

February 2026

**The Collective
Power of Childcare
Workers and Their
Communities**

A Case Study of
California

By Lena Bilik

The Collective Power of Childcare Workers and Their Communities: A Case Study of California

FEBRUARY 19, 2026

By Lena Bilik

Share [f](#) [X](#) [T](#) [✉](#)



Introduction

For too long, the US has seen childcare as a problem for the private market. But [that market has failed](#) in every way. Childcare remains unaffordable, exceeding families' costs of housing [in most of the country](#). Childcare workers are not paid a living wage, leading to massive workforce shortages, which result in half of families living in a [childcare desert](#). Markets alone do not provide sufficient access to care; childcare is high-cost and labor-intensive, [with low profit margins](#), keeping wages for providers lower than most other industries. Further, without public funding at the level that supports K-12 educators, wages are also far lower than those of educators who teach older children. But programs cannot raise wages without increasing childcare prices for families beyond what they can afford. Without public intervention that would fund wage supplementation, this childcare crisis will only continue.

Our broken childcare system is at its heart a labor issue and should be seen as such. It impacts workers of all kinds: not only the childcare providers, who do such valuable care work for pennies on the dollar, but also working parents, for whom high costs and low availability of childcare can impact their ability to participate in wage labor at all.

Publicly funded universal childcare is [crucial](#) to a strong and functioning economy, but it comes with a sizable price tag. The US stands relatively alone in refusing to acknowledge that childcare is worth the investment; our peer nations [invest far more public money into early childhood](#) than we do. As with many political fights

for public programs in the US, the conversation around funding for childcare has been steeped in scarcity politics, means-testing, and austerity. But, like with many other necessities we choose to leave to the private market, we don't actually lack the dollars to provide affordable, high-quality childcare for all Americans—we lack the political will to recoup them.

We have previously written about the dire need for significant, sustained federal investment to create [national public universal childcare](#). Winning such an investment will require persistent public pressure through a national movement to make childcare a priority for federal policymakers. Meanwhile, in the absence of action from the federal government on childcare, many states and localities have seen movements of their own that have led to [innovative local solutions](#). These efforts leave us with an inequitable patchwork across the country, but they have a lot to teach us and have the potential to grow into a larger movement for childcare that could compel a future federal administration to act.

This brief focuses on the labor organizing side of the growing movement for public childcare investment. The power-building occurring in this space is a critical part of winning the funding we need to deliver a childcare system that works for children, families, *and* workers. This brief uses California as a case study to explore how organizing childcare workers and their communities builds power for a historically disempowered sector.

In examining the power-building work of childcare organizers, this brief is inspired by the frameworks of social scientists such as Gigi Barsoum, Julia Coffman, Albertina Lopez, and Mariah Brothe Gantz, who write about their learnings from grassroots campaigns in "[A New Framework for Understanding Power Building](#)" and "[Advocacy That Builds Power](#)."¹ These frameworks examine how to expand measures of success beyond just electoral, policy, and systems change wins and emphasize harder-to-quantify changes including narrative shifts, true grassroots leadership by the people most impacted, strategies based in shared understanding of root causes, and communities having access to leadership opportunities and political education.

Power-Building

Aditi Vaidya, Ai-jen Poo, and LaTosha Brown [describe community power-building as](#) being "about building a sense of collective agency—that people can be more powerful together and harness that collectivism to change the conditions of their lives and our neighborhoods."

Sustainable power-building campaigns can include the following qualities:

- Decisions are made through grassroots, bottom-up leadership structures, with high-level decision-making done by the people most impacted by structural inequities and the issues at hand
- Prioritizes growing a shared understanding of root causes, including through collective education of individuals' challenges as being connected to systemic challenges
- Creates narrative shifts
- Mobilizes people to work together to improve their lives and the communities where they live and work
- Supports the development of a base or constituency to make connections across people's lived experiences

Drawn from the work of the Urban Institute, Aditi Vaidya, Ai-jen Poo, LaTosha Brown, Gigi Barsoum, Julia Coffman, Albertina Lopez, and Mariah Brothe Gantz.

Much of this brief draws from a series of interviews conducted with 14 stakeholders including local and national union staff, childcare provider-organizers, community organizers, local researchers, and parent-organizers. Subjects were interviewed about organizing methods, the power-building implications of organized childcare workers, and the thoughts among childcare workers and their communities about the need to raise state revenue for childcare, including their thoughts about a wealth tax.

Our broken childcare system is at its heart a labor issue and should be seen as such.

This case study demonstrates the potential of a collectively organized childcare workforce to demand and fund the childcare system workers and families need and deserve. The power built and sustained by labor unions not only is a crucial tactic to win universal childcare, but is already creating an organized constituency with the political power to sustain and influence quality childcare policy and implementation, as well as other public policies that can materially improve the lives of working families.

The Childcare Workforce

The United States' persistent underinvestment in childcare suppresses wages for childcare providers, fueling the cycle of low supply of programs. The historic and persistent undervaluing of the labor of people of color, particularly women of color, plays a role in the long-standing low wages for the childcare sector. More than 90 percent of childcare providers are women, and more than a third are people of color. Childcare providers are also [more likely](#) than public school teachers to be immigrants and to come from lower-income backgrounds. The racism and sexism at play in this sector particularly impacts Black providers, [who make less than their white peers](#) across care settings and racial groups.

