



PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT

FIGHTING FOR WORKERS & ECO-SOCIALISM

Childcare Policy 2023

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Quality childcare remains unaffordable and inaccessible for many families. Fees are among the highest in the EU with many parents still shelling out the equivalent of a second mortgage. Others are forced to work part-time or rely on the goodwill of grandparents. Childcare workers are overworked and underpaid while leave for parents is also severely underpaid and based on an outdated, sexist model where fathers receive minimal paid time off¹. This places the burden of childcare on women from birth and along with the lack of affordable childcare is one of the main reasons for the gender pay gap. A survey by the National Women's Council² found that more than 1 in 3 women with children have had to give up work due to the high cost of childcare, rising to 60 per cent among lone parents.

The Irish state, influenced from its inception by the conservative sexism of the Catholic Church, has consistently refused to invest in high quality, public childcare that is accessible to all. It has particularly failed single parents, low paid workers and children with disabilities. Government investment in childcare is only half³ the EU average. Successive governments have opted to exploit the unpaid labour of women in the home and outsource early learning and childcare to the private sector, rather than providing childcare as a universal free public service like free primary and secondary education or universal healthcare.

This has created a situation where three-quarters⁴ of childcare services are provided



for profit. Large childcare chains like Giraffe and Safari are making millions⁵. Meanwhile childcare workers struggle to get by on as little as €13 an hour⁶. Low pay is the single biggest factor in the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, followed by 'stress/burnout' and lack of benefits⁷. It is disgraceful that in a sector where 98% of workers are women, two-thirds⁸ have no access to paid maternity leave from their employer.

In recognition of these problems, both the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and the United Nations Committee on Rights of the Child^{9 10} have recommended transitioning to a publicly funded childcare model. But this would still involve outsourcing to the private sector and would not achieve the radical systemic overhaul that is needed.

People Before Profit would go beyond this and transition rapidly to a *fully publicly owned and funded National Childcare Service, available to all parents for free, for as many as or as few hours as they need*. A National Childcare Service is the best model to guarantee universal, free quality childcare for all children - including children with disabilities who are so often excluded by the current market-based model - as well as excellent pay and conditions for workers.



Universal free public childcare can eliminate the exploitative working conditions, low standards and repeated scandals caused by profit-seeking in the private childcare industry. It will involve very significant pay increases for childcare workers in the private and community sectors by employing them as public servants on similar pay scales and conditions as teachers. This will mean

- taking the major private childcare and early years chains into public ownership
- replacing contracts with private providers with public provision
- ensuring that convenient, free after school services are available on or alongside school premises, and
- significantly expanding the total number of childcare places through new public provision to satisfy the increased demand that will result from universal free access.

All the above will require a significant increase in government spending on childcare. We would finance this in part through the massive surpluses currently held in reserve by the government and in the longer term through

the substantial increases in taxes on big business and the wealthy outlined in our Alternative Budget. This also outlines how increased childcare spending of €1.5 billion in year one of a multi-year transition programme would be spent, with

- the immediate abolition of childcare fees for parents
- a €2 per hour wage increase for all childcare workers and
- a major expansion of public childcare places.

People Before Profit recognise that many parents may prefer to work fewer hours if they could afford it, particularly during the early years of their children's lives. We therefore propose extending paid Parent's Leave and amalgamating it with Maternity and Paternity leave so both parents can avail of 12 months' paid leave each in the first two years of their child's life. Crucially, we would legislate to oblige all employers to top up all forms of parental benefit (including Maternity, Paternity and Parent's Benefit) up to 100% of pay. This would incentivise greater take-up, particularly by men. At the moment, 92% of eligible female private sector workers take up maternity benefit whereas only 51% of eligible men take up paternity benefit - mainly because the rates are so low. We would also legislate for paid childcare leave when children are sick and make Parental Leave - which currently allows parents to take up to 26 weeks' unpaid leave for each eligible child before their 12th birthday - fully paid through the same combination of state benefit and mandatory employer top up.

Finally, we will implement a range of other work-life balance measures that will benefit all workers but are likely to be particularly helpful for parents, including:

- increasing the minimum number of days of paid annual leave to 30 (bringing us in line with France)
- obliging employers to facilitate, not just consider, requests for flexible, part time and remote working
- introducing a four day or 30 hour week without loss of pay, which would have the added important benefit of cutting carbon emissions by up to 20 percent (Four Day Week Ireland, a broad coalition of trade unions, environmentalists, women's rights and civil society organisations is campaigning for this).

People Before Profit believe that this combination of universal free childcare, enhanced fully paid leave and work-life balance measures will - for the first time ever - give parents real choice in their childcare arrangements. It won't be the whole answer to tackling gender equality but it will help to dismantle some of the economic barriers that women still face.

We recognise that many of these measures would face significant opposition from senior civil servants complaining about increased costs for the state and

employers complaining about increased costs for their businesses. But every single measure that has significantly improved workers and women's lives was opposed historically by governments and bosses, including the 5 day week, paid holidays, sick pay, maternity leave - the list goes on. Every single one of those rights initially seemed radical but all of them were won through struggle by workers' and women's movements. The same can happen with the radical - but necessary and achievable - measures proposed here as part of a programme for a future left government.

Endnotes

- 1** Mothers currently receive 26 weeks' paid Maternity Leave and 7 weeks' paid Parent's Leave; fathers currently get 2 weeks' paid Paternity Leave and 7 weeks' paid Parent's Leave. This is to increase to 9 weeks' paid Parent's Leave for both parents from August 2024.
- 2** <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/orla-oconnor-why-it-is-imperative-that-we-invest-in-affordable-public-childcare/a1163581819.html>
- 3** https://www.siptu.ie/media/media_23785_en.pdf
- 4** Pobal. "Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021," May 2022, p. 11 https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2022/05/Pobal_22_EY_20-21-Report_final_2.pdf.
- 5** Walsh, Ann-Marie. "Childcare Providers' Profits Trebled during Pandemic, Siptu Finds." Irish Independent, February 9, 2023. <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/childcare-providers-profits-trebled-during-pandemic-siptu-finds/a781784457.htm>
- 6** https://www.workplacereactions.ie/en/what_you_should_know/hours-and-wages/employment%20regulation%20orders/early-learning-and-childcare-sector/ Wages for young workers are even less, starting at a pitiful €9.10 an hour for workers under 18.
- 7** SIPTU Big Start. "SIPTU Budget 2024 Submission: Supporting Educators and Managers in the Provision of Quality Education and Care," August 2023, p. 3. https://www.siptu.ie/media/media_23785_en.pdf.
- 8** "Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality," June 2021, p. 59 <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/previous-assemblies/2020-2021-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf>.
- 9** Recommendation 8 - Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. "Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality," June 2021. <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/previous-assemblies/2020-2021-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf>
- 10** Committee on the Rights of the Child. "Concluding Observations on the Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports of Ireland*," February 28, 2023