

Australia: Jobs and in-house production slashed at state broadcaster

Our reporter
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Michelle Guthrie, managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), announced last week that over 150 staff, including one in five management jobs, or about 5 percent of the total workforce, will be eliminated by June 30 at the network. The ABC, which has just over 4,000 full-time workers, is the country's largest broadcasting network and media employer.

Guthrie was appointed managing director ten months ago, having previously worked as a senior Google executive and an employee of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp for more than a decade, including at News International, BSkyB and Foxtel.

Addressing a meeting of all ABC employees on March 7, Guthrie declared that "incremental reform" at the network was "not the answer" and that 2017 would be "a year of action and change."

The "changes," which are cynically entitled *Investing in Audiences*, undermine the basic foundations of the state-funded public broadcaster and, under the banner of increasing ratings, prepare the ground for increased outsourcing of production and even-deeper attacks on jobs. The measures are in line with the demands of big business and the corporate media.

The existing 14 divisions within the ABC have been reduced to 10 "teams." Leaders of the new teams were instructed to immediately start drawing up lists of employees to be made redundant.

Guthrie claimed that the savings from these savage cuts—\$20 million in 2017 and eventually \$50 million per year—will be transferred into generating and improving broadcasting content. She also claimed that 80 new positions would be created in regional areas. While no details were provided on the future regional jobs, the axing of between 150 and 200 staff will be finalised before the end of June.

In Orwellian language, Guthrie insisted these policies would "result in a stronger, more confident and better-

equipped ABC." Yet immediately after her presentation to ABC staff, managers began rounding up production workers to tell them they were being made redundant. Within hours of Guthrie's speech, 85 positions—36 in television and 49 in News—were axed.

The overwhelming majority of those losing their jobs are directly involved in production. This includes the elimination of the entire field camera and sound department in television, along with graphic designers, producers, editors, vision-mixers, production coordinators and others, who all play key roles in creating content. This means that all of these positions will be outsourced.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, published by Fairfax Media, hailed the ABC cuts.

The *Australian* congratulated Guthrie on her "good sense" and "robust management style" and said the job destruction was in line with what the newspaper "has long advocated."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* supported the measures and called on the ABC to consider various non-government revenue-raising options. This should include, the newspaper said, selling subscriptions to on-demand television, podcasts and extra channels, as well as a merger with SBS, Australia's other state-funded radio and television network. SBS is already semi-privatised, with its television network selling advertising.

The latest cuts at the ABC are part of a long-running federal government assault on the broadcaster. In 1985–86, the ABC employed over 6,000 staff. Since then, funding has fallen by more than 20 percent, or \$230 million in real terms, and over 2,000 jobs have been eliminated. These job losses are the direct outcome of chronic underfunding, which began with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments three decades ago, and has continued under subsequent governments, Liberal-

National and Labor alike, ever since.

Confronted with ongoing government funding cuts, and the need to expand into digital TV, radio and online services, ABC management has drastically reduced programming budgets, outsourced production and destroyed hundreds of permanent jobs.

ABC management revealed last week that the redundancies in TV and news are in response to cost cutting—\$254 million—announced in 2014 by the federal Liberal-National government. An estimated 400 positions were axed in response to those cuts, which came on the heels of 79 redundancies the same year when the government terminated a \$223 million contract for the Australia Network, which used to broadcast to over 46 countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2016, there were a further 365 layoffs: 305 in March, when ABC management shut down its retail stores across the country, 14 jobs destroyed in News Operations in May, and another 46 positions eliminated in television, radio, audience and marketing, six in news and six in international operations.

The unions covering ABC workers—the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA)—have consistently blocked any campaign to defend jobs, falsely claiming that management could be pressured to change course.

The CPSU has yet to issue an official statement about the latest cuts, while the MEAA has lamely called on Guthrie to “explain how job cuts in key technical support roles will not impact on the ABC’s news services.” Nor have the unions announced any mass meetings. Some union members have been told that union officials will only meet with workers who are facing the sack.

Just as they have done in the past, the unions will appeal to management for “voluntary redundancies” while offering their services to assist in corralling staff out the door.

A central component of the ABC’s so-called *Investing in Audiences* agenda is to reorient the public broadcaster and transform it into a ratings-driven entity.

The ABC chief has declared that she aims to dramatically boost the network’s ratings and achieve a “100 percent” reach. This ratings target is virtually impossible, and will be used to justify the elimination of what remains of radio and television programs on the arts, music, science and history.

Guthrie told the ABC’s Radio National last week that “Catalyst,” Australia’s only weekly TV science program, was a pointer to the future and that it was necessary to

“continually refresh programs.”

Last year’s so-called refresh of the ABC program, however, changed “Catalyst” from 34 half-hour “magazine-style” episodes per year into 17 one-hour single-issue programs.

In the business-oriented language of ABC management, “Catalyst” funding was made “contestable” with the independent production sector able to make episodes. Under this model, there are now only two permanent ABC jobs for the program, plus four “36-week run-of-show” contract positions. Everyone else is employed as casuals on 16-week contracts.

ABC management claim *Investing in Audiences*’ so-called Content Fund will generate up to \$50 million a year for programming. While full details have not yet been provided, the fund is “contestable and open for business” to internal and non-ABC producers to present ideas aimed at boosting ratings. The fund will be controlled by the new director of audiences, Leisa Bacon, who was previously head of the network’s Audience and Marketing division.

ABC chief Guthrie made clear last week that *Investing in Audiences* is only the opening salvo in her campaign to “transform” the public broadcaster. “My view, she declared, “is that all ABC content funding should be contestable.” Just as with Australia’s VET (Vocational Education and Training) and the higher education sectors, “contestability” means privatisation, loss of job tenure and the outsourcing and casualisation of all employment.

The assault on ABC workers parallels cost-cutting and privatisation measures being implemented at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Over the next five years, the BBC will outsource production of 60 percent of its radio content. Late last year, BBC Studios, the network’s television production unit, axed 300 jobs, or 15 percent of its workforce. The production unit is in the process of being spun off into a separate commercial business and production of many of its popular programs offered to private producers.



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