

Engine failure on Auckland to Sydney flight poses questions over Qantas cost-cutting

Paul Bartizan
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On January 18, the crew of Qantas Flight 144 from Auckland to Sydney issued a mayday call after one of the Boeing 737-800's two engines failed. The emergency call was subsequently downgraded to "pan-pan," after the pilots concluded there was no immediate danger to life despite the serious mechanical problem. Details of what caused the engine failure have not been made public.

In the following four days, five Qantas flights were aborted due to various mechanical and safety issues. The string of incidents came only a month after a Qantas Airbus A380 flying from London to Sydney made an emergency diversion to Azerbaijan on December 23 due to a technical fault.

This poses urgent questions about maintenance standards and safety at Australia's largest airline. Qantas has used the COVID-19 pandemic to deepen company-wide cost-cutting measures, including in engineering.

The 152 crew and passengers on board QF144 heard a loud bang and felt a shudder as the plane dipped to one side. Around ten minutes later, one of the pilots walked through the passenger cabin to inspect the wing.

The flight landed safely at Sydney airport at 3.30 p.m.. Emergency services were scrambled to meet the plane as it landed but their assistance was fortunately not required.

While passengers were not informed of the engine failure until after the plane landed, the initial mayday call was reported by the media, meaning an anxious wait for family and friends of those on board. One passenger told reporters that, when he turned on his phone, he saw 18 missed calls from his distraught wife who had been following news coverage of the flight.

Qantas executive Andrew David said, "Aircraft are complex pieces of machinery with millions of moving parts, and it's not uncommon to have a problem with one of them. What's important to know is that aircraft are designed with that in mind and have a lot of built-in redundancy, and our crew are trained to deal with those

situations so that they can land safely."

In fact, engine failure is not a common problem on commercial jets and one of two engines on a plane is a very critical "moving part." While Boeing 737s, with twin jet engines, can fly safely with only one, the very real danger is that a second engine failure over open water could result in catastrophe.

In lockstep with the company, Steve Purvinas, federal secretary of the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA), chimed in. He said: "Is there a systemic maintenance problem with Qantas aircraft? That can't be indicated by a few problems over a few months."

The rush to declare the incidents as being minor is premature and unscientific, given the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) investigation is just beginning.

Before they issue a report, the ATSB claims, "should a critical safety issue be identified during the course of the investigation, the ATSB will immediately notify relevant parties, so that appropriate safety action can be taken." A number of ATSB investigations are, however, still pending two years after the incident date pointing to the lack of resourcing of the ATSB following decades of successive government staffing cutbacks.

In response to the latest string of incidents, Australia's Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) issued a press release on January 20 stating, "The CASA is confident Qantas is operating safely and has confidence in its safety management systems." Again, this seems premature given the ongoing investigation.

In the week following the engine failure, five Qantas flights returned to their take-off airports due to safety concerns. Qantas averages 60 "turnbacks" per year, so five in four days is remarkable. These incidents include:

- January 19, QF101 from Sydney to Nadi, Fiji. An 11-year-old 737-800 returned to Sydney due to a problem with the anti-icing component of the plane's pitot tubes, which are used to measure airspeed.

• January 20, QF1516 from Melbourne to Canberra. A 23-year-old Boeing 717 operated by Qantas subsidiary Network Jet Systems turned back to Melbourne after a problem with the plane's flaps, which are used to increase lift to enable slower takeoff and landing speeds.

• January 20, QF430 from Melbourne to Sydney. A 19-year-old 737-800 turned back to Melbourne because of a "minor engine issue".

• January 20, QF686 from Adelaide to Melbourne. A 20-year-old 737-800 aborted take-off and returned to the terminal after a fault was detected.

• January 22, QF102 from Nadi to Sydney. Another 11-year-old 737-800 turned back after smoke was detected in the cabin, thought to be from a faulty oven in the galley.

These followed a widely reported Qantas diversion on December 23. A 13-year-old Airbus A380 operating Qantas' flagship route QF1 between Singapore and London was forced to make an emergency landing in Baku, Azerbaijan, after sensors indicated smoke in the baggage compartment. This was later determined to be a false reading.

There is no indication of any direct connection between the recent incidents, but the spate of mechanical problems does suggest there may be serious underlying problems with maintenance of the airline's ageing fleet. Since 2015, Qantas has taken delivery of just 11 new planes, meaning the average age of its fleet has increased from less than 8 years to more than 14. There is nothing inherently unreliable or unsafe about older aircraft as long as they are properly maintained, but the purchasing freeze has been accompanied by the slashing of engineering personnel.

Since March 2020, the number of Qantas Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineers (LAMEs) has been cut by one third. Those who have remained have not had a wage rise since 2018. They have had their hours and pay slashed during periods when air travel was reduced due to border closures and other public health measures.

The ALAEA has prevented any attempt by workers to fight for better wages and conditions. After Qantas Group LAMEs voted overwhelmingly to strike last year, the union called a single one-minute "strike" on August 25.

The ALAEA is now in the final stages of ramming through a sell-out enterprise agreement. The deal includes no back-dated pay rises for 2019 and 2020, and 3 percent increases each year from 2021 to 2025, far below inflation, which is currently 7.8 percent.

Similar cuts to real wages have been, or are in the

process of being, imposed by Qantas and the aviation unions throughout all sections of the airline's operations, including pilots and flight attendants.

Despite receiving more than \$2 billion in government handouts, Qantas has slashed 9,400 jobs since March 2020. The airline is currently appealing a Federal Court ruling that found its outsourcing of 2,000 ground handling jobs in 2020 was illegal. The TWU prevented industrial action against the outsourcing and has instead promoted illusions that the sacked workers could achieve restitution through the courts.

While these attacks have sharpened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are part of a longstanding operation to cut costs and boost shareholder profits.

Qantas, originally owned and operated by the Australian government, was privatised by the Labor government in 1993. Ever since, both Labor and Liberal governments have backed the company's relentless drive to suppress wages and slash or outsource thousands of jobs.

Over decades, the aviation unions have allowed Qantas to divide up the workforce, creating a host of subsidiary companies with separate enterprise agreements to create a multi-tiered structure of pay and conditions. The unions have exploited this division to isolate disputes and completely undermine the capacity of workers to oppose attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

In September 2011 Qantas locked out 4,000 workers and grounded its international fleet for a month. Labor government Transport Minister Anthony Albanese, now Prime Minister, backed the Qantas attack and the Fair Work Commission ordered an end to all industrial action. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) implemented the cuts demanded by Qantas.

Whatever the particular reasons for the spate of incidents at Qantas, it would be irrational to conclude that the company's continual slashing of costs will not have a negative impact on safety and reliability.

Qantas, like all airlines around the world, needs to be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that critical decisions on safety and staffing can be made in the interests of airline workers and passengers, not corporate profits.



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