The fragmented, often independent nature of childcare work has also kept wages low by making childcare a challenging sector to organize using traditional labor organizing methods. The current US early childhood education (ECE) system encompasses a wide range of programs and delivery systems, including community-based childcare (such as family, friend, and neighbor care [FFN]), public care, private for-profit and nonprofit childcare centers, and licensed for-profit family childcare homes. In addition, domestic work has never been afforded the same labor rights and protections that the United States afforded mostly industrial workers through the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which determines which workers have the right to form a union. Though that has made it difficult for home-based and family childcare providers in particular to unionize over the years, center-based childcare providers who are employees (e.g., not directors) have been able to unionize under the NLRA on a shop-by-shop basis.

Much of the recent progress of childcare labor organizing has been among home-based providers finding innovative ways to assert their labor rights. Home-based providers are typically regulated and receive their income through public subsidies, so some have been able to creatively use state legislation and executive orders to gain collective bargaining rights with their state as their employer. In recent years, [11 states](#) have adopted collective bargaining policies for home-based care workers, including those providing childcare and long-term care. In general, where childcare workers *are* unionized, their wins have been significant. But the sector still has low levels of union density due to the aforementioned barriers to more traditional labor organizing that the sector faces.

Recent organizing wins for childcare workers have taken place in the context of a labor movement struggling in the face of weakened labor laws, corporate lobbying against labor law reform, and aggressive union-busting by employers. Nevertheless, successes in the childcare space are one of many signs that a robust labor movement might be rejuvenated. In a country divided on so many issues, an overwhelming [68 percent](#) of Americans support the labor movement—a percentage [not seen since the mid 1960s](#)—and research shows that [60 million workers](#) would join a union if they could. In recent years new organizing campaigns have been successful at [a number of companies](#) including Amazon, Starbucks, Trader Joe's, Barnes & Noble, Chipotle, and Volkswagen and have [made gains](#) in hospitality, public education, and health care—despite numerous setbacks from incredibly aggressive anti-union organizing from many of these employers. Childcare organizing is contributing to this trend toward worker power, with the potential to bring a large sector of nearly [1 million workers](#) into a revived labor movement.

An organized childcare workforce can advocate to raise wages and safeguard against inferior working conditions, as organized workers in any sector can. **Crucially, improved working conditions in the care sector would also translate into more available and high-quality childcare for working families.** We've seen an increase in providers in states and localities that have publicly invested directly in workforce compensation, like [Massachusetts](#) and [Washington, DC](#). Low wages and few benefits for the workforce also impact quality of care; [research shows](#) that making early childhood provider compensation and benefits more comparable to kindergarten teachers' is essential to creating a stable, healthy learning environment for young children.

Raising Public Revenue for Childcare

We will need significant public revenue to fund the wages and benefits needed to attract and sustain the stable workforce necessary for a high-quality universal childcare system. One way to raise revenue could be to target the current extreme wealth inequality and unequal tax code. [The top 1 percent of American households now own roughly 40 percent of the wealth, while the bottom 90 percent own just 21 percent.](#) Since the Reagan administration, [the US tax code](#) has favored tax cuts for corporations and wealthy individuals, despite evidence that suggests that tax cuts for the wealthy have little effect on economic growth or employment levels. The [average tax rate for taxpayers](#) in the top 0.1 percent fell from 42.2 percent in 1980 to 33.2 percent in 2018. Meanwhile, median-income taxpayers saw only a reduction from 29.8 to 25.4 percent, and those in the bottom 10 percent saw a slight increase from 22.2 to 24.2 percent. And many of the very wealthiest Americans [avoid paying any taxes at all](#); as of 2022, America's billionaires and centi-millionaires (those with at least \$100 million of wealth) collectively held [at least \\$8.5 trillion](#) of "unrealized capital gains". As Roosevelt Institute Fellow Indivar Dutta-Gupta [testified](#) at a hearing for the [Child Care for Every Community Act](#), a 25 percent minimum tax on the wealthiest Americans could enable us to lower the cost of childcare to just \$10 a day for most families.

The tax code isn't much better in most states. But a small handful of states, including Vermont, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and California, have been able to use [tax and revenue-raising strategies](#) to fund childcare, schools, and other social services for children and families. And [a 2023 study](#) over multiple years in multiple states found that infants are more likely to survive to age one in states that raise more revenue from those most able to pay.

In the wake of decades of inaction from the federal government on solving the childcare crisis, many states have stepped up to fill in the gaps. Better state tax policies can be a critical tool to funding childcare. Though the tax base varies widely from state to state and states, unlike the federal government, cannot deficit spend, there is still potential to build a state-by-state national movement to show that childcare should be a public good and that public investment in the childcare workforce is critical to increasing supply and quality. State and local action, particularly driven by labor organizing, could help stabilize childcare systems in states and build momentum to get the federal investments in childcare that we need.

