

After Australian journalists' strike

The political issues facing Fairfax workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The week-long strike by journalists and editorial staff at Fairfax Media, in opposition to the company's announcement last week of 125 newsroom sackings, was a significant stand against the continuous restructuring of the media, and the decimation of jobs throughout the industry.

Journalists rejected the attempts of the union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), to limit the strike to a token one-day stoppage. They took action in the face of the ever-present threat of legal penalties and massive fines by the federal government's pro-business industrial tribunal, the Fair Work Commission, which hangs over the head of any section of workers who defy anti-strike laws and take up a struggle in defence of their jobs and conditions.

The Fairfax journalists' strike won widespread support, reflecting a growing sentiment among working people more broadly for a genuine fight-back against the corporate offensive against living and working conditions.

But journalists must face the fact that, despite their courageous stand, the strike has resolved none of the problems they confront. From the outset, the union did everything it could to limit industrial action to employees at Fairfax's major media outlets. At the same time, it sought to divert opposition into impotent pleas to the company's ultra-wealthy investors to reverse the decades-long cutbacks to newsroom jobs.

The union was well-aware that these appeals would fall on deaf ears, and that Fairfax's major shareholders are preoccupied only with maximising their profit margins. The real concern of the MEAA, as in every previous dispute, has been to ensure its own position at the bargaining table, buttress the profitability of the company and safeguard the privileges of the union officialdom, while negotiating away the jobs, rights and conditions of its members.

This was made crystal clear at return-to-work meetings yesterday morning. MEAA officials, including the union's CEO, Paul Murphy, all but dropped any pretense of opposing the sackings, declaring, instead, that they would provide journalists with "advice" on forthcoming redundancies, and resume their sordid back-room

negotiations with company management.

The union's actions are in line with the role it has played in every previous round of sackings at Fairfax, and throughout the industry. To cite only the most recent examples: in 2009, the union prevented any struggle against 500 editorial job cuts at Fairfax. In 2011, a further 90 sackings took place, and in 2012, more than 1,900 editorial and print positions were destroyed. Over 80 jobs were cut in 2014, followed by another 160 editorial jobs at regional newspapers in 2015–16.

The record makes clear that any conception that jobs can be defended within the framework of the MEAA, is a futile illusion.

The union has collaborated in round after round of corporate restructuring, which has transformed Fairfax into a shell of its former self, directly at the mercy of the most predatory financial interests. TPG, a private equity firm renowned for predatory takeovers and asset-stripping, has bid for Fairfax's most profitable assets. But the company is already dominated by numbers of huge investor groups, which control 35 percent of shares.

Fairfax is not alone. In fact, the rise and rise of finance capital has been one of the central features of global capitalist development over the past three decades. Bound up with the decline in the rate of profit, and the globalisation of production, it has spurred a rapid growth in social inequality and the destruction of any section of industry deemed insufficiently profitable.

A 2009 report, highlighted in the *Conversation* last month, found that just 30 financial entities controlled more than half the world's 299 very large corporations (VLC). Finance capital accounted for 68.4 percent of VLC ownership. The report rejected the distinction sometimes drawn between finance and industrial capital, noting that the financial elite and its dictates dominate every aspect of the world economy. Financial entities, including hedge funds and private equity firms, are endlessly scouring the globe in search of the highest rate of return, demanding the elimination of any imposts on immediate profit-making opportunities.

The stranglehold of finance capital has had a dire impact on media quality. The corporate press has always advanced the interests of the political and business establishment. But in the past, it did so by publishing newspapers that contained first-hand reportage, factual information and some insight. No longer.

Many Fairfax journalists acknowledge that they are simply unable to cover the most pressing political, social, cultural and economic issues with any depth. Content is more and more tailored to increasing advertising revenue by attracting the highest number of online clicks, as paper sales continue to plummet. Across the industry, the pretense of media independence and impartiality is largely a thing of the past, with editorial decisions ever more tailored to the demands of corporate shareholders and the political establishment.

Journalists and other media employees, from photographers to editors, are confronted with the fact that their industry, along with their jobs and livelihoods, is facing complete decimation. Many are asking themselves: how long will major mastheads, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age* and the *Australian Financial Review* last, let alone Fairfax's rural and regional papers?

Their plight parallels that of every other section of the working class. Whether car workers, or power workers in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, school teachers, public sector employees or journalists, workers face the prospect of sackings, a relentless assault on their working conditions and the lowering of their pay, all demanded by finance capital.

This agenda, accelerated by the deepening breakdown of global capitalism, is being imposed by governments in every country. All the capitalist parties in Australia, including Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens, have made clear that austerity is the order of the day. Having imposed decades of spending cuts, and overseen corporate restructurings across the board, they are now pledging to impose the demands of the financial markets for a social onslaught unprecedented since the Great Depression.

The thoroughly corporatised unions, which defend the profit system, and are politically allied with the Labor Party, impose this agenda by suppressing any political or industrial struggle against the corporate offensive.

For media workers, as for every other section of the working class, the first stage in the struggle to defend their jobs and conditions is to make a complete political and organisational break from the trade unions. Independent rank-and-file committees must be established by workers at Fairfax and throughout the industry, to coordinate industrial and political action and break the isolation imposed by the MEAA.

Such committees must turn to media workers across Australia, and around the world, including Fairfax staff in

New Zealand, who are also facing job cuts, Fairfax contract workers in India and the Philippines, and other sections of the working class around the country, confronting a similar assault on their jobs and conditions.

The critical issue that such committees must confront, however, is that of political perspective. The old forms of struggle—limited strike action aimed at extracting concessions from employers, or protest votes in state and federal elections and the election of independents—have failed. They were based on the conception that pressure from below could force the powers-that-be—from the major corporations and finance houses, to governments and the courts—to effect reforms that would advance the interests of the working class.

The globalisation of production has rendered the politics of national reformism utterly bankrupt. Under conditions of globally mobile capital, the nationalist program of the unions has transformed them into an industrial police force, which seeks to ensure the international competitiveness of their “own” nation's businesses, in order to attract investment. They do this by enforcing cuts to wages and conditions, aimed at rendering labour in their “own” country cheaper than elsewhere. The logic of this process is an endless race to the bottom.

In other words, the defence of jobs in the media, and everywhere else, requires nothing less than a struggle against the moribund capitalist profit system itself, based on a revolutionary, that is, a socialist and internationalist perspective. There is no way around the fact that quality media jobs, and an independent press are incompatible with the dictatorship of finance capital. The major media entities must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

Such a perspective can only be realised through the unified political mobilisation of the working class in every country, aimed at establishing workers' governments to implement socialist policies and reorganise the global economy on the basis of social need, not the profit dictates of finance capital.

We urge Fairfax editorial workers, and workers everywhere, to give serious consideration to these complex political questions and to contact the SEP for further discussion.



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