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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR IS BROKEN. REFORM URGENTLY REQUIRED

In the lead-up to the Federal Government's Jobs and Skills Summit on 1-2 September, the IEU has called for urgent action to address the crisis in the early childhood education sector.

Centres are struggling to fulfill their staffing ratios, and school leavers are not attracted to the profession due to the poor pay and conditions.

"Bargaining for improvements in pay and conditions for early childhood teachers is an uphill battle," IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Mark Northam said.

"The sector is fragmented, with teachers and their union representatives forced to bargain with hundreds of different employers.

"Sometimes those employers can be volunteer committees, unfamiliar with the industrial relations system. The industrial landscape is adversarial and plays a big role in the crisis in staffing that we see unfolding right now.

"To fix this we need an even playing field, with sector-wide bargaining for all teachers. The same conditions that apply to school teachers must apply to early childhood teachers, as they have the same qualifications, and undertake the same accreditation through the National Education Standards Authority (NESA) as school teachers."

The Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch, which represents the industrial and professional interests of early childhood teachers, endorses the comments made by ACTU Secretary Sally McManus on the ABC's 7.30 on 24 August.

"The main reason why wages have collapsed is because collective bargaining collapsed," McManus said.

"Now it only covers one in seven workers. That's about 14 per cent of the workforce and the people that are missing out are feminised industries. So aged care, childcare, but also people in small workplaces as well."

The IEU finalised a work value case for early childhood teachers at the Fair Work Commission in 2021 which resulted in a 3.5% to 18% pay increase for teachers under the modern award.

The FWC Full Bench found that "the exercise of professional skills and judgement, the overall work value, involved in early childhood teaching was the same as that of school teachers. The rates of pay do not recognise that teachers are degree-qualified professionals,"

Northam said it was time to rebuild the industrial relations system so pay and conditions reflected what early childhood teachers are worth.

"This issue should be top of the agenda at the Federal Government Jobs and Skill Summit at Parliament House.

"Otherwise, this crisis will deepen, and some centres will have to close their doors to children and children because there are not enough staff for them to operate.

"This will be disastrous for families, employers and the productivity of Australia."

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The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents over 33,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

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