

Australian childcare centres hit by COVID outbreaks

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Hundreds of childcare centres across Australia have been forced to close in recent weeks due to COVID-19 outbreaks.

In the first week of January, 303 childcare centres were listed as closed in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, 30 in Victoria, 29 in South Australia, 22 in Queensland, three in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and one in the Northern Territory. The closures occurred despite a lot of centres having shut down for the summer break. After many reopened last week, closures increased further, with a total of 490 registered as closed yesterday. The tally is almost certain to increase in the next period, as numbers of working parents return from leave and resume placing their children in care.

Childcare workers are among those confronting the highest risk of infection in their workplace. Caring for the youngest children, unmasked as well as unvaccinated, cannot occur while maintaining any kind of social distancing, while attending to various hygiene issues further heightens the risk of infection.

The exposure to COVID of thousands of young children and babies, all of whom are unvaccinated, represents another indictment of the bipartisan "let it rip" policy being implemented by every state and federal government.

The disaster in childcare provides a foretaste of what will happen within the schools, if they are permitted to reopen as scheduled in late January and early February.

"Early Learning and Care was experiencing a workforce shortage before the COVID-19 pandemic" Elizabeth Death, the chief executive of the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, explained. "We are now in a workforce shortage crisis."

In the early 1990s, the then federal Labor government encouraged private operators into the early learning and

childcare sector, which had previously been predominantly publicly operated. Childcare provision has since functioned as a cash cow for business thanks to generous government subsidies.

Australian families are among the highest users of childcare among OECD countries. Almost 40 percent of households spend more than they can afford, according to international benchmarks that outline no more than 7 percent of disposable household income ought to be allocated.

According to a Mitchell Institute report last year, "Counting the cost to families: assessing childcare affordability in Australia," 83 percent of families using childcare spend more on it than they do on utilities. Altogether, nearly 40 percent of families spent more than 7 percent of their household income on childcare making it unaffordable for almost 400,000 Australians.

While childcare workers are paid poverty level wages, CEOs in the sector are handed exorbitant salaries. At the same time, babies, toddlers and young children are put at risk, with government regulations widely disregarded.

A recent study found that three-quarters of the 12,000 enforcement actions taken since 2015 were against for-profit providers.

At the same time, cost-cutting and unsustainable workloads have led to high staff turnover and staff shortages. A survey undertaken by the United Workers Union (UWU) reported that between 35-48 percent of educators leave the sector each year, double the average national workforce turnover. Two-thirds of survey respondents said their centre was understaffed, with 60 percent saying they had often come to work or stayed on the job while sick due to staff shortages. Some 71 percent of centre directors report a significant increase in staff leaving the sector since the COVID-19

pandemic.

A quarter of staff said they spent 5-10 unpaid hours per month completing their programming, with another 5-10 unpaid hours worked each month setting up rooms and cleaning. Staff are regularly “invited” to “working-bees” on the weekends to try to catch up with cleaning and jobs they haven’t completed during the week.

A worker responding to the union’s survey commented, “It’s become worse in the last couple of years. We still provide care for the same number of children, but without enough staff. It’s happening every day and it’s dangerous for children and staff. Staff routinely go home crying and then have to come to work the next day even though they are well-beyond exhausted or physically unwell, for fear of making the next day worse for the rest of their colleagues, children and families.”

The disastrous state of the sector is the result of bipartisan policies implemented by Labor and Liberal governments alike. The UWU, like its predecessors, United Voice and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, has refused to mobilise educators against these attacks, instead functioning as the enforcer of each new government measure. The union upholds Fair Work industrial laws, introduced by the last Labor government, which ban virtually all industrial action.

The UWU, like every other union, is playing a critical role in allowing the Morrison federal government to keep childcare centres open as an essential component of the overall drive to force people back on the job amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

With callous indifference to the health and lives of workers, Australia’s “national cabinet” last week responded to the mass closure of childcare centres by adding staff in the sector to its list of those who can be forced to remain working even if they are close contacts of a COVID infection. A close contact is now defined as someone living with an individual who has tested positive to the coronavirus, meaning childcare workers who are likely themselves infected will be compelled to go to work.

New organisations of struggle, independent of the unions, are needed. As a first step childcare workers should form rank-and-file committees and link up with school teachers, university staff and other sections of the working-class facing similar risks to their working

conditions and health.

Childcare centres should only be open to children of emergency workers with full income support for all workers affected by the suspension of non-essential production. The strictest safety precautions including effective provision of PPE must be freely available. Staff to children ratios need to be cut to what is scientifically recommended.

Tens of thousands of additional childcare workers need to be hired and decent wages paid. Workloads must be reduced and ongoing and accessible information provided of COVID-19 outbreaks at childcare centres. The wealth of the super-rich, major banks, and large corporations must be expropriated and society must be organised along rational scientific lines to meet the needs of the vast majority.

Childcare workers who agree with this perspective are urged to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees. In collaboration with educator rank-and-file committees internationally, developed through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the CFPE has mobilized educators independently of, and in opposition to, the corporatist unions.

Register for the CFPE meeting, “No to Australian school reopenings amid record COVID infections! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees!” It will be held online on January 23 at 11am (AEDT).

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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