Understanding caring, organizing women: how framing a problem shapes union strategy

Published by:

$SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

etui.

European Trade Union Institute

Additional services and information for *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://trs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://trs.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://trs.sagepub.com/content/16/3/399.refs.html

Understanding caring, organizing women: how framing a problem shapes union strategy

Charlotte AB Yates

Full Professor of Political Science and Labour Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario

Summary

Unions need more women members in order to grow. To organize and represent women, however, unions have to understand their different identities, issues and relationships at work. Using the concept of *framing*, in a case study of union organizing amongst child care workers, this article argues that unions struggle to define the scope and nature of a problem in ways that appeal to prospective women members and mobilize support for union-proposed solutions. The article explores how one union attempts to organize child care workers from diverse employment settings with divergent interests into a coalition with parents behind demands for a universal child care system.

Résumé

Les syndicats ont besoin de compter davantage de femmes dans leurs rangs s'ils veulent s'agrandir. Pour syndiquer et représenter les femmes, ils doivent toutefois comprendre leurs différences d'identité, de problèmes et de relations au travail. En utilisant le concept du *framing*, ou définition du cadre, dans une étude de cas sur la syndicalisation parmi les gardiennes d'enfants, le présent article montre que les syndicats luttent pour définir la portée et la nature d'un problème en utilisant des moyens qui constituent un attrait pour les futures affiliées et mobilisent tout soutien aux solutions qu'ils proposent. L'article examine également comment un syndicat tente de syndiquer des gardiennes d'enfants travaillant sous des formes d'emploi très différentes et avec des intérêts divergents et de créer une coalition avec des parents, au-delà de la simple revendication d'un système universel de garde d'enfants.

Zusammenfassung

Gewerkschaften brauchen mehr weibliche Mitglieder, um zu wachsen. Um Frauen zu organisieren und zu vertreten, müssen die Gewerkschaften jedoch ihre verschiedenen Identitäten, Belange und Beziehungen bei der Arbeit verstehen. In diesem Beitrag wird das Konzept des *Framing* anhand einer Fallstudie über eine Gewerkschaft im Kinderbetreuungssektor untersucht und der Schluss gezogen, dass Gewerkschaften sich schwer tun, die Tragweite und das Wesen eines Problems in einer Weise

Corresponding author:
Charlotte AB Yates, 34 Bond Street South, Hamilton, ON L8S 1S7 Canada.
Email: yatesch@mcmaster.ca

zu formulieren, die weibliche potenzielle Gewerkschaftsmitglieder anspricht, und Unterstützung für die von der Gewerkschaft vorgeschlagenen Lösungen des Problems zu mobilisieren. Der Beitrag untersucht den Versuch einer Gewerkschaft, MitarbeiterInnen von Kinderbetreuungseinrichtungen in unterschiedlichen Beschäftigungskontexten und mit unterschiedlichen Interessen dazu zu bringen, sich gemeinsam mit den Eltern für eine universelle Kinderbetreuung einzusetzen.

Keywords

Union organizing, child care workers, framing, representation, community

Organizing women workers into unions has become a strategic priority for many labour movements around the world. With historically low rates of union membership and growing rates of labour force participation, women offer unions scope for significant membership growth at a time of general national union membership stagnation and decline (ILO, 2000). Union density trends show that women's union membership is on the rise across a diverse range of countries and indicate that women are much more likely than men to account for increases in union membership (Visser, 2006).

Yet union understandings of, and hence responses to, women, vary considerably across and within national labour movements. Some unions approach women as workers like any other who are employed in particular sectors doing certain types of work. In this version, women are understood to be labour market actors like men. This differs from conceptions that recognize women as having distinctive issues that they bring to the workplace or union table, and that tend to arise out of the specificities of women's relationship to the public and private spheres, and in particular the family. Finally, some unions understand that women are constituted of a broad set of social and cultural differences that shape their collective identities and ways of acting. Whichever particular conception of women becomes dominant shapes how unions approach the question of what constitutes women as distinct from men. These conceptions then influence the strategies unions deploy to organize and represent women. Interpretations of the meaning of woman also shape how we, as analysts, reflect on these union strategies and actions. How we understand or *frame* our conception of women as the subject of our actions or analysis therefore matters.

