Australian Fairfax journalists strike for a week over job destruction

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Journalists and other editorial workers at Fairfax Media in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane yesterday voted to go on strike for seven days after the management announced that at least a quarter of all newsroom jobs were to be cut.

The elimination of another 125 jobs will further destroy the media outlet's capacity to provide basic news coverage and background features. It will decimate a workforce already gutted by the destruction of more than 2,600 editorial and printing jobs by Fairfax, one of Australia's major media owners, since 2007. The company also plans to sack casuals and slash rates for contributors.

By launching the walkout—the longest strike by editorial staff in recent history—the Fairfax workers are taking a stand against the ongoing demolition of jobs and carve-up of the media industry by the financial elite.

In what amounts to a rank-and-file rebellion, at urgent stop-work meetings, the editorial workforce rejected calls by their trade union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), to confine their response to a token one-day stoppage.

"The momentum for the seven-day strike came from the floor," one Fairfax journalist told the WSWS. There was a groundswell of sentiment that "enough is enough." One journalist told *Guardian Australia*: "It's the longest strike I can remember in recent history. But it was unanimous and it's what the floor wanted."

Arts writers, who are being particularly targeted in the latest round of job cuts, appealed for solidarity, and won a powerful response. More broadly, there are concerns about the future of journalism itself. Investigative reporter Kate McClymont told reporters: "We care deeply about journalism."

The MEAA did everything it could to prevent the current strike, holding consultations with management, proposing alternative means of slashing costs in the hope of not provoking the resistance of its members.

The walkout expresses pent-up anger over ever-deepening job losses and the union's role in assisting the company. In March last year, many staff from Fairfax's newspaper divisions went on a four-day strike over planned job cuts of 120 editorial staff, but the MEAA then worked with the company to impose a slightly reduced number of redundancies.

Yesterday, Fairfax management contemptuously declared that the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Melbourne *Age* and the *Australian Financial Review* would be published as usual and the company's web sites would keep operating. Fairfax can do so because of strike exemptions granted by the MEAA.

Other Fairfax editorial workers at the *Newcastle Herald* and *WA Today* walked out for 24 hours. *Canberra Times* journalists did not go on strike. Instead, the MEAA's house committee passed a resolution that they would not complete work usually done by staff at other mastheads.

Union members told reporters they were well aware that management may seek an order from the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to stop the industrial action. The strike is unlawful under the draconian Fair Work Act introduced by the previous federal Labor government with the support of the trade unions. If the FWC issued a back-to-work order, the strikers would risk fines of up to $10,800.

The Fairfax job cuts are part of a wider assault by the corporate elite throughout the media industry, and other basic industries, in Australia and internationally. Fairfax yesterday warned of more job destruction in New Zealand after that country's corporate regulator disallowed a merger with a Murdoch media network.

Just weeks ago, Australia's largest media organisation, Murdoch's News Corp, unveiled cuts to frontline editorial staff, with suggestions that up to two-thirds of photographic staff will go. More jobs are threatened at the Channel Ten network, which is seeking a $250 million loan on the financial markets to avoid receivership.

In 2008, Fairfax 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 in Sydney and Melbourne in 2014. In 2015–16, it destroyed over 160 editorial jobs at regional newspapers.

Fairfax, like other companies, is increasingly being devastated by finance capital. Fairfax was once the instrument of media barons—the Fairfax and Packer families—who maintained journalistic staff to pursue their corporate interests. Over the past decade, it has become a vehicle for ruthless fund managers intent on extracting profits for their wealthy shareholders.

Fairfax is today owned by financial funds operating in the interests of billionaires. Its six largest shareholders control 35 percent of the company's stock—Ausbil Dexia (7.76 percent), Henderion Global Investors (6.06), IOOF Holdings (5.40), SAS Trustee Corporation (5.14), Schroder Investment Management Australia (5.12) and Dimensional Fund Advisers (5.12).

Both the commercial and political interests of these funds are antithetical to journalism that in any way challenges the prevailing economic and political order. This was made explicit in a vision statement issued by Fairfax last month when it first foreshadowed this week's cuts.

"Our pro-investor, pro-consumer view of business is central to our influence in the economic and business community," the company said in a five-page document titled "Metro Journalism—The way ahead." This pro-business bias had to animate Fairfax's reportage, it stated. "We believe in the merits of market-based solutions to economic challenges and an Australia that rewards aspiration and hard work," it said.

Despite paying lip service to "high-quality journalism," the statement insisted that, in order to attract advertising revenue, stories had to focus on attracting a "wide audience." The document declared: "We need to ask questions like, 'is this piece of journalism worth paying for?'"

As part of this process, Fairfax confirmed earlier this year it is pursuing plans to spin off its profitable Domain real estate business, with a possible float on the Australian Securities Exchange by the end of 2017. Billionaire investor Alex Waislitz, who owns more than 50 million Fairfax shares, said he was pleased "the board has listened to shareholders."

Steve Allen, media analyst at Fusion Strategy, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "Shareholders really don't care about the construction, or the validity, or the exclusivity of journalism ... The reason for splitting Domain out from the rest of the company is that it's the thing that investors want to jump into. What's holding down the share price at Fairfax is that people don't want all the legacy products that sit within Fairfax Media."

The MEAA has responded to the outrage of editorial workers by seeking to channel it into futile pleas for the management to reconsider the value of journalism. Like the trade unions in every other industry, which have rubber-stamped the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs, the MEAA has not opposed any job destruction. Instead, it has repeatedly negotiated with Fairfax, seeking to assist it to achieve its cost-cutting requirements while defusing and suppressing the opposition of its members.

That is why a political break is needed from the MEAA. Genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union, need to be established to turn to all the journalists, media workers and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks. This requires a socialist perspective aimed at the reorganisation of the media and society as a whole in the interests of the vast majority of working people, not the profits of the capitalist class.