

Qantas to slash wages and conditions of Australian cabin crew

Martin Scott
22 January 2022

Australia's largest airline, Qantas, this week applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) seeking the termination of an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) covering around 2,500 long-haul flight attendants.

If successful, the move would slash wages and conditions for cabin crew on the airline's international routes, forcing them onto the industrial award—the minimum pay and conditions legally allowed for the industry.

Under the award, hourly base pay for flight attendants would be reduced by 20–40 percent, and crew could be forced to work 48–88 more hours per 56-day roster period.

Qantas appealed to have the existing agreement torn up by the FWC after 97 percent of workers rejected an EBA proposed by the company last month.

Qantas's proposed four-year agreement would freeze wages until June 2023, followed by sub-inflationary 2 percent annual increases in the third and fourth years. All international flight attendants would work under conditions based on the lower-tier "Part 2" of the most recent EBA, which expired in June 2021.

Making clear that the FWC application was an ultimatum to workers, Qantas International chief executive Andrew David said: "We're open to putting the same deal that was rejected back on the table."

In a press release issued Thursday, the Flight Attendants Association of Australia (FAAA) lamented the fact that Qantas had sought to tear up the agreement "without even contemplating asking for the assistance of the Fair Work Commission to try and reach agreement, as Virgin did when their cabin crew similarly rejected an EBA."

In other words, the FAAA, which tried to delay the vote, has no objection to workers' fates being decided by the federal government's anti-worker tribunal, as long as the union has a seat at the table.

Last year, the FAAA and Transport Workers Union

presented Virgin cabin crew with a similar proposition to that now issued by Qantas, urging workers to vote "yes" on an unpopular proposed EBA, as the only way to be "safe from the award."

Making clear its service to the airline, not to workers, the FAAA statement explained the union had "facilitated extensive flexibility to the Company throughout the pandemic and beyond," and "agreed to the majority of the Company's claims."

The FAAA, like all the other corporatised trade unions, has functioned as industrial police to enforce the demands of management for decades. The press release admitted the Qantas EBA had been "renewed and changed 10 times since the 90s and on each occasion with improvements in flexibility for the company."

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Michele O'Neil weighed in, issuing a plaintive demand that "Qantas should withdraw this threat, and should be condemned by the Morrison government."

In other words, in response to this major assault, the perspective of Australia's peak union body is that workers should appeal to the company that is seeking to slash their pay and conditions, and the government that handed Qantas billions of dollars while dismantling the rights of workers.

Furthermore, the pandemic crisis, put forward as the justification for the attack, is the direct result of the criminal reopening drive carried out by Morrison, and Australia's state and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, at the behest of big business, with Qantas playing a leading role.

Having successfully lobbied for the opening of borders, the airline was looking to profiteer from two years of pent-up demand, predicting late last year that domestic travel would be up 17 percent on pre-COVID levels by June.

A mass surge of Omicron infections around the country, resulting in no small part from the airline's own

operations, scuppered these plans. Qantas was forced to cancel flights due to staff shortages and growing concern among would-be travellers over the threat of the virus.

Now, the company is seeking to recoup some of these missed profits by slashing the pay of its workers.

The move to tear up the EBA is in line with growing calls from the ruling elite for sweeping changes to industrial relations, with a particular focus on the enterprise bargaining system.

Major stevedoring company Patrick Terminals and tugboat operator Svitzer also appeared this week before the FWC, seeking to terminate EBAs and force workers onto minimum-wage award conditions.

Under Qantas's proposal, it also would be able to roster all crew for up to 240 hours per 56-day period—a 20 percent increase for flight attendants currently employed under "Part 1." The seniority-based rostering system would be abolished and all crew schedules would be allocated at the absolute discretion of the company.

This would allow all flight attendants to crew all aircraft types, overturning the current division between "Part 1" employees who crew Airbus A330s and "Part 2" employees who crew Airbus A380s and Boeing 787s. This division is a result of the introduction of a second-tier workforce, with the FAAA's help, in 2007.

In addition, Qantas demanded changes to Available Spans (AV Spans)—the number of days that crew has to be available for work at short notice if required. The company claimed this was necessary because, "in their current form, AV Spans often result in additional roster disruption and resource coverage to manage the operation." In other words, Qantas is seeking to increase the number of days crew members spend on standby.

These changes, the company claims, are necessary "to enable the [Qantas] Group to recover from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis."

The reality is, all these changes are aimed at reducing overall staff numbers to increase profitability, and are part of an ongoing restructuring process that was underway well before the pandemic.

Determined not to let a crisis go to waste, Qantas has slashed more than 8,000 jobs since March 2020, while receiving more than \$2 billion in government bailouts. This included \$726 million from the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme, enabling the airline to slash its wage bill at public expense, while still carrying out profitable operations.

The groundwork for the airline's EBA demands was laid in 2007, when the FAAA rammed through a sell-out

enterprise agreement allowing the airline to establish a second-tier workforce with vastly reduced pay and conditions for new workers.

In preparation for the introduction of the Airbus A380 to the Qantas fleet, the company established a new entity, QF Cabin Crew Australia, to employ all subsequent hires.

At the time, FAAA International secretary Michael Mijatov hailed the outcome as "overwhelmingly positive." In fact, the deal delivered new hires lower annual base salaries and allowances and a 20–30 percent increase in duty hours, effectively slashing hourly rates by more than 50 percent.

Qantas and the union negotiated a 3 percent wage rise and \$3,000 sign-on bonus to sweeten the deal—essentially a bribe to ram through an agreement that ensured worse conditions for new recruits and divided the workforce, undermining future struggles.

The track record and recent comments by the FAAA and ACTU show that workers cannot halt the company's offensive, let alone fight for better pay and conditions, within the framework of the trade unions.

Instead, workers need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. These would be guided by a fight for a socialist perspective, in which airlines, along with other major transport companies, public utilities and the banks, would be placed under public ownership and workers' control. Only then could these vital services be operated in the interests of human need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact