

Australia: Fairfax journalists strike, but union appeals to corporate investors

Our correspondents
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Fairfax Media editorial workers remain on strike after walking out for a week on Wednesday in protest against the planned destruction of up to 125 editorial jobs, or a quarter of the company's news rooms, as part of a \$30 million cost-cutting operation. One of the two main print monopolies in Australia, Fairfax publishes the *Age* in Melbourne, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Financial Review*, as well as a number of other newspapers.

While Fairfax management has provided no exact details, "non-core" areas are to be heavily hit. According to some reports, the company will drastically cut the number of specialist writers—in science, arts, entertainment and magazine supplements—and the jobs of video journalists and graphic designers.

There will be only one arts writer at each of its newspapers, with most arts and entertainment stories to come from syndicated sources. Rates for all freelance journalists will be drastically reduced, with payment rates for features and reviews halved.

The sackings will eviscerate the newspapers and lead to further job destruction, following a decade of cost-cutting. Since 2011 alone, more than 490 journalists and photographers have been axed from the company's major city publications. Scores of positions have also been eliminated at its regional publications.

Fairfax management has responded to the strike by declaring there will be no backing down on its cost-cutting diktats. The company's *Australian Financial Review* editorial today denounced the strike, branding it "futile." It declared that the job destruction was necessary in order to match the recent \$40 million restructure and sackings by the Murdoch-owned News Corporation.

Fairfax CEO Greg Hywood assured corporate investors late this week the job cuts would proceed. "This is not the first time we have had industrial opposition to what we are doing [but] we won't be dissuaded from making the right decisions," he said. "Publishing is facing structural challenges and these could only be addressed by completely resetting existing models."

The Fairfax strikers have received messages of support and encouragement from journalists at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, News Corporation and other media outlets.

Journalists internationally have also voiced solidarity with the strikers, with many pointing out that the cuts were announced on World Press Freedom Day.

As with all the previous sackings at Fairfax and other Australian news outlets, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) did everything it could to prevent this week's walkout, offering instead to help the management find alternative means to slash costs.

By similar means, the MEAA and the printing unions have repeatedly assisted Fairfax impose one devastating round of job losses after another—totalling more than 2,600 editorial and printing jobs by Fairfax since 2007.

The MEAA is now diverting the strikers into dead-end appeals for Fairfax investors—the very financial funds dictating the company's carve-up—to see commercial "sense" in retaining journalists.

On Thursday, the MEAA issued an open letter appealing to Fairfax board members and investors to reinvest in news rooms "not necessarily out of a sense of civic duty (though that counts too) but because it makes sound business sense."

The letter even accepts the management's decision to sell off Domain, the company's profitable real-estate web site, while pleading for some recognition of, and reward for, the link "between Fairfax's journalism and Domain's commercial success."

The union is calling on striking journalists to collect signatures for this groveling plea and for supporters to send letters to CEO Hywood to "find other, sustainable ways to grow your news organisation."

The concerns of the hedge funds and big corporate investors that own and control Fairfax Media are diametrically opposed to honest, accurate and politically probing journalism. They are driven by demands for higher profits, plus access to political influence.

That is why, in order to defend their jobs and journalism itself, Fairfax workers have to break from the MEAA, and establish genuine rank-and-file committees to turn to journalists, media workers and other sections of the working class facing similar attacks. Such a struggle 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.

Fairfax strikers have spoken with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters explaining why they decided to strike and their concerns about the future of the media.

A political reporter said the decision to walk out for a week was a “big step” and would affect the media coverage of the May 9 federal budget. He said it was the first lengthy journalists’ stoppage since 1995 and it was rare today for any group of workers to strike for such a period.

Fairfax staff, he continued, wanted to “send a message to the company that this level of job cuts is unacceptable and puts journalism at risk.” It was also a message to the public, he added, that quality journalism, which is “essential” and a “pillar of democracy,” is in danger.

The journalist said the job losses would have a serious impact on the quality of Fairfax Media’s coverage, which was already “dropping,” including in basics like grammar and fact-checking, and that there would be fewer stories, less depth of coverage and reduced photographic reportage.

Fairfax, once a news company, he continued, was becoming just a subsidiary of its Domain real estate web site and headed down a path where it “doesn’t do news anymore.”

Despite the MEAA’s record of facilitating job cuts, the political reporter had illusions in the trade union. It “could always do more,” he said, but it was “not strong enough to take on the corporate elite.” He hoped strong industrial action would “bring the company back to the negotiating table.”

“Many of us would sympathise with your call for independent rank-and-file committees to take the fight out of the hands of the MEAA,” he said, but “let’s wait and see.”

The reporter thought the media should be freed from corporate control and placed under social ownership but could not see that happening. It would be difficult to convince politicians and taxpayers of that, he said. It would require a “much bigger push” to overturn the entire economic and political system based on private profit.

A young reporter, who wanted to remain anonymous, said the job cuts were “all about profit.”

“Fairfax sees that the news is not raising a lot of revenue but that hasn’t always been the purpose of news. The work that we do has got a broader public service focus. To look at it as a profit-raising activity isn’t right and not the way for democracy to work. Domain is our big profit-maker and selling it off will basically subtract its profit from what we do, so we’ll be a separate entity.”

Sydney Morning Herald consumer affairs reporter Lucy Cormack said the job cuts would do “terrible things to the quality of our news room. Fewer journalists means fewer stories that matter. Our stand is so important because the media is a cornerstone of democracy and we can’t let Sydney become a one-newspaper town.

“They’re talking about massive cuts to the entertainment and

the arts section. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* in Melbourne have had a huge voice for the arts scene in both cities and they are vital. I fear that if we lose some of those voices, we’ll never get them back and it could have terrible consequences for the arts scene.”

Rachel, also from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said: “We’re really disgusted and upset about this decision to axe 125 jobs. It is going to cut really deep into the quality of the journalism that we do. More importantly, is the broader question of democracy and how we run a free and independent press in this country. So we feel that any cuts to us, that’s an attack on democracy.”

Commenting on the decision to strike, she added: “Other workers need to know that they’re not alone, that this is happening all over the country. We stand with people who are losing their jobs because it’s not right... We feel that we stand with other workers who are also losing their jobs in other industries.”

Rachel said Fairfax had “gone pro-market, pro-business.” Asked whether she thought the media industry should be under social ownership and democratic control as part of a reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the wealthy elite, she replied: “Wow, that’s a big question. The ownership of information is a really interesting question... We need a media that is rigorous, robust and that tests the facts before publication.”

Jack Fisher, another Fairfax journalist in Sydney, said: “We’ve taken this step because we know we’re working on a knife’s edge already and we won’t be able to function without the journalists whose jobs are currently at stake.

“Our news rooms are where stories are broken. They’re where journalists have the resources to hold power to account and to ask difficult questions and to chase investigative stories. We don’t believe that a Sydney or a Melbourne that’s dominated by the Murdoch Press is something that either Sydneysiders or Melbournians want.

“There are many ways in which our democracy is perhaps not as robust as we think it is and I think a solid media and a strong Fourth Estate does the work of pushing our imperfect democracy towards something that’s perhaps more ideal.”



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