

Australia: Engineers place bans, defying Qantas intimidation

Terry Cook
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Aircraft engineers at Qantas began industrial action on November 13 in support of improved pay and working conditions. The 190 professional engineers, members of the Association of Professional Engineers Scientists and Managers of Australia (APESMA), have placed indefinite bans on overtime and on attending out of hours calls between 5pm and 9am daily.

The decision to impose the bans follows a breakdown of protracted negotiations for a new enterprise agreement and is overwhelmingly backed by the engineers, 98 percent of whom voted in support of industrial action the previous week.

The highly-skilled engineers—responsible for maintaining the safety of the Qantas fleet including inspecting and signing off on any significant maintenance work before an aircraft can fly—are reportedly seeking a 30 percent pay increase over three years. They are also demanding changes to the company's current call in and out-of-hours work policy that has led to fatigue related safety issues. In addition, the engineers want Qantas to make available company-sponsored professional development in order that they can keep pace with new aviation technology.

In a November 12 press release announcing the bans, APESMA director Catherine Bolger revealed that the union had entered last minute talks with senior management in a bid to avoid industrial action, but admitted the discussions resulted in "little progress". This had left "professional engineers at Qantas with no choice but to take industrial action for the first time in history," she declared.

The last minute bid to head off industrial action is in line with earlier appeals by Bolger for management to return to the bargaining table "to facilitate negotiations to end the impasse". In the absence of any campaign by the union to turn out to mobilise the support of other sections of Qantas workers, and given the company's refusal to budge one inch during months of discussions, "ending the impasse" can only mean brokering a deal acceptable to the company at the direct expense of the engineers.

The workers have imposed the bans in the face of a campaign by Qantas to witchhunt them. Company spokesmen have continually branded their pay claim as "unreasonable" and "excessive" while dismissing their genuine safety concerns as a red-herring dragged into the dispute.

At the same time, Qantas management has repeatedly declared that it has put in place "contingency plans" to break industrial action, including the use of engineering managerial staff to carry out maintenance inspections and other engineers' duties. On the eve of the bans taking effect, Qantas corporate affairs manager David Epstein ominously stated: "There will not be any disruption to our operations and I can assure customers that they can travel with confidence."

The company's intransigence towards the engineers is bound up with its determination to inflict a further round of savage cuts to jobs, wages and working conditions across its entire workforce, in a bid to gain a competitive edge against its rivals. The global financial crisis has severely impacted on air travel, reducing passenger numbers and cutting profit margins.

Epitomising the type of hefty concessions airlines are now demanding from their staff, British Airways this year called on its 40,000 workers to work for one month for free and imposed a \$4,000 direct pay cut on its 3,200 pilots.

Qantas itself now faces increasing challenges on its traditional international routes from airlines with lower cost bases, while its domestic carrier Jetstar is being hit by ongoing competition from other cut price airlines for the domestic market. At the same time, demand for Qantas's high revenue business and first class seats is 20 percent lower than last year. While these bookings comprise just 10 percent of the airline's total passenger numbers, they represent 40 percent of revenue.

In April this year, citing the impact of the global crisis, Qantas announced it was eliminating 1,750 jobs, taking its job losses in one year to 3,340 or almost 10 percent of its workforce. The attack on jobs came in the wake of savage cuts to wages and working conditions throughout its operations, including those of key sections of workers such as long haul cabin crew and maintenance engineers.

In all these disputes, despite considerable opposition from the rank-and-file, the company has succeeded in imposing its demands because of the complicity of the airline unions. They have uniformly worked to isolate the workers involved and to suppress

any independent action.

The determination of the engineers to defy the company and persist with industrial action raises decisive political issues not only for them but for all Qantas employees, along with workers right across the airline industry and more broadly.

Taking a stand in defence of wages and working conditions, or even raising pressing safety concerns, puts the engineers in direct conflict not only with the cost cutting agenda being pursued by Qantas, but with the entire pro-market agenda of the Rudd Labor government and its handmaidens in the trade unions.

Like governments around the world, the Rudd government is utilising the global economic crisis to orchestrate a sweeping restructuring of the social position of the working class, backing companies to carry through the wholesale slashing of jobs, wages and working conditions.

Since coming to office, Rudd and his deputy, Julia Gillard, have worked assiduously to put into place a draconian industrial relations regime that includes an arsenal of anti-strike provisions. They launched Labor's industrial policing agency Fair Work Australia (FWA) on July 1 this year, arming it with far-reaching powers to intervene in disputes at the behest of employers.

The FWA has extensive powers to call a halt to industrial action if it deems the action could cause "significant economic harm to the employer" or "threaten the life, safety, health or welfare" of a part of the population or "cause significant damage to the Australian economy or part of it" or do "significant harm to a third party". Such sweeping definitions have been devised to cover virtually every form of industrial action.

The FWA has already been mobilised against Qantas workers and other sections of the working class. Last month, the government's Fair Work Ombudsman backed Qantas in seeking fines, multi-million dollar compensation and injunctions against the Transport Workers Union over a four-hour stoppage that airport baggage handlers carried out in May to oppose outsourcing.

Likewise the agency intervened to outlaw industrial action by paramedics in Victoria fighting for decent wages, and recently ruled against an application by postal workers for a ballot of members to decide on industrial action for an enterprise agreement.

The federal government and its state counterparts have also used repressive industrial laws to penalise construction workers in a dispute on the West Gate bridge site in Melbourne and to threaten massive fines against bus drivers at Busways in Sydney for taking limited industrial action over the imposition of regressive timetables.

Qantas engineers should harbour no illusions that, because they play a vital role in maintaining Qantas's operations, Labor will

refrain from resorting to similar measures to assist the company in defeating them.

Qantas has proven itself to be a pacesetter in imposing the type of draconian cuts that Labor is now seeking to inflict on every section of the working class. The company will utilise any defeat for the engineers as a springboard for further cuts throughout its operations that will, in turn, be used by other companies as a new exploitative benchmark for their own workforces.

Nor should any worker ever forget that it was the Hawke-Keating Labor government that carried out a vicious strike breaking operation, including the use of the RAAF, to smash the airline pilots' strike in 1989. The attack, like every other, both before and since, had the full support of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and its affiliates.

At two successive Labor Party national conferences, the unions have endorsed Labor's new anti-worker IR regime, including its anti-strike provisions. They act unreservedly as industrial policemen for both government and employers. Based on their reactionary nationalist perspective of shoring up the profits of Australian employers against their international competitors, the unions work to enforce concessions upon their members. The result is workers being pitted against each other in a never ending downward spiral in their wages and conditions.

In order to go forward the engineers must recognise that they are in, not only an industrial struggle against their employer, but a political struggle against the government and their own union. They will need to take the dispute into their own hands, and turn out to gain the support of Qantas and other workers, who all face similar attacks. Such a struggle can only be developed and sustained to the extent that it is based on a new political perspective—a socialist and internationalist program that rejects the subordination of the interests of working people to the relentless drive for profit and seeks to unify them for the socialist transformation of society. This will include transforming the airlines into public utilities, under the democratic control of working people, and organised according to a rational, global plan. Only on this basis can the jobs, wages and working conditions of airline workers, along with affordable and safe travel for all, be guaranteed.



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