Case Study: California

California offers an interesting lens to explore the potential of childcare worker organizing to build power. California is not on the forefront of childcare spending, and [fewer than half](#) (46 percent) of young children in California ages 0–5 had regular childcare arrangements in 2023. The gap between supply and demand is high for subsidized care as well—in 2024, only 14 percent of eligible children were enrolled in subsidized childcare programs (though this is up from 11 percent in 2022). In order for communities there to achieve big wins on childcare for workers and families, this movement will need to fight for increased revenue. County-level revenue-raising measures are already spreading across the state, but the vast wealth in California has yet to be tapped to fund childcare solutions. Interviews conducted for this brief indicate that the foundations of solidarity and power-building that California labor organizers have built prime the state for this larger fight.

California Childcare Funding and Revenue

Funding for ECE in California currently comes from federal, state, and local governments, as well as from payments from parents. California receives about [\\$2.6 billion](#) annually from the federal government for ECE. For state fiscal year 2025–26, California's [budget for childcare is \\$3.3 billion](#), with \$2.5 billion for subsidized childcare slots. \$770 million of that is directed to CalWORKs Child Care, a program that supports families engaged in welfare-to-work activities via the state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. \$1.7 billion is allocated to programs like the Alternative Payment Program (the state's Child Care and Development Block Grant—supported subsidy program) and the Migrant Alternative Payment Program (which provides childcare subsidies for migrant workers).

In California, childcare for infants and toddlers costs an average of \$1,886 per month for center-based care and \$1,585 per month for home-based care—between \$19,022 and \$22,628 a year. Care for one infant takes up more than [18 percent of a median family's income](#) in California, and care for two children takes up close to 30 percent of a median family's income. Like other states, California's childcare system includes licensed family childcare homes and centers, license-exempt providers (or family, friend, and neighbor caregivers), and transitional kindergarten provided at school-based sites. [In California](#), family childcare providers tend to offer nontraditional hours and more affordable care for a small number of young children, and centers serve more children but tend to cost more—though both can be paid for with subsidies available to some families who meet income and other eligibility requirements.

Similar to other states, California is facing funding deficits for childcare (and other services) after the expiration of the over \$5 billion in onetime childcare funding from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and American Rescue Plan Act. California, like many states, used that funding to increase provider rates, expand subsidized childcare slots, and support the early care and education sector in other ways. California managed to avoid the detrimental effects of several aspects of this “cliff” using state dollars, but it faces more difficult budgets ahead unless new revenue is raised.

Though Governor Gavin Newsom has committed to adding around 77,000 childcare slots to [fulfill his commitment of 200,000](#) new slots by 2027–28, this will not fully address the demand for subsidized and affordable childcare in California. In 2025, the California Budget & Policy Center wrote that additional [state and federal dollars will be necessary](#) to fully meet the childcare needs of low-income California families. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at UC Berkeley [estimates](#) that a childcare initiative in California that would ensure a well-qualified and fairly compensated workforce providing a high standard of care would cost between \$29.7 billion and \$75.4 billion, or \$30,000 to \$39,000 per child, annually, when fully phased in. They estimate that this investment in childcare would serve between 993,000 and 2,018,000 children and would employ between 317,000 and 826,000 ECE teachers at fair wages. For context, all this would amount to 1.0 to 2.5 percent of California's total GDP.

California County-Level Childcare Revenue Raisers

Some exciting work has begun county by county in California to raise the revenue needed for childcare solutions. San Francisco has been using a commercial property tax for years to offer more families free or subsidized childcare, add more facilities, and pay providers a living wage. In 2025, San Francisco [launched a plan](#) to pay its childcare providers even more, raising wages for more than 2,000 educators, many of them by an average of more than \$12,000 a year. As the first county to implement these efforts, San Francisco has inspired other localities to follow suit. Sonoma County has a similar sales tax to raise funds for providers and to improve facilities. Pomona [passed a measure in 2025](#) requiring the city to designate at least 10 percent of its budget for children's services, including childcare. Local news [has reported](#) that after these investments the waitlists for childcare have lowered, and wages have increased. But even in a successful initiative like Pomona's, more public funding is needed—primarily to create more buildings and facilities to meet the

demand.

The most recent initiative has been in [Alameda County](#), which, after yearslong delay from a lawsuit led by the Alameda County Taxpayers' Association, is finally distributing funds collected pursuant to a 2020 ballot measure that enacted a half-cent sales tax to fund increased access to childcare and children's health-care services. The funding is going directly to childcare providers at risk of closing their doors, including both family childcare programs and centers. This yearslong effort was heavily supported by labor and community groups including Parent Voices Oakland, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1021, (including Child Care Providers United), SEIU 521, and local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. A union organizer told me that many are hopeful this most recent initiative could ripple out and inspire more counties to act and eventually build a movement to pressure the state to step up with revenue raisers of its own.

Part of this trend is local communities' response to the decline in state funding for early childhood services. For years, California used funding from a tobacco tax for early childhood, but that tax revenue has declined with the decline of tobacco use. Additionally, the subsidized childcare funding from the state can fluctuate year to year, leading counties to act on their own.

