

THE INFANT CARE CRISIS:

What Can Unions Do?

BY JENYA CASSIDY

The joy that Judy and Charley Blanche felt at the birth of their second child was somewhat dampened by the knowledge that Judy had less than six weeks to bond with her baby and find suitable child care before returning to work. “It feels like a dark cloud is hanging over me,” she said. “I looked for a child care center that would take both the new baby and our two-year-old but there were no slots for infants anywhere we could afford.” Judy, a sales manager in Boston, got pregnant less than two months into her current job and, therefore, did not qualify for the 12 weeks of job protection under the Family and Medical Leave Act. “I’m getting scared. We need my income but I’m having doubts that we’ll find something acceptable by the time I need to go back.”

The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies Report, “Breaking the Piggy Bank,” claims the high price of infant care

“I decided on a center because I loved it. It was in a great location, very clean, great quality. Then, they told me the price and I flew out of there! Three hundred dollars a week – I can’t do that!”

— Mother from Washington D.C. (NACCR&R Report)

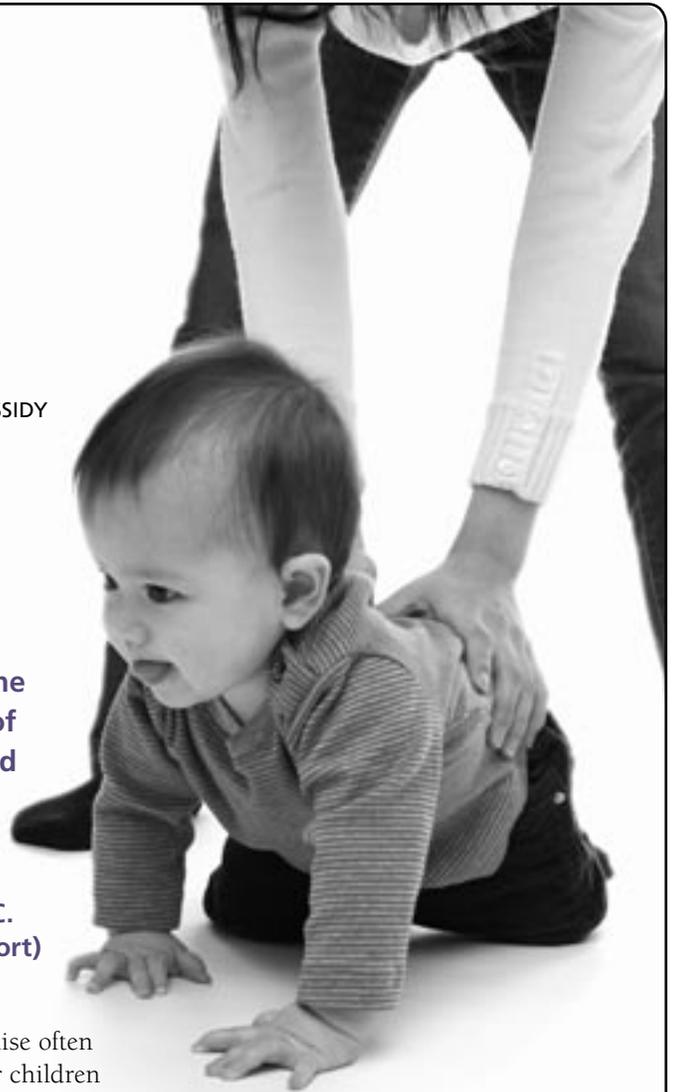
forces parents to compromise often on the quality of care their children receive. Studies show that high quality care; care that is safe, stable and developmentally appropriate, is vital for future success in school and fewer social and behavioral problems. According to child development specialist, Helen Neville BS, RN,

one-on-one attention and intimate connection is essential for an infant’s positive development. But what if only a small segment of society can afford to stay home or pay for quality care?

