

# Protesting Australian childcare workers speak out: “We’re paid an absolute pittance for what we do”

Our reporters  
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Childcare workers took part in rallies across Australia on Wednesday to demand improvements to their poverty-level wages and to oppose the increasingly unbearable conditions that have been foisted onto them by governments and the private employers that dominate the sector.

While the protests expressed mounting anger among workers, the United Workers Union (UWU) promoted bankrupt illusions that the big business federal Labor government would resolve the crisis facing childcare staff. The unions are collaborating closely with Labor as it seeks to suppress wages, implement a new round of pro-business restructuring and keep a lid on the mounting class struggles, including in sectors such as childcare where the unions have historically had no presence.

The UWU sought to restrict discussion among workers. This included anti-democratic attempts to block Socialist Equality Party campaigners from speaking with protesters in Sydney and Brisbane, for fear that they would expose the UWU’s long record of imposing sellouts, outline the right-wing and anti-working class character of the Labor government, and advance the fight for rank-and-file committees among childcare workers.

The union was clearly fearful that this program, aimed at developing a genuine industrial and political fight by childcare and other workers, would win a strong response. Despite the attempted censorship, WSWs reporters spoke to a number of participants.

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At the rally in Sydney, **Cathrine**, who works casually as an early childcare educator, explained: “When I was working full-time, I would go home after an eight-hour shift and do at least 30 minutes of unpaid work straight away with my kids sitting on my lap. Then if I had to write observations I would do it once my kids were asleep.

“When COVID hit, the wind got taken out of us. We felt scared every day coming to work. We thought ‘everyone else is shutting down, why are we not shutting down?’ But the government didn’t care that we were putting ourselves at risk. They said ‘put on a mask and socially distance,’ which is physically impossible with children.”

Asked why childcare centres had remained open, Cathrine said: “Because parents can’t work with their children at home, and I don’t think workplaces give the flexibility needed. The government treats us like childminders. We are told to just shut up and put up and that we can’t complain because we are essential workers.

“I’ve had quite a number of children catch COVID. It is a cycle where two or three children will catch it and then we will be free for a few weeks or a month, then it comes back again. This has happened since the lockdowns finished.”

On the ending of safety measures, she said, “it’s really scary, I’ve caught it, my son’s caught it and I had longer effects. I was off work for a month, and I am casual so I couldn’t afford it, but had no choice.”

Asked if she thinks there should be unified action amongst workers, Cathrine replied: “Do you mean like the Yellow Vest protests in France? If we could do that it would be amazing. The only way to really get things moving is to piss people off and hit it in their money.”

Cathrine expressed interest in the SEP’s call for rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. “I do think the unions haven’t got the teeth that they used to have. This isn’t a strike, it’s nothing. I’m taking unpaid leave to be here today,” she said.

**Kathy** and **Anabelle** (pseudonyms) work at some of the last remaining council run childcare centres in Sydney.

Kathy said, “the pay we get does not match the work we do. There is so much staff turnover and burnout. There is no incentive to stay or for more staff to come and work. In private centres people get into business and they want to make profit, they want to make money.”

Speaking on the impact of COVID-19, she added, “we felt like pawns. We had to stay open so that the people they actually consider important could go to work. What we do is not just childminding, we help shape these children.”

Annabelle stated, “Every single day there are one or two educators off. This can be through leaving the sector or due to COVID.” Speaking on the SEP’s call for joint action she said, “I most certainly think the action should be united, especially

with teachers.”

Kathy added, “with nurses nothing is happening for them as well. I have a friend who is a nurse working with children and they didn’t even get hazard pay. Just like us they were just thrown in there and told ‘it is all right, children don’t get it that bad.’ But children can pass it on. That is when we saw we mean nothing to them, we just mind the children.”

**Alex** works at a for-profit centre that was not shut down for the strike. When asked what she would demand for workers in the sector, she said, “higher pay rate across the board, a minimum 20 percent increase. We are accredited teachers and have to maintain 100 hours of professional development. We should not have to pay for those courses and complete them in our own time. That is 100 hours of unpaid work.”

