

Australia: Qantas uses Labor's laws to lock out thousands of workers

Terry Cook
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In a provocative and aggressive move, Australia's largest airline Qantas yesterday morning locked out nearly 4,000 Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at airports across the country. The workers, including baggage handlers, caterers and freight staff, were due to walk out for four hours at 7 am but were prevented from starting work from 4am.

Having been given notice of the limited strike action, Qantas was able to swing a contingency plan into action. It used larger aircraft to cut passenger backlogs and deployed a strike-breaking force, including management personnel, who had been trained for at least nine months.

As a result, the company claimed only 28 domestic flights were cancelled while 27 were delayed on average for 15 minutes. International flights were unaffected, leading Qantas spokesman Luke Enright to boast: "Things are going better than expected."

TWU spokesman Mick Pieri immediately ruled out further strike action and scrapped a 48-hour ban on higher duties. While he claimed that the four-hour walkout had sent Qantas "a pretty good message," his announcement continued a pattern by the airline unions of suppressing any genuine struggle against the company, which unveiled last month plans to eliminate 1,000 jobs and expand its low-wage operations in Asia.

Last-minute talks between Qantas and the TWU in the Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal on Monday failed to resolve a protracted dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The TWU is seeking 5 percent annual pay rises for three years and job security clauses to prevent outsourcing and limit the use of contract labour.

Qantas has attacked the union for wanting to "entrench work practices that impact on flexibility." The company's intransigence is bound up with its far-

reaching restructuring plan, aimed at drastically slashing its cost base, which it claims is 20 percent higher than competitors such as Singapore Airlines.

Qantas is determined to inflict a decisive defeat on key sections of its workforce. Along with the TWU, the airline is in similar bargaining disputes with the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) and the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA).

The unions, however, have kept each dispute separate and confined their members to protest stunts or very limited stoppages. Engineers stopped work at Sydney Airport for an hour last night and on Friday are due to suspend heavy maintenance work on Qantas aircraft for a day. The pilots' union has limited its members to in-flight announcements and non-compliance with the uniform code. Each union is working behind the scenes to broker deals to lower wages and achieve the productivity gains that Qantas wants.

While the Gillard government has not commented on yesterday's lockout, it fully backs Qantas. Transport Minister Anthony Albanese last month said the restructuring was a "commercial decision" made necessary by "Qantas wanting to make sure that they can remain secure and remain in a strong position."

Qantas is making use of draconian lockout provisions in Labor's FWA laws. The legislation not only bans all industrial action, except during negotiations for enterprise agreements, and outlaws all solidarity action, but permits employers to impose immediate lockouts. Moreover, workers must conduct lengthy secret ballots, and give companies at least 72 hours' notice before taking action, allowing employers to prepare lockouts and other strike-breaking operations.

Qantas's strike-breaking operation is the second significant lockout in Australia within two weeks,

following last week's retaliation by giant US door and window manufacturer Jeld-Wen against Corinthian Doors workers on strike against wage-cutting in four states (see: "Jeld-Wen workers locked out in pay-cutting dispute").

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An escalating offensive is being waged by corporate Australia against workers' jobs, wages and conditions, spearheaded by announcements of nearly 2,000 job cuts by BlueScope Steel and OneSteel. Manufacturing and other basic industries are at the centre of an economic restructuring drive by the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the trade unions to make Australian capitalism "competitive" amid the worsening global financial crisis.

The airline unions have long known of Qantas's strike-breaking plans but have done nothing to oppose them, let alone call for united action by pilots, engineers, cabin crew and ground staff. To do so, would mean coming into direct conflict with the Labor government, its pro-business agenda and its FWA legislation. Instead, the unions have ensured minimum disruption to Qantas's operations.

The unions endorsed Gillard's anti-strike laws at Labor Party and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) congresses and use them to straightjacket workers. Labor's legislation commands the absolute fidelity of the unions because it assigns them the role of industrial policemen for the government and companies in containing and suppressing any opposition by workers.

In 2008, for example, the airline unions assisted Qantas to impose a 3 percent pay ceiling, along with cuts in conditions for licensed aircraft engineers and long-haul cabin crews, and the outsourcing of many ground staff jobs. The deals paved the way for Qantas to eliminate 3,340 jobs, or almost 10 percent of its workforce, over the following 12 months.

For more than two decades the unions have helped enforce a protracted "race to the bottom" within the airline industry, as part of the cut-throat global process that has seen all airlines turn to low-cost operations at the expense of jobs, conditions and safety. In Australia, this record includes the betrayal of the 1989 pilots' strike, the carve-up of assets and destruction of jobs at Ansett Airlines when it went bankrupt ten years ago,

and the imposition of substandard conditions on Virgin and Jetstar crews.

Rather than opposing Qantas's restructuring drive, the unions are again demonstrating that they will collaborate with management to eliminate longstanding conditions and thousands of jobs. Qantas workers cannot defeat the new stage of the management's assault outside of a rebellion against these organisations and the Fair Work Australia laws. This means a political struggle against the Gillard government and a turn to other sections of workers in struggle in Australia and internationally, guided by a socialist perspective to unite workers against the private profit system.



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