

Australian child care workers angered by cuts to conditions

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New South Wales child care workers, who are among the lowest paid employees in Australia, face further reductions in their working conditions in exchange for an 8 to 10 percent wage increase, in a new pay deal approved by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission last month.

The \$41 a week increase, half paid in August, the remainder in November, will bring starting pay rates for the state's 15,000 to 20,000 child care workers to \$23,600 a year, which is less than the official poverty line for a family of four. Those at the top of the scale—qualified coordinators in large child care centres—will get as little as \$30,600 a year.

The long-delayed pay rise equals the meagre increases paid in 1998, 1999 and 2000 in successive instalments to some other low-paid workers under the so-called Living Wage decisions of the federal industrial commission. According to the federal government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, these increases were meant to bring low-income workers' pay up to a liveable wage. Yet the rises were not granted to child care workers because of employer opposition.

Hailed by Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) officials, the terms of the pay deal were outlined in a report to a NSW Child Care Workers conference that the union held in Sydney recently. Although child care workers have been officially recognised since the early 1970s, the conference was the first ever convened.

The union called the conference in an attempt to head off the anger of its members over poor pay and conditions. The agreement unveiled at the conference, however, imposes many of the demands made by the NSW Employers Federation for the reduction of award conditions:

- * Instead of a paid meal break, employers can direct new employees to take an unpaid meal break of up to 30 minutes, adding an extra half hour to a shift. The same

condition can be imposed on existing employees, provided that they give their “consent”.

- * Longer hours of work and irregular hours apply, including 10-hour shifts.

- * The 10 percent part-time loading has been eliminated.

- * Rostered days off (RDO) have been further restricted, taking another step to meeting employer demands that RDOs be eliminated from the industry altogether.

- * The use of temporary contracts can be expanded throughout the industry.

This last clause will have a severe impact. Last May, KU Children's Services, a company with 130 centres and more than 1,000 staff, won the right to employ workers on contracts of six to nine months or less, in order to reduce staff during non-peak holiday periods between December and March. These conditions can now be extended to all child care employers, effectively cutting the annual income of those employed on a temporary basis by 25 percent. Already between 13 and 20 percent of child care workers are casuals.

Meal breaks are another particularly contentious issue. Prescribed staffing/children ratios require that workers remain on the premises and on call whether they are on paid or unpaid breaks. There is great pressure on new and existing employees alike to remain on the job during their meal breaks. One child care worker asked at the conference: “If we've lost our paid lunch break, did we really only get a \$9 a week pay-rise?”

According to a LHMU survey carried out last year, more than 60 percent of child care workers do up to five hours of unpaid overtime every week. Work-related shopping, programming, parent meetings and rostering are being performed outside paid hours of work. Fifty-eight percent said they were so overworked they could not provide the right level of care.

Adding to the pressure on child care workers is the federal government's scheme to force the unemployed

into child care centres as part of its work-for-the-dole program. In an initial intake last year, more than 350 job-seekers with minimal training were placed in child care centres. Not only are these unpaid workers being used to eliminate full-time jobs, they require extra supervision by the remaining staff.

Because it has become impossible for most families to survive on one parent's pay packet, the demand for child care services grew enormously in the 1990s, resulting in a four-fold increase in the number of child care centres.

However, in line with the government policy of rolling back all public services, federal budget cuts to child care—at least \$821 million since 1996—have resulted in closures, thousands of job losses and the continuing erosion of working conditions. The number of places for the main form of care, Long Day Care, which is centre-based care for infants and preschool children, fell from 194,600 to 190,300 in one year, June 1998 to June 1999, alone.

Centres in working-class areas are being hit the hardest. Between 1996 and 1999, almost 400 child care centres closed, the majority in low-income neighbourhoods. During the same period, the number of families with incomes under \$27,000 using child care fell by 8,500 as against a decline of 800 in middle income households (\$28,000-\$65,000).

New child care centres, 90 percent of which are privately owned, are opening in areas where family income is \$51 a week higher than the national average and closing in suburbs and towns where family income is \$32 a week lower than the average.

A number of child care workers at the conference spoke to the *WSWS* about their conditions. One casual worker said the government cutbacks had produced “devastating changes. Whereas before you had five or six staff, with at least two to respond to a crisis, now there are three or four. When you've got babies barely out of the nursery up to five-year-olds, problems are happening all the time.

“Suddenly the drop in numbers means that there's not much laughter any more. The level of stress and anxiety is noticed in the kids. Most of the job cutbacks were achieved by natural attrition but sometimes we had to call meetings to discuss who was leaving. That was tragic.”

Janee Binnie, who works in the Newcastle region, north of Sydney, spoke at the conference, criticising the trade-offs that the union had agreed to. To the applause of the audience, she said the meal break clause opened up divisions between workers. “You might be the only person in a work site to be on a paid lunch break. How

can we stop such workers being victimised? We have to be concerned about people who haven't got a job yet. What can we do?”

Binnie told the *WSWS* that the budget cuts had had a “huge impact on community-based centres while private centres have opened up everywhere.” She had organised her own rally of child care workers in Newcastle after the LHMU told her that a protest action in Sydney earlier this year was not called by the union, but by child care workers themselves.

At the conference child care workers also discussed the crippling impact of the state government's child protection legislation. Ostensibly introduced as a result of the government's concern for the welfare of children, the legislation has been utilised to discredit and direct suspicion against those working with children, such as child care workers and teachers.

One child care worker described an incident where a very young child, prone to convulsions, had a temperature of 39.8, requiring, over the child's loud protestations, immediate medication. Because the worker had to ensure the presence of witnesses to exclude an allegation of child abuse, she was distracted from the medical emergency.

Under the regulations, once a child says that someone slapped them, a report has to be prepared. Once made, an allegation remains on the worker's record, regardless of whether it is found to be true or not. One participant commented: “There is never a finality. We're very vulnerable. Once there's an allegation, mud sticks.”

A real measure of the government's concern for children are the deteriorating working conditions for those entrusted with the care and nurture of babies and infants. As a result of these conditions, child care workers have bitterly complained that qualified and dedicated workers are being driven out of the industry.



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