

Childcare workers vote to walk off the job ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Children will be sent home early from childcare centres in coming months, with thousands from the sector's female-dominated workforce voting to walk out in protest against the large pay gap between men and women.

In a recent ballot, more than 3000 early childhood educators overwhelmingly voted in favour of "escalating" their battle for better wages with a series of national walkouts in coming months.

The move follows similar action in the sector earlier this year, coinciding with International Women's Day. Up to 1000 workers walked off the job, forcing hundreds of children to be sent home early from childcare centres all across Australia.

"Everyone knows how important early childhood educators' work is, and yet many educators earn just \$20 an hour," said Helen Gibbons, assistant national secretary of childcare union United Voice.

"Educators have overwhelmingly endorsed walking off the job to win the professional pay they deserve."

Figures show childhood educators earn on average between \$20-\$23 an hour – a yearly wage of between \$40,700 and \$46,000 – depending on their level of qualification.

Early childhood teachers with a four-year bachelor's degree earn \$29 an hour, or \$58,000 a year, well below the \$73,000 average income of primary school teachers.

Members of the United Voice union are fighting a landmark case in the Fair Work Commission, pushing for pay rises of between 39 per cent and 72 per cent. They are arguing that the 80,000-strong workforce is paid woefully less than men with similar qualifications because of an outdated notion that childcare is viewed as "women's work in the home".

Liberal Democrat senator David Leyonhjelm was heavily criticised earlier this year when he appeared on television and summarised the role of childcare workers as "wiping noses and stopping the kids from killing each other."

"For a very a very long time, it's been seen as a babysitter's role, and it's not," said childcare educator Samantha Grinham.

"We educate children, we care for children and, yes, they are under five, but the education and care they receive is very important ... just as important as it is in the primary and secondary sectors."

Ms Grinham and her 16 co-workers at the Windsor Community Children's Centre have decided to take part in the national walkout.

"The industrial action is going to get bigger," she said. "The last time it was 20 centres, but the next time IT might be closer to 40 or 50."

Union organisers anticipate staff from a range of community-run and for-profit providers will take part in the walkouts. Last year, the action was supported by the centres involved and "we will be working towards this again", a union spokeswoman said.

In the Fair Work Commission, childcare educators say their claim for a substantial hourly wage rise would go a long way in reducing the 16.2 per cent pay gap that exists between men and women in Australia.

The Australian Childcare Alliance points out that payroll was the "most significant expense facing childcare centre operators", but has stated the union's pay case was a matter for the independent industrial umpire.

"We think the commission is the appropriate organisation to be making decisions in relation to wages and wage claims," a spokesman said.

-reprinted from Sydney Morning Herald

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