In Brisbane, **Bev**, a former teachers’ aide who came to support the childcare educators, and whose daughter is a kindergarten teacher, said the pay was poor and so was the recognition for the educators’ contribution to the development of the children.

“There are a lot of companies out there that make a lot of money from childcare, but it isn’t reflected in the salaries,” she said, adding that teachers’ aides were badly paid too, but it was far worse for childhood educators.

Bev was sceptical about the UWU’s promotion of illusions in the Labor government.

“I would hope the Labor government would do something but quite honestly the parameters of childcare in this country are wrong. Childcare should be available to everybody, regardless of what level they are at. I don’t know why it can’t be subsidised like state education... So I would hope, but I am not 22 anymore, so I’ve been around a long time and I know the winds of change take a long time too.”

**Kate**, a childcare worker, commented: “There is a whole lot of profit for people running childcare. While we see escalating fees there is no benefit to the people teaching or giving care. Workers get the basic wage per hour—anywhere from \$22—and for those who have a diploma it could be around \$29 per hour. There is casualisation too. There has to be some structural change.”

Kate agreed that new workers’ organisations, like rank-and-file committees, were needed. Asked if she believed the union officials when they said they were “on your side” and “batting for you,” she said: “No, I have worked long enough to know that is not the case.”

In the regional New South Wales city of Newcastle, several hours north of Sydney, **Natasha** explained: “I’ve been working in the childcare profession for three decades and I am still receiving the same amount of pay that someone would be receiving if they started three years ago.

“The first- and second-year workers don’t receive the same pay initially. There is no real financial benefit in this job. The only reason any of us do it is for the love of the kids.

“I was in close contact with children who I would find out the

following day had COVID-19. No one was talking about keeping us safe.”

She described the conditions at one centre she worked at, where short staffing meant they “would constantly be at the wrong ratio. We were breaking the law. The current ratio is one educator to ten 3-5-year-olds, a 1:8 ratio for 2-3-year-olds and 0-2 years is 1:5. I was in a room on my own with 20 children at one point.

**Jo**, from a council childcare facility in Melbourne, said, “Educators are burnt-out. We’ve got staff away all the time. One day we had 11 staff away, when we have 40 staff, so we couldn’t run rooms. It’s not a quality service.”

**Elisha** said, “We’ve got these guidelines, so many expectations to document all the children’s learning in such little time to do it, it’s just not feasible. They’re trying to stretch us when we’re already at our absolute limit.”

**Ebony** explained, “We’re putting our own money back into the centre. We’re on minimum wage but if we want any resources, we have to buy it ourselves. I’ve got two children myself, so the rising cost of living is really hard. We all work to make a living and we’re barely surviving.”

**Linda**, an educator from a private facility in Melbourne, said, “We’re paid an absolute pittance for what we do. The sector has such low pay, nobody wants to work in it. We’re haemorrhaging because we cannot get staff. We must write mountains of paperwork, even when we’re short of staff. As a result, many educators do this work at home for no pay.”

On the pandemic she said, “The first lockdown there were fewer children, but for the second one the government broadened the definition of ‘essential worker.’ Suddenly everyone was an essential worker, it was a joke! We were told to test ourselves, but we couldn’t even get rapid antigen tests.”

“You can never get ahead. You can’t earn enough to get a basic standard of living. If you’re a single person on an educator’s wage clearing \$857 a week, how are you going to survive? How are you going to pay rent?”

“Sometimes the nursery is absolute hell. You have 12 babies under 1, with 3 staff. You can’t give quality care. And we get told, ‘But you’re on ratio.’ Ratio is the bare minimum by law. No one’s doing us any favours by keeping us on ratio.

“There are childcare centres running for profit. They run the place on the smell of an oily rag. It’s all about the big dollar, the shareholders. Here we are working our arses off for low wages, and the people who own these companies are driving around in BMWs, Mercs and living in swanky houses. We’re the one holding up the boat for them. They’ve probably never set foot in a childcare centre in their lives.”



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