A 16-Year Fight for California Childcare Providers United

Underinvestment has meant California's childcare workers have faced similar challenges to their peers across the country. The state's current voucher rates for subsidized care are still based on a 2016 survey and [do not cover the true cost](#) of quality childcare. Predictably, this means low wages for workers, resulting in a shortage of licensed childcare for families that need it.

Overall, the childcare workforce in California is 4.9 times more likely to live in poverty than elementary and middle school teachers. More than 70 percent of families in the state who receive childcare vouchers send their kids to family childcare homes or have FFN care, [according to state data](#), and family childcare providers are particularly struggling: The California Department of Social Services [has reported](#) that 73 percent of family childcare providers do not pay themselves a salary and work over 64 hours per week. One-third of family childcare providers worry that their earnings are not enough to support their families, and two-thirds of center teaching staff have the same worry. This has a ripple effect on the larger workforce supply, which impacts the availability of childcare for working parents.

In 2020, Governor Newsom signed AB387 into law, allowing family childcare providers to collectively bargain with the state for a labor contract. This was a win hard fought by providers, parent allies, and organized labor 16 years in the making, marked by vetoes by multiple governors. Since then, [California Childcare Providers United](#) (CCPU, a collaboration between two major unions that already represented some childcare workers, SEIU and AFSCME) has seen multiple wins that have materially impacted the lives of the rank and file. In 2023, providers won [a two-year \\$2.8 billion investment](#) in childcare, which included: \$600 million in funding for a 20 percent average pay increase for more than 40,000 providers; \$80 million in annual funding for the nation's first-ever retirement fund for childcare providers, and \$100 million for health-care funding for providers. (Prior to the historic retirement fund win, less than a quarter of family childcare providers in the state reported any retirement savings.) Families have benefited as well, with [the 2023 budget](#) including a cap for money contributed to childcare payments at 1 percent of income—some families previously had to pay up to 10 percent of their income in copayments for the state's childcare subsidies. And because the CCPU represents a sectoral bargaining approach to improve working conditions, some benefits won by the CCPU impact workers in the entire sector of home-based providers, regardless of whether they are members of CCPU. For example, a key win in the two-year investment was the state's agreement to start a process to overhaul the way rates are calculated for providers who receive subsidies to provide childcare for low-income families.

But in 2025, the union faced an uphill battle to protect its wins and keep fighting for its members because of the perception from the governor and the legislature of a leaner budget outlook. With state governments bracing against looming federal cuts to social services and larger economic uncertainty, this bargaining round proved more difficult than contract negotiations in the past. Before the agreement was finalized, [Governor Newsom said](#) that, while he's proud of his administration's unprecedented investments in childcare, he must "hold the line" in his budget proposal because of a negative fiscal outlook. Months of labor talks followed, in which [the state threatened to cut](#) some of the workforce's newly won benefits and postpone the "true cost of care" plan. "We had some victories, but right now, it's like [they're] turning their backs on us," Patricia Moran, a family childcare provider from San José and member of the union's bargaining team, [told local journalists](#).

After months of labor talks, organizing, and [rallies](#) in Sacramento that saw family childcare and center childcare providers alike traveling to the Capital from all over the state and making speeches and meeting with legislators, the new agreement covering CCPU members retains the retirement, health-care, and training benefits of the past agreements, includes a cost-of-living adjustment of a 1.5 percent subsidy rate increase, and pledges \$90 million in stabilization payments that will help prevent providers from having to close their doors while they wait for the implementation of the new payment plan. The budget also included an agreement that, starting July 2026, those providers will receive payments prospectively and based on enrollment rather than attendance.

The recent fight, though the providers and organizers held on to their gains, tells us a lot about what comes after childcare providers win their right to bargain: not only about the power they've built, but about the reality of the ongoing fight to win the funding they need.

Labor Organizing to Raise Revenue for Childcare

Unions can be powerful engines for building power and awareness around the need to redistribute public funding for public services. Qualitative interviews with childcare provider-organizers, union organizers, and other stakeholders in California show that an organized childcare sector has the potential to build a movement to raise the public revenue necessary to truly deliver the childcare system that workers, children, and families deserve.

Childcare providers in California are keenly aware of the public dollars needed to actually fund childcare in California—an awareness that has further grown during the past 20 years of worker organizing. This has been an active conversation since the beginning of the CCPU. Several provider and union organizer interviewees recounted that the first campaign of the CCPU focused on an understanding that the state telling providers that "we can't afford it" is not a true or good enough excuse. The campaign for the negotiations for the first CCPU contract utilized community messaging about taxing the rich. Multiple interviewees told me that that messaging deeply resonated with providers—they look at the wealth all around them in California, especially in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, and realize they deserve to ask for more than poverty wages and low rates. And as one organizer put it, after they won on retirement, many of them understood that "after a long fight, all that the state had to do was write a check." One provider-organizer told me, "Our bargaining rights bill got vetoed three times, but it wasn't until we went with the narrative that 'California can afford it' that we won." And as another organizer noted, in many ways family childcare providers are the best people to explain how the math simply does not add up on how we currently fund childcare: They pay staff, receive the subsidy rates, and see all laid out in their books how hard it is to stay out of the red and keep their doors open.

