

Australia: Fairfax journalists strike over job cuts

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Over 500 journalists at Fairfax Media's *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Age* and *Australian Financial Review* walked out on strike yesterday after the company suddenly announced it would axe the equivalent of up to 120 editorial jobs, or about a quarter of the journalist positions at the newspapers.

The newsroom staff, who will remain on strike until Monday, were informed about the job destruction via email from the company's editorial director Sean Aylmer at 11 a.m. on Thursday. He foreshadowed "redundancies, tightening contributor budgets and reducing travel costs and expenses."

Outraged by the cuts, Fairfax Media workers decided to defy Australia's industrial relations laws, introduced by the last federal Labor government, which declare stoppages "unlawful" except during enterprise bargaining periods. Today, journalists at other Fairfax mastheads, the *Canberra Times*, *Brisbane Times*, *Newcastle Herald* and the *Illawarra Mercury*, decided to strike for 24 hours in solidarity with their Sydney and Melbourne colleagues.

Fairfax Media CEO Greg Hywood said the company, one of Australia's largest media corporations, faced an "an ever-changing highly competitive media environment which involves rapid evolution of our publishing model." The job cuts, he said, were "necessary to sustain high quality journalism."

The job cuts have nothing whatsoever to do with "quality journalism." Their purpose is to drive down costs, eliminate hard-won working conditions and increase the exploitation of the remaining workforce. They are part of a decade-long process of ruthless restructuring and job destruction to drive up profits. Fairfax recently announced a \$24.7 million profit for the first half of the financial year, despite falling advertising revenue and declining newspaper

circulation.

More than 2,500 journalist and printing industry jobs have been axed by Fairfax Media in the past eight years. In 2008, it cut 500 editorial positions, including journalists, editors, sub-editors and proofreaders; in 2011, 90 jobs; in 2012, 1,900 editorial and print positions; and in 2014, over 80 editorial jobs, including 30 photographers. The company shut down its print facilities at Chullora in Sydney and Tullamarine in Melbourne in 2014. In 2015–16, it destroyed over 160 editorial jobs at its regional newspapers in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

Like the unions in the car, steel, engineering and mining industries, which have rubber-stamped the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) has not opposed the job destruction, but instead assisted the company to achieve its cost-cutting requirements.

The MEAA has also helped the Murdoch-owned News Corp axe hundreds of jobs during the same period. This has included the elimination of over 1,500 editorial and printing jobs at the *Australian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* in 2012 and the destruction of 55 journalists' positions in 2015.

Rather than oppose the media corporations, the MEAA has diverted journalists' anger into limited strikes and other harmless protests. This action has not been aimed at defending jobs but appealing to media management to involve the union in negotiating redundancies, new work schedules and various cost-cutting "alternatives."

Addressing a rally of about 100 journalists outside Fairfax's Sydney office today, MEAA chief executive officer Paul Murphy urged those in attendance to sign a union petition. The petition appeals to Hywood to "reconsider" the job cuts and "engage with your staff

to find smarter, alternative ways to stay competitive and reduce costs without undermining these [newspaper] mastheads.”

In other words, management should work with the union, which will produce the required cost-savings.

Others addressing the rally included state Labor Party leader Luke Foley, state Greens MP David Shoebridge and UnionsNSW secretary Mark Morey. All feigned support for the striking journalists while appealing to the media corporation to “reassess” the job cuts because it was damaging its newspapers’ reputations. Shoebridge hailed the striking journalists for “standing up for the best interests of your employer.”

Despite the defiant stand of the journalists, underscored by those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the struggle to defend jobs cannot advance if it remains under the grip of the MEAA, which will do whatever is necessary to impose the company’s requirements as has been repeatedly demonstrated over the past decade.

The defence of jobs and conditions requires the establishment of genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the MEAA, and a turn to all the journalists, media workers and other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally facing similar attacks. Such a fight can only succeed if it is guided by a socialist perspective aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the media proprietors and other wealthy elites.



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