Australian unions hail announcement of new Qantas boss

Martin Scott
25 May 2023

Earlier this month, Qantas announced that Vanessa Hudson would replace Alan Joyce as the airline's chief executive officer in November. Australian union leaders hailed this news as a "fresh start" and a "golden opportunity" to "rebuild" the national carrier.

The union bureaucracy is seeking to promote illusions that a change in the Qantas leadership will reverse years of cost-cutting measures at the airline. This is a transparent attempt to quell workers' anger over the growing chasm between their wages and job security and the company's vast profits.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) secretary Michael Kaine told the union's National Council last week, "It's encouraging that Qantas has announced a new CEO. It'd be great if Alan Joyce would go now, that would be good, but we hope that Vanessa Hudson will work with us to repair the damage that he's done."

Not even bothering to conceal their true message, the bureaucrats laid out their intentions to collaborate closely with the new management. Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sally McManus said at a May 2 press conference, "We would like to work with the new CEO to rebuild the brand of Qantas."

This statement expresses the real concern of the union apparatus—not the jobs, wages and conditions of aviation workers, but the reputation and ongoing profitability of one of Australia's largest businesses.

The damage to Qantas's "brand" is a direct result of mass sackings carried out by the company in 2020, with COVID-19 induced movement restrictions as the excuse. This self-inflicted labour shortage was made worse by the fact that the reopening of borders—which Qantas management was instrumental in demanding—took place at the height of the first Omicron wave, meaning vast numbers of aviation workers were unable to work due to infection just as demand soared.

The claim that the change of CEO represents a "fresh start" is fraudulent on every level. Hudson could hardly have been more steeped in the operations of Qantas management and its board. She has worked at the airline since 1994, holding a variety of executive positions.

Hudson has been chief financial officer (CFO) of Qantas since October 2019. She oversaw the airline's accounts as it grabbed almost $2.7 billion in JobKeeper and other government handouts in the early part of the pandemic, while standing down tens of thousands of workers. As CFO, Hudson presided over a three-year plan announced in June 2020 to cut $1 billion a year in costs, including through the destruction of "at least 6,000" jobs.

In 2011, when Qantas grounded its entire fleet in response to minor industrial action, Hudson was one of three executives called as "witnesses" by company lawyers, urging Fair Work Australia to terminate workers' right to strike. She therefore played a key role in one of the most notorious corporate manoeuvres in modern Australian industrial relations history.

Hudson will start with a base salary of $1.6 million, lower than the $2.2 million enjoyed by Joyce. But she stands to take home some $5.8 million, as long as the organisation meets "bonus targets" relating to cost-cutting and shareholder returns.

Contrary to the lies constantly put forward by the union bureaucracy, the slashing of jobs, wages and conditions at Qantas over the past 15 years were not just the product of the individual proclivities of Alan Joyce.

Joyce, like any other corporate CEO, represents the interests of the board of directors and the shareholders. Qantas chairman Richard Goyder declared last September that Joyce was "the best CEO in Australia by the length of a straight." This, along with the appointment of Qantas insider Hudson as Joyce's replacement, makes clear that the company's wealthy backers are categorically not looking for a "fresh start."

While Qantas workers were forced into early retirement, poorly paid casual work or protracted unemployment, the airline is now recording record profits.

Qantas announced Tuesday that it expects to record underlying profits of around $2.48 billion this financial year, almost $1 billion more that its previous high in 2018.

While denouncing the company for banking these vast profits off the back of mass sackings and government bailouts, Kaine again insisted that Joyce alone was the culprit. He repeatedly declared, "Joyce is not only the highest paid CEO in Australia, he's also clearly the worst."

As well as promoting illusions that the coming Qantas leadership change will automatically resolve the issues workers face, obviating any need for industrial action, these personal

© World Socialist Web Site

attacks against Joyce are designed to cover over the treacherous role of the union bureaucracy itself.

The TWU and other aviation unions have consistently prevented any mobilisation of workers in defence of 1,700 ground staff who were outsourced in 2020, instead dragging them through more than three years of court proceedings.

As these workers have anxiously awaited the outcome of one appeal after another, the TWU has worked with management at ground-handling contractors Menzies and DNATA to impose enterprise agreements that barely match inflation and do nothing to improve already poor wages and conditions. While workers at both companies had approved industrial action at the same time, the union leadership ensured they remained isolated and called off a planned strike by DNATA workers at the eleventh hour.

Over the past year, the TWU and other aviation unions have rammed through sell-out enterprise agreements, ensuring 80 percent of the Qantas Group workforce is now covered by the company's "new wage policy." This locks in a two-year wage freeze, followed by 3 percent per annum nominal increases, far short of the official inflation rate, which is currently 7 percent.

This is the continuation of decades of union sell-outs, allowing Qantas to slash wages and conditions, including by breaking up its workforce into numerous subsidiary contractors.

Determined to shut down workers' opposition to the continuing erosion of wages, jobs and conditions at Qantas and in the aviation sector more broadly, the TWU is not only promoting illusions in Hudson and the courts, but in the federal Labor government.

Kaine declared that "now the electoral map is overwhelmingly red [i.e., Labor]… it's a chance for us to lead the rebuild in the aviation sector."

In fact, Labor governments, in close collaboration with the unions, have carried out the harshest attacks on Australian aviation. During the 1989 pilots' strike, Bob Hawke's government used the air force as strikebreakers. The Labor government under Hawke's deputy and successor, Paul Keating, privatised Qantas as part of a wave of selloffs, including of the Commonwealth Bank and the major airports.

When Qantas grounded its entire fleet in 2011, it was taking advantage of draconian anti-strike provisions in the Fair Work Act, introduced two years earlier by the Rudd Labor government. It carried out the aggressive action with the full support of Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who actively intervened on behalf of Qantas.

The Albanese Labor government has already begun to strengthen these pro-business measures. Its first tranche of industrial relations measures, passed last December, will give the Fair Work Commission even greater powers to shut down industrial action and impose the demands of management.

In every case, the TWU and other unions lend their full support to these pro-business laws, enforcing workers' compliance with the orders of the industrial courts, which they falsely claim is an "independent umpire."

This is because the unions are no longer workers' organisations at all but serve as an industrial police force of big business and government. Closely tied to the world of finance capital through the massive superannuation funds they control, the union bureaucracy represents the interests of wealthy corporate shareholders, who demand ever-increasing profits, derived from the evisceration of jobs and basic rights.

The endorsement of Vanessa Hudson by the bureaucracy should serve as a warning for workers at Qantas, and throughout aviation, that the union apparatus is fully prepared to enforce the coming demands of management for a deepening assault on its workforce.

To defeat this, workers need to build their own organisations, rank-and-file committees. These are the means through which they can break free of the union stranglehold, link up with their counterparts across aviation and more broadly and democratically prepare a unified counteroffensive against the slashing of jobs, wages and conditions.

Secure, well-paid jobs and safe conditions for workers and passengers are completely incompatible with the private ownership and profit-driven operation of airlines, which are a critical component of public infrastructure.

This means that what is required is a political struggle to establish workers governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing the airlines, airports and other vital industries, along with the big banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

The inherently global character of the sector underscores the fact that this struggle can only proceed through the international unity of airline workers all over the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site