The assault on Qantas workers and the global airline crisis

Patrick O'Connor
7 March 2014

Last week's announcement by Qantas that it will sack another 5,000 workers and impose a wage freeze is part of a far-reaching global restructuring of the airline industry that is boosting corporate profits at the expense of workers. Jobs are being decimated around the world. Pilots and air crew, engineers, baggage handlers and others are being reduced to a low-wage, casualised workforce. The only way that Qantas workers can defend their jobs and conditions is through a unified struggle with the estimated eight million airline workers internationally against the global airline conglomerates.

Air transportation is a vital aspect of modern mass society. It depends upon the daily collective labour and expertise of countless technicians, engineers, safety experts, air traffic controllers, logistics experts and airline workers. In few other industries is one of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—that between the social character of production and the private ownership of the means of production—as destructively evident. Almost all the world's major airlines are owned by a conglomeration of banks and financial institutions, whose drive for ever-greater profits has seen flight routes curtailed, service standards degraded, safety precautions undermined and tens of thousands of jobs destroyed.

This restructuring is relentless and long standing. The 2001 terrorist attacks in the US hiked fuel and security costs for the airline companies, which responded with cost-cutting measures. However, the 2008 financial crash triggered an even greater crisis, as the ongoing economic slump collapsed passenger numbers around the world. Between 2008 and 2013, a total of 375 airlines ceased operations.

In the US, airlines slashed the number of domestic flights by 14 percent between 2007 and 2013. Smaller cities have borne the brunt of the corporations' drive to slash costs—in Toledo, Ohio, for example, the number of flights was reduced by 75 percent. Passengers across the country have paid higher fares as a result of reduced competition, with four airlines now accounting for 80 percent of all flights. Airline workers in every carrier face pressure for higher productivity and reduced wages. American Airlines set the competitive benchmark via a managed bankruptcy in 2011–2012 that aimed to reduce labour costs by 20 percent, via 13,000 layoffs and cuts to wages, pensions and healthcare benefits.

The situation in Europe is even worse. Lufthansa, Scandinavian Airlines, British Airways, Aer Lingus, Air France-KLM, Iberia and other airlines have together in the past five years destroyed tens of thousands of jobs and cut wages. Among European pilots alone, 3,000 were laid off between 2008 and 2013. Those still employed face constantly eroded workplace conditions, especially in the growing budget airways sector. Irish-based Ryanair hires 70 percent of its pilots via temp agencies—pilots must be "on call" at all times, but are paid only for time flown and receive none of the benefits granted to permanent employees.

In Asia, despite an expanding airline market, major carriers have moved to slash costs, including through worker stand downs. The UN's International Labor Organization reported: "Air India introduced measures to allow 15,000 employees to take leave without pay for three to five years. Similarly, Cathay Pacific encouraged 17,000 employees to take up to four weeks holiday without pay; and Japan Airlines required 16,000 employees to take two months unpaid leave."

In not a single instance has a struggle been waged against the destruction of jobs and attacks on workers' wages. Responsibility for this lies squarely with the

© World Socialist Web Site

trade unions, which have collaborated closely with the corporations and national governments to impose restructuring and suppress resistance among airline workers.

Every year has seen a fresh round of union betrayals. In 2013, workers with Spain's Iberia launched strikes and protests in February, which were attacked by police, against the company's plan to slash 19 percent of its workforce, destroying 3,800 jobs, and cut wages. The unions immediately intervened, shutting down the strike action and agreeing to government-sponsored mediation on the basis of a company offer to lower the job cuts from 19 to 16 percent of the workforce, and limit wage cuts to 7 percent for ground staff and 14 percent for cabin crew and pilots. As a result, Iberia's parent company last month announced an annual profit of $1.1 billion.

Also in 2013, Germany's Verdi union imposed an industrial agreement freezing wages for Lufthansa workers, and allowing the airline to set up subsidiary companies with workers on 30 percent lower wages. Significant job cuts were last year agreed to by the unions in other European countries and North America.

Throughout every sector of the world economy, the unions seek to defend their own material privileges by offering their services as industrial enforcers, ramming through mass layoffs and wage cuts in the name of ensuring "international competitiveness." Whereas previously unions sought limited improvements to workers' wages and conditions, the emergence of globalised capitalist production methods during the past three decades has produced a radical transformation in their role. The unions are no longer workers' organisations in any sense of the term and are diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class.

Qantas workers have had bitter experiences with the unions. In 2011, management took the unprecedented step of grounding the airline's entire international fleet as a means of smashing workers' resistance to its restructuring drive. The unions responded by working with the then Labor government, which intervened to have all industrial action by Qantas workers outlawed. This anti-democratic attack was explicitly welcomed by the unions, as a "circuit breaker," allowing them time to reach sell-out agreements with the management. As the unions well understood, Labor's intervention allowed Qantas to step up its restructuring agenda, paving the way for the current moves to freeze wages and sack 5,000 more workers.

Qantas workers are locked in a collective struggle not only against the company and the Liberal-National government that stands behind it, but also the trade union bureaucracy. Initial empty threats about strike action in response to the latest cuts were dropped within a day. Instead, the unions pleaded for closer "consultation" and partnership arrangements with the company.

It is impossible for Qantas workers to defend their jobs and conditions without a complete break from the trade unions and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to organise a determined industrial and political struggle. A turn must be made to other sections of workers under attack and to workers at other carriers, both Australia and internationally.

Airline workers around the world are facing a relentless assault as a result of the breakdown of global capitalism. They can only defend their jobs and wages through a political struggle based on a socialist and internationalist perspective directed at abolishing the profit system. That means fighting for the establishment of a workers' government that will take the airlines out of corporate hands and into public ownership under the democratic control of the working class, as part of the socialist reorganisation of the world economy.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site