

Childcare workers protest across the country, shutting down centres as they demand improved wages, conditions and respect

[1]

Author: ABC

Source: ABC

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Sep 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online [2]

EXCERPTS

Crowds have gathered in cities across the country as more than 1,000 childcare centres shut down and thousands of early childhood workers protested over pay and conditions.

United Workers Union (UWU) early education director Helen Gibbons described the shutdown as "the largest action of early educators that this country has ever seen".

Some centres have closed for a full day, while others have only been shut for a few hours.

The UWU estimated at least 70,000 families would be affected by the closures.

Ms Gibbons said the sector's workers were calling for change because the existing system was: "Not delivering for educators ... not delivering for children ... and not delivering for families."

"We need real reform," she said.

Ms Gibbons said workers taking part in the industrial action were focusing their efforts on three demands.

"Pay us what we're worth and give us a reason to stay in the sector," she said.

"The second demand is [to] value early education as education in the same way that we value schools.

"And the third demand is to put children before profit."

The action included every capital city in Australia's states and territories, as well as some regional centres.

The Melbourne contingent of the rally met at Federation Square, while in Sydney hundreds gathered at Martin Place.

Margie Flanagan, who works at a not-for-profit childcare centre in Warrandyte in Melbourne's north-east, said early childhood education should be treated like other parts of Australia's education system.

"We want children to be valued, we want educators to be valued – we want educators and teachers to be valued as professionals," she said.

"We would like better wages, living wages.

"We would like the federal government, Mr Albanese, to step up and put early childhood education and care in the education system ASAP.

"We don't need it to be a profit-driven sector."

In Adelaide, more than 200 childcare workers protested on the steps of South Australia's Parliament House.

Hillbank Community Children's Centre director Rebecca Stiles said the situation for workers was dire.

"Today is about educators and recognised for what we are which is educators," Ms Stiles said.

"People are leaving this sector in droves because they can't afford to pay.

"One of the educators has been forced to work at the Adelaide Show.

"One of my other educators is forced to live with their parents: they can't afford to move out.

"We've been fighting for this for so long."

Worker says sector at 'tipping point'

Despite wet weather, childcare workers gathered in the Brisbane CBD to call for better pay working conditions

Childcare centre director Jessica Grissell said workers were "educating children every single day" but "feel like carers".

"Our sector really needs the support now before it's too late," she said.

"If we're not here, the workforce is halved – because one parent has to stay home with their children.

"We are essential, and I think we proved that through the pandemic."

She said the way the sector was classified needed to be changed.

"We want to be classed in the education sector. We don't want to be classed in the middle of health and education," she said.

"Ninety per cent of a person's brain development happens in that first five years – I don't understand how that is not important enough to be classed in the education sector."

Early childhood teacher Karen Moran said her workplace already struggled to meet staffing requirements.

"We're at the point now where we are calling parents every day and saying, 'Sorry, you can't bring your children today,' because we simply can't staff it," she said.

"That's beyond crisis. I think this sector is at a tipping point.

"Give us a reason to stay."

In the nation's capital, hundreds of Canberrans – young and old, educators, parents, and politicians – rallied outside Parliament House.

The mood was hopeful and heartened, after what speakers described as "years of inaction" by the former federal government.

The Member for Canberra, Alicia Payne, said the Prime Minister spoke with educators on Wednesday morning about their concerns and priorities, and this government was committed to improving wages and conditions.

'People are just considering us babysitters'

In Perth, about 100 people rallied.

Early childhood educator Emily Matshidiso Mokebe said the wages in the industry were not keeping pace with the rise in the cost of living.

"With the extra interest rates going up but the salaries not going up, it's very hard to balance work and home," she said.

"I feel like we don't get enough support from the government.

"A better wage ... will go a long way."

She also called for society to place a higher value on early childhood education.

"I feel like people are just considering us as babysitters, whereas we go to school to get education to do this job," she said.

"We need the recognition as much as the educators in primary and secondary schools.

"We deal with children from zero to five years old, which are the very important stages in a child's development and learning.

"We're ensuring that their fundamental stages are being met before they go to school."

In Hobart, about 70 people gathered in front of Town Hall demanding better pay and respect for their profession.

Early childhood educator Maddy Calcraft told the crowd that: "Every day, I see my colleagues taking work home, purchasing resources out of their own pockets and exhausting themselves to try to provide quality care in an environment that's forgotten what quality looks like."

She said the industry was overworked, underpaid and undervalued.

The crowd chanted: "Give us a reason to stay – it's time for better pay."

In Darwin, a rally of about 35 people was organised by the director of the Casuarina Childcare Centre in the city's north, Alice Branco.

She said the action was a "long time coming"

"It is time to reform the sector. We've been waiting for a long time, more than a decade," she said.

The crowd was a mix of parents and early childhood educators, some in attendance with their children.

Mother Yasman Cole said early childhood educators were part of the reason she could have a job.

"Without [them], a lot of parents would not be able to work ... we would have a lot of families on Centrelink," she said.

Early childhood teacher Chelsea East, who was there with her own two children in a pram, said the sector deserved more pay and better conditions due to the role it played in society.

"We deserve more, educators are the backbone.

"We look after your children so you can go to work ... without child care, Australia stops," she said.

Major operator Goodstart backs wage increase

In the lead-up to the protests, qualified childcare workers taking part shared with the ABC how low wages were putting them under financial stress, particularly with the rising cost of living.

An entry-level childcare employee is paid just 47 cents above the minimum wage, at an hourly rate of \$21.85.

The federal government has committed to a \$5 billion reform that will increase subsidies to families using child care from July next year.

But experts have said improved conditions for workers in the sector should be part of the changes as well.

Goodstart Early Learning said earlier that workers from about 200 of its childcare facilities would attend rallies.

The not-for-profit organisation is Australia's largest early learning provider, with 649 childcare centres across the country.

"We know that a lot of parents have opted to pick up their children early so that more of the educators can attend their rallies. A lot of parents are very supportive," Goodstart's head of advocacy John Cherry said.

Mr Cherry said Goodstart believed wages needed to be increased, pointing to "a huge gap between what educators are paid in the early childhood sector and what they're paid in government schools".

G8 Education, a private company which runs more than 440 childcare centres in Australia, said the company was aware some workers would be taking part in the industrial action.

Region: [Australia and New Zealand](#) [3]

Tags: [child care](#) [4]

[closures](#) [5]

[wages and working conditions](#) [6]

[advocacy](#) [7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/09/childcare-workers-protest-across-country-shutting-down-centres-they> [2]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9036> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9175> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy>