

Australian unions assist Qantas airways to sack workers

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Having dropped their initial empty threats of strike action within just a day of the February 27 announcement by Qantas Airlines that it will sack 5,000 workers in the next three years, the trade unions are actively working with the company to impose its planned layoffs.

On Wednesday, lawyers representing the Australian Services Union (ASU) told the Fair Work Commission—Australia’s industrial relations body—that the union had reached an informal agreement with Qantas over the company’s plans to cut by a third the number of full-time staff at its Sydney airport international terminal.

Qantas initially issued a deadline of March 21 for expressions of interest from workers for so-called “voluntary” redundancies or for moving into part-time work, before proceeding with compulsory layoffs.

The agreement means that Qantas will simply delay its deadline until April 14, giving the company and the ASU three more weeks to coerce or pressure workers into quitting their jobs “voluntarily.”

The ASU queried the original deadline because it was not issued in “consultation” with the union. Far from opposing the job cuts, the union wants to work closely with Qantas to achieve its objectives. ASU New South Wales branch secretary Sally McManus said the agreement would not stop the job cuts but would give workers more “dignity.”

Tony Selvin, a lawyer representing the ASU, told the commission that the ASU would now drop its advice to members not to participate in the so-called voluntary redundancy scheme.

The ASU will also spend the next month drawing up alternative cost-cutting plans for the company that it believes can be imposed with less resistance from workers, including so-called “job sharing” and cuts to unpaid leave.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) immediately hailed the agreement as a template for

implementing all 5,000 planned job cuts. ACTU secretary Dave Oliver told the *Australian*: “If [Qantas CEO] Alan Joyce can demonstrate to Qantas workers and their unions that genuine redundancies must be made, then our expectation is that the arrangements agreed to between Qantas and the ASU be applied consistently across the workforce.”

Oliver said it was “disappointing that Qantas ignored union calls to treat their hardworking and loyal workforce with respect and had to be dragged to the courts to put this process in place.”

Just as in the auto industry, where the unions are enforcing the plans of Australia’s three car manufacturers—Toyota, GM Holden and Ford—to shut down by 2017, the unions are determined to impose the avalanche of job cuts taking place throughout the economy.

The unions utilise the Fair Work Commission as a convenient means of enforcing the corporate-government agenda. In 2011, after Qantas grounded its entire fleet in response to limited industrial action, the tribunal intervened—at the behest of the former Greens-backed Labor government—to ban all strike action. This allowed the company to pursue its immediate restructuring plans, axing more than 1,000 jobs.

Labor and the Greens have now organised a Senate committee inquiry, which began yesterday, into the Abbott Liberal-National government’s plans to scrap the foreign ownership caps on Qantas, which will allow the airline to be carved up.

Appearing before the committee yesterday, Qantas CEO Joyce made clear that the 5,000 job cuts were only the beginning. Asked whether an end to foreign ownership restrictions would mean an end to further layoffs, Joyce replied: “I can’t rule anything in or out.”

Joyce also declared that Qantas had to match the labour “flexibility” enjoyed by rival Virgin Australia. Already,

many part-time workers at Qantas are given so few hours that they earn just \$200 per week.

The Senate inquiry is a political fraud being conducted to divert the anger of workers. The so-called alternative advanced by Labor and the Greens—for a government debt guarantee for Qantas—would be accompanied by demands for greater “competitiveness” and “productivity” through layoffs and cost-cutting, just as happened under the Labor-Green government in 2011.

Together with Labor and the Greens, the unions are promoting reactionary nationalism, aimed at dividing Qantas workers from their counterparts internationally. In the latest episode, the ASU denounced Qantas’s decision to expand its low-cost call centre operations in New Zealand. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ASU organiser Kath Ryman said it was a slap in the face for Australian workers.

The reality is that Qantas employees confront the impact of a global assault on workers throughout the airline industry, which has intensified since the 2008 financial breakdown. Amid cut-throat competition, airlines worldwide are seeking to impose the burden of the crisis on the working class, while national governments and trade unions divide workers along national lines.

Speaking to the Senate inquiry, Joyce specifically referred to plans by Japan Airlines to cut 21,000 jobs, or 30 percent of its workforce, as well as similar moves by Lufthansa and American Airlines.

Confronted with this global assault, Qantas and other airline workers must break from the unions and form their own independent rank-and-file organisations to defend jobs and conditions. This necessitates a turn to airline workers around the world and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks on the basis of an internationalist and socialist strategy.

The author also recommends:

The assault on Qantas workers and the global airline crisis

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