

Childcare worker strike could be Australia's largest amid 'skyrocketing' education demands ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Despite working full-time, Amanda Lippasaar is struggling to keep her children properly clothed.

The qualified childcare worker did a two-year diploma but gets paid \$28 an hour at a not-for-profit childcare centre in Adelaide's north.

She says as cost-of-living pressures mount, it is becoming harder to shield her children from the biting realities.

"Just recently it was just ... getting them new shoes," she said.

"I felt bad because [my son] had holes all in his shoes, and I literally couldn't afford shoes for my own child."

Ms Lippasaar said the financial stress had seeped into other parts of her life too.

"I have to consider whether it's worth making that extra trip to get something from the shops," she said.

"Just a little bit of petrol just impacts everything."

In Australia, an entry-level employee under the childcare workers' award is paid just 47 cents above the minimum wage, at \$21.85 per hour.

Ms Lippasaar is one of many staff on that wage planning to walk off the job today, as part of what the childcare workers' union expects to be the biggest strike in the sector's history.

The United Workers Union (UWU) said about 1,000 centres around the country will close.

Those striking will join a series of rallies across the country on this afternoon, with most beginning at 3pm.

"Parents should talk to their early educators to see if the action is impacting their centre and room," UWU early education director Helen Gibbons said.

Ms Lippasaar has never been involved in a strike before but said she and other workers had reached breaking point.

"For myself, it is working through this whole pandemic and still not being valued [as] the educators that we are," she said.

"Nothing has changed in the past two years for us, working through a very deadly disease and still educating these kids, keeping them safe."

'Expectations have skyrocketed'

Ms Lippasaar said it was not just pay, but conditions that had made her consider joining the thousands actively leaving the sector.

"I've definitely thought about it a few times, going to a job where you just go to the job, come home and you don't have to think about it," she said.

Skills Commission figures show demand for early childhood workers and teachers this year hit a record national high.

"Expectations have just skyrocketed in the last few years, the expectation of educating on top of all of our other duties."

She said early childhood work was increasingly professionalised, with the extra administrative tasks to prove it.

"We are placing those building blocks for the next teachers, the next lawyers, the next engineers. It all starts here, it can't happen without us."

What are the solutions?

The United Workers Union, which is leading today's shutdown, wants improved pay and conditions, as well as broader, systemic change. Currently, the federal government funds a childcare subsidy for parents, who then use it to pay fees to their independently-run childcare centres.

The new Albanese government has committed more than \$5 billion from July next year, to increase those subsidies and reach more families.

However, the union, and experts like Macquarie University's Tamara Cumming, said funding should also be tied to worker pay and conditions.

Dr Cumming said a raft of for-profit operators had hiked fees as subsidies increased — without lifting staff wages.

"That system really needs to be rethought in terms of how the money that's going into early childhood education is distributed," she said.

"Can it be distributed more fairly in the form of wages to educators, and/or to services, to maintain what they need to do, without relying on increasing the fees to families, who are really struggling to be able to afford early childhood education?"

JobKeeper-like model floated as possible solution

Dr Cumming said tightening the existing child care regulations, known as the National Quality Standard, should also be a priority.

"[That ensures] educators' wellbeing and the quality of their work environment is really at a standard where people can stay in the sector," she said.

The union has suggested the states follow Victoria's lead, where the state government recently established 50 state-run childcare centres to tackle major placement shortages where for-profit centres were not viable.

That means the centres operate more like the state schooling system, with governments, rather than private providers, responsible for wages and conditions.

Early Childhood Australia's chief executive Sam Page said a wage subsidy model similar to JobKeeper would be a way to immediately increase wages.

"Early childhood educators and teachers want to be considered professionals in their own right ... that deserve pay parity with teachers and diploma-qualified educators in other sectors," she said.

"We would like to see a subsidy model, like the JobKeeper payment paid to employers, but that money has to flow directly into the wages of educators and teachers, and we wouldn't want to see any additional funding being used for other purposes.

"We don't want families to be out of pocket at all."

Federal government's plans for regulation and review

The federal government has already said it plans to legislate to allow workers to negotiate their pay and conditions with multiple employers, which experts say could help them get a better deal.

Before the election, it also pledged to get the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) to regulate prices and the Productivity Commission to review the sector.

Early Childhood Education Minister Anne Aly said she was committed to supporting and growing the early childhood education and care workforce.

"I look forward to continuing these discussions to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced in the sector and developing solutions to help us recruit, train and retain a high-quality early childhood education and care workforce."

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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