

Australian unions exploit childcare strike to promote Labor

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The United Voice trade union used a walkout by some childcare staff yesterday to promote the lie that the election of a federal Labor government will resolve the issues confronting low-paid workers.

The afternoon stoppage was the fourth in 12 months, involving up to 7,000 childcare workers across the country. The partial strikes are part of United Voice's "Big Steps" campaign, which is trying to channel the widespread anger of workers over poverty-level wages behind impotent appeals to the current Liberal-National Coalition government and support for the big business Labor Party.

Childcare employees, even with tertiary education qualifications, are paid as little as \$22 an hour. Amid soaring demand for childcare, they face increasingly onerous conditions, including looking after ever-greater numbers of children. The union campaign has included demands for pay parity with other professionals, such as school teachers.

Media reports indicate that around 30 childcare centres in Sydney were affected by the strike, with similar numbers in other capital cities. The limited participation underscored the reality that the United Voice campaign is not aimed at mobilising workers in an industrial and political fight, but at providing Labor with a platform to posture as an alternative to the Coalition government.

Around 300 people attended the Sydney stop-work protest, many of them union officials and Labor Party members. In effect, it was a Labor Party election rally. Introducing deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek, a United Voice spokesperson declared: "Unlike the Liberal government, the Labor Party is actually listening. So who are you going to vote for? Your votes are what matters. Your votes set the course for the country."

In line with the union campaign, Plibersek depicted the low childcare wages as primarily a result of "gender discrimination," because most of the workers are female.

This argument serves to divide male and female workers and direct childcare workers into appeals for wage "parity." The truth is wages for all workers are stagnant or declining as a result of decades of regressive enterprise agreements, enforced by Labor and the unions, which have slashed pay and conditions.

Plibersek claimed that the Coalition government "doesn't understand" the impact of low wages on workers, while she was "on the side" of childcare staff. In reality, Plibersek was a central figure in the 2007–2013 Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, which imposed sweeping cuts to healthcare, education and welfare.

As health minister in 2012, Plibersek personally oversaw a \$400 million cut to federal hospital funding, leading to the destruction of over 700 jobs and the closure of 400 hospital beds in Victoria alone.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Michele O'Neil delivered a speech based on the unions' bogus "Change the rules" campaign to channel discontent behind Labor. "This government doesn't value you," she declared. "They're concerned about looking after the big banks, the big businesses. Wages are going backwards. That's why we're fighting to change the rules."

The truth is that the previous Labor government, with the unions' full support, introduced the Fair Work industrial relations laws, which the unions now claim to oppose. The legislation bans virtually all industrial action.

O'Neil personifies the two-faced union posturing. Her election as ACTU president this year was

welcomed by the Australian Industry Group, which noted employers had “dealt constructively with Ms O’Neil for many years through her work at the textiles union.” O’Neil collaborated with major transnational corporations in the destruction of thousands of clothing workers’ jobs.

The rally concluded with union bureaucrats placing postcards addressed to Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the steps of Sydney’s federal parliamentary offices. This pathetic gesture shows that the union’s stance largely stems from the government rebuffing its overtures for backroom discussions.

The conditions facing childcare workers are the product of a privatisation agenda, enforced by successive Labor and Coalition governments, which the unions have done nothing to oppose.

In 1991, the Keating Labor government expanded federal childcare funding to the corporate sector, abolishing its earlier limit on not-for-profit operators. This was part of a broader agenda that saw the Labor government sell off public assets, while overseeing the destruction of thousands of jobs across manufacturing and industry.

In 1994, Labor introduced the Child Care Cash Rebate, providing parents with a rebate for childcare expenses, giving them a financial incentive to turn to profiteering operators.

Keating’s program, deepened by subsequent governments, transformed the sector. In 1990, 85 percent of childcare was delivered on a non-profit basis. By 2005, private companies controlled 70 percent. Today, corporate entities dominate the industry, charging exorbitant fees and paying minimum wages.

In 2013, the Gillard government launched the Early Years Quality Fund. Hailed by United Voice’s predecessor union, it mandated wage rises covering just 30 percent of childcare workers. They mostly received pay increases of just \$3 an hour, and some \$6 an hour. The Coalition government reversed these limited rises in 2014.

Childcare workers can advance their interests only through a struggle against Labor and the unions. A new Labor government, like its predecessors, would impose the dictates of the corporate and financial elite for deeper cuts to social spending and a stepped-up offensive against the wages and conditions of the

working class.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at the Sydney protest.

Lillian, who has worked in the aged-care sector for 25 years, said: “I’m here to support early childhood workers, because they deserve equal pay. In aged care, like childcare, federal funding is increasingly going to the private operators, so there are many similarities between the two industries.

“We need to be a very multi-skilled workforce. It’s a big skill set and it’s not being recognised. It’s not fair. It’s hard for us to pay our bills. I’m on a low single income, so I need as many hours as I can get just to afford the cost of living. Sometimes you get a lot of work, sometimes you don’t get many hours at all, which really impacts on take home income.”

Cassandra, a childcare worker, said: “I’ve come here today to fight for fairer pay for our whole profession. In the 11 years I have worked in the sector, I’ve only made it to the \$25 an hour mark. I plan this to be my life-long career and at the moment, it is not financially viable for me to stay in the profession.

“The cost of living is rapidly rising. I’m a renter and it has not got any easier. I’ve had to move somewhere cheaper so I can keep working and studying.

“Accessing childcare has become a real problem for working class families. The government hasn’t capped fees, so private centres keep raising the costs. It’s making it harder and harder for parents to get their children care and education.

“Gillard didn’t do anything until the very end of her prime ministership. She put in some provisions. It wasn’t industry wide and it was only for a small amount of childcare workers. As soon as the Liberal government got in again, they took it away.

“Neither party has been representing well for the early childhood sector. Labor has been making bigger commitments but we haven’t got much to show for it. Political promises leading to elections often don’t pan out.”



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