

Australian journalists condemn the axing of more Fairfax jobs

Our reporters
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Striking Fairfax Media journalists spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at their rally in Sydney today, explaining why they have walked out until Monday to fight the threatened loss of a further 120 jobs and revealing some of the conditions under which they are already working.

Simon, a *Sydney Morning Herald* artist, said: “Fairfax recently made a \$27 million profit and the board get bonuses for cutbacks they carry out. This means that the money that they cut from us goes up the food chain to management.

“It was an angry meeting yesterday because we didn’t realise the cuts were coming. Although 20 people took redundancy last year, that had already been planned. Suddenly we’re told yesterday that there will be two weeks of consultations and then they’re starting the next round of job cuts.

“What’s happening here is traumatic. I had three jobs to do yesterday, including a major feature page image. I’d read the briefs and was getting to start producing something and the email arrives telling us that there would be 120 jobs cut. How can you work in this situation?”

Michael said: “I’m a 20-year veteran of the redundancy cuts here and it’s getting very tough. It’s like death by a thousand cuts. We’ve had to become very multi-skilled and extremely efficient but it doesn’t matter how good you are, you’re constantly being told that you have to work smarter. How can you do this with a workforce that is more and more depleted? The loss of 120 jobs is going to make life here very difficult.”

Tim, a senior writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said: “I’ve been here for five and a half years and we’ve lost a lot of great people—great writers, great photographers—and we feel that the latest cuts are going

to push this paper over the edge...

“People were very angry about that and the meeting was united about going on strike to fight it. I’ve not been on a three-day strike before and I don’t think Fairfax has seen that for many years. That’s a measure of the feeling here. People work very hard and give their best and cover over the gaps, but there must come a point when you’re no longer able to do that.”

Mat, a sub-editor, explained the impact of previous job cuts on working conditions. “It’s incredibly fast-paced,” he said. “You don’t even have time to think. You don’t have time to read the stories. You’ve just got to ship it up. It’s ridiculous.

“You’re adding the metadata, sourcing the pictures yourself, and you’ve got to put everything on social media. Sometimes you’re doing four stories an hour. A traditional sub-editor would have fact-checked things. Now you don’t even have time to read.

“These days they can monitor things instantly to see what’s getting the most traffic. One of our jobs is to constantly be removing stories that aren’t doing well. More niche areas, and investigative stories that don’t get as many hits, are overlooked.

“My job is always under threat. A lot of my colleagues have been sacked. A couple of years ago, about 30 sub-editors were outsourced to New Zealand at half the wages. This week, they’ve all been sacked and their jobs are being outsourced back here to workers who will be paid even less.

“When they announced these cuts yesterday by email, one of the lines was that this was an ‘ongoing process,’ so they’ll keep getting rid of more jobs. That’s capitalism. I have a permanent part-time position, which was very hard fought for. I can’t get full-time work. I have to beg for additional casual shifts to make up a five-day week, which I didn’t get last week. They

need more full-time staff, but they prefer people who are casual or on contracts because they have fewer rights.”

Commenting on the MEAA’s role, the sub-editor said: “Like many unions, they lose their teeth because they deal with management a lot of the time, and they take on a lot of management thinking. Management are very savvy about how to handle the union and get them on side.”

One young *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist said there was “a lot of anger” about the scale of the cuts and the “swift and cold” manner in which they were executed. The response was “quite militant,” he said, with the staff deciding to walk out even though such strikes were “unlawful action” under the draconian industrial laws introduced by the previous federal Labor government.

“We can’t keep doing this,” he said, referring to the pressure already on journalists, who were being forced to double as sub-editors and undertake other kinds of work. As a result, there were stories that “we just can’t cover.” Once again, he said, Fairfax Media’s cuts were targeted at the editorial staff. This was his third strike in three years, he commented, but the stoppages had only “tried to reduce the damage” and “protect the brand.”

A Fairfax Media designer with 27 years’ experience said: “This round seems to be aimed at writers and reporters. Most of the previous cuts in the past few years have been aimed at production. That’s what I think has really hit a nerve. Change is the only constant. I think a lot of it comes down to management. They have their KPIs [Key Performance Indicators], ticking the boxes. They kid themselves that they’ve improved things, but it’s just window dressing.

“You can feel the quality slipping, constantly... I’ve seen some superb people pushed out of the place... The metrics are what’s driving everything. Talking to some colleagues yesterday, they said the best metrics they got were for really seedy, low-brow articles.”



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