

More than 1,000 childcare workers walk off job over pay gap ^[1]

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Mar 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

More than 1,000 early childhood educators across Australia have walked off the job to campaign for equal pay in the “pink-collar” sector.

Dozens of childcare centres closed mid-afternoon on International Women’s Day on Wednesday, said to be the largest action taken by the sector in Australia.

The national gender pay gap in Australia is 16.2% but female-dominated industries attract lower wages than those made up of mostly men.

The childcare sector is 97% women but qualified early childhood educators earn some of the lowest wages in the country – as little as \$20.61 an hour, or about half the national average wage.

It was estimated more than 1,000 walked off the job at 3.20pm – the time that women in Australia effectively start working for free.

Helen Gibbons, the assistant national secretary of the early childhood union United Voice, said participating educators had worked closely with parents over a matter of weeks to ensure they would not be inconvenienced by the industrial action.

“We’ve been really excited and pleased to see that a lot of parents are really supportive of this campaign and in fact many parents will be joining the educators when they’re walking off the job this afternoon.”

Some centres would remain partially operational and run by a skeleton staff.

On Wednesday morning an early childhood educator, Julie Lofts, said she wanted the government to recognise the value of her work. After 18 years in the industry, she said she continued to live paycheque to paycheque, and had struggled to raise two sons balancing bills and “some quality of life”.

“I should be paid a lot more than what I get now,” she said. “I don’t do this for the money, I do it because it’s a job that I love. But I’m not paid according to my qualifications.”

Carley Adams, an educator at the same centre, had been “shocked” to discover how little she would earn when she joined the sector six years ago.

“It’s my career, it’s not just a job I come to every day ... When you find something you love to do it’s hard to leave it, but if I don’t get a pay rise I would have to leave eventually, which is sad.”

Gibbons said it was great that educators loved their work “but you can’t go to the bank and get a mortgage with love”.

“It’s not OK that they have to rely on loving the work that they do to survive on.”

She said the low rate of pay devalued the contribution they made to children’s development.

“It is obscene that in 2017 people can get paid \$20 an hour for such important work. We know the reason why it happens is because 97% of the people who work in this sector are women and we know that this has traditionally been seen as women’s work.”

She said the federal government needed to take its responsibility for funding all education seriously. Australia spends less than half the OECD-recommended benchmark of 1% of GDP on the early childhood educator sector. “The funding that they provide in early education does not provide for professional pay and they need to fix it.”

Wednesday’s action is the latest in United Voice’s ongoing Big Steps campaign. Women walked off the job on Equal Pay Day in September last year, and also chained themselves to the offices of the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and the treasurer, Scott Morrison.

“They are not going to stop. They know this issue needs to be addressed, it needs to be taken seriously, and that they deserve equal pay. And they’re going to keep fighting until they get it.

“The ball’s in Malcolm Turnbull’s court and he needs to do something about this. But if he doesn’t, don’t expect these people to stop.”

-reprinted from The Guardian

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