

Australia: Baggage handlers' strike cancelled as union prepares sellout

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The Transport Workers' Union (TWU) called off a strike by 350 DNATA workers planned for last Monday, claiming it had reached an in-principle agreement with the company. DNATA provides baggage and cargo handling, catering, cleaning and other ground handling services to airlines including Qantas, Emirates and Etihad.

Baggage handlers and other airport ground crew employed by the Emirates Group subsidiary in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide had been set to stop work for 24 hours after 96 percent of workers voted to strike.

The TWU called off the DNATA strike and is preparing to ram through this agreement as part of a concerted effort by the unions to prevent unified action of workers across the aviation industry. By stopping this strike, on the false premise of a "win", the TWU is attempting to drive a wedge between workers at DNATA and those at other companies, and isolate other workers engaged in disputes.

- In 2020, Qantas used the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to outsource more than 1,700 ground handling workers to third-party providers including DNATA. The TWU has blocked any industrial fight in opposition to this move, instead promoting illusions that the workers could win their jobs back through appeals to government or the courts. Despite multiple court rulings finding the sackings illegal, Qantas has not been forced to reinstate the workers or provide financial compensation.

- Workers at Menzies Aviation, another ground handling provider, have applied to the Fair Work Commission to hold a strike ballot.

- Late last month, after a 93 percent strike vote by Qantas, Jetstar and NetworkAviation engineers, the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers' Association called a pathetic one-minute stoppage.

- Australia's largest airline, Qantas, is in the process of forcing through a four-year agreement to slash real wages across most of its workforce. Qantas is demanding a two-year wage freeze followed by two years of 2 percent per

annum wage "rises," along with the destruction of other working conditions. In close collaboration with the unions covering aviation workers, Qantas has already finalised nine such agreements this year covering more than 4,000 workers. By ensuring these disputes are kept isolated, the unions have allowed the company to pick off one section of workers after another.

The TWU declared the DNATA in-principle agreement a "win" for workers, claiming the four-year deal will deliver a 17.2 percent pay rise, along with unspecified promises of "more secure jobs" and "more full-time opportunities."

The pay "rise," which amounts to 4.05 percent per annum, backdated to 2019, is barely enough to keep up with the understated official inflation rate of 6.1 percent—as of the end of June—and falls far short of meeting the rapidly rising cost of living. The wage bump also does not make up for sub-inflationary wage increases in previous TWU-negotiated agreements.

A backdated pay rise is meaningless for DNATA workers who were stood down without pay for months in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the company is based in Dubai, DNATA workers were not eligible for the federal government's JobKeeper wage subsidy.

The TWU's vague claims of improved "job security" will be of equally little value in an industry where wages and conditions have been eviscerated over decades in line with the cost-cutting demands of the airlines.

A 2018 TWU submission to the federal government's Productivity Commission showed that more than 90 percent of airport ground crew were employed on a part-time or casual basis.

Split shifts, sometimes with an unpaid break between shift halves that is as long as the total paid time, have become commonplace. This is the result of successive sell-out enterprise agreements (EAs) negotiated by the TWU

with the country's largest ground services provider, Swissport (formerly Aerocare).

For years the TWU has prevented an industrial struggle by Swissport workers against this practice, instead promoting illusions that better conditions could be won through appeals to the industrial courts. While the Fair Work Commission (FWC) has forced the company to make minor changes to its EAs over the years—celebrated as major victories by the union—the current agreement, signed by the TWU in 2020, still allows split shifts.

While Swissport successfully argued in the FWC that split shifts were permissible because they are “voluntary,” the company made clear their real character in a 2017 letter to workers: “We do wish to give you the voluntary option to work split shifts to enable you to earn sufficient income without the requirement to engage in secondary employment.”

In other words, by refusing to guarantee workers enough hours, or a high-enough rate of pay, to earn a living wage, Swissport compels them to “volunteer” to work gruelling split shifts.

Throughout the aviation industry, in Australia and globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used by the major airlines as a pretext to accelerate their restructuring plans.

Since 2020, Qantas has slashed around 9,400 jobs, despite receiving more than \$2 billion in government handouts, including \$865 million in JobKeeper wage subsidies, more than any other Australian company.

Earlier this month, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce made clear the company intends to deepen its assault on workers, declaring: “On a permanent basis, we plan to deliver around \$1 billion in annual cost savings for financial year 2023... That is achieved by hard decisions, like job losses and ongoing stand downs of our people.”

The airline claims this cost-cutting is necessary to counter reduced revenue due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and increased fuel costs as a result of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Despite these “challenging conditions,” Joyce is set to receive his highest annual compensation in his 14 years as Qantas CEO. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, Joyce could earn as much as \$13.5 million in the 2022-2023 financial year.

The personal earnings of the Qantas CEO, which are explicitly tied to the slashing of workers’ jobs and pay to increase shareholder profits, are obscene.

However, the TWU’s attempts to channel workers’ anger into calls for Joyce to resign, ahead of his already

planned departure next year, is a diversion that will do nothing for workers. The continual restructuring and outsourcing at Qantas is not the product of one individual, but is part of a global process.

The TWU’s promotion of illusions that the federal Labor government will intervene to improve wages and conditions in aviation is another dead end. The Albanese government has made clear that it plans to carry out a major assault on the working class, warning of the need for workers to swallow “tough medicine.”

To fight for improved wages and conditions in their industry, workers at DNATA should reject the TWU deal and join other workers across the aviation sector in a unified struggle against the deepening assault on their jobs and rights.

Such a fight is impossible within the framework of the TWU or any other trade union. The TWU’s shutting down of the DNATA strike is just the latest example of the role the unions play in dividing workers, preventing unified action and enforcing the dictates of the major corporations.

In opposition to this isolation, workers must build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the trade unions. Through these committees, aviation workers can link up with others across their sector and throughout the broader working class in Australia and around the world.

The struggle for decent conditions in aviation is inseparable from a fight for socialism and workers’ governments, in which airlines, along with other major corporations and the banks, will be placed under democratic workers’ control and ownership, to serve the interests of working people, not the profit demands of the financial elite.



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