

Australia: Unions back cuts in working conditions at state broadcaster

Our reporters
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Last month Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) workers endorsed a new enterprise agreement at the state-funded broadcaster. The deal covers about 90 percent of the corporation's almost 5,000 employees and includes 2 percent annual pay rises for the next three years, back-pay from July 1, a \$500 "sign-on bonus" and minor improvements in parenting and family violence leave.

Two senior government ministers—Employment Minister Michaelia Cash and Communications Minister Mitch Fifield—and the Australian Public Service Commissioner immediately wrote to ABC management denouncing the deal.

The new agreement (EBA) was overly "generous," they claimed, and breached the government's federal public-sector wage bargaining guidelines by offering back pay and a sign-on bonus. Under the government's wages policy, federal public sector wage increases are capped at 2 percent per year and must be paid for by cuts in working conditions.

ABC board chairman Jim Spigelman rejected the government allegations, declaring that they represented an attack on the state broadcasters' "independence" and that management was only legally required to give "consideration" to the government's wages policy.

Spigelman also falsely claimed that the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), which cover ABC workers, had opposed the new EBA.

The public spat and associated media coverage is aimed at obscuring the reality that the new EBA is a direct attack on the hard-won conditions of ABC workers and was rubber-stamped by the CPSU and the MEAA. The new agreement, in fact, is central to the next stage of the cost-cutting and job destructive outsourcing agenda now being imposed by

management and has the active support and collaboration of the unions.

Rather than receiving "generous" pay rises and conditions, ABC employees now face three years under an agreement that leaves them significantly worse off: pay rises of just 2 percent a year (a real wage cut when compared to actual increases in the cost of living); the loss of legally enforceable rights covering so-called "performance management," recruitment procedures and dispute resolution; and a reduction in the minimum call-out time for casual workers.

In addition, staff can now be compelled to use two of their four weeks of annual leave during an enforced end-of-year shutdown. They can also be moved between rosters an unlimited number of times without agreement, with some employees set to lose 13 rostered days off (RDOs) a year.

At the beginning of the negotiations, the unions cynically told their members that the ABC enterprise agreement was "the single most important lever that is controlled by ABC staff."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The final management deal, which was endorsed on October 25 by a majority of the 68 percent who voted, was the end result of backroom talks and manoeuvres by the union bureaucracy aimed at demonstrating to management that it could implement its cost-cutting demands.

CPSU and MEAA members from the outset made clear in several combined mass meetings that any new agreement should not leave them worse off. Many indicated that they were prepared to take industrial action.

Mass meetings in July passed a resolution stating that the agreement had to have a "fair" pay rise and no cuts to conditions and called on the union to seek "protected" industrial action under Australia's

restrictive Fair Work industrial relations laws.

The Fair Work legislation, which was passed by the Rudd Labor government with union support in 2009, contains heavy fines if workers strike outside “protected” enterprise bargaining periods.

The CPSU and MEAA directed ABC members to wear union stickers to work and participate in other harmless stunts in the 10-week period before any vote for industrial action was taken. By early September the CPSU and MEAA stopped holding joint mass meetings. On September 27, the ABC management suddenly announced on that it would put a final EBA offer to a direct vote by all ABC staff.

The MEAA, which had previously conducted an online poll of its members, responded by cancelling its protected industrial action ballot and declaring that the “overwhelming majority” of its members said the agreement “was worth considering.”

The CPSU, which had been holding what it described as “phone consultations” with its members, declared that it was taking a “neutral position” on the deal. In other words, the unions tacitly gave their seal of approval.

Throughout the dispute, the CPSU and the MEAA have cynically promoted the illusion that management could be pressured to offer a better deal. Like their counterparts nationally, the unions have always insisted that Labor would be more amenable to the public sector workers’ demands.

This was a lie. The decades-long onslaught on the working conditions and the destruction of over 1,500 ABC jobs began under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983–96 and continuing under subsequent governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike. These cuts—from 6,500 employees to less than 5,000 today—have been imposed with the active collaboration of the unions.

In 2014, when the Abbott Coalition government slashed \$254 million from the ABC over five years and management of the state-funded broadcaster said it would axe 400 jobs, or almost one tenth of the workforce, the CPSU and MEAA opposed any campaign to defend the jobs. They called, instead, for talks with management to negotiate the cost-cutting and for redundancies to be voluntary.

During the past three decades the CPSU and other unions have collaborated with the federal and state

governments to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs and the privatisation and sub-contracting out of whole areas of the public sector work.

The unions’ endorsement of another round of attacks on the working conditions of ABC staff is yet another example that it is prepared to do anything required of it to impose the federal government and public sector management demands.

Last week, even before the new ABC agreement was ratified by Fair Work Australia (FWA), fulltime employees of “Catalyst,” the network’s long-running science television show, were told that their jobs will be axed as the program is to be produced largely by non-ABC staff in the future. The unions failed to even issue a press release about the announcement.

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