In this article, I explore how unions' understandings or ways of 'framing' women shape union organizing and representational strategies through the analysis of a case study of an organizing drive amongst child care workers in British Columbia. After a brief conceptual discussion of the notion of framing and action, the article turns its attention to the ongoing efforts of the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) to organize child care workers working in homes, day care centres and as domestic workers or live-in nannies. The article shows how the union has attempted to build solidarity amongst workers and with parents, by framing these workers as caregivers with common interests to parents. The union has also adopted new strategies of union membership that overcome the isolation of this work and the union institutional barriers presented by standard union membership. This framing by the union marks an important shift in how the labour movement approaches issues of women and unions. The union's framing of child care work and workers around conceptions of 'caring labour' reflects the influence of feminist ideas on the union's understanding of women's role in the domestic sphere. Secondly, by seeking to adjust the structures of union membership, the BCGEU is attempting to overcome women's non-standard relationship to the labour market which represents one of the most significant barriers to women's membership in unions.

Understanding womanhood

For decades, women were invisible in the world of unions, as well as work. This does not mean that women were not members of unions. Nor does it mean that women did not work. Rather, women have been confronted within unions by complex and often conflicting understandings of their relationships to paid work and the labour market. These understandings have influenced whether the work that women do is validated, and how women are treated within unions. Historically, many unions viewed women as secondary wage-earners who worked for 'pin' money and were therefore uninterested or incapable of engaging in most paid work, and certainly of belonging to unions.

Alternatively, women have been treated as competitors in the labour market who pushed wages down or as members of the 'weaker' sex who needed protection rather than rights. More recently, as equality became conflated with sameness, women were included in workplaces and unions as 'one of the guys', needing to be treated in the same way as men – including having to laugh at sexist jokes – but having to accept obvious signs of discrimination such as lack of equal pay.

These ways of understanding women's work and place in the workplace have been contested by women throughout history. But it was in the 1960s and 1970s when the most significant breakthroughs for women in unions occurred as women in the public sector organized into unions and joined the broader women's movement to demand recognition and equality.

Although few unions have been untouched by the 1960s social revolution for women, there continue to be large differences within and across national labour movements in what women's issues and the strategic means by which women's inequality in unions and workplaces are addressed. For example, the union UNISON in Great Britain enshrined proportional and fair representation in its constitution to address the lack of women leaders and delegates to union meetings (Munro, 2001). This approach to improved women's representation has been echoed elsewhere, and reflects an understanding that women face attitudinal and resource barriers to getting elected to union leadership positions. Yet, many unions and labour movements have resisted affirmative action strategies that set targets or quotas for women or visible minorities in leadership positions, arguing that these represent 'reverse discrimination', or prevent the 'best individual' from leading the union. Underlying this line of argument is an understanding that there are no systemic barriers to women's inequality, just individual ones.

Given the remarkable convergence in many parts of the world in women's demands of unions for equal pay, better representation and protection from discrimination, why is there such divergence in the issues that unions address and their approach to solutions? There are several places that we might look for these answers, including in the proportion of a union's membership that is women. In this article, however, I argue that the root of these differences lies in how unions understand the question of women and their differences from men, and subsequently articulate this understanding in the ways in which they frame problems and their solutions. These understandings of women and gender relations are rooted in material conditions and prevailing cultural norms and social practices. But material conditions do not translate into a single reality. Nor are prevailing norms and social practices entirely hegemonic. Rather, unions have throughout history periodically advanced alternative ideological views from which stem demands and ideas that challenge dominant ways of thinking and acting. Feminist ideas and interpretations have been important in challenging ideas and practices in society, including within unions, leading to new ways of understanding the 'problems of women' and the solutions thereof. This means then that there are no *essential* differences between men and women, outside their capacity to bear children. Rather, the differences between men and women are rooted in inequalities in power – both material and sexual – and access to resources but are socially constructed and politically enshrined to reproduce

these differences over time. With no pre-existing agreed-upon understanding of the conditions of women, there is therefore no direct translation from recognition of women's inequality to particular solutions. The ways of defining issues and solutions therefore become contested.

