

Australian Broadcasting Corporation workers prepare to strike over wage-slashing offer

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More than 1,000 workers at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) will soon vote on whether to carry out strikes or other industrial action as part of a dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

In November, 72.8 percent of the public broadcaster's total staff of around 3,900 voted against a management offer that workers have described as "insulting." The proposed three-year agreement contained nominal wage increases of just 3 percent per annum, far short of the rapidly rising cost of living.

The ABC is the country's largest broadcasting and media employer, generating a range of television and radio programs that commercial media networks do not produce, as well as online content.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which cover the workers, have both filed applications with the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to hold protection action ballots. If a majority of workers vote in favour, industrial action could begin late this month.

In an attempt to head this off, management has reportedly emailed workers with a revised offer, which it plans to put to a vote next month. According to Nine media, the new proposal contains a 4 percent increase in the first year, 3.5 percent in the second and 3 percent in the third, as well as a one-off payment of \$1,500. This would still leave workers well behind inflation, and do nothing to address their concerns around workload, overtime rates and rostering.

The unions are calling for a 6 percent annual pay "rise," telling workers a figure that even *matches* inflation is impossible. MEAA media director Cassie Derrick acknowledged last week: "The reality is that inflation is 7.8 percent. The ABC is not going to pay that. Our claim is below inflation. It's a pay cut after a decade of spreading people thinner and thinner."

The unions have also advanced demands for "improved" progression through salary bands, a review of "heavy, excessive or unsafe" workloads, changes to overtime payments, as well as rostering improvements.

The meagre pay claim comes after years of stagnant or declining real wages enforced by the unions through successive enterprise agreements. In addition, ABC workers have faced years of wage theft, with multiple underpayment scandals emerging in recent years.

In 2021, the ABC was forced to admit it had underpaid hundreds of workers who elected to waive overtime, penalty rates and other entitlements in exchange for a higher base rate. Some of these workers were underpaid more than \$10,000 between July 2014 and June 2021. Also affected were workers who were incorrectly paid introductory "Band 1" wages although they should have been in a higher classification.

This followed a finding by the Fair Work Ombudsman in June 2020, ordering the ABC to pay more than \$12 million to 1,900 casual workers who were denied overtime, penalty rates and some allowances between October 2012 and February 2019.

The CPSU and MEAA have already dragged this dispute out for several months, engaging in backroom talks with management and forcing workers to go through the motions of voting down the wage-slashing deal, despite calls from workers for strikes since negotiations began in July.

In an attempt to prevent industrial action, the union bureaucracies have sought to divert the anger of workers over ongoing cuts to jobs, wages and resources at the ABC into toothless petitions and plaintive appeals to the same parliamentary parties that have slashed the network's budget repeatedly over decades.

Over the past ten years, more than 1,600 jobs—almost 30 percent of the workforce—have been destroyed at the national broadcaster. The unions falsely portray this as solely a product of the Liberal-National Coalition's "ideological" opposition to the supposedly left-wing ABC.

When 250 jobs were slashed in June 2020, MEAA chief executive Paul Murphy said: "The Coalition Government's war against the ABC since it was elected in 2013 amounts to nothing less than vandalism of one of Australia's most trusted and valued public institutions."

Declaring that workers therefore needed to “give management some leeway,” the MEAA’s only criticism of management was that it did not follow the “voluntary” redundancy process established by the union leadership in the enterprise agreement.

The union bureaucracies have presided over far more than “a decade” of ruthless attacks on the ABC, at the hands of federal Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

Adjusted for inflation to December 2021, the ABC’s operational funding has fallen from \$1.32 billion in 1985–86 to \$886 million in 2022–23, a 32.8 percent decline. While there has been a steady decline over the past ten years, from \$1.02 billion in 2012–13, the sharpest attacks were under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Between 1985 and 1996, the ABC’s operational funding was slashed by one third in real terms.

Derrick’s claim that last year’s election of a federal Labor government presents “an opportunity for a fresh approach by management” is a lie. The purpose is to prepare workers to accept a wage-cutting agreement on the phony basis that the country simply can’t afford a better offer.

The additional operational funding of \$83.7 million over four years included in Labor’s October budget is wholly inadequate to reverse the losses incurred during a four-year funding indexation freeze begun in 2018. The ABC told Senate Estimates in October 2021 that 147 jobs had already been cut as a result of the pause. Even with the resumption of indexation in 2022, the ongoing impact is expected to be a shortfall of more than \$40 million per year.

The reality is that the attacks on workers’ jobs, pay and conditions at the ABC will only deepen, in line with the Albanese Labor government’s broader assault on the working class.

Like capitalist governments around the world, Labor is responding to skyrocketing inflation with ever-harsher cuts to wages and social spending. This is carried out under the pretext that wage growth is responsible for the increasingly impossible cost-of-living pressures workers face.

This is an outright lie. The escalating global economic crisis is a result of the vast sums handed over to big business and the banks to prop up financial markets and boost the profits of the wealthy elite. This process, taken up in earnest with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, was sharply accelerated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing economic effects of the pandemic, including major disruption to global supply chains, as well as the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, have exacerbated the crisis.

Now, Labor and its global counterparts are seeking to impose the full cost of this, along with their rapidly escalating military budgets, upon the working class. Treasurer Jim Chalmers has raised the need for workers to

make “sacrifices,” and the government has made clear that it opposes “across-the-board” wage growth. At state and federal level, Labor has imposed massive real wage cuts throughout the public sector, including in health and education.

ABC workers cannot advance their struggle through appeals to Labor, which, despite the lies propagated by the trade unions, has overseen the harshest attacks on funding for the state broadcaster.

The sub-inflationary pay “rise” claim advanced by the CPSU and MEAA makes clear that, as long as the union bureaucrats are in charge, wages and conditions will only go further in the wrong direction.

This poses the urgent need for ABC workers to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves. This is the only means through which workers can discuss, prepare and mount a struggle, not only for decent wages and conditions, but against the ongoing trend towards privatisation and commercialisation of the ABC.

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