Staff protest axing of key programs at Australian government broadcaster

Richard Phillips
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Angry Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) staff walked off the job last week for 24 hours after management sacked Paul Barry, presenter of the *Media Watch* television show, and announced that *Quantum*, Australian television's only locally produced science program, would be axed along with the network's 15-member Science Unit. The decision to strike, the first national action by 4,200 employees of the government-owned broadcaster since 1996, was taken at well-attended mass meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and other major cities, as well as regional centres.

The strikers passed a resolution condemning managing director Jonathon Shier's refusal to "guarantee the essential independence and non-commercial character of the ABC and its programs". They voted to establish campaign committees to fight management and government attempts to undermine ABC programming, independence and internal production capacity.

Demonstrations were held in support of the strike and the following day a protest picket was staged outside an ABC Board meeting at the network's headquarters in Sydney. Construction workers employed on new extensions at the headquarters walked off the job during the board meeting and national newspapers were inundated with letters condemning the attack on the ABC.

The latest cuts constitute a further step in the ongoing assault on the network by Labor and Coalition governments over more than 15 years. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ABC budgets were slashed and more than 1,500 jobs eliminated. In 1996 the Howard government cut $66 million from the broadcaster's budget.

A day before last week's mass meetings eight senior ABC journalists, including Maxine McKew, Quentin Dempster and Robyn Williams, called a special press conference warning that moves to commercialise the ABC would lead to its destruction.

Kerry O'Brien of *The 7.30 Report*, a week night national current affairs program, accused management of attempting to disguise its $8 million cuts to news and current affairs whilst attacking editorial independence. "We are supposed to be an institution that values intellectual pursuit," O'Brien said, "yet to try to do that in a climate of fear is completely contradictory."

ABC management announced this week that *The 7.30 Report's* five-night schedule would be cut to four, with the program replaced on Friday nights by a state-based current affairs show.

Ian Henderson, ABC-TV's Victorian newsreader, told workers at the union meeting at Ripponlea studios in Melbourne that he rarely supported strike action but that Barry's dismissal from *Media Watch* had changed his mind. "I think the public wants more than the voice of Kerry Packer or Rupert Murdoch blaring out of loudspeakers. They want a cogent, intelligent alternative," he said.

In a lengthy comment published the next day in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper Henderson said that if Barry was not reinstated it would spell the end of any semblance of independent journalism in Australia. "[A]ll journalists working at the ABC will get the message," Henderson said. "You can be sacked for not toeing the corporate line. The days of independent watchdog journalism are over. Get used to a new era of dependent, lap-dog journalism."

The dismissal of Barry, an award-winning journalist, is a clear attempt to silence news and current affairs journalists from publicly opposing management and government policy. He is the third journalist to be dismissed in the last four years from *Media Watch*, a top-rating 15-minute weekly television show spotlighting the media. The show has highlighted politically or commercially motivated press reportage and recently exposed the "cash-for-comment agreement" between the major banks and John Laws, one of Australia's wealthiest talkback radio announcers.

Barry's sacking came a few weeks after he conducted a hard-hitting interview with ABC chairman Donald McDonald. Barry defended press criticism of Shier and accused McDonald of inadequate responses to the growing disaffection within the ABC. Shier is reported to have been furious over the interview.

Addressing the Sydney mass meeting, Barry said the issue centred on "the editorial integrity and independence of the ABC" and the right of people in the organisation "to say what they know they should say without fear of losing their jobs". The Sydney mass meeting passed a resolution calling for Barry's reinstatement and banning ABC staff from applying for the *Media Watch* presenter's position.

Managing director Shier arrogantly dismissed the union ban on the presenter's position, declaring the next day, "I spent four years in Eastern Europe, but that [the union ban] is a bit old-fashioned, isn't it? ... The Berlin Wall went down about nine years ago."

Shier claimed that ABC workers were attempting to control the corporation and that an "entrenched culture," where staff had too much input, had to be broken. "That's where the status quo is," he said, "and that's got to change. The management must manage the place."

This was echoed in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney on December 5, which backed the managing director declaring: "If Mr Shier is to succeed in revitalising the ABC, he first must break the culture of inertia that permeates the organisation. His efforts will be assessed by the ABC Board and ultimately by taxpayers who fund the broadcaster, not a group of people ideologically opposed to change."

Appointed nine months ago by the ABC Board to restructure and commercialise the network, Shier has instructed department heads to present a list of "targeted redundancies" to eliminate at least 200 jobs.

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This includes at least 100 from television, 50 from technical services, 20 from news and current affairs and up to 30 from radio. The full list of jobs to be axed will be announced on January 1, which Shier has provocatively called “drop dead day”. On December 6, Shier told an ABC Board meeting that there was “not a lot of fat” in the organisation but that more jobs would have to go.