The theoretical literature on the concept of 'framing' is a useful starting point for grappling with these issues. Diane Stone's work on causal stories and policy argues that the first step in framing is to shift the understanding of a 'difficult condition' into becoming a problem 'amenable to human action' (Stone, 1989). This then reframes the condition from being the result of an act of nature, an accident or fate itself, to a problem in the public domain which can be remedied whether through public policy, or, in this case, union action. Robert Entman's work on framing elaborates on the importance of different frames for shaping how we interpret reality, and act accordingly:

> The character, causes, and consequences of any phenomenon become radically different as changes are made in what is prominently displayed, what is repressed and especially in how observations are classified . . . The social world is . . . a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized (Entman, 1993: 232).

Different frames select what is important about an issue, event or set of relations, and what is made invisible and offer interpretations of causality, moral judgement and appropriate courses of action to 'solve' a problem. In this way, Entman argues '... the frame determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it.' Such frames are shaped by competing sets of ideas and belief systems, which are advanced by competing interest groups, social movements or political parties and through political struggles, rebellions, uprisings and legal disputes (Stone, 1989: 281). The victor in these struggles over interpretation provides the dominant framing of a social problem which then becomes normalized in political discourse. Such normalization results in the selection of certain definitions and solutions as 'logical', while other definitions or solutions become unreasonable, too radical or in many cases disappear altogether from public debate and politics. Political opposition is often about contesting dominant frames and offering alternative understandings of material reality that open the door to alternative forms of political and social activism, and policy agendas for change. In this way, framing is also highly relevant to understanding the conditions under which solidarity and collective identities are constituted from amongst a diverse workforce.

In the remainder of this article, I turn to a discussion of a case study of union organizing amongst child care workers in British Columbia (BC) in Canada. Using the concept of 'framing', the paper explores how the BC Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) challenged conservative framings of child care as a market opportunity for business service delivery or the 'natural' responsibility of women and mothers which belonged in the private sphere of the family. Set against a backdrop of government cuts to child care funding, the union organized to make affordable access to child care a public issue. The union's understanding of child care recognized the work done by child care workers as skilled and worthy of higher wages and improved conditions, therefore also providing a frame that opened the door to unionization amongst these workers. The BCGEU also framed its agenda around an understanding of child care work as caring labour, which built the basis for alliances between child care workers, the union, and parents groups around a common policy agenda of universal child care. Although the union organized some child care workers as union members in existing local union structures, it blended this traditional approach to union membership with other more informal means of representation aimed at building a coalition of child care workers who worked in their homes, and more recently domestic workers. Such an approach required a particular way of framing the work and experiences of child

care workers that highlighted their common experiences, overcame the isolated material conditions of this work and formed a platform of common interests and strategies for change.

