'. It places some constraints on what were more familial relationships, and it's hard work; it's not an automatic positive step for staff. But to the extent that people can come to grips with this forced role definition it can be nothing but positive in the long term. In the short term, rules that have become comfortable over the years get shifted, and change is difficult, at times painful." The most positive benefit of the union so far, he felt, was greater communication among the different centers in the agency.

**The Day Care and Human Services Local**

As their membership in the union has grown, day care and other human service workers have formed their own "local" within District 65 which carries on organizing work and political action specific to human service issues - as well as sponsoring social events and opportunities for training and skill-sharing.

As Bruce Johnson (chair of the Local, and a teacher at a unionized center) said, "We can't solve our problems sitting in our individual centers. The union is a vehicle for workers to get together. And we're interested in cooperative efforts with other child care advocacy groups." The Political Action Committee of the Local aims to keep members informed about political issues in day care and to mobilize support. The Organizing Committee (which has grown from BADWU and the staff of newly unionized centers) carries on the work of organizing more centers into the union, and continues to produce the bimonthly BADWU News.

**Isn't This a Bad Time to Unionize?**

In such a politically turbulent year one might ask, "Isn't it selfish to unionize at a time like this?" Nancy de Prose, day care organizer for District 65, answered this way: "There's never going to be an easy time or a perfect time. We've lived through a lot of yearly crises - but when we're talking about who subsidizes day care, we have to remember that the low pay of day care workers is a big 'hidden' subsidy. We know the financial limitations of individual centers, and we're taking part in the fight for public funding. We don't seek situations which simply pressure parents to pay more."

Another union member pointed out that concern for the children has remained the staff's top priority during a very grueling negotiating process: "Otherwise, if it had been machines we were working with and not children, there would have been a strike a long time ago."

What are some long-term goals of the day care union? Bruce Johnson pointed to three goals in which District 65 will take part:

- "obtaining stable, affordable, high-quality child care for families throughout the state,
- making child care for employees an active issue in the labor movement, and
- making day care work a career one can stay in for a long time, with livable wages, health care, working conditions which don't burn people out - and pensions!"

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**STEPS TO UNIONIZING**

*(from the BADWU News)*

1. See the need to improve working conditions and the quality of child care.
2. Contact other workers involved in unionizing to get information.
3. Talk to your fellow workers.
4. Sign union cards.
5. Union recognition can be demanded from your employer when 30% have signed cards. However, you should gather support for unionization from as many workers as possible.
6. If your employer recognizes the union, skip to step 10.
7. If your employer refuses to recognize the union, a petition for an election is filed with the State Labor Relations Board (SLRB).
8. Hearings are conducted to determine the bargaining unit. If employer still refuses to recognize the union, a secret ballot election is held.
9. When the majority of workers vote YES to the union, the SLRB certifies your union as the sole collective bargaining agent.
10. Workers form a negotiating committee and draw up a contract proposal.
11. Collective bargaining begins. A committee of workers and a union rep. meet with employer's committee to negotiate contract.
12. The contract goes back to the general membership for approval and both sides sign the agreement.