

# Australian union limits Qantas aircraft engineers to one-minute strikes

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On Thursday August 25, hundreds of licensed aircraft maintenance engineers (LAMEs) employed by Qantas and its subsidiaries stopped work in response to the airlines' continued demands for wage freezes, which have already left workers without a pay increase since 2018.

This was no ordinary strike however. The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) organised stoppages lasting just one minute at the start of each shift, for one day only. No further industrial action has been called, although the union says it may introduce overtime bans.

The pathetic character of the action called by the ALAEA is directed against any genuine struggle. It came after 897 Qantas, Jetstar and Network Aviation workers, 93 percent of respondents, or 76 percent of the total workforce, voted in favour of strikes "up to 12 hours in length."

Attempting to justify the absurdly limited strike action, ALAEA Secretary Steve Purvinas told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): "We can have our say by withdrawing our labour and we are going to do that, for one minute," before suggesting that the administrative hassle of docking employees' pay for one minute would burden Qantas.

The airline refuted this bogus claim, with a spokesman saying, "these token one-minute stoppages won't have any impact on customers or our operations."

The union also warned workers "we do not want to get the public offside." In reality, Qantas customers are already experiencing poor service, cancellations, delays and lost baggage as a predictable result of the mass lay-offs and restructuring that the company has carried out over the course of the pandemic.

While Qantas demands wage freezes, Purvinas and the ALAEA continue to hold "good faith negotiations" with the airline. Purvinas told workers in a video message, "we do want to give some time for resolution of these matters

before we have to go and do anything that may even come close to disrupting the public."

Making clear that the ALAEA's allegiance is to the company, not workers, Purvinas continued: "Whenever there is going to be a stoppage, alternative labour provisions will be provided to make sure there is no loss of labour."

This is purportedly to avoid any intervention from the Fair Work Commission (FWC), which, under Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, has the power to shut down industrial action on the basis it may cause harm to the wider economy.

The FWC was established by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government with the full support of the unions. All of the union bureaucracies, including in the airlines, uphold the authority of the FWC and use it as a battering ram against workers' demands for action.

The one-minute strike comes amid ongoing attacks on the LAME workers.

The almost 700 LAMEs employed in Qantas mainline operations have not had a pay rise since July 2018, as the union has allowed this dispute to drag on since their last enterprise agreement (EA) expired in January 2019. Network Aviation workers have gone more than two years without a pay rise, while Jetstar workers have not seen an increase since January 2021.

Qantas is seeking to impose a four-year enterprise agreement (EA) containing a two-year wage freeze, followed by two years of 2 percent pay "increases" across most of its workforce, including the LAMEs. In real terms, this means a massive wage cut. Inflation was 6.1 percent for the year ending in June and is predicted to exceed 7 percent before the end of 2022.

The airline is also seeking to slash other conditions in the existing EA, including a cap on the percentage of LAMEs it can employ on a part-time or casual basis, the requirement for workers to vote on roster changes and

allowances for working on “customer aircraft”—aeroplanes owned by other companies and of a type not operated by Qantas.

The ALAEA is advancing meagre wage demands designed to be as palatable as possible to the airline. Under the union’s proposal, Qantas workers would receive a one-off 12 percent increase at the beginning of the four-year deal. Around 150 Jetstar workers would receive 15 percent over four years, while the 50 LAMEs employed by Network Aviation would see a 20 percent increase over four years.

In a revealing statement from July 14, the ALAEA admits its 3 percent claim for mainline Qantas workers “is below the RBA recommendation that wage rate increases should be 3.5%.” In other words, the country’s central bank has called for larger wage increases than the union!

Qantas relies on the ALAEA and other aviation unions to enforce the destruction of jobs and the erosion of wages and conditions.

Earlier this year, Qantas flight attendants were threatened with the termination of their enterprise agreement which allowed the Flight Attendants Association of Australia to push through a sell-out agreement, also including a two-year wage freeze. Eight other wage-cutting agreements covering 4,000 Qantas workers have been finalised this year.

The unions tell workers that giving up hard-won conditions in one EA after another is necessary to protect their jobs. But the reality is, no matter how many regressive deals the unions ram through, the jobs bloodbath continues.

Since March 2020, the number of Qantas LAMEs has been reduced by one third. This was part of broader restructuring carried out by the company under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, some 8,500 jobs were slashed, including the illegal outsourcing of around 2,000 baggage handlers and other ground staff.

These workers have since been dragged through lengthy legal challenges, only to be told their jobs would not be reinstated even after multiple rulings in their favour. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) has suppressed the development of a genuine struggle, instead promoting illusions that workers could resolve their issues through the courts, government intervention, or the union’s feeble calls for Joyce to resign.

While thousands of workers were sacked and tens of thousands stood down without pay, Qantas raked in around \$2 billion in government bailouts during the pandemic. The company expects to return to pre-COVID

levels of profitability this year and exceed them in 2023.

Relentless restructuring by Qantas and other airlines, in Australia and globally, deepened during the pandemic, has pushed workers across the aviation industry into financial insecurity and is generating opposition amongst aviation workers.

Over recent months, tens of thousands of aviation workers throughout Europe and the US have taken strike action over pay cuts and understaffing caused by the mass destruction of jobs throughout the industry over the past three years.

Around 350 Dnata baggage handlers, who provide services for Qantas, Emirates and Etihad, will strike for 24 hours on September 12, demanding improvements to pay and conditions, including minimum guaranteed work hours.

In order to advance their struggle for real wage increases and improved conditions, workers at Qantas and across the aviation sector must take matters into their own hands. The desultory one-minute strikes called by the ALAEA are only the sharpest example of why workers cannot fight within the framework of the unions.

Aviation workers cannot take a step forward without first launching a rebellion against the trade unions and organising independent rank and file committees to bring these struggles together across the aviation industry in Australia and globally.

A new political perspective is required, aimed at establishing workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies, including transforming the airlines and all essential industries into public entities under the democratic control of the working class, to meet social need, not private profit.



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