

Pay rises, not cupcakes: Childcare educators to strike nationally

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EXCERPTS:

Childcare workers across the nation will shut down centres on September 7 and strike over poor pay and conditions that are causing early learning educators to abandon the sector in droves.

United Workers' Union delegates from around Australia voted on Wednesday to walk off the job to signal to the new government it needs to urgently boost funding so that qualified staff may be paid wages on par with school teachers, whose salaries are up to \$30,000 more.

The union's early education director Helen Gibbons said marches would be staged across the country, including in front of Parliament House, on a date usually marked to celebrate early learning educators, who are given cupcakes as thanks.

"Early educators are clear: no more cupcakes. It's time for real change," Gibbons said. She said hundreds of centres nationally had already registered to strike, and several thousand staff were likely to march.

"We know this is a new government, but this has been a long time coming, and educators are leaving in droves, centres are turning away enrolments because there's not enough staff. We need action and we need a plan and we need it quickly and we're not prepared to wait."

She said while there were individual workplace negotiations taking place, the industrial action was aimed squarely at the government to improve workplace conditions and retention and provide enough funding to the sector to ensure staff were paid their worth.

"Educators can earn as little as about \$24 an hour and they have a qualification and have all that experience and enormous responsibilities. It's a really intense, difficult job. It's a great job and we know the work that they do is really important, but they don't feel looked after," she said.

Early Childcare Education Minister Anne Aly said early educators were taking action to see their circumstances addressed, "and I'll be working constructively with all stakeholders including the educators to improve the sector".

"Our early childhood educators play a vital role, not just for children and families but also the wider economy, and they deserve to be recognised and valued consistent with that critical role," Aly said.

Vacancies in the sector are more than double what they were four years ago. In May, there was a staff shortfall of 6600 nationally.

John Cherry, the head of advocacy for Goodstart early learning centres, said the organisation supported the union's call for the government to invest directly to fund educators' wages up to rates comparable with state schools, saying it was the worst workforce crisis they'd seen in 12 years of operation.

"In some of our centres we've had to cap enrolments because we've been unable to find adequate staff, that's an exceptional situation ... but it's a constant scramble," he said.

"After three years of working through COVID and staff shortages, burnout has emerged as one of the key reasons educators are leaving the sector."

Gibbons said the union had surveyed members last year, and 37 per cent had responded that they intended to leave within a year.

The federal government has promised to spend \$5.4 billion overhauling early childhood education, including by lifting subsidies for lower-income families and having the Productivity Commission review the sector with a view to creating a universal fee subsidy of 90 per cent.

Aly also said the consumer watchdog had been tasked to examine the relationship between funding, fees, profits and educators' salaries.

Teachers in NSW have been on strike several times this year over frustrated pay negotiations with the government.

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