Building a coalition around caring: the BCGEU and child care workers

Child care work in Canada is undertaken by a diverse array of people, mostly women. Parents, whether full-time workers or full-time parents, usually play a pivotal role in child care throughout a child's life. Yet, more and more of these parents rely on some form of child care outside the family unit, in large part because of women's greater labour force participation and labour market attachment, even amongst women with young pre-school children. Forms of paid child care have been described in Canada as a patchwork of arrangements (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, 2004). Formal child care centres hire specially trained workers to work in a setting similar to a school or nursery where parents bring their children to the centre for care. Such centres are regulated by government standards that include caregiver-child ratios, hours of work and minimum standards of pay. This setting most closely approximates other workplaces in which unions represent workers. Partly because of changes to policies by conservative governments, a growing number of parents take their children to another parent's in-home day care where a parent, usually a woman, gets paid to take care of a small number of children often in addition to her own. This model of care mimics the home environment where one woman provides the care to multiple children. Such home care ranges from being highly informal to more 'official' where a home becomes designated as a home day care by having met various health and safety and other public standards. Finally, a growing number of families rely upon in-home domestic, and often live-in, care which is most often undertaken by migrants to Canada from other countries. Although regulated by governments, this kind of care is open to serious abuse of the domestic worker as they are isolated in the home and have tenuous rights at work and in the country (Bakan and Stasiulus, 2005). Although child care is the work that unites all of these groups, including parents, the different material, social and emotional conditions under which this work is done present significant challenges to defining a common identity amongst child care workers and a commitment to an agreed upon solution to the question of the role of government in child care.

Child care and child care work is an issue that a handful of unions in Canada have championed over the last several years. One reason for this lies in the growth in female union membership. As more women with pre-school children stay in the labour market and join unions, union members see affordable, quality child care as an issue of importance that their union should and can address. Some unions have therefore joined with child care advocacy and women's rights groups to put child care onto the public agenda and make it a priority for government action. The demand for child care has tended to be vocalized as campaigns for a universal public child care policy that would ensure access to affordable and high quality child care. The efforts of unions and social movements were spurred on by the province of Quebec's child care policy introduced in 1997. This policy offered families child care at a subsidized rate where parental contributions, initially $5 per day and subsequently increased to $7 per day (Lefebvre and Merrigan, 2005), represented just 18 percent of the total cost of child care. Success of union lobbying efforts seemed to be at hand when in 2005 the Liberal national government announced its intention to introduce a national child care policy. When the Liberals lost the election in 2005, the new Conservative government quickly renounced this policy. Within a year, this new government introduced its own child care policy that consisted of tax credits to encourage businesses or non-profit organizations to create child care spaces and a $1 200

subsidy to be given to parents so they could 'choose' how to care for their children, an approach that the Conservatives defended as allowing parents (writ *mothers*) to stay at home (Greenway, 2006). In British Columbia (BC), the provincial government followed suit with cuts to their child care budget. Unions across this province, including the BCGEU, regrouped in efforts to resume their fight in support of universal child care, attempting to reframe the issue in ways that would build support for the union movement's position amongst the broad range of child care providers themselves as well as amongst parents.

With a membership comprised 65 percent of women, most of whom are employed in the public sector, the BCGEU is one of the largest unions in BC and one that for more than 15 years has prioritized the recruitment of new members. Given the large number of women in the BCGEU, it was not surprising that this union was at the forefront of advocacy and coalition building in support of universal access to quality child care. This coincided with the union's goal of expanding its membership by organizing amongst community service providers across rural and urban communities, a position that lent itself to the union attempting to organize child care workers across the province.

It is important to recall that union organizing in Canada generally entails obtaining certification from an administrative body that determines if a union has secured majority support from workers in a particular worksite or firm. Unions need evidence that workers have signed union cards to apply for certification. This certification then confers onto a union the right, and responsibility, to bargain collectively for all workers in this worksite whether they are members of the union or not. This process of certification has tended to be highly adversarial as employers resist union efforts to organize their workplaces, the result of which is to make it difficult for unions to gain access to the workers they are seeking to organize and reduce the rate of successful recruitment.

