

More than 1,000 Australian childcare centres to strike for better pay and conditions ^[1]

Early childhood education workers will walk off the job on Wednesday with rallies to be held in every capital city and some regional centres

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EXCERPTS

At least 1,000 childcare centres across the country will close their doors on Wednesday to protest low wages and conditions in what unions say is the biggest industrial action early educators have taken.

The executive director of early education at the United Workers Union, Helen Gibbons, said an estimated 70,000 families would be affected on Early Childhood Educators' Day. It is usually a celebration for childcare workers.

Gibbons said more than 1,000 centres registered with the union but she expected "many more" were planning to join the action and attend rallies.

Some centres will be closed all day while others will shut for part of Wednesday, Gibbons said. Those that service essential workers or vulnerable children will close some rooms and operate with a skeleton staff.

Maggie, who did not want their last name to be used, lives in Sydney and sends two children to a not-for-profit childcare centre.

Maggie and their husband will both be attending the Sydney protest rally with their two children to show support.

"I want to show solidarity with the people who look after my kid when I can't because I have to do my paid job – I want to support them," Maggie said.

Maggie's centre was quietly backing staff taking action with at least one educator attending.

"It's a vital service and I think there is not a lot of leeway for people to shop around. That's why the whole sector needs to be lifted up."

A spokesperson for G8 Education, which runs childcare centres across the country, said some employees would be participating in the shutdown but services would run as normal.

"We will support this where we can while ensuring continuity of service is maintained for our families," the spokesperson said.

"We're participating in sector discussions around how government can further support pay and conditions across the sector in a manner that does not see overwhelming costs passed on to providers and working families."

The KU Children's Services chief executive, Christine Legg, said KU paid staff above award wages and supported an overall increase.

"KU supports raising the status and standing of all who work in the early childhood education and care sector," Legg said. "As an employer of choice, KU invests in offering sector-leading pay and benefits to all our staff – they are truly the heart of our organisation."

Rallies are expected to be held in every capital city and in many regional centres.

The union is calling on the federal government to "urgently outline a plan and timeline to deliver on three key priorities" – to give childcare workers better pay, to value the sector as part of the education system and to put children before profit.

Gibbons said "if you work in a school setting, you'd earn significantly more and that's why we lose so many people to school settings," with workers in childcare earning 30% less than teachers.

She said the sector was "broken" with operators profiting off the low wages of early childhood educators. A report released by the union last year showed private equity and shareholders owned 68% of all services.

The federal minister for early childhood education, Anne Aly, told Guardian Australia the government was committed to providing "landmark cheaper childcare reforms" which would ensure more families could access childcare so mothers could return to work.

“Our early childhood educators make an important and unique contribution to the lives of our children and Australian families, it’s vital we recognise this work and rightfully recognise the workforce as educators, not childminders,” Aly said.

“The Albanese government has announced a range of measures to help close the gender pay gap. Additionally, we will change the Fair Work Act to allow multi-employer bargaining – a measure that will help women in the care sector negotiate better agreements and pay rises.”

The dissatisfaction with pay and conditions is not limited to the childcare sector, with strikes also planned by airport ground-handling staff in Qantas’s supply chain next week and negotiations to improve nursing ratios ongoing after strikes last week.

The workers for Dnata, the company to which Qantas outsourced their ground handling, will hold a 24-hour strike on Monday 12 September, while Menzies Aviation workers in NSW and Victoria will also apply to the Fair Work Commission to hold a protected action ballot, according to the Transport Workers Union.

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