Hundreds of jobs axed as News Corp Australia shuts regional and suburban newspapers

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Last week, the Murdoch-owned News Corp Australia announced that it will stop printing its 112 regional and suburban newspapers at the end of this month. Thirty-six newspapers will be closed outright, with the remaining 76 only producing digital editions.

The company refused to reveal how many jobs will be axed, but the decision is likely to eliminate at least 900 positions. The newspapers—some in existence for over 150 years—previously employed up to 1,300 people. The closures constitute one fifth of the country's regional and suburban newspapers and place a question mark over News Corp's regional newspaper printing facilities.

The surviving papers, News Corp management declared, will be produced by 375 journalists. Most of the suburban digital publications, however, will not have separate websites but will only be available behind paywalls on the company's capital city tabloids, such as Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* or Melbourne's *Herald-Sun*.

These moves will further restrict public access to news and information, especially for older and poorer working class people, and strike another blow to regional towns, on the back of similar closures of banks and retail chains.

News Corp's attack on journalists and other media workers is not confined to its rural and regional publications. Pay cuts, along with increased part-time work, nine-day fortnights and calls for employees to take accumulated leave, initially imposed on suburban and regional media workers in April, have been imposed or demanded at the company's metropolitan newspapers.

News Corp management claimed its decision to stop printing regional and suburban newspapers was solely in response to the COVID-19 crisis and sharp falls in advertising revenue. This is false.

While the pandemic has seen dramatic declines in advertising, News Corp CEO Mark Miller boasted in April that readership of the company's publications over the previous 12 months had risen by 81 percent and that consumer subscription sales were are up 287 percent. The increase, he declared, "is the most dramatic we have ever seen."

News Corp, like its local and international competitors and big businesses everywhere, has seized on the pandemic to speed up existing plans to drastically restructure its operations and drive up profits. The company is also seeking to further consolidate its domination of the Australian media. News Corp controls 70 percent of the country's print media.

Last week's announcement is part of an escalating wave of job destruction, wage cuts and increased productivity demands by Australian media corporations. Over the past decade more than 3,000 journalists, photographers and editorial jobs have been axed nationally. More than 210 newsrooms have been closed or temporarily suspended in the past 18 months alone.

Australian Associated Press (AAP) is set to close at the end of the month, destroying the jobs of about 600 journalists, photographers and other media workers, following the elimination of 10 percent of the news agency's workforce in 2018.

The decision to axe AAP was made in March by its majority shareholders, News Corp and Nine Entertainment, in order to consolidate their joint

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hegemony over the media by denying other outlets access to the news agency's material.

In April, Australian Community Media & Printing (ACM), the country's largest owner of regional and rural publications, shuttered four newspaper printing facilities and suspended publication of 160 of its regional and agricultural newspapers. An unknown number of journalists and other staff were either stood down or had their working hours slashed.

ACM—previously part of Fairfax Media—was taken over by Nine Entertainment and sold in 2019 to Antony Catalano and Thorney Investments. No announcements have been made about when or if these newspapers will reopen.

Smaller regional publishers, including Cape and Torres News in Northern Queensland, the Elliott Newspaper Group in northwestern Victoria and others have also stopped printing their newspapers. While the owners claim they will resume production later this year, these pledges are worthless.

According to the *Guardian*, another round of job cuts is underway at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which is owned by Nine Entertainment, and at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The state-funded ABC has slashed an undisclosed number of casuals at news and current affairs in the network's television and radio programs.

Adding to the devastation, *Domain*, a real estate platform, recently gave its journalist and production staff the "choice" of taking 20 percent of their salaries for six months in share rights, or working shorter hours.

Nor has the offensive been restricted to newspapers. In early May, Australia's largest magazine publisher, Bauer Media, shut down seven fashion, lifestyle and celebrity magazines and sacked 200 journalists, editors and production workers, including 60 from Pacific Magazines, which had just been acquired from Seven West Media. In April, Bauer in New Zealand stopped publishing all magazines in that country and axed the jobs of over 230 journalists and other production staff.

Other media outlets closed in Australia in the past three weeks include BuzzFeed News, 10 Daily and News Corp's With Her In Mind Network (Whimn). Job cuts have taken place at Vice Network's Sydney and Melbourne offices.

The industry's main trade union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), reacted to News Corp's announcement last week with a perfunctory statement about "the seriousness of the crisis" facing journalism, and appealed to the federal government to provide more funds to regional newspapers.

"We are determined to see proper consultation and fair treatment for any affected staff," MEAA chief executive Paul Murphy cynically declared. The union's officials had rubber-stamped previous deals that led to News Corp's announcement last week.

Like other unions, the MEAA functions as an industrial police force. It operates as an arm of the corporate media, negotiating redundancy deals, imposing productivity demands, cuts in conditions and the increased casualisation of journalists, photographers and other production workers.

News Corp journalists, photographers and other production workers seeking to defend their jobs cannot leave their fate in the hands of the MEAA. The union will do whatever media employers require, as long as it is retained as their workplace enforcer.

Successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have helped create the conditions for this assault on journalism and public access to information. They have dismantled provisions limiting monopoly control over the media, allowing the corporate giants to accumulate enormous wealth and power.

To fight this assault, media workers need to establish genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the MEAA, to unite and mobilise other journalists and media workers and broader sections of the working class. The struggle against the corporate destruction of jobs and journalism requires a socialist perspective, based on the needs of society, as well as media workers and their families, not the profits of the media proprietors and the financial elites.

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