One provider-organizer told me, "Our bargaining rights bill got vetoed three times, but it wasn't until we went with the narrative that 'California can afford it' that we won."

Childcare providers and organizers have done extensive advocacy work educating legislators about the realities of the funding needed for childcare in California. One provider-organizer explained that, particularly in their last contract fight, when the state was pushing back due to “budget constraints,” providers did their homework on revenue. They kept being told that the federal government’s cuts impacted the state’s ability to honor its commitments to the union. But the providers told the state they knew California is the fourth largest economy in the world, and they didn’t back down from their demands.

Interviewees spoke about how some of the organizing work the unions have done around worker education about the root causes of the challenges the sector faces has expanded upon a growing class consciousness among childcare providers. Whereas previously, there would typically be some competition between providers, especially between different types of programs, this changed with worker education. As one put it, “It’s so much easier to look down the street at other providers and say, *That person is getting two pennies more.* But we were able to organize and do the political education work to say, *If all these corporations were taxed on those profits overseas, for example, that would get us \$4 billion—which gets you a lot more than two pennies.*”

Solidarity Academy

Part of the professional development and training that the SEIU offers to childcare providers is called the “Solidarity Academy,” which extends to parents and community members as well. The training focuses on how to build power to advocate for childcare for all, and includes an economic and power analysis around public budgets as moral documents, as well as how corporations dodge their taxes, even as their own workers rely on public subsidies for childcare. Developed through the SEIU Education and Support Fund, the curriculum focuses on advancing a “collective vision and strategy for winning affordable, quality care, fair compensation, and a voice in decision-making,” according to training documents. The root of the training is a real power analysis, aiming to build a shared understanding of *why* we have not sufficiently funded our childcare system, and “how we can pay for our vision.” A staff member at Solidarity Academy reported that the section on revenue was most engaging for attendees, describing seeing providers learn how the childcare system is funded (and underfunded) as “mind blowing” as well as empowering to many people there.

Training in the Solidarity Academy model can drastically impact parent and provider engagement in organizing and advocacy. The training is not only for rank-and-file union members, but brings in the larger community those workers reside in to build solidarity and shared political education. Several of the attendees left saying they planned to get more active in organizing and advocacy around the issues discussed. A staff member recounted running into a woman who had not been a union member before the training at a big event in Los Angeles months later, and she was now wearing a union t-shirt and bringing tens of her friends with her.

By directly weaving in an analysis of revenue raising as well as organizing tactics like power mapping, worker training like the ones in California offer a depth of political education that nonunionized workers rarely, if ever, have access to. One interviewee noted that this kind of collaboration is made possible by labor; she works on expanding these trainings nationally, but her team struggles to put on such trainings or fit them into their budgets in the states without childcare unions. This kind of political education is a major resource to power-build in sectors like childcare, and has the potential to fuel and sustain a larger movement. By cocreating a shared understanding of the systemic reasons behind the challenges workers face, a whole community is primed to fight for real change.

Solidarity in a Complex System

Parents, providers, and community members have a rich history of organizing and agitating alongside each other for investments in childcare in California and

elsewhere. The 1990s saw national and local movements through the Worthy Wage Campaign, a grassroots effort to empower and mobilize educators to reverse the childcare staffing crisis. In 2023 [Black Californians United for ECE](#), a coalition of ECE professionals, advocates, nonprofit leaders, and university faculty, launched [Lift Every Voice, Parent Voices](#), a grassroots parents organization that combines leadership development and community organizing, has long been a force “to increase funding, improve quality, and provide better access to childcare for all families,” and the parent group has explicitly organized around a platform that includes increased wages for childcare workers.

Parent, labor, and community voices are a powerful constituency when they come together to advocate. For example, interviewees told me that the CCPU worked closely with Parent Voices to ensure that the parent and childcare worker communities were not wedged apart, actively avoiding the pitfalls of the teachers vs. parents conflicts that can occur in K-12 labor fights. One interviewee told me that the union provided internal and external education to make sure everyone understood that it is a “false choice” if the governor says that he cannot add more slots for parents because providers want more pay. Of course, more work remains to be done here. One interviewee told me that though there has been marked organizing and solidarity between parents who receive subsidies and childcare providers, that dynamic has not yet expanded to non-subsidy-receiving parents. But union staff and providers told me that organizing work has led to a deeper understanding among communities that, if you don't pay fair wages to have the necessary workforce, it doesn't matter how many vouchers you have—there won't be enough childcare.

Other tensions and barriers to solidarity arise in this sector from the mixed delivery system in the US. A worker at a center-based program has very different needs than one that works out of their home—and lawmakers and public policy often fail to acknowledge this distinction. Some of that can be seen clearly in California. The fact that the contracts between the state and the CCPU only represent family and home-based providers, not center-based providers, has caused some tensions. Some SEIU locals do represent center-based providers, and some FFN providers have started to become members of CCPU, but the CCPU contracts with the state are technically only bargained by family childcare providers, so divisions persist. Certain wins nevertheless benefit center-based providers—as multiple interviewees flagged, when the CCPU fights for “true cost of care” rate increases for childcare providers who take subsidies, providers who take subsidies in *all* care settings see that positive impact. And it may even inspire more programs to take subsidies.

