

Australian childhood educators holding protests on Wednesday

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On Wednesday, Early Childhood (EC) educators will participate in several rallies across Australia. The workers confront increasingly unbearable conditions, including poverty-wages, high demand and the constant threat of COVID-19 infection.

The demonstrations are taking place amid the development of a broader movement of the working class, reflected in strikes and protests by rail staff, nurses, teachers, warehouse workers and other staff.

The protests have been described by some media reports as “strikes,” but this is false. Instead, the United Workers Union (UWU) has called a “national shutdown” based entirely on an appeal for parents to voluntarily withdraw their children from childcare facilities.

The UWU has been exceptionally vague on how the “action” will occur. It appears, however, that in effect parents are being told to take the action. They will likely still have to pay for the day’s childcare. Many of the impoverished EC staff will likely be compelled to remain on the job to ensure they receive their pay.

This is a cynical stunt by the union designed to placate the growing anger and frustration of EC workers at their intolerable conditions and pay rates.

The union has instead organised token events, guaranteeing that operations at most private childcare providers will proceed with minimal or no disruption.

In line with previous UWU rallies they will promote the most bankrupt illusions in the federal Labor government, which the UWU supports. It hailed the election of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in May, and has since peddled the lie that his Labor government is seeking to improve the wages and conditions of the most exploited workers, such as aged care staff.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Labor is spearheading an offensive against the working class. It has stated its rejection of any across-the-board wage rise and is mapping out sweeping budget austerity measures to pay for business handouts and military spending.

Treasurer Jim Chalmers has repeatedly declared that working people must “sacrifice,” while the Labor government maintains Stage Three tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy and insists that its

main priority is to ensure “productivity,” a code word for stepped-up exploitation of workers and greater corporate profits.

Last week, UWU officials took part in the Jobs and Skills Summit, together with the Labor government and the country’s corporate and business chiefs. The gathering had nothing to do with boosting wages, as has falsely been claimed. Instead, its aim was to deepen union collaboration in pro-business restructuring, and to further entrench the role of the union bureaucracy to suppress mounting working-class struggle.

Tomorrow’s action is modelled on earlier bogus campaigns by the UWU.

In 2018, the union held four partial strikes as part of its “Big Steps” campaign. At the time, the aim was to channel widespread anger over low wages behind impotent appeals to the then Liberal-National Coalition government. At the same time, the UWU promoted the big business Labor party as some kind of political alternative for the working class.

In August 2021 the UWU itself released a report based on a national survey of 3800 EC educators held earlier in that year. Of those surveyed, 37 percent declared their intention to leave child care in the near future. The reasons given were: excessive workload and insufficient time to provide quality early childhood care (73 percent), low pay (63 percent) and feeling undervalued (47 percent).

The average wage for a child care worker in Australia is \$29.60 per hour, but there are many who earn as little as \$23.50 per hour. Over 70 percent of the educators surveyed stated that they worried constantly about their financial situation and would struggle to cover a sudden, emergency cost of \$400.

These conditions have only worsened over the past two years. Throughout the pandemic EC educators have been designated as “essential workers” compelled to work under unsafe conditions. In many instances they have been forced to undertake extra administrative and cleaning duties with no increase in pay. Thousands were sickened by the virus.

The unions are directly responsible. They fully backed the “essential worker” designation for EC educators. And more broadly, they have ensured that workers remain on the job throughout the pandemic, to ensure business activities proceed.

The unions enforced the disastrous reopening of the economy

last December, dictated by corporate profit interests, It has resulted in almost ten million infections and more than 11,000 deaths. Now they are collaborating closely with the federal Labor government and the state administrations, as they deepen the “let it rip” agenda by withdrawing the handful of safety measures that remain.

On its website, the UWU outlined three vague slogans that are the basis of tomorrow’s rallies:

- Give us a reason to stay and pay us what we are worth
- Value early education as part of the education system, just as important as schools
- Put children before profit

Notably, the union is not putting forward a single concrete demand, on pay or any other issue. This means that it is fighting for nothing. As in aged care, if the Labor government makes a token announcement on EC educators’ pay and conditions, it will be hailed by the UWU as a “victory.”

Labor and the unions, moreover, are directly responsible for the dire conditions that exist.

Wages in early child care have been at poverty level for decades. It was the Keating Labor government in the early 1990’s that initiated a program of wholesale privatisation of the childcare sector. Today, Australia’s early child care system is 77 percent privatised, one of the highest rates in the world, and is dominated by corporate entities charging exorbitant fees and paying minimum wage rates.

In 2013, the Gillard Labor government, working with the UWU’s predecessor union, mandated paltry pay rises to which just 30 percent of early EC educators were entitled. These limited rises were then abolished by the Liberal Coalition government in 2014.

Far from placing “children before profit,” successive Labor and Liberal governments, both state and federal, have entirely subordinated education to the interests of big business, with the full collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy.

At the Jobs and Skills Summit, business representatives articulated their demands for the “reform” of the early childhood education sector. By this, they do not mean the amelioration of childcare workers’ conditions. Instead, they mean the expansion of childcare to working class families in order to free up parents for entry into the workforce to address critical labour shortages induced by the pandemic and to drive up productivity.

The unions fully back this agenda and have not challenged the dominance of the sector by private corporations, who are set to receive an even greater windfall.

The demands of business were echoed by Daniel Andrews, Victorian Labor premier, who said at the summit that 26,600 women in Victoria alone were locked out of the workforce due to a lack of access to childcare, costing the state economy \$1.5 billion a year.

The Andrews government has already announced that next year free kindergarten of 15 hours per week will be offered to

3-year-old and 4-year-old children. This is despite the fact that there is a shortage of thousands of EC educators in Victoria. The Perrottet Liberal government in NSW has also announced similar plans a little further into the future.

EC educators must reject the UWU’s attempts to tie them to big business Labor governments and the profit demands of the corporations.

Instead, they should turn to the emerging struggles of the working class across the country and link up with workers throughout the education sector and more broadly. This includes high school teachers in Victoria, against whom the Andrews government and the Australian Education Union recently imposed a wage-cutting industrial agreement that will entrench the dire situation in the schools.

To advance their interests, EC educators need their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees entirely independent of the unions. These are the vehicle for spreading information, uniting with other workers and preparing a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive against the assault on wages and the intolerable conditions that exist.

This is a political fight against the Labor governments, the ruling elites and the unions, which function as their enforcers. The rampant privatisation of childcare and early childhood education underscores the need to fight for a socialist perspective, which would place these essential social services under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to meet the needs of staff and the working class as a whole.

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