The first phase of the BCGEU's organizing strategy consisted of organizing workers in child care centres, mostly non-profit, in key urban areas. These workers worked under conditions much more similar to other BCGEU members involved in caring occupations and therefore were organized around interests common to other workers in the union. These included improved wages, benefits and working conditions, especially around shift scheduling. The similarity of these workers to existing members also allowed the union to draw on existing frames constructed around the value of public service work. A peculiarity of many of these organizing drives was that they were facilitated by the managers of the day care centres who saw the union's advocacy for universal child care and improved wages and working conditions as an opportunity to build pressure on governments for greater public child care funding. This top-down strategy allowed the union to gain access to the workers in order to sign them up as union members and increased success as the employer did not oppose the union. The BCGEU has successfully organized more than 100 child care centres in several urban centres across the province.[1]

With only about 20 percent of children in BC being cared for in child care centres, however, this leaves a majority of child care workers outside of the union (Statistics Canada, 2005). For the union to be seen as a legitimate and effective voice for child care workers and to advocate for publicly supported universal child care it would need to represent a critical mass of child care workers. Union organizers and leaders determined that to achieve this level of representation the union must reframe its understanding and public position on child care in ways that would have broad appeal to child care providers in multiple different settings and would overcome differences in interests and identities between workers in child care centres and those offering in-home family child care.

---

1 http://www.bcgeu.bc.ca/files/UnionAdvantageBrochure.pdf

To offer an alternative framing of the child care issue, and encourage a common policy position on child care, the union needed to counter conservative ways of framing child care that tended to divide parents, in-home child care providers and for-profit and non-profit day care centres amongst themselves.

There are several contradictions faced by the union in framing the child care issue in ways that could forge a coalition amongst child care providers in support of universal child care and ultimately in favour of having the union represent their interests in the political and possibly employment arena. At the heart of these contradictions lie the complex relations of care and love involved in looking after children. Similar to other public sector work, regulating or negotiating over the terms and conditions of child care work is not just a matter between the employer and employee, but rather involves an interested and affected 'public', in this case parents. Parents have become an increasingly organized and powerful voice in North American politics who hold tremendous moral sway over issues regarding child care. Whether the union was advocating for a universal child care policy or improved wages for child care workers, union success necessitated that the union frame its demands and strategy to garner support amongst parents. This was relatively straightforward to do around demands for high quality, affordable child care, but was more complex when demanding higher pay for child care workers which could be passed on to parents as increased costs.

Studies of child care workers identify tensions in workers' relationship to their work. Many child care providers speak of this work as a vocation driven by their love of children, relationships that are 'naturalized' by society as part of the self-sacrificing nature of women in caring roles. In-home child care providers often define themselves as surrogate mothers, caring for others' children as they would their own (Follmer, 2008). Union organizers whom we interviewed talked of this as the 'mother Theresa' syndrome. Commodifying such relations appears contradictory and is open to criticism – both public and self – that caregivers do not really care if they insist on better wages, reduced hours of work and occasionally take job action to defend their rights. At the same time, child care providers, especially those who provide care in their own homes, have found that their caring role opens them up to abuse by the parent-clients who arrive late to pick up their children and expect the child care provider to go that extra mile for love of the client's child. There are also conflicting identities and interests amongst child care providers who work in the different employment settings. Our interviews pointed to a tension between day care and in-home child care workers as the former looked down on in-home family child care providers, seeing them as less trained and more akin to glorified babysitters, an identity that studies have shown is rejected by in-home child care providers themselves (Tuominen, 2003). For their part, family home-based care providers saw their family day care as a business (Saggers et al., 1994). Not surprisingly this generates some contradictory identities and reactions to unions as these caregivers see themselves as independent entrepreneurs as well as caregivers. Although many child care providers saw the union as promoting their interests, they also experienced a tension in their support for the union as unions represented workers, not 'mothers'. These differences have threatened to play out in the BCGEU's campaign for a universal child care policy and make building coalitions and the framing of child care a complex process of constant negotiation.

The BCGEU established its goals as advocacy for universal child care and to become the 'voice of child care in the province' (Interview LO1, 2009). In pursuit of these goals, the BCGEU framed this work in four ways.

