

Qantas threatens to replace pilots with outside crews

Terry Cook
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With cost-cutting wracking the global airline industry, Qantas—Australia’s largest airline operator—has issued an ultimatum to its long-haul pilots. It is threatening to hire outside crews for proposed ultra-long-haul flights if the pilots do not accept regressive working conditions.

At the same time, the company’s low-cost Jetstar subsidiary is conducting a confrontation with its pilots and ground crews, triggering another round of stoppages around the country this week.

Qantas has conducted protracted negotiations with the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) for a new enterprise work agreement (EBA10) covering long-haul pilots.

The gruelling flights will operate non-stop from Australia’s east coast to London and New York, beginning in 2023. Dubbed “Project Sunrise,” this will require Qantas to place a firm order with Airbus for new A350-1000 aircraft.

Not only would the non-stop flights mean pilots spending longer hours in the air, adding to the levels of fatigue, and even greater periods away from home. They would also suffer a substantial loss in pay.

The company also has demanded a two-tier wage system, paying new pilots less, plus the removal of some night credits—a pay loading for long flights—and the reduction of overtime pay rates, for working a straight 12 hours, from double-time to time and a half.

While Qantas claims that under its proposed agreement captains would be paid a base salary of \$395,000 a year, one media outlet that viewed the agreement reported that the captains would receive \$342,000.

Last week, in a letter to the AIPA and the pilots, Qantas International CEO Tino La Spina warned that if the company could not secure an agreement “that meets

the Sunrise investment case within the Airbus time frame we will be left with no viable alternative but to have the Sunrise flying performed by a new employment entity.”

Provocatively, La Spina added: “We know that flagging this will not be well received by many of you. But we want to make sure you have all relevant information when you are weighing your decision on the EBA10.” He claimed that failure to agree before March 31 would mean Qantas losing its time slot for delivery of the Airbus order.

Making clear he expects the AIPA to step up its efforts to beat down resistance among pilots, La Spina threatened to end negotiations and sidestep the union. Throughout the current conflict, as in all past EBA disputes, the AIPA’s main concern has been to maintain the company’s reliance on it as an industrial police force, bargaining away the conditions of its members.

In the past, the AIPA has been able to contain opposition by its members and deliver Qantas’s cost-cutting demands.

At the end of 2013, for example, together with other airline unions and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the AIPA joined closed-door meetings with Qantas in the wake of its announcement to slash 1,000 jobs. This was in addition to the already 8,000 jobs axed in the previous four years, as part of the company’s drive to impose billions in cost reductions.

The unions assured Qantas they would do everything possible to suppress workers’ opposition to the job destruction and work to deliver on-going savings, including wage freezes and reduced working conditions.

Such past betrayals have galvanised an outspoken opposition among pilots, who have begun issuing inter-

worker communiqués, not endorsed by the union, calling on their colleagues to reject the proposed agreement.

One such communiqué, dated January 22, stated: “We work over Christmas, weekends, all through the night, and now they’re asking us to do a flight that is currently illegal, with serious safety questions, and instead they just want to nickel and dime the pilots.” It warned: “Qantas pilots in cockpits all over the world will be distracted today and over the coming weeks by Tino’s email and the threat to their jobs.”

The rejection of the agreement would be the first necessary step in mounting a counter-offensive against Qantas’s decades-long assault on its entire workforce, and similar attacks throughout the global airline industry.

As Qantas pilots resist the company’s attack, their fellow workers at Jetstar, including pilots and ground staff, are fighting the company’s ongoing assault on their jobs and conditions.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) has called for a 4 percent annual pay rise for the ground staff, an increase in the number of rest breaks, and a minimum of 12-hour breaks between shifts. Workers are also demanding measures to halt the exploitation of casual workers, such as guarantees that the airline will employ more permanent workers and an increase in the minimum hours of work that Jetstar can offer from 20 to 30 hours.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), which accepted an 18-month pay freeze in the last agreement covering Jetstar pilots, is calling for an annual wage rise of 3 percent, not enough to cover sharp rises in the cost of living.

Jetstar has rejected the claims of ground staff and pilots as “unsustainable.” In response to limited strike action, it has threatened to ground its entire operation and lock out its workforce, emulating the aggressive action taken by Qantas in 2011.

However, the trade unions covering the Jetstar workforce are containing all opposition to short stoppages. They are working to prevent any link up with the pilots’ fight at Qantas. The unions are acutely conscious of the resurgence of workers’ struggles internationally, often outside the control of the unions. They fear similar developments in this country.

A unified fight by workers at Qantas and Jetstar could

become a focal point for a struggle across the entire working class against the ongoing corporate onslaught on workers’ conditions.

The record shows that airline workers at Qantas, Jetstar and across the industry can place no faith in the unions and must take matters into their own hands. The turn must be to the establishment of new independent organisations of struggle, such as rank and file committees, guided by a socialist perspective.

The author also recommends:

Jetstar Australia pilots and airline workers strike over wages and conditions

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