

Australia: Fairfax journalists strike over job cuts

Richard Phillips
9 May 2014

About 600 journalists, photographers and other production staff at Fairfax Media, one of Australia's largest media companies, stopped work for 24 hours on May 8 over company plans to eliminate an estimated 80 jobs by the end of this year. These include 30 photographers, 35 equivalent full-time editorial production staff, and 15 workers from the "Life Media" magazine division.

The company's photography department will be slashed to just 20 staff nationally, with most photographic work outsourced to the US agency Getty Images. More outsourcing of sub-editing and proofing work is also planned.

Affected staff members were given only 20 minutes' notice ahead of meetings about their futures. Others learnt of the threat to their jobs via email.

Thursday's strike involved staff from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*, regional dailies the *Newcastle Herald*, *Illawarra Mercury* and *Canberra Times*, and a partial walkout at the *Australian Financial Review*. Journalists at the company's online *Brisbane Times* backed the strike, refusing to make their copy available to Fairfax's print mastheads.

Fairfax management reacted with an email claiming that the action was "illegal" and threatening to sack the strikers. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) used these threats to urge its members to end the strike at mass meetings yesterday afternoon.

Like its trade union counterparts in the manufacturing, public sector and other industries, the MEAA has refused to challenge the widespread job cuts that have swept through the media and print industry during the past decade.

Following Wednesday's walkout the union appealed to Fairfax management to "establish staff-and-management committees to ... explore alternative

methods to achieve cost savings." In other words, the union wants to be directly involved in the cost cutting process.

The latest Fairfax cuts follow the axing of 500 editorial staff in 2008, 90 jobs in 2011 and 1,900 editorial and print jobs in June 2012. About 1,500 editorial and printing jobs from Murdoch-owned News Limited were also axed in 2012, followed by about 100 journalist jobs at Channel Ten in the same year.

In each case, the MEAA limited any strike action, using it to appeal for a seat at the table with management to discuss cost-cutting alternatives and organise so-called voluntary redundancies.

The job destruction has been replicated internationally—in the US, Britain and Europe—with the removal of tens of thousands of journalists, photographers and other editorial staff during the past decade. In 2002, there were an estimated 70,000 journalists working in the UK. By 2010, this figure had dropped to 40,000.

Fairfax Media, News Limited and other media outlets are confronted with ongoing falls in advertising revenue. According to recent figures, Australian metropolitan newspapers attracted \$76.3 million in monthly advertising revenue in March 2011. By March 2014, this had dropped to \$42 million.

The Fairfax job cuts are just the latest stage of the wholesale restructuring of the media industry and part of the broader onslaught on the jobs and living standards of the working class. The entire car industry is slated for closure in Australia, and thousands of jobs are being destroyed throughout every sector of industry.

Any genuine struggle to defend jobs requires a rebellion against the straitjacket being imposed by the unions and a turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing similar attacks.

Such a fight can only go forward on the basis of a socialist perspective aimed at the reorganisation of society from top to bottom in the interests of the social needs of the majority, not the profits of the media proprietors and other wealthy elites.

Fairfax journalists and photographers gathered outside the company's Sydney headquarters spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters yesterday.

Paul Bibby said he was “deeply shocked” by Fairfax’s decision and said it represented “another attack on the core work we do.” He explained: “This goes to heart of what I do on daily basis because I work closely with the photographers and they are extremely talented and professional. They are the best in the country and the papers will not be the same without them.

“We are outraged about what has happened. It seems like management has already made up its mind and isn’t going to be dissuaded. The media industry is going through a lot of dramatic change—there’s a lot of blood on the floor—and I’m afraid I don’t know where the end line is in all this. I’m concerned about where on earth this is going to leave the paper.”

Janie Barrett, one of the photographers who could lose their jobs, has worked for Fairfax for 10 years. “I’m saddened by all this, not just because I might be out of job but because it is going to have a tremendous effect on the newspaper,” she said. “It will have a flow-on effect and it is unlikely that I’ll get another job as a press photographer.

“Journalists and photographers work as teams, especially in news situations. One complements the other and it has an impact on the results. Photographers are the eyes of the story and without that, and people committed to their work, the real situation is not truly captured. I spent a year and a half on one photo essay—about a woman having a heart and lung transplant. You’re not going to get that with outsourced photographers.”

James Alcock said he had worked for Fairfax for 25 years, first as a copy boy, then as a photographer. “For photographers to be discarded like this is a devastating blow, personally and professionally,” he said.

“I’ve seen a lot of changes in the industry but for photographers this is the most serious blow. It is a small industry and because there are cuts across the

media in general there’s not much scope for going anywhere. Everything from here will be a step backwards. People are going to end up on the scrapheap.”

Tim Elliott, a reporter since 2006, said: “Huge chunks of working journalists have gone out the door at Fairfax in recent years. Photographers and the people that layout the pages are essential.

“I care about the quality of the paper, even if management doesn’t. I want these people to stay. Although I think my job is relatively safe, or as safe as it can be in 2014, but I suppose nobody really knows.”

The author also recommends:

Newspaper staff strike in Australia against job losses
[1 June 2012]

Australian newspaper chain unveils job-cutting restructuring
[19 June 2012]



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