First, child care was represented as 'caring labour', with occasional references to early childhood educators. The language of caring labour attempted to balance recognition of child care as work (whether paid or unpaid) with recognition of child care as a labour of love. This framing allowed the union to appeal to in-home child care providers, parents and others involved in this

sector. The reference to early childhood educators reflected tensions within this group of workers between those with and without formal college training in early childhood education.

Second, the union contested in multiple ways popular understandings of child care work as having little or no market value and of being unskilled and 'natural' for women. In its public campaigns, the union argued the economic importance of good child care for the economy, arguing that 'For BC businesses, economic success depends a great deal on the stability and well-being of employees'.[2] Good child care was a critical part of ensuring stability and wellbeing, and of improving labour productivity.

Third, the union framed child care work as skilled, and akin to a profession rather than a vocation from which flowed demands for professional development through ongoing training, recognition of skills through better wages and benefits and respect at work and in the public domain. This responded to concerns of both in-home and day care workers, thus acting as a bridge between the two groups.

Finally, the BCGEU framed its involvement with child care workers as a campaign to improve access to, and the quality of, child care rather than as an organizing campaign to secure benefits for workers themselves. The union's advocacy for improved wages, benefits and training became a means of improving quality care. This way of connecting wages and working conditions with quality care reinforced alliances between caregivers, parents, child care advocates and the union. This is reflected in a March 2006 bulletin on child care and unions released by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC which came out in support of the BCGEU's organizing campaign:

> Unionized child care settings are more likely to pay higher wages, provide better working conditions and benefits, and support professional development. Unionized settings employ staff with higher levels of training and experience lower levels of staff turnover. These characteristics are all associated with quality child care and, as a result, unionized settings are more likely to provide quality care that supports healthy childhood development.

The BCGEU's framing of child care in this organizing campaign responded to the particularities of work in the child care sector, as well as the different identities and interests amongst child care workers. It also reflected the union's majority female membership and a set of ideas and practices around community union organizing that had become dominant in the union for some years. Finally, the BCGEU's framing of this issue reflected a sophisticated challenge to neoliberalism's framing of child care as a private family issue, best done by mothers or 'friendly' neighbours with natural abilities. The BCGEU framed child care as a public issue of relevance to a wide cross-section of the population, as well as an economic issue that influenced labour productivity, economic growth and, implicitly, shaped employers' abilities to harness the full capacity of their workforce. From this framing, the BCGEU has contributed to reopening public debate around child care, placing universal child care back on the political agenda.

But for discursive framing by opposition and subordinate groups such as unions to succeed in sustaining change in the public and political arena, it must be coupled with real material gains. This involves successful organizing of child care workers into the BCGEU and making successful claims as the legitimate representative or voice of child care workers, whether at the bargaining table or in the political arena. It is to these issues we now turn for discussion.

Child care is so seriously underfunded in Canada that only by building a more inclusive coalition in support for universal child care, and hence more public funding, could the union

---

2   http://www.bcgeu.ca/files/ChildCareBusinessOnePage.pdf; see also BCGEU, 2008.

deliver to workers on their demands and expectations. The union needed to find a means to orga-nize a cross-section of those involved in caring for children, while also building support amongst parents and ultimately within communities where these parents and children lived. The BCGEU therefore put together a community-based organizing campaign. The union hired several social activists from the United States who had experience in grass-roots organizing strategies that could be adapted to organizing child care workers. This strategy built on an existing tradition within the BCGEU of building their union through community coalitions. The Director of Special Projects for the BCGEU commented that:

> There is a great deal of connection to the community, especially with the (BCGEU) Human Rights Officer's job. She seems to be more connected to community support than you might find in other unions. She participates in festivals, parades, has talks and get-togethers. This appears to be in large part due to a culture in the union that sees this as important. She sees this as, in part, a means of brand-ing the union so that in the future people may want to join. (Interview, June 2009)

