Thousands of Australians stranded overseas by profiteering airlines

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Over 23,000 stranded overseas Australians have registered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) that they are unable to return to Australia due to extortionate prices being charged for airline tickets and repeated months-long delays.

Amid the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, the largest numbers of Australian citizens and residents are trying to leave India, the Philippines, South Africa and Vietnam. In effect, they are being denied their legal right of entry to Australia.

Airlines are prioritising passengers able to pay in excess of $10,000 for business-class and first-class tickets, with some planes reportedly carrying as few as four economy class passengers. Multiple reports have emerged of desperate travellers having their bookings cancelled at the last minute by airline companies.

In mid-July, the Australian "national cabinet" of federal, state and territory government leaders imposed a 4,000 per week limit on the number of inbound arrivals from overseas. This has resulted in caps of 30 passengers on incoming flights.

The caps were reportedly introduced to assist states and territories manage the number of overseas arrivals, who require two weeks of hotel quarantine. In addition to flight costs, returning travellers are required to pay for their own quarantine—$3,000 per adult for the two weeks.

According to the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA), one airline informed it that more than 100 passengers had been stopped from boarding an aircraft, following the implementation of caps in early July.

Airlines have sought to justify the systematic bumping of economy class passengers by citing the costs of flying the aircraft.

However, Qantas, Australia's main airline, has received $248 million from government aviation industry support schemes and $267 million through the government's JobKeeper wage subsidy program, while slashing its workforce.

This is part of the overall anti-working class response to the pandemic by governments and the corporate elite. The message from the government and the airlines is clear: If you cannot afford to pay first class, you are on your own.

According to the *Australian,* international airlines have said it could take six months to return all the stranded passengers with the current arrival caps in place.

Sarah Ng, who is currently in Japan, told the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) she has had nine flight cancellations since March. Franklin Moon and his partner Keegan Guidotti, also in Japan, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that they had spent thousands of dollars on several scheduled flights since April, only to have each one cancelled without any refund.

In June, a Qantas spokesman said that well over a million bookings had been moved, refunded or turned into credits for future use. But credits are of no value unless fights are available.

Frank Toner, in London and desperately trying to get back to his pregnant wife, was bumped from his flight. His wife Shahrzad reported that the airline had told her that the flight was cancelled, "but after pressing them, they admitted the flight is actually still going ahead but only for business and first-class passengers… We are now calling airline after airline to get a ticket, and they're all willing to take our money until we ask them about the cap into Australia, then they admit they're overbooked."

Heather Cassidy, also in the UK, told the *New Daily*:

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“We booked with Qatar and they cancelled last week, so we rebooked, and it kept coming up rescheduled. They kept offering an upgrade all the time. They wanted $43,000! I was like: ‘Is this for my own plane?’ … Unless you have millions … you haven’t got a chance. If you’ve got the money, you’re alright. The rich get in.”

The ABC reported earlier this week that families in Britain are organising a special charter flight to bring their newborn babies home following months of trying to secure an airline ticket.

The AFR last week reported that government agencies are telling those stranded to draw from their superannuation, while others have been advised to procure funds through GoFundMe crowdfunding campaigns to pay for business class tickets.

Hundreds of people have lodged complaints about cancellations. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in a display of callous indifference, responded: “I asked Australians to return home on March 17, 2020. At the time, DFAT expressly warned of the difficulties, noting that travel was becoming ‘more complex and difficult’.”

Laurence Muir-McMurtrie, a founder of the Aussie Expats Abandoned Abroad Facebook group, told the AFR that Morrison’s “return home” call did not “take into account the complexities of relocating an established life abroad that may include a family with children at school, property and possessions and more.”

In an attempt to offset anger, the government announced that “eligible” people could apply for one-off repayable loans. Individuals will be can apply to borrow up to $2000 and families will be allowed to apply for loans worth up to $5000. Yet, those who already have paid for economy class tickets have been bumped from flights multiple times.

Not only has the Australian government offered little to nothing in the way of aid. The opposition Labor Party has maintained a virtual silence on the issue. And the governments of countries in which expatriates are stranded have denied any responsibility and provided no assistance.

The plight of overseas workers, students and tourists is not unique to Australians. Many people from every corner of the globe are known to be stranded in foreign countries, often similarly abandoned by their respective governments.

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