

Tony Abbott's broken promise to early childcare workers is a cruel betrayal ^[1]

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Source: Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Dec 2013

EXCERPTS

Screaming children, soiled nappies, inquisitive minds. Our early childhood workforce work incredibly hard. These are the people who care for over one million of our children each and every day. They comfort, nurture and educate during the period when 90% of children's brain development takes place.

And they do it for a pittance.

Few could argue that these vital workers should remain amongst the lowest paid of the Australian workforce, yet this week, just before Christmas, thousands of them have had a long overdue pay rise cruelly ripped off them. People are right to be mightily peeved about this. This is a display of the government's chaotic decision making, their disregard for the promises they have made and for the workers who are affected.

By way of background, child care centres generally pay their staff in one of two ways: either at the award rate (painfully inadequate), or at a rate negotiated through an enterprise agreement (still seriously inadequate). Workers are paid at varying rates but they all share salaries so low that they are forced to make the impossible choice: between caring for other people's children or being able to suitably provide for their own.

It is a common complaint from educators, "I love this job - I do it for the children - but I simply can't afford to continue". All reasonable people would agree that this needs to be fixed.

The solution is for an across the board increase to their award lifting all salaries, ensuring that no one gets left behind. For this to occur, the previous Labor government created the Fair Work Commission (which enabled cases like this to be heard), and established a pay equity unit to provide the support to help the case succeed. But it doesn't happen overnight.

Like the social and community services sector case which ultimately saw over \$3bn in increased wages flow to a low paid and feminised workforce, hours or research, support, argument and hearings need to occur first. It is a process that is underway though and one which, if supported by the Abbott government, will hopefully bring a successful result and a long term solution.

In the meantime, however, many of our educators just cannot hold on. We are losing staff at a rapid rate, and parents are left dropping their children off in the hands of carers who all too often won't be the same ones the following week.

When in government, Labor decided to urgently act on this and show the sector that we recognised their plight and would assist whilst the case was being heard. We established a two year \$300m early years quality fund (EYQF) to ensure that more workers could move from the award rate to a higher salary on an enterprise agreement. Relief was at hand and when Tony Abbott pledged before the election that, "if elected, the Coalition will honour funds contracted from the EYQF", it really looked like these underpaid, undervalued staff would finally see a pay rise.

This is where the story takes a turn into bizarre land. What happened next was farcical.

Just weeks after the election, the government changed its mind and declared that the payments were now up for review. Uncertainty returned, once more staff across our child care centres questioned if they should stick with it, whether they were really appreciated and would actually ever receive adequate pay.

But wait, another flip flop and change of direction: when asked about these contracts just last week, Abbott assured all "we will absolutely honour all of our commitments and contracts, and contracts which have been entered into will be honoured". Finally, hard working professionals were edging closer to their additional three dollars an hour just before Christmas.

But alas, it was not to be - the twists and turns and weasel words continued. In one of the most seriously peculiar and desperately cruel government announcements yet, this week we learned it was all off. The government would honour these contracts, assistant minister Ley informed us, but then they'd ask the sector to "do the right thing" and give the money straight back so it can be spent on training.

I'm not going to try and work out how a government can say that a program is so bad that it can't continue, so above-board that they'll honour contracts, and so misguided that they'll ask for the money back - and hold all of these possible at the same time. But what I do know is who will suffer as a result.

Too scared to break yet another election commitment, they've asked child care providers to break it for them. Early childhood educators have once more been let down and ripped off. The announcement is a mean betrayal which leaves our early childhood educators out of pocket.

The government justifies its position by stating that the Fair Work Commission is the only body that should determine child care wages - if they do not now sign up and support the wage claim before the Commission, this will be shown to be just more empty words, creating more false hope for a group of hard working Australians who deserve much, much better.

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- reprinted from the Guardian

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[2]

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Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/12/tony-abbotts-broken-promise-early-childcare-workers-cruel-betrayal>

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