Central to the union's community-based child care campaign was the union's creation of a new membership category, called Special Associate Members (SAMs). SAMs allowed caregivers to become associate rather than fully-fledged members of the union and gain certain benefits from association with the union, including being part of a broader political campaign to improve child care funding. This was a significant development in the context of the prevailing system of union representation in Canada where workers are either legally recognized as being unionized, dues-paying members or not. Although Special Associate Members are not legally recognized as union-ized, dues-paying members in the classic industrial relations framework, the union leadership hopes that SAMs will act as a stepping stone to full union membership. Given that its new target was to reach out to home-based child care workers, although not necessarily domestic workers, union campaign strategists concluded that they could not organize these caregivers through their workplace, which was also their home. Rather the union had to connect with them through their local community. The union held public forums and town hall meetings in several communities across the province to discuss the issue of child care, using its network of community activists and union members to reach out to prospective members and connect with parents. Using these public meetings to identify interested home day care providers, the union then offered these caregivers special associate membership in the union.

Local SAM chapters elected their own leaders who coordinated activities through the BCGEU and have been involved in political lobbying with the union for improved funding. The benefits offered by the BCGEU to SAMs included free workshops on workers' rights, health and safety and career development, including access to some professional development training, leadership train-ing, access to membership reward benefits such as better insurance rates, information on legislative and policy changes, status at union conventions and invitations to be part of a broader community of child caregivers advocating for improved funding and ultimately universal child care. To date, the BCGEU has organized successfully over 1 000 workers mainly at home based child care centres. They are divided into geographic zones and have elected their own leaders of nine active chapters across the province. Despite the BCGEU's commitment to this alternative form of orga-nizing, organizers are aware that this approach to organizing is fraught with dangers. They are uncertain whether SAMs will ever become fully-fledged union members, and if they do it could take several years. This certainly was the experience of a similar type of organizing campaign by the Steelworkers union in Canada when they unionized security guards in Ontario and Quebec.

The union continues to face reluctance to joining a union on the part of in-home day care providers, a problem that is rooted in their identity as mothers and independent businesses. Given the costs associated with developing and supporting SAM chapters across the province, the lack of incoming union dues to offset these costs could undermine this initiative in the future. In balance, however, the union organizers do not see any alternative strategy working more effectively than this one. The BCGEU therefore has begun working with domestic workers, hoping to implement a SAM system with them in the future.

As the BCGEU succeeded in organizing support amongst multiple constituencies involved in child care, it has begun to position itself as a central – if not the – voice for child care in the province of British Columbia. The BCGEU has built additional legitimacy for its voice by joining several advocacy groups aimed at improving child care in Canada. In so doing, the BCGEU is actively engaged in framing the subject and practice of these advocacy groups, but also in adapting its claims in order to continue to build alliances and support for a national child care system. Ultimately, out of these efforts has developed union demands for a universal child care policy that ensures widespread access to affordable and quality child care. The BCGEU's framing of the issue of child care is also interlaced with its social justice orientation as it connects a national child care strategy with eliminating child poverty. This populist framing of the child care issue holds the possibility of building even greater public support for the union's campaigns of improved funding and political commitment to child care as well as to improve the wages and working conditions of caregivers.

Conclusion

The BCGEU is engaged in a strategy of organizing child care workers that actively frames this work and those involved in child care in ways that highlight their common experiences as care-givers involved in caring relationships. The union has framed child care as caring labour that is skilled work and socially and economically valuable, a frame that attempts to be inclusive of parents, live-in nannies, child care workers and in-home child care providers. This framing also picks up on contemporary feminist ways of understanding women's role in caring for dependents. The union has used the framing of child care work around valuation as a basis to advance the employment demands of improved wages and conditions for child care workers while simultaneously sidestepping any strategic interventions that would pit its demands for child care workers against parents. Perhaps even more challenging has been the union's efforts to frame this debate and organize into the union in-home child care providers who often see themselves as entrepreneurs with a stake in small business, or mothers who do not belong within a union. Framing by the union is therefore revealed as a delicate act of balancing competing identities and expectations with the core role of unions in labour markets. Finally, by creating special associate memberships, the union has adapted its organizing strategy to address the particular diversity of employment settings and interests of those caring for children. This experiment with SAMs suggests an attempt by the union to address the broader, structural challenges confronted especially by women in their relationship to the labour market.