Multiple interviewees told me they have seen progress in cross-setting solidarity, thanks to the fact that the same umbrella unions represent center-based, FFN, and family childcare providers alike. A provider turned organizer whose local represents both center- and family-based providers told me that the union educating providers on how different care settings work has helped the workers understand that they should not be in competition with each other, but instead should “lay the responsibility on the state, knowing both workers rely on subsidies.” She told me that, once they understood that, it was a real opener into building solidarity as a larger sector. Several organizers I spoke with acknowledged that more work remains to be done here, but that inroads have been made. A staff member that leads trainings through SEIU like the Solidarity Academy also told me that, despite the real ways providers in different program settings have been pitted against one another, the SEIU's connection to providers of all different program settings (through SEIU locals as well as the CCPU) has allowed for more opportunities for solidarity than would otherwise exist. The trainings and events led by the SEIU also explicitly use solidarity-related political education to combat the ways different providers are incentivized to see each other as competition, rather than as colleagues with the same challenges.

Parent, labor, and community voices are a powerful constituency when they come together to advocate.

In addition, collective bargaining agreements like the one in California demonstrate the power of sectoral bargaining. The union bargains with the state of California on behalf of *all* home-based providers in the state, which allows any wins to benefit the entire sector, regardless of whether they are members of CCPU. Sectoral bargaining, which is more common in other countries, has the potential to [benefit workers](#) through higher wages as well as a fairer and more competitive labor market in general.

Two interviewees also noted the tensions between universal preschool (UPK) (known in California as Transitional Kindergarten, or TK) and other parts of the childcare field—a tension seen elsewhere in the country as well. Though the trend of state- and local-funded UPK is a positive development for children and families, these programs have led to unintended negative consequences when not matched with simultaneous investments in care for the entire age spectrum of early childhood education. The childcare business model for centers and home-based programs leans heavily on colocating older and younger children. Since care for younger children requires a smaller staff-child ratio, centers cross-subsidize their infant and toddler slots with tuition from three- and four-year-olds—but providers can't do this if all the three- and four-year-olds are now typically in separate UPK facilities. The other issue is that, when UPK pays higher wages than jobs caring for younger children, programs for infants and toddlers lose staff, further decreasing childcare availability for parents of younger children.

More expansive, creative thinking is needed about how to build more solidarity among childcare workers in our incredibly complex, mixed delivery system, as well as among the parents forced to navigate that system. The work in California, and likely other states, can show us where the tension points are, what has worked to ease them, and how those strategies should be expanded to build a cohesive movement of workers and parents. A major throughline noted by interviewees about the successes in solidarity-building in California across childcare stakeholders was the pivotal role of unions.

Growing local movements for universal childcare can help build this solidarity. Universal systems beget larger constituencies of advocates for said systems. A publicly funded system has more potential to knit disparate factions of stakeholders into one united constituency and build a sense of solidarity among all families, workers, and other childcare stakeholders that will advocate for its quality and staying power over time. We can see this in places like New York City, where constituencies of parents and providers have grown around the popular public universal 3K program to make it a politically salient issue though their fight to [keep it funded across administrations](#). Similar advocacy efforts from a mix of parents, providers, and advocates have [rallied to protect](#) public investments in childcare and the childcare workforce in Washington, DC. Increased universality and public investments in care have the potential to build on the powerful solidarity movements growing through increased worker power.

The Power of Organized Childcare Workers

A theme across every interview with organizers, providers, and other stakeholders was the immense empowering effect of the organizing efforts in California on the sector and its larger communities. That long fight for bargaining rights with the state produced immediate, material wins. This laid a groundwork of commitment and energy. One organizer told me that the immediate wins allowed providers to not just *theoretically* understand that “if you organize you win”—they *did* that. It went from a labor meeting battle cry to a material reality. One organizer told me that this empowerment has been rippling outward into organizing done outside of the union, into their larger communities. She explained that organizing family and community childcare workers is particularly significant at the community level because it means “empowering a whole group of people that are essentially community centers in their neighborhoods.”

In recent months, when local communities in California organized across sectors to fight for immigrant rights in the state capital, one organizer told me that it was the CCPU members leading the lobbying meetings, because they were the ones who were most confident and experienced engaging in political leadership. Another told me about how hard this community works to encourage voting in their neighborhoods. A family childcare provider turned union organizer recounted a

striking moment in Sacramento this year; the team was there for their contract negotiations, and they were told about an immigration hearing happening that day. They asked the group if anyone wanted to testify, and a member who was a family childcare provider, born and raised in Mexico, jumped at the chance and stepped up to testify without any preparation. The provider-organizer stated how powerful it has been to see workers find their voice and to be so brave in using it. Multiple interviewees reported that the labor unions' consistent commitment to building leadership opportunities for providers, as well as including providers in major campaign strategy and decision-making, has been instrumental to building this capacity.

She explained that organizing family and community childcare workers is particularly significant at the community level because it means “empowering a whole group of people that are essentially community centers in their neighborhoods.”

