

Australia: Thousands of early childcare educators protest poverty-level conditions

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9 September 2022

Thousands of early childhood (EC) educators attended rallies in 19 locations across Australia on Wednesday.

They are some of the lowest-paid workers in the country, with a base rate of less than \$22 per hour, barely above minimum wage. Despite this, parents are forced to pay exorbitant fees to the highly profitable private companies that dominate the childcare sector.

The large attendance reflected the hostility of workers to these conditions. Hundreds of parents also attended, supporting the EC educators, and denouncing the unbearable childcare costs.

Speeches were held at the different locations and in Sydney, workers marched to 1 Bligh Street, which houses the Sydney offices of the federal government.

The United Workers Union (UWU) sought to limit the extent of the action. Although the protests were billed as a “strike,” childcare centres were not closed, instead appeals were made to parents not to send their children in. Nevertheless, workers joined the rallies in large groups, taking unpaid leave to attend or coming at the end of their shift.

Educators who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* called for pay increases, improved conditions, more staffing, time off for required professional development and protection from COVID-19.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, EC educators were labelled “essential workers” and forced to remain on the job. Workloads dramatically increased as staff had to take on the additional role of cleaners, while shifts were cut to shore up the profits of childcare centre owners.

The poverty-level conditions faced by EC educators are the product of the privatisation of childcare services, implemented and overseen by both Labor and Liberal-National governments over decades.

Australia has one of the highest rates of childcare privatisation in the world, with 77 percent of the industry controlled by private corporations, which turn over \$14 billion in revenue annually. Each year, these companies receive \$10 billion in government subsidies, paid directly to employers.

There are big profits to be made and numbers of investment and equity firms have bought into the childcare business. G8 Education, Australia’s largest for-profit early childhood education company, reported a net profit of \$46 million last year.

This privatisation has rapidly driven up the cost to parents, with the national average price of childcare reaching \$120.70 a day before subsidies. However, many working families pay hundreds of dollars more than that each day.

A report published last year by the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University found that EC education and care is unaffordable for 39 percent of all families who use the childcare system, according to an international benchmark that no more than 7 percent of household disposable income should be spent on childcare.

The study also found that 83.3 percent of families spend less on clothing than childcare, 83.1 percent spent less on household utilities, 69.9 percent spend less on transport and 30.6 percent spend less on groceries than on childcare.

Union speakers at Wednesday’s rallies did not put forward a single concrete demand on pay, conditions or any other issue. Instead, the UWU delivered a series of vague slogans, the most prominent being “give us a reason to stay and pay us what we are worth.”

The “strike” was used by the UWU to promote illusions that workers can advance their demands for improved pay and conditions through appeals to the recently elected federal Labor government.

The rallies came less than a week after Labor's Jobs and Skills Summit. Falsely touted as a meeting to boost wages, the summit brought together representatives from business, government and the unions to plan a deepening offensive against the working class.

A critical component of the summit was a memorandum of understanding signed between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) in support of multi-employer bargaining.

The purpose of this is to expand the reach of the enterprise bargaining system, which has been used by business and the unions for decades to slash wages and conditions.

This would potentially include many EC educators. Of the 7,300 childcare employers across the country, only 2 percent currently have enterprise agreements.

The UWU and ACTU are seeking to bring all these workers under multi-employer bargaining. This is not only to increase union membership, but also to head off an eruption of workers in opposition to conditions in the childcare sector.

At Sydney's rally, ACTU Secretary Sally McManus told the crowd "you deserve the same rights to be able to bargain" as other workers.

At the Brisbane, Queensland rally, one of the main speakers quoted former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who he claimed backed the union's first "Big Steps" campaign in 2008 and the call for higher wages for childcare educators. The speaker did have to concede, however, that no pay rise had eventuated.

This did not deter Queensland Minister for Energy and Renewables Mick de Brenni, who claimed to "seriously" support what he vaguely called "a living wage" for childcare educators, again offering nothing concrete.

This is in line with the agenda of the Anthony Albanese Labor government. Since coming to office in May, the Labor government has made clear it is a right-wing pro-business government, warning of massive budget cuts and that "sacrifices" will be needed from workers.

While offering zero for EC educators, Labor has promised to grant \$5.4 billion in federal childcare subsidies, falsely claiming this will help families with childcare costs. These subsidies, to be paid directly to childcare employers, will have minimal impact on the

cost of childcare and do nothing to increase wages in the sector, while delivering increased profits for private childcare operators.

The cost of childcare has been steadily increasing since the early 1990s. The Keating Labor government began the rapid privatisation of childcare, abolishing limits on private "not-for-profit" operators and vastly expanding federal funding into the corporate sector. This was continued and deepened by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened into the rallies, to expose the rotten history of the UWU and their record of selling out one industrial dispute after another. The SEP highlighted the role of Labor and advanced a perspective for the formation of independent organs of struggle.

The UWU sought to block this perspective from reaching workers by intimidatory and anti-democratic methods. In Brisbane, officials surrounded campaigners in an attempt to shut down discussion with workers. In Sydney, they intervened to drag workers away from being interviewed.

For EC educators to advance their interests they must build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the pro-business Labor party and trade unions.

The rampant privatisation of childcare services must be reversed. This requires a fight for a socialist perspective, which would place essential social services, including childcare and schools, under public ownership and democratic workers' control, to meet the needs of children, parents, staff and the working class as a whole.

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