While the ABC is cutting staff, it has, since Shier's appointment, spent an estimated $10 million on redundancy payouts to 26 executives. The corporation's annual executive salary bill has increased dramatically with an influx in new executives who have been recruited almost exclusively from the commercial sector, with no experience in public broadcasting. These include ABC TV chief Gail Jarvis, who previously worked for Nine Network, owned by Kerry Packer, and Guy Dunstan, ABC's director of program and content development, former manager of the Murdoch-owned Star TV network in Hong Kong.

The Howard government has been stacking the ABC Board with sympathetic big business appointees. Just two days before the ABC national strike, it announced the appointment of Maurice Newman, chairman of the Australian Stock Exchange and Deutsche Bank Australia, and a close confidante of the prime minister.

Shier's remarks about changing the ABC's “entrenched culture” indicate that what is underway is far broader than simply the axing of jobs and programs. In the past, the rationale for the ABC was that it provided an alternative to the commercial media—owned by a handful of business tycoons—had a degree of political independence and catered for a number of specialised audiences. The aim of the Howard government and its appointees, apart from neutralising the ABC as a source of political criticism, is to thoroughly commercialise every aspect of its operations and to turn it into a money-making concern in readiness for its eventual privatisation.

John Millard, a producer and reporter for ABC TV's *Australian Story*, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Programming will be decided on the basis of commercial considerations, not their editorial merit or in the public interest. Shows will be commissioned in-house or externally according to whether they generate income—either through external sales or product spin-off retailing. This is how Shier and the ABC Board, which he serves, is undermining and privatising the ABC.

“Shier talks about an entrenched ABC culture, but has he asked those who watch and listen to the ABC and support it all over the country? ... The road now being taken by the ABC Board can be seen in New Zealand and Canada. In Canada there are so many advertisements running on the government network that people want to know why the network needs any taxpayer funds.”

The November 30 decision to end the production of *Quantum*, one of the broadcaster's longest running and most successful science shows, illustrates the processes underway.

Like other specialist productions, *Quantum* has been subjected to ongoing budget reductions with research staff numbers cut over the last five years from four full-timers to one with two part-time workers. Journalists have been forced to become multi-skilled, using cameras, sound and other equipment. Two years ago the budget for each episode was $180,000; this was reduced in 1999 to $80,000.

Now *Quantum* will be shut down completely in May and its full-time staff moved to an in-house jobs pool. Science Unit staff were told that this would be the fate of all other specialised ABC production units, which would be restructured into separate “genres”. The skills accumulated over many years by specialised teams will be dispersed and the units replaced by one person or at most two people who will “commission” programs. These will be made by ad hoc in-house production teams or outsourced. Increasing numbers of permanent ABC technicians and other workers will be employed on a short-term contract basis.

The prestigious Australian Academy of Sciences, which was instrumental in establishing ABC science programming in 1964, immediately opposed the decision to end *Quantum* and disband the Science Unit. Professor John White, the Academy's policy secretary, described the closure as a “leap backwards” by the ABC and the Howard government.

ABC officials later claimed that they would increase science programming and that the research unit was simply being restructured to another department, but Dr Peter Pockley, a founding director of the unit, dismissed these claims outright. In a press comment Pockley warned viewers to “expect flashy productions of minimal substance from a variety of short-term contractors”. He said the demise of the ABC's most respected production unit “heralds a disaster that goes far beyond science”.

Last week the ABC Board called on the government for $37 million in additional funding this year. Even if granted, this finance would not be allocated to news and current affairs or other areas that have suffered cuts but to potentially profitable new media retailing and broadcasting. According to ABC staff, one area proposed for expansion is the production of multi-media programs for businesses.

The last two weeks have also seen significant reductions in ABC radio budgets. A $200,000 cut will be implemented at Radio National, which will mean the loss of at least six jobs, and directly affect two-thirds of the station's programming. On December 8 Classic FM employees were told that the radio station's discretionary fund for the financial year 2000-2001 had been slashed by 34 percent or an estimated $200,000. The discretionary fund is used to pay musicians, broadcast live classical music concerts and operas. Classic FM, having spent at least half of its budget, will probably be forced to reduce its external activities by more than 65 percent during the next six months. This will severely affect live music broadcasts and the recording of new Australian music.

Leading music industry figures have criticised the decision. Jane Hickey, general manager of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, which relies on Classic FM to record and broadcast its subscription concerts, said the decision would seriously affect the orchestra's income. Roland Peelman from New Music Network said: “This is the final straw of something which has been in motion for some time. Our cultural environment, built up over so many years, is being dumbed-down because of this ratings obsession.”

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