Organized Labor: One Way to Build a Mass Movement for Childcare

Other states and communities can take lessons from how California is building a grassroots, worker-led movement. One factor cited by multiple people interviewed (and [elsewhere](#)) was the commitment of SEIU and AFSCME member leaders and staff to collaborate with a unified state strategy through CCPU, which is a partnership between SEIU and AFSCME. Another tactic that came up multiple times was the strategy of utilizing existing childcare provider networks and professional trainings to organize workers. Additionally, stakeholders outside of the union told me that CCPU should get credit for being a strong ally for all of the field—including parents, advocates, and workers not yet represented. Despite the fact that more remains to be done to organize the rest of the workforce, CCPU made a persistent and targeted attempt to think about the entirety of stakeholders. Interviewees also named refusing to back down from bold demands as a key to success, as well as investing in leadership training for providers, prioritizing worker education, and truly engaging providers in high-level campaign decision-making—all methods of true sustainable power-building.

If more states start to empower childcare unions, in part by allowing for collective bargaining where it may not already exist, childcare policy can act as a power-building policy, in which mass organized constituencies exist around it to maintain it, ensuring both quality and longevity of any investments or policies. Additionally, the critical lessons learned in California should influence local *and* national childcare policy design. The more policymakers include unions and other truly representative grassroots groups in childcare policy, the more power will actually be built in a demographic that has long been the underappreciated engine that keeps the economy running.

There are various ways to do this beyond allowing for collective bargaining rights and building labor enforcement mechanisms into policy. Policymakers should think creatively about allocating funding and resources for labor unions in innovative ways as part of a childcare policy design—for example, asking questions like: What if childcare unions could act as community navigators to inform parents and providers about a new subsidy expansion or public program? How can we build childcare policy that also empowers parents, providers, and their communities to advocate for themselves and the children they care for in a sustainable, lasting way?

More than just achieving individual contracts, “wins” from organizing in California are about building power. Though power may be harder to measure in traditional terms, the interviews conducted for this brief show a potential for ripple effects on communities to fight for policies that they want and deserve for years to come. One interviewee told me that in California “the provider leadership and power is at an all-time high of what I’ve seen in my career.” Many interviewees emphasized the

importance of the sheer power of being seen, a growing culture of solidarity, and a collective voice for a very diverse, isolated, and long underappreciated workforce.

What's Next for Childcare Organizing in California?

Organizers noted that, though major inroads have been made, more work remains to be done to organize parents as well as equip providers to organize the parents in their programs. Many agreed that the potential in this solidarity is powerful and could be leveraged to fight for progressive tax reform to publicly fund childcare and other social needs, as there is much more need for public funding.

Unionized workers' advocacy often ends up transcending campaigns that only focus on the needs of one sector. Recent history that bears this out—the Fight for \$15 movement, for example, was powered by the labor movement, while also being a cross-sector, cross-membership fight that transcended contracts of individual units or locals. Other examples include when teachers' unions advocate for their students, like when Chicago Teachers Union struck for wraparound services for students experiencing homelessness in the mid 2000s, or when health-care workers organize for broader systems change, like when the SEIU was a crucial part of the fight to pass the [Affordable Care Act](#).

Though California has the reputation for already being a high-tax state, this isn't the complete story. It is true that higher earners usually pay higher taxes in California than they would in other states, but only the top 5 percent of California families pay tax rates that are more than 2 percentage points higher than the national average. California's tax system is relatively flat overall, which makes it less regressive than other states—but also leaves a great deal of money on the table in a state with such enormous levels of personal and corporate wealth. [California corporate profits](#) were a record-breaking \$368 billion in 2021, but corporations in the state pay about half of what they did in the early 1980s in state taxes as a share of their profits. On the individual level, as California is home to some of the wealthiest people in the country, the income inequality is staggering: [In 2022](#), the richest 0.1 percent of Californians had an average income of \$12.9 million, about 250 times the average income of middle-income Californians (\$51,300).

Providers absolutely understand that there *is* money—it's just not going to them.

California has in recent years made attempts to draw from the vast amounts of wealth in the state to better serve the vast majority of residents, but none have yet made it over the finish line.

In 2024, an assembly tax committee blocked a wealth tax bill, Assembly Bill 259. [The bill, introduced by Assemblymember Alex Lee](#) (D-San Jose), was opposed by the governor and supported by organized labor and a group of progressive state Democrats. It proposed a 1 percent annual tax on individual net worths exceeding \$50 million and a 1.5 percent annual tax on net worth over \$1 billion. It is estimated that a bill like that would generate over \$20 billion annually—which approaches the estimated cost of a full universal childcare system in California. And it would only apply to a small fraction of the richest families.

Additionally, there are lessons to be learned from a 2020 movement in California to pass the Schools & Communities First Initiative—a ballot initiative that got tantalizingly close to passing and would have closed corporate property tax loopholes that have allowed big corporations and wealthy investors to avoid paying their fair share for schools and public services. Organized by a broad coalition of labor unions (including the teachers' union, nurses' unions, and state, county, and municipal employees union) and local and state grassroots and advocacy groups, the initiative would have reclaimed \$11 billion every year for schools and local communities. The movement to pass the initiative was in the end outspent by business interest groups and anti-tax organizations to the tune of [about \\$5.6 million](#). An organizer involved in this campaign interviewed for this brief

explained that being so outspent and yet getting within 2 percentage points from winning reflects the broad readiness in the electorate in California to redistribute wealth. The organizer also noted that he sees organized labor as a crucial partner and mechanism for raising state revenue, because “organized people is organized power.” Despite his pessimism about the appetite of the legislature or governor’s office to raise state revenue, the near-win in 2020 as well as the increasing revenue-raising at the county level across the state leaves him optimistic for building a larger movement.

