

Australia: Fairfax Media imposes forced redundancies

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One of Australia's two major newspaper proprietors, Fairfax Media, last week sacked up to 30 editorial staff at the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), the *Age* and the *Australian Financial Review*. Editors reportedly called journalists and artists one-by-one and informed them they were redundant.

One Fairfax sub-editor said: "Some people were told face to face, some people were called when they were doing their shopping. We saw people tapped on their shoulder while they were working in front of us, and told they didn't have a job."

Among those axed were Philippa Hawker, a veteran film critic for the *Age*, award-winning illustrator Rocco Fazzari, with 25 years' service with the SMH, along with the publication's investigations editor Anne Davies, its national affairs editor Tom Allard and senior business reporter Michael West.

The forced retrenchments came after the company failed to achieve sufficient expressions of interest in taking "voluntary" redundancies to achieve the number of job cuts it foreshadowed two months ago. On March 17, Fairfax management announced plans to axe 120 jobs, or around a quarter of the editorial positions across the three newspapers.

The job cuts are part of a decade-long process of ruthless corporate restructuring and job destruction to drive up profits, amid a deepening economic slump. Fairfax recently announced a \$24.7 million profit for the first half of the financial year, despite declining newspaper circulation and falling advertising revenue.

In March, Fairfax's announcement provoked immediate strike action over three days by Fairfax journalists nationally, including at the *Canberra Times*, *Brisbane Times*, *Newcastle Herald* and the *Illawarra Mercury*, where workers walked out in support of their targeted colleagues.

Significantly, the strikers defied Fair Work industrial laws, introduced by the last federal Labor government with the complete support of the unions, that outlaw industrial action except during so-called bargaining periods for enterprise work agreements.

Despite the determined stand taken by journalists, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) has responded to the forced redundancies by confirming that it accepts cost cutting across the company's operations.

MEAA spokesperson Katelin McInerney told reporters: "We've been talking to the company for the last week or so putting pressure on them to come to the table to broaden this process (cost cutting) outside of just news." She said it was "very disappointing" that the management had resorted to sackings.

McInerney also boasted that during the talks the union "negotiated down" the job cuts from 120 to 82 by helping the company find alternative "savings." As past experience shows, "savings" is a euphemism for the elimination of working conditions.

At meetings of editorial staff in Sydney and Melbourne on May 10 to discuss the forced redundancies, the union made no proposal for action to defend jobs. Instead it called for a vote of no confidence in the Fairfax management and said it had lost faith in the ability of the chief executive Greg Hywood to successfully execute revenue-raising measures.

The MEAA's involvement in this process demonstrates that it is not opposed to the destruction of jobs but prefers that "voluntary" redundancies be used, so as to avoid the eruption of resistance that could get out of the union's control.

It is no accident that the company's forced redundancies came after Fair Work Ombudsman

Natalie James announced an investigation into the March strikes and issued a compulsory order to the company to hand over the names and personal details of the employees involved.

The ombudsman's action could create the conditions for the federal government's Fair Work Commission (FWC) to impose individual fines on the journalists of up to \$10,800 for breaching the Fair Work Act and a fine of up to \$54,000 on the union.

James's intervention was clearly a bid to intimidate Fairfax staff before the company announced forced redundancies that could have triggered further walkouts. At the same time, it is designed to provide the MEAA with the means to apply pressure to keep its members in line.

The union is doing nothing to oppose the Fair Work witch-hunt. MEAA chief executive Paul Murphy said the union would only make sure "our members have access to appropriate legal advice in relation to anything the Fair Work Ombudsman might request of them."

The union was quick to apply pressure on journalists. One Fairfax sub-editor told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "When it came to the forced redundancies the union said we can't recommend that anyone go on strike because the company has already said that they're going to report us to Fair Work. So they couldn't recommend that people walk out."

Referring to the way the MEAA relies on the previous Labor government's Fair Work laws to suppress industrial action, the sub-editor commented:

"What the union said is you have to apply to take legal strike action, give about two weeks' notice and have a ballot. Our union rep said you can't walk out straight away, thank Julia Gillard [former Labor prime minister] for bringing in that legislation. We had a protected ballot a few years ago, during the last sackings, and it is a lengthy process."

The MEAA, like the trade unions in car manufacturing, steel, mining and engineering, has cynically used the draconian Fair Work laws to prevent any unified struggle by workers against job cuts and closures, restricting their members to limited strikes and empty protest actions. Such actions are designed to let off steam and provide time for the unions to broker and impose outcomes in disputes, along the lines dictated by the companies.

At Fairfax the unions, including the MEAA, have overseen the destruction of over 2,500 journalist and printing industry jobs in the past eight years, including 160 editorial jobs at its regional newspapers in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia in 2015–16.

The MEAA has also helped the Murdoch-owned News Corp axe hundreds of jobs over the same period, while working to prevent any unified struggle by workers across the two media organisations.

The reality is that the MEAA's concerns lie not in defending the interests of its members but in maintaining the union's place in the industrial relations loop, demonstrating to the employers that it remains the best means of enforcing their cost-cutting requirements.



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