

Australia: Qantas gears up for major assault on airline workers

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Qantas, Australia's largest airline company with 35,000 employees, is preparing a major confrontation with pilots, engineers and ground staff in order to impose a sharp defeat and open the way to slash working conditions.

The management has vehemently rejected claims by the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA), the Australian Licenced Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) for "job security" clauses in new enterprise work agreements.

The clauses would set Qantas workers' terms and conditions as the minimum standard for employees in Qantas subsidiaries and other companies performing work outsourced by the airline.

Qantas CEO Alan Joyce has ruled out any concessions on the demand, telling News Ltd that "in essence, they are a veto on change and they are a veto on us being able to run a business and have flexibility". Qantas will not allow any interference with its drive to cut costs to boost market share and profits.

Joyce last week vowed to "stare down" the unions, claiming that giving "job security" guarantees would be "hugely detrimental" to the commercial operations of Qantas and its cut-price carrier Jetstar.

Qantas this week confirmed media reports that it had contingency plans to counter any industrial action, including the training of management personnel as strike-breakers.

A Qantas spokesman said management staff had been sent to Los Angeles to train for baggage handling and check-in operations. The spokesman stated that Qantas had "used management numerous times during past industrial disputes," including "when the TWU workers took action at Adelaide airport in 2007 and at Melbourne airport in 2009".

Qantas's intransigence is part of an ongoing offensive by airlines internationally, hit by a sharp decline in travel in the wake of the global financial crisis and by rising fuel prices.

Over the past three years, Qantas has stepped up attacks on its workers' conditions and turned to the increasing use of contractors, outsourcing and subsidiaries employing staff on reduced wages and conditions.

In 2008, Qantas imposed a 3 percent pay ceiling, cut the conditions of licensed aircraft engineers and long-haul cabin crews, and moved to outsource baggage handling jobs. In April 2009, it announced the axing of 1,750 jobs, taking its total job losses for the previous 12 months to 3,340, or almost 10 percent of the airline's workforce.

Last week, Qantas announced further cost-cutting measures, including axing managers and flights, claiming this was necessary to combat higher fuel prices and the adverse impact of natural disasters in Queensland, Japan and New Zealand.

The AIPA, representing 1,700 Qantas long-haul pilots, and the ALAEA, with over 5,000 engineer members, are currently in negotiations with Qantas. The TWU, representing 9,000 ground staff, is yet to begin formal negotiations.

While Qantas is gearing up to decisively confront its workforce, the three unions are working to keep their claims separate and limit any industrial action, at the same time striving behind the scenes to accommodate Qantas's "flexibility" dictates.

Qantas's pilots, concerned over the threat to their jobs, overwhelmingly voted in February to authorise the AIPA executive to "take all necessary steps", including industrial action, to secure a job security clause.

AIPA vice president Richard Woodward, however, declared: “We’ve got no intention of disrupting the travelling public, absolutely none”. He promised only “minor disruptions”, with Qantas given ample notice. Moreover, the AIPA has already offered Qantas “substantial” productivity concessions, while limiting its pay claim to 2.5 percent per annum, a cut in real terms.

Likewise, while the ALAEA has applied to the Gillard government’s Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal for a secret ballot to allow its members to vote on industrial action, the union’s federal secretary, Steve Purvinas told media at the end of March that action would be delayed until after Easter. The union “did not want to disrupt travellers,” he said, and sought to give negotiations “sufficient time to reach settlement”.

Together with the other unions, the ALAEA has a history of selling out struggles over wages and conditions. In July 2008, the union called off industrial action for a 5 percent cost of living pay increase after accepting the airline’s 3 percent pay ceiling.

TWU national secretary Tony Sheldon has condemned Qantas’s strike breaking preparations as “a deliberate attack on its workforce”, but will still participate in negotiations tipped to begin in June.

The TWU has presided over hundreds of job losses, and helped enforce the Gillard government’s anti-strike laws. In 2010, the TWU paid a \$35,000 fine imposed by the Federal Court over wildcat industrial action by baggage handlers at Adelaide airport and Melbourne airport in 2007 against Qantas’s decision to outsource work. The strikes were deemed “illegal” under the FWA laws because they fell outside bargaining for a new enterprise agreement.

An announcement by International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) president Paddy Crumlin this week that the federation would launch a campaign to “galvanise” aviation unions across the globe to take action against Qantas if management staff replaced strikers is an outright fraud.

One only has to revisit the strike by British Airways cabin crew last year. So-called “international union support” for the BA workers saw unions across Europe sell out disputes in a number of airlines that had erupted at the same time. This left the BA workers isolated, to be eventually stabbed in the back by their

own union, Unite.

The Qantas unions took no action to back the BA workers. Instead, they allowed Qantas to cover for disrupted BA services, as did other members of the Oneworld airline alliance. No doubt these airlines will make their services available to Qantas if industrial action erupts.

Qantas is also assured of the support of the Gillard Labor government, which has backed employers through its draconian workplace relations laws. To defeat Qantas’s attacks therefore requires an all-out political and industrial struggle, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective that rejects the subordination of the needs of workers to profit, and sets out to forge the closest bonds between workers in every country.

If Qantas succeeds in inflicting a decisive defeat on a key section of workers, it will set a benchmark for similar attacks across its operations and by employers on other sections of the working class. Opposition to this strategy cannot succeed if it remains within the confines of the trade unions, which at each step seek to isolate workers and impose the demands of the employers.

The turn must be the building of new independent rank-and-file organisations to unite Qantas workers in a common struggle and mobilise support across the entire airline industry, both in Australia and internationally.



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