The collective power being built in California, the early wins on revenue raisers at the county level in the state, and the growing worker education movement in the childcare sector all demonstrate the potential to grow a movement to get the state to realize what one organizer told me childcare providers already know: “Providers absolutely understand that there *is* money—it’s just not going to them.”

Conclusion

An organized workforce creates a container and a constituency for advocacy and action around working-class issues that extend beyond any one individual contract. We know that unions offer bargaining power for improved working conditions, wages, and benefits for workers. But [research also shows](#) a strong relationship between union density and a broad range of democratic outcomes, with union members’ political advocacy having impacts beyond the needs of that particular workforce. Part of this is the “race to the top” phenomenon, in which unions set broader standards like higher wages that nonunion employers have to meet to attract workers. We also see broader positive outcomes from the political advocacy unions engage in as membership organizations representing working people—including higher wages, access to paid sick leave, access to paid family and medical leave, and fewer voting restrictions.

California is not alone in seeing labor movement activity in the childcare sector. In fact, other states have already seen real impact from organized childcare workers. [In Connecticut](#), where [family childcare providers](#) represented by SEIU Local 2001 have also seen wage increases and professional development funds from their contracts. Labor energy played a role in successful revenue-raising in the state, helping advocate with other community and childcare organizations to win a recent [\\$300 million transfer](#) from the state’s general fund surplus into a new Early Childhood Education Endowment, which will focus on infant and toddler care in addition to pre-K.

Further research to track childcare labor organizing in California, as a state not as far along in its revenue fight as others, will be useful to learning more about what can make or break a state’s investment in childcare. Growing labor power in this sector will be increasingly important with more and more states taking innovative steps to provide more access to childcare—from Vermont to New Mexico and, most recently, New York. Expanding access to free or affordable childcare will necessarily require sustained investment in workforce compensation in order to increase supply, and organized labor can be an important voice to ensure this is a part of any proposal for universal childcare—at the state or federal level. California is just one example of a growing worker power movement to mobilize childcare providers to fight for what they need and deserve as a sector, which can in turn create the environment of care that families also need and deserve.

Childcare workers and their workplaces often act as community hubs, which means they contain expansive potential for building collective power for a diverse constituency. And an organized group of childcare workers, parents, and community members fighting for a universal childcare system that works for all of them mobilizes the political power we need to create lasting, responsive policy change in this area. This is a long underestimated and systemically disempowered constituency that, when empowered and collectively organized, can build a movement for change on childcare—as well as systemic changes for working people that we have yet to imagine.

Footnotes



1. It also draws from the Urban Institute's "[Community Power-Building](#)," which, in the context of housing justice organizing, describes power-building as not only about short-term wins but about how "work can also plant the seed for long-term, structural change to address the root causes of inequities." ↩

Acknowledgments



The author would like to thank Suzanne Kahn, Nina Dastur, and Katherine De Chant for their feedback, insights, and contributions to this paper. The author would also like to thank the 14 stakeholders interviewed for this paper, including local and national union staff, childcare provider-organizers, community organizers, local researchers, and parent-organizers who shared their stories, insights, and reflections about the important organizing work happening in California. Any errors, omissions, or other inaccuracies are the author's alone.

Suggested Citation



Bilik, Lena. 2026. "The Collective Power of Childcare Workers and Their Communities: A Case Study of California." New York: Roosevelt Institute.

RELATED RESOURCES

SERIES

Building the Future of the Care Economy

JULY 21, 2025

REPORTS

Building a Vision for Universal Public Childcare: Principles for a Childcare System That Works for Workers and Families

JULY 21, 2025

By Lena Bilik, Mary Beth Salomone Testa, Suzanne Kahn, Nina Dastur, and Meredith Loomis Quinlan

REPORTS

Whole Child, Whole Day, Whole Year: Assembling a Comprehensive Child Development System for America

JUNE 12, 2025

By Kathryn Anne Edwards

BLOG

New Mexico Offers Free Childcare for All. The Federal Government Should Follow Suit.

SEPTEMBER 18, 2025

By Lena Bilik

BRIEFS

Investing in Care: Exploring an Industrial Strategy for Care Work

MAY 23, 2024

By Suzanne Kahn

REPORTS

Direct Spending on Care Work: Thinking Beyond the Tax Code for Caregiving Infrastructure

APRIL 16, 2025

By Indivar Dutta-Gupta

TAGS: [Care Economy](#), [Labor](#), [Worker Power](#)

AUTHOR

Lena Bilik

SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER

As senior program manager, Lena supports think tank staff and fellows with research and project management.

[READ MORE](#) ▶





**Roosevelt
Institute**

rooseveltinstitute.org