Australian media union refuses to challenge job cuts at Fairfax

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Hundreds of angry journalists employed by Fairfax, one of Australia's largest media and newspaper companies, walked out on strike late last week in protest over management plans to axe 550 jobs from its Australian and New Zealand operations.

The three-day strike involved journalists from the *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sun-Herald*, *Australian Financial Review* and regional publications the *Newcastle Herald* and *Illawarra Mercury*. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which covers journalists, however, refused to challenge the company's job destruction program and the walkout ended on Monday with the union claiming a "significant breakthrough" on a long-running Employment Bargaining Agreement (EBA) wage deal.

While Fairfax has not yet announced where all the job cuts will fall, at least 30 percent will come from editorial staff and include up to 60 from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun-Herald* and 55 from the Melbourne-based *Age*. The losses also include the closure of a full-time legal advisory team for journalists at the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

This is the fourth round of job cuts at Fairfax in the last four years and follows last year's decision by senior company executives to award themselves a 45 percent increase in bonuses—up from $1.5 million in 2006 to $2.2 million in 2007.

Fairfax chief executive David Kirk arrogantly told Australian Associated Press that the job destruction would not affect the quality of the company's newspapers, claiming that most of those to be made redundant would not be journalists but sub-editors in the advertising and lifestyle sections. According to management, the latest job losses will save the company around $A50 million a year.

Fairfax produced the Friday and weekend editions of the *Herald* and the *Age* using management staff and Pagemasters, a private sub-editing and proofing contracting agency based in Brisbane. Among those submitting copy for the strike editions were New South Wales state Labor premier Morris Iemma and regular right-wing commentators Miranda Devine, Paul Sheehan and Michael Duffy. Iemma's article was a promotion of Labor's privatisation of state electricity.

Those already sacked include Andrew Jaspan, the *Age* editor-in-chief, and Mike Carlton, a regular *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist, whose job was terminated after he refused to submit his weekly column in solidarity with other journalists. The company threatened to lockout the striking journalists and sue for damages if they did not return to work on Monday.

Despite these provocations, the MEAA made no appeal to Fairfax print shop employees to join the walkout and rejected calls for picket lines to be established at the major company print works in Chullora in Sydney and Tullamarine in Melbourne.

The MEAA held information meetings on Sunday, with union officials recommending that strikers return to work and accept a new EBA offer in a ballot to be held later this week. Under the new offer journalists will receive pay rises of between 11 and 12.25 percent over three years—an increase barely in line with inflation. The company previously demanded that the increase not apply to journalists earning more than $100,000 a year. Under the new offer this threshold has been increased to $115,000 a year, rising to $128,500 in three years' time.

As in previous years, the MEAA is refusing to fight Fairfax's job destruction. While MEAA officials denounced Fairfax executives at the meetings they made no call for a campaign to defeat the job cuts, telling members that most of the job losses would be absorbed through voluntary redundancies.

One Sydney-based Fairfax journalist, who wanted to remain anonymous, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the dispute. He outlined how the job losses

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would seriously undermine working conditions and standards at the newspaper chain, and voiced his concerns about the union's refusal to oppose the destruction of jobs.

"The public relations line of the company is that all the job cuts will be in the sub-editing area and it won't affect frontline reporting. Management hopes that readers don't really know what sub-editors do and think you can get rid of them using new technology. But you can't.

"This is dishonest for a number of reasons. Last year the *Herald* eliminated sub-editors' jobs, about a third of the editing staff, and moved to a seven-day sub-editing roster, so they can't cut any more. This has been a real disaster. Everyone's deadlines have been brought forward, which means you can't follow late breaking stories, there are a lot more errors in the paper and headlines that don't make sense.

"When management talks about eliminating about 60 jobs from the *Herald* most of these will be reporters and writers. It won't be subs. There are also about eight or nine photographers, and presumably they'll get rid of a number of those," he said.

"We also had two in-house lawyers at the *Herald*—they're the people you go to when you have a story that might place the paper in danger of being sued. One of them has been sacked and the other moved to the *Financial Review*. This means that when you need to get a story 'legalled', it will be sent out to a legal company. This will take time and probably be at an exorbitant cost. The real effect is that it will discourage people from writing stories that need to be legalled, and stop the writing of contentious border-line material.

"The union has told us that they'll probably get voluntary redundancies, but these will probably be senior journalists who can bring experience and quality to the newspaper. They don't necessarily file material as regularly as younger journalists. They might only file a story once a fortnight, but it will be a cracker. This sort of high-end model of journalism is very important, but it's falling by the wayside and being replaced with churning for stories to go online in a desperate grab for internet clicks."

Asked to comment on the reaction amongst journalists when the job cuts were announced, he replied: "There was a real sense of sadness, particularly amongst the more experienced journalists whose careers, which they had begun with gusto and pride in their work, were being undermined with impunity by managers who didn't really know what they were doing. Putting out a daily newspaper is a pretty stressful business and people go above and beyond every day and every week. This is done out of pride in the product, which makes the job cuts all the more gutting.

"The problem is that the campaign and the strike were never defined as being in opposition to the job cuts. We passed resolutions condemning the cuts, but never said that unless the company agreed to halve the number or something like that then we would continue the action.

"When we voted last Thursday to go on strike it was always in the expectation that we would return on Monday. But the mood went a lot further during the strike, and I think that people were really steeling themselves for a protracted dispute. Although the meeting essentially decided to accept the EBA, there was a real sense that our action was about more than the latest pay deal.

"Here was a chance to take a stand against the company's low-cost "churnalism" model and its disregard for the staff and their jobs. When the union reported back that the company had given ground on the EBA and recommended that we return to work, there was really a feeling that all the momentum amongst the membership had been wasted.

"A few people spoke out, saying we had lots of community support, not because of the fine print of the EBA, but because union members had taken a stand over the issue of quality and jobs. Some of those who spoke said they felt that by going back to work we were betraying that support. Another aspect of that support is that people are getting worried about their own jobs and they're probably looking for someone to take a stand."

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