The BCGEU is involved in a dynamic process of framing and re-framing the child care issue as it seeks to build a broad-based coalition from which to pressure governments to invest in child care and adopt a universal child care policy. The BCGEU's framing and subsequent strategic actions in organizing child care workers have simultaneously to address the diversity of employment settings in which child care takes place while also navigating the shifting currents of neoliberalism that frame child care around traditional conservative family values which assert the moral

superiority of mothers and the family in looking after children. For neoliberals the solution to child care and child poverty lies in individual initiative and greater commitment to family and neighbourhood. The BCGEU has therefore taken on a struggle over who gets to define the 'problem' of child care and its solution. This showdown will be of critical importance to women and mothers not just in BC but across the country. But the BCGEU's discourse and strategy for organizing child care workers is also an important lesson to unions who know that organizing female dominated workplaces is important but have yet to grasp how women are different than men, and to translate this understanding into reformations of their structures, practices and strategies.

Acknowledgements

Funding

References

Akyeampong E (2006) Unionization. In: Statistics Canada *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, August. Ottawa: 18–42.

Bakan A, Stasiulus D (2005) *Negotiating citizenship: migrant women in Canada and the global system*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

BCGEU (2008) *Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance*. Pre-Budget Consultation 2008. Ottawa, 15 August 2008.

BCGEU (n.d.) The Union Advantage Brochure. Available at: http://www.bcgeu.bc.ca/files/UnionAdvantage Brochure.pdf

Childcare Advocacy Association of Canada (2004) From Patchwork to Framework: Highlights for a Childcare Strategy for Canada. Ottawa, Ontario. Available at: http://www.ccaac.ca/pdf/resources/framework_highlights.pdf

Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (2006) Child Care and Unions: Taking the Next Step. March, 2006 bulletin. Available at: http://www.bcgeu.ca/files/CCCABC&unionization.pdf

Entman RM (1993) Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.

Follmer H (2008) *How Child Care Providers see Themselves: The Development of Perceived Professional Role and Social Role Identity*. Thesis In Human Development and Family Studies Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Texas Tech University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Sciences, August.

Greenway N (2006) Tories push ahead with tax breaks to business for child care. Ottawa, *Citizen*, 13 June. Available at: http://action.web.ca/home/crru/rsrcs_crru_full.shtml?x=89781&AA_EX_Session=37c21 ee4b55c4e7a9d80e5ae2a7047cd)

ILO (2000) The Role of Unions in Promoting Gender Equality. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/public/English/employment/gems/download/fin_rep.pdf

Lefebvre P, Merrigan P (2005) *The Quebec's Experiment of $5 per day per Child Childcare Policy and Mother's Labour Supply: Evidence based on the five cycles of the NLSCY*. Rapport de Project/Project Report 2005RP-21. Montreal: CIRANO.

Little M (1998) *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario*. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press.

Munro A (2001) A Feminist Trade Union Agenda: The continued significance of class, gender and race. *Gender, Work and Organization* 8(4): 454–471.

Saggers S, Grant J, Woodhead M, and Banham V (1994) The Professionalisation of Mothering: Family Day Care. *Journal of Sociology* 30(3), 273–287.

Statistics Canada (2005) Child Care. *The Daily*, 7 February. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/050207/dq050207b-eng.htm

Stone D (1989) Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas. *Political Science Quarterly* 104(2): 281–300.

Tuominen M (2003) *We Are Not Babysitters: family child care providers redefine work and care*. New Brunswisk, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Visser J (2006) Union membership statistics in 24 countries. *Monthly Labor Review* (January): 38–49.