

# Australia: Flight attendants' union orchestrating sell out of Qantas workers

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The Flight Attendants Association of Australia (FAAA) is holding meetings this month to ram through a new enterprise agreement (EA) virtually identical to the deal overwhelmingly rejected by 2,500 Qantas long-haul cabin crew in December.

Qantas executive Rachel Yangoyan admitted in an email sent to staff late last month that, apart from a few “clarifications” relating to fatigue management and crew availability requirements, the company’s current proposal “is the same.”

After 97 percent of long-haul flight attendants at Australia’s largest airline rejected the deal last year, the company applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to have the existing EA terminated. The manoeuvre threatened to 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 sector.

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.

Now, management and the union are using this threat to browbeat workers into accepting the rotten EA. The FAAA has made clear it will not mount any challenge whatsoever to the company’s grubby manoeuvres with the FWC. On the contrary, the union is urging workers to back the deal, telling them the only alternative is being forced on to the award.

In a statement responding to the company’s ultimatum, FAAA national secretary Teri O’Toole cynically declared: “Seventy-four percent of our crew said they would have to leave the profession if they had to work under the modern award. This becomes too high a risk, and so we have the deal back on the table and will support it.”

In other words, O’Toole is telling Qantas, and every other airline, the union will back any EA, whatever assault on jobs, pay and conditions it contains, as long as the minimum wage award looms as, in her own words, “a gun to the head” of workers.

Now, the union is working to deliver precisely the outcome Qantas was hoping for when it made the FWC application. At the time, Qantas International chief executive Andrew David said: “We’re open to putting the same deal that was rejected back on the table.”

The FAAA 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 month, the union 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.”

O’Toole claimed: “This is EBA11 and the conditions that were traded on the previous 10 could be lost if the union pushes with a challenge to the termination.” In fact, the deal on the table represents a dramatic acceleration of the erosion of working conditions enforced by the union over decades.

The proposed four-year EA will impose a wage freeze until June 2023, followed by sub-inflationary 2 percent annual increases in the third and fourth years. It will also enforce a raft of regressive changes to working conditions including to rostering. One such change would enable management to roster all crew for up to 240 hours per 56-day period, a 20 percent increase for many flight attendants.

The current seniority-based rostering system would be abolished, allowing all crew schedules to be allocated at the absolute discretion of the company. In addition, the deal would substantially increase the number of days per roster cycle that crew must be

available for work at short notice if required.

Yangoyan declared the company's deal "a positive outcome for everyone and an important step in securing the critical changes we need to support the recovery of our international business."

In other words, Qantas, which sacked or stood down thousands of workers during the pandemic, is now seeking to maximise profits with the resumption of international travel by slashing wages and conditions.

The unconditional commitment by the FAAA to enforce the company's dictates is not an aberration. It is the continuation of the airline unions' decades-long collaboration with Qantas and other carriers to restructure operations and cut costs.

In 2007, the FAAA rammed through a sell-out enterprise agreement allowing Qantas to establish a second-tier workforce with vastly reduced pay and conditions for new hires. In preparation for the addition of the Airbus A380 to its fleet, the company established a subsidiary, QF Cabin Crew Australia, to employ new staff on inferior base salaries and conditions. The FAAA hailed this development as "overwhelmingly positive."

In 2020, the airline unions, including the FAAA, signed off on EAs covering their members at Virgin Australia that imposed an 18-month to two-year pay freeze. The unions argued the deal provided "job security" by placing "Virgin on the footing it needs to be a strong, competitive airline." In reality, the deal was part of an ongoing vicious restructuring of the airline carried out at workers' expense, including the axing of 3,000 jobs ahead of its sale to private equity firm Bain Capital.

Even as the airlines utilised the COVID-19 pandemic to restructure their operations and bring forward long-planned cost-cutting measures, the airline unions continued to plead for increased government assistance to the carriers that would eventually amount to billions of dollars.

In another cynical move, the FAAA is looking to channel the widespread anger generated by Qantas's ongoing attacks, which are fully backed by the Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison, into the election of an equally pro-market Labor government in the upcoming federal election.

This is the purpose behind O'Toole's recent comment that the current industrial relations system,

"which allows businesses to throw out entire agreements, was unfair" and her call for "a government that does not allow business to trash its employees."

In fact, the current "Fair Work" laws were introduced by Labor in 2009 with the full support of the unions. The draconian industrial laws include harsh anti-strike provisions and provide the FWC extensive powers to terminate enterprise agreements, shut down industrial action and impose heavy fines on workers for breaching its directives.

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese has promised a Labor government he leads would be "first and foremost" in "the business of creating wealth." Albanese vows to follow the lead of former Labor prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, who, in close collaboration with the unions, established the anti-worker enterprise bargaining system and laid the groundwork for the "Fair Work" legislation.

The track record of the airline unions, and the FAAA's current collaboration with Qantas, demonstrates that to oppose the management offensive and advance the fight for better pay and conditions, airline workers must take matters into their own hands.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, and a turn to workers across the aviation sector and the broader working class, to take up a unified struggle against management, the unions, Labor, and the industrial courts.

This must be based on a socialist perspective and a fight for a workers' government, to place the airlines, along with other major transport companies, public utilities, and the banks, under public ownership and workers' democratic control. Only then could these services, vital in a modern society, be operated to meet the needs of workers and society, not to serve the profit interests of the financial elite.



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