UNIONS GET INVOLVED

Most parents, like the Blanches, approach the high cost of child care as a personal problem. But in New York City, the lack of affordable, quality child care became such a crisis for working parents that unions began to take action. A group of unions including SEIU 1199, AFSCME, CWA, TWU, UFT and many others formed a coalition to fight for subsidies for low income parents, more centers to increase capacity and paid family leave to help parents stay home longer to bond with newborn babies.

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What pushed the unions to focus on child care? According to Ralph Palladino, 2nd Vice President of Local 1549, DC 37, AFSCME, it happened for AFSCME when they started looking beyond the “top four” bargaining issues – wages, job security, pension and benefits. “I got involved (in the child care issue) when I noticed that so many members were brought up on charges for missing work due to child care problems. People couldn’t find affordable care, their children were sick or their provider left. Management didn’t want to hear it and people were getting written up.”

Moira Dolan, Assistant Director of Research for DC 37 said, “I started looking at our demographics and noticed that a large percentage of members had dependents born between 1994 and 2007. You know that child care plays a big role in these families’ finances.” The New York Union Child Care Coalition was instrumental in the successful campaign to win state child care subsidies for union members by increasing the amount of money a family could make and still be eligible. “Now because of the unions, a lot of these parents spend half of what they used to spend on child care.”

A CHILD CARE CENTER FOR MEMBERS

The union opened a child care center for its members at Bellevue hospital in New York City. Lillian Roberts, Executive Director of DC 37, sees the center as a model for the rest of the country. “What better way to lighten the load for our members than to provide a quality, affordable and safe child care center right where they work?” she said. “We know that the European industrial democracies, such as France, Sweden and Germany, dedicate substantial resources towards providing child care to aid their citizens who do the hard work of nurturing the next generation.”

Like many work and family issues, finding child care can seem like a personal problem: a family either has the money for top quality or it doesn’t. After working with the Coalition to secure quality child care for more families, Lillian Roberts of DC 37 sees it differently: “The union’s ultimate goal is for safe, clean affordable child care to be available to every family that needs it. This is not a wild-eyed dream: We know it can be done.”

HERE’S HOW UNIONS CAN HELP MEMBERS WITH CHILD CARE:

1) Educate: Make information on local child care resource and referral agencies and quality child care available to members.

2) Bargain: Get child care assistance from employers – parents can’t work without it. Many unions have done this successfully.

3) Advocate for state assistance for low income members:

Work with child care advocates on state and national policies that help low income families with child care costs.

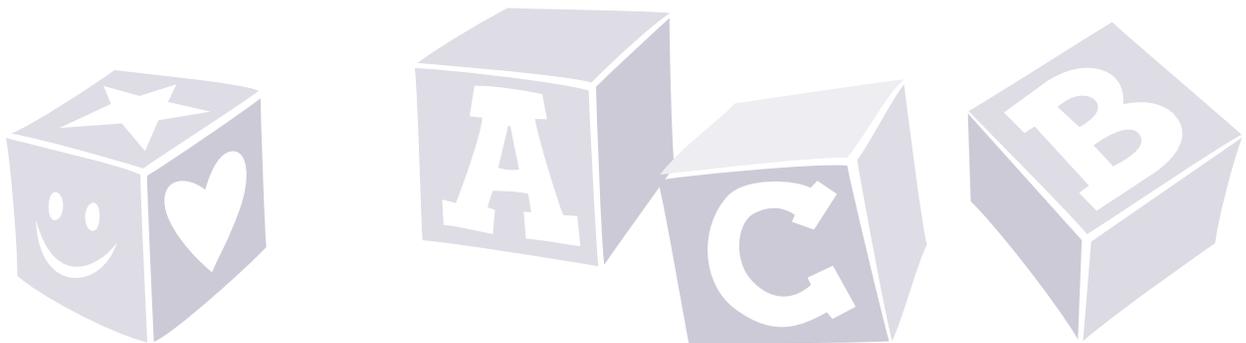
4) Lobby for paid family leave:

Promote the expansion of FMLA and paid family leave in your state. Child care advocates worked alongside union activists to pass California’s paid leave law.

For more information, go to our website: www.working-families.org

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— Moira Dolan



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