Australian governments cover up roots of childcare crisis

Erika Zimmer
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Australian federal, state and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have responded to disturbing allegations of sexual abuse in childcare centres by refusing to address the underlying issue of profit-driven understaffing.

This response was laid out by Jason Clare, the Albanese Labor government's federal education minister, after what was dubbed as an emergency national meeting of federal, state and territory ministers in late August.

Clare said his government would provide $189 million over four years to pay for closed-circuit television cameras, bans on the personal use of mobile phones in centres, a national register of all childcare staff and improved training for staff, supposedly to enable them to identify child abusers.

None of this will ensure the safety of children in the understaffed, under-funded and casualised daycare centres.

In July, about 2,000 parents in Melbourne, Victoria's capital city, were advised to get their babies and toddlers tested for sexually transmitted diseases after a childcare worker, Joshua Dale Brown, was charged on July 1 with over 70 offences.

The allegations produced deep concern not only among families with children in childcare facilities but throughout the working class. But the Albanese government is trying to divert this alarm and anxiety away from the root causes in the profit-making domination of day care.

As the WSWS commented on July 13: "Brown's alleged offending would constitute criminal and anti-social behaviour of a pathological character. But the conditions where it could occur, without detection for an extended period of time, are clear.

"The privatisation of childcare, an industry that has experienced burgeoning growth over the past decade, means profit, not childcare, is primary."

Responding to Labor's announcement, one childcare worker commented on social media: "Come on people! It's not phones and cameras that are a danger! It's the owners and their budgets, and unrealistic demands! They're responsible for what is wrong in this industry and the safety of children is the risk!"

Others have voiced concerns that, in an industry dominated by private corporations operating for profit, the increased surveillance measures will primarily be used to drive up workloads.

In July, in a bid at political damage control, the Victorian state Labor government commissioned a Rapid Child Safety Review. It was led by Jay Weatherill, a long-time union and parliamentary careerist, who as premier of South Australia from 2011 to 2018 oversaw the slashing of hundreds of public sector jobs.

To head off criticism, the review's report paid lip service to the problem of privatisation. It stated in its executive summary: "The overwhelming conclusion we have reached is that the while the current market-driven model for ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] remains, the risks to quality and safety in early childhood education and care will persist."

This was a token gesture. The report only suggested that the federal Labor government "consider" a 10-year strategy for reform.

The review insisted that improving ratios of staff to children was not critical. The report declared: "Broader ratio changes that just increase the number of educators and teacher, without changing how they are arranged, distributed and supervise children, would not necessarily increase safety and could exacerbate workforce challenges."

Inadequate staffing was left for governments to merely "consider."

At a press conference after the ministers' national meeting, Clare ruled out any reversal of privatisation or any suggestion that the acceleration of the private childcare market was connected to risks to children.

Clare insisted: "Australia expects all of us to work together… the private sector, the for-profits, the not-for-profits, [parents] don't give a damn about the difference or the breakdown or who's responsible for what."

Also speaking for big business, the Murdoch media's *Australian*, which has called for deep cuts to social

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spending, warned against a review of staff-to-child ratios. It claimed that an increase in staffing would send childcare costs soaring and threaten the viability of childcare centres.

Much evidence exists connecting the rise of for-profit childcare providers with increasing neglect and injury to children, understaffing, breaches of quality care such as inadequate nutrition, inadequate supervision and widespread hiring of unqualified or unvetted staff.

The Keating Labor government's acceleration of the privatisation of childcare in the 1990s has resulted in Australia having one of the highest rates of privately run childcare in the world. Today, 75 percent of long day care centres are run for profit.

As centres cut corners, including through understaffing and employing cheaper staff, financial services companies such as Finexia are forecasting big profits. "Investment in the childcare sector remains highly sought after," Finexia has stated, due to "substantial government funding and commitment."

At the media conference, Clare declared that mandatory training of staff to spot predators "could be the most important thing we do here to help keep our kids safe." The reality is that childcare staff are being progressively de-skilled. Unprecedented staffing shortages, primarily due to low pay and intolerable working conditions, have left childcare centres scrambling to hire anyone, regardless of qualifications or training.

Huge turnovers in staff, extreme levels of casualisation, chronic understaffing and the hiring of underqualified or unvetted staff have resulted in as many as one quarter of for-profit childcare centres employing trainees without qualifications. Universities and private education providers are exploiting the staffing crisis by offering short childcare courses with hefty fees.

Questioned by reporters about staffing, Clare asserted that a 15 percent pay rise—over two years—recently granted to childcare staff after decades of wage stagnation was an important step in bringing employees back to work.

The reality is that even with a 15 percent pay rise, many childcare workers are still being paid poverty-level wages and continue to struggle to live in major cities and towns. Moreover, as a result of the pay rise, experienced and highly qualified childcare workers are being replaced with cheaper staff as the for-profit sector seeks to cut costs.

Clare's proposed national register of childcare workers relies on passing legislation to compel childcare providers to collect and supply as-yet unknown information on childcare staff. This could include unsubstantiated allegations, thus threatening the livelihoods and democratic rights of childcare workers.

The Labor government's "reforms" have been welcomed by the major corporate childcare companies, such as G8 and Goodstart, as well as the United Workers Union (UWU), which covers childcare workers.

In a "Safer Staffing Action Plan" sent to the national ministers' meeting, the UWU did not oppose the corporate domination of the sector.

The UWU actually proposed to accept continued understaffing via a loophole that permits exemptions from staff-to-child ratios in various circumstances. The UWU said "staffing waivers" should be "only used as a last resort and strictly time limited." That leaves the door wide open to "waivers."

Under the capitalist profit system, childcare has been transformed into a marketplace of exploitation. The right to fully-staffed, highly-trained, properly-resourced childcare, freely accessible to all, can be established only through the development of a political fight against the Labor and Liberal governments and their partners in the union bureaucracies.

Childcare workers and parents should contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, to develop a discussion on forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, throughout childcare centres.

In recent weeks, the rank-and-file "Action Committee, Nurseries & Education" has been founded in Germany to take up the fight against the ongoing deterioration of conditions for nursery and day-care-centre workers, children and parents. The committee's founding resolution demanded: "Billions for nurseries/day-care centres and schools, not bank bailouts and the rapid expansion of the military to prepare for war."

The resolution explained: "The overriding principle of our action committee is that the interests of staff, children and parents take absolute priority over the so-called imperatives of austerity and profit, which are only put forward to shovel society's wealth further and further from the bottom to the top."

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
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