

Australian childcare worker explains unsafe conditions

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A highly qualified veteran childcare worker, Anne, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* following recent allegations of child sexual abuse by a childcare worker in the Australian state of Victoria. Since news broke of the charges laid against Joshua Dale Brown, the media have reported that thousands of complaints over inadequate conditions have been made in childcare centres across the country.

Outraged parents have been promised “reforms” by both the state and federal Labor governments. Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan announced a review. Federal Education Minister Jason Clare declared that new rules would be legislated so that childcare centres found to be failing safety standards could have their federal funding cut after a single breach. At the same time, Clare admitted that regulators already had the power to shut a centre if they thought there was a serious threat to children’s safety.

Anne commented on the July 13 WSWs article, which warned that the privatisation of childcare by successive Labor and Liberal-National state and federal governments has led to a situation where such abuses of children could occur. Today, 75 percent of long day care centres are run for profit—among the highest rates of childcare privatisation globally.

Childcare workers are among the lowest paid in the country. A recent 15 percent pay rise—granted over two years—has barely dented decades of wage stagnation. There are currently 21,000 staff vacancies in the sector, driven by poverty wages, crushing workloads and rampant casualisation.

The WSWs article said chronic understaffing, low wages, unregulated profiteering and the hiring of underqualified or unvetted staff were “incompatible with any guarantee of safety and quality care.” It concluded: “The privatisation of childcare, an industry that has experienced burgeoning growth over the past decade,

means profit, not childcare, is primary.”

Anne graduated as a high school teacher in the late 1980s and taught in working-class Western Sydney schools. She noticed that children were arriving in high school unable to read and thought there was something wrong. When she started her own family, she began an early childhood degree in special education, a course she undertook for nearly three years. In addition, she completed a Certificate 3 course in Children’s Services, the minimum entry requirement for working in childcare centres.

In 2013, Anne added to her qualifications by acquiring a Certificate 3 in School Based Education Support, a teacher’s aide course. She recently upgraded her Children’s Services qualification to a Certificate 4 level.

Anne first explained how much working-class families now depend on childcare centres.

“Huge numbers of babies and children are coming into childcare centres. The demand is so great. Young families have got mortgages, especially the Sydney-based families. They are professional women, couples that cannot afford to take two or three years out of their working lives the way I did. Their career won’t be there for them. They can work part-time and juggle parenting and working. But the system is basically forcing them to work full-time and asking more and more of them. So, they’re in a real bind.”

Anne outlined the conditions facing childcare workers.

“Typically, a childcare centre’s daily routine would consist of free play until 9.30 as the parents drop their children off, then morning tea, then a nappy change. Nappy changes happen every two hours. Then there is an education activity, say the team leader reads a book to the group, then lunch, then nap time, during which we document children’s activities, then nappy change, then maybe outdoor play.

“The day is highly structured, it’s got to be. When

you've got 20 toddlers in a room, there's chaos. The centres sell themselves as child-centred, play-based, but children are constantly interrupted from their play, getting through the routine of nappy changes and meal times.

"Children are divided into rooms, nursery, toddler and pre-school, with a ratio of staff to children, according to their age. But the educators are very rarely in the room at one time. Say you have four educators allocated to a room. The four of you are responsible for cleaning, changing nappies, doing the laundry, serving meals, climbing ladders to stack shelves with resources. That's in between lunch and morning tea breaks. It's hard work. You are working flat chat from the minute you get there.

"I've had nurseries that are ten babies and up. You're always working under ratio.

"A big issue is lack of continuity of care. For early childhood care you need the consistency of staff, you need the familiar faces. You need the child to think, 'this is a person I see every day I come here.' You might have 20 staff members going through one room. That's very upsetting for children. They never know who they're going to meet from day to day.

"There has to be a well-structured daily program to be able to get the children into some sort of routine, some sort of peace and quiet where they know the rules of the room. But it's very difficult for the children to know the rules of the room and the expectations for their behaviour when you've got different staff members every day.

"Every day these children are faced with the one team leader on Monday and Tuesday and Friday. So, the children might see them on Monday and Tuesday but the ones that come on Wednesday and Thursday are faced with a different team leader and a different casual and a different support person."

Anne commented on the lack of training and experience among many younger childcare workers.

"I've noticed over the past decade, staff are getting younger. That's a good thing because generally they do have a bit more energy, but they are learning, they are new to their field. They learn a lot about early childhood in their first years. But there doesn't seem to be a lot of mentoring from older, more experienced workers, because the older workers really aren't there anymore.

"Most childcare workers are under 30, the regulars would be under 25. The team leader might be in her 30s or late 20s, so she's got a couple of years of experience and she's a diploma-trained person, whereas the more mainstream workers would be Certificate 3 trained.

"It's becoming mandatory to have a Certificate 3 but

the centres get around that by saying they are 'working towards' a Certificate 3. A lot of trainees that are 'working towards' a Certificate 3 are international students. A lot of them are straight out of school, so they might be 19- or 20-year-olds. There might be one or two in each room."

Anne drew attention to the differences between for-profit and not-for-profit childcare centres.

"I've worked in both for-profit and not-for-profit childcare centres. The local council-run, not-for-profit centres have definite policies and procedures and are accountable. There seems to be more monitoring where the staff are writing both policies and procedures. Staff are involved in policy upgrades and reviews and are more involved in how the centre is running. They try to work within the framework and make sure they are reading the quality national standards, such as child safety, interaction with children, interaction with parents and families. There was professional development. It was a system that was able to look after its workers.

"However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the not-for-profit sector has deteriorated as well. Both sectors are now struggling with staffing, getting qualified staff."

Anne highlighted the low pay for childcare workers.

"People are leaving the industry, especially older workers. Because we are more expensive, employers want to get rid of us. I experienced absolute friction when the new pay rates came in during 2022–2023. Basically, experienced staff were being paid close to \$35 per hour as a casual and that was unheard of. Employers were saying, 'oh no, that's a lot of money, we can't afford a Certificate 3-trained person being paid \$35 per hour, that's outrageous.'

"\$35 per hour for the industry is phenomenal. There would be few workers today getting that pay rate. It's all about the cost. Unless [childcare centres] get proper oversight by the government, and the government isn't just throwing money at them with no accountability, the system will remain broken."



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