

Australia: Qantas aircraft engineers vote for industrial action

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At a meeting on Friday, about 190 professional engineers at Qantas decided to impose work bans following a 98 percent vote to take industrial action. Seven months of negotiations for a new work agreement have failed to resolve issues over pay and working conditions.

The highly-skilled engineers, members of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers of Australia (APESMA), are responsible for maintaining the safety and airworthiness of the Qantas fleet, including inspecting and signing off on any significant maintenance work before an aircraft can fly.

They are seeking a 30 percent pay increase over three years but Qantas has declared the demand “unreasonable” and “excessive”. Another key issue in the dispute is the airline’s call-in and out-of-hours work policies, which have led increasingly to cases of fatigue among the engineers, thereby posing safety issues.

According to an APESMA media release: “There have recently been occurrences where in a 24-hour period, some senior engineers at Qantas were required to respond to critical, complex engineering issues with less than 5 hours sleep between jobs, approving critical aircraft maintenance tasks.”

According to an APESMA spokesperson, as of November 13 the engineers will ban responding to call-outs and doing out of hours work.

This is the first time in the airline’s history that this section of professional engineers has decided to take industrial action. It reflects a broader discontent among

workers, not only at Qantas but across the airline industry and more broadly, who face an ongoing assault on their pay, working conditions and jobs.

The company’s refusal to meet the engineers’ pay claim is in line with its drive to drastically slash costs at the expense of the workforce. In April this year, Qantas axed another 1,750 jobs, taking its job losses in one year to 3,340 or almost 10 percent of its workforce.

In June 2008, Qantas imposed a 3 percent cap on pay increases across its workforce, inflicting what amounts to a real pay cut as inflation was running at well above 4 percent.

During a crucial dispute last year, Qantas prepared a non-union work force to counter industrial action by 1,500 engineering staff, members of the Australian Licensed Airline Engineers Association (ALAEA), who were seeking a 5 percent pay rise. Earlier, it forced the 3 percent pay settlement on long-haul cabin crew, members of the Flight Attendants Association of Australia (FAAA), while at the same time introducing a two-tier pay regime under which some 2,000 new employees would receive inferior wages and working conditions.

In both disputes, despite considerable opposition from the rank-and-file, the company succeeded in imposing its demands with the aid of the unions, which worked to suppress any independent action by workers. The company was backed by the Rudd government, which demanded that workers accept “wage restraint” in order to “combat inflation”.

The defeats inflicted in these key disputes cleared the

way for similar outcomes to be forced on other Qantas workers, including maintenance staff and baggage handlers.

Last month, Qantas joined the Rudd government's new Fair Work Ombudsman in seeking fines, multi-million dollar compensation and injunctions against the Transport Workers Union over a four-hour stoppage by airport baggage handlers in May to fight outsourcing. (See: "Australian government's industrial 'cop' prosecutes union over Qantas strikes").

While the current conflict involves a relatively small number of workers, and their pay demands would have little impact on Qantas's profits, the company is determined not to set a precedent for other sections of its workforce. Qantas claims to have put into place "contingency plans" centred on using managerial staff to perform the functions banned by the engineers.

The APESMA, however, is promoting the dangerous illusion that the airline will bow to pressure. In the association's latest media release, APESMA director Catherine Bolger again appeals to management to return to negotiations and to "talk to us about real solutions," despite the company's stubborn refusal over months to budge.

Bolger declares: "Alan Joyce (the new Qantas CEO) has talked a lot about a more constructive relationship with the workforce than existed under the previous management. We call on him to show that actions speak louder than words, and to facilitate negotiations to end this impasse."

The attacks on Qantas workers, for which former CEO Geoff Dixon was notorious, were not the product of individual malevolence. Rather Dixon was driven by the necessity of ensuring Qantas remained "internationally competitive" under conditions of a serious crisis in the airline industry and challenges from low-cost airlines. Under Joyce, who formerly ran Qantas's own cut-price airline Jetstar, the management has continued on the same aggressive course.

A struggle by aircraft engineers for decent pay and conditions necessarily involves a turn to other airline

workers in Australia and internationally and a challenge to the company's overriding priority of private profit at the expense of its employees, safety standards and affordable, high quality air travel.



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