

Australian union cancels strike by airport firefighters, announces sell-out deal

Steve Strietberg, Martin Scott
13 April 2024

A four-hour strike by 800 airport firefighters across Australia, planned for Monday, has been called off by the United Firefighters Union of Australia (UFUA), on the basis of an “in-principle agreement” with Airservices Australia that will impose further cuts to real wages.

The UFUA announced Thursday the cancellation of the planned stoppage, which would have disrupted aircraft operations at 27 capital city and regional airports.

Workers should reject the union bureaucracy’s attempt to unilaterally declare their struggle over, and record a resounding “no” when the sell-out deal is eventually put to a vote.

As recently as Tuesday, the UFUA leadership was telling members, “Our bargaining position remains our original log of claims,” which called for pay rises “in the region of 20%” over three years. But in the sell-out “in-principle” deal, the union bureaucracy has accepted the government-owned corporation’s original offer of a paltry nominal wage increase of 11.2 percent over three years—4 percent this year, followed by 3.8 and 3.4 percent in 2025 and 2026.

This is a wage cut in real terms. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 4.1 percent in 2023. But the official inflation figure is itself a major understatement of the soaring cost of living. The ABS also found that, in 2023, living costs for employee households rose 6.9 percent.

Moreover, the deal does nothing to address the real wage cuts workers have already endured as a result of previous UFUA-enforced agreements imposing the Labor government’s punitive wage-cap policies. According to the union’s own calculations, lead aviation firefighters (LAFs) are currently earning \$9,468 per annum less than if their wages had matched inflation since 2019.

Even with the new classifications introduced in the “in-principle” agreement, introducing higher wage tiers for

LAFs after 12 months and 24 months of service, the most experienced of these workers will still be almost \$1,500 per annum worse off in real terms than in 2019.

There is no indication from the UFUA’s “overview of key gains,” published on Friday, that the agreement will even begin to address the major staffing issues that plague the sector. While the log of claims called for the agreement to specify minimum staffing levels per location, per shift and in total, the only staffing “gains” now reported are the creation of 65 to 70 new fire commander positions and increased union-management collaboration on staffing.

This will do nothing to resolve the dire present situation. UFUA secretary Wes Garrett claimed last month that, as a result of resource shortages, “domestic and international flights are taking off and landing without the required number of aviation firefighters and trucks to protect that aircraft’s size and passenger capacity.”

He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “At night, the shortage of aviation firefighters has become increasingly worse, and a large number of aircraft the size of a Boeing 737, which can carry up to 200 passengers, are being forced to land with either no firefighting service at all or with less than the minimum number of firefighters required to protect air travellers should there be a crash or other emergency incident.”

This makes clear that if the UFUA bureaucracy succeeds in ramming through this sell-out deal, it will not only lock in another three years of real wage cuts for its members, but continue to enforce the dangerous conditions confronting aviation workers and passengers.

This would be a repeat of the union’s role in the last round of enterprise bargaining in 2022. During that dispute, Garrett said, “every month, over 600 flights are operating from Australia’s airports without the aviation firefighting protection they require under international aviation safety regulation.”

In December 2022, the UFUA called an end to industrial action, claiming to have won “all of our outstanding claims,” including a “minimum staffing clause.”

At a time when official inflation was at 7.8 percent, the union leadership claimed 4.9 percent was “the best possible deal we could have struck in the current circumstances.” To placate workers, the UFUA insisted this was merely an “interim” agreement, with larger gains to come in the future.

The “in-principle” deal announced Thursday, containing even lower nominal pay increases, exposes the completely fraudulent character of the union’s claims in 2022.

The UFUA leadership’s declaration that industrial action would be halted, before workers were given even the most basic details of the behind-closed-doors deal, was a clear violation of firefighters’ determination to fight.

In early March, workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of protected industrial action, with more than 85 percent of the workforce recording a vote in favour of strikes up to and including the length of a full shift.

Announcing the ballot results on March 19, the union bureaucracy was quick to shut down talk of an Easter long weekend strike, reassuring the airlines that there would be no disruption to their operations and profits over the busy holiday period.

Garrett made clear at the time that the union bureaucracy was aiming to shut down any industrial action before it began, saying “We’re hoping that in the interim, and of course, we’ve at least got the Easter weekend to play with now, that Airservices will come to the table and we’ll get some genuine movement on our negotiations.”

The UFUA’s move to push through a sell-out is not just a betrayal of aviation firefighters, but serves to isolate other Airservices workers and broader layers of public sector workers and government contractors who are also subject to the federal Labor government’s wage-cutting policy.

This includes air traffic controllers, covered by professional association Civil Air, who are voting this month on whether to take industrial action, including strikes of up to 24 hours. As the UFUA did initially, Civil Air is advancing a 20 percent pay rise claim.

What these workers are up against is not just Airservices Australia, but the federal Labor government, which is determined to carry out its pro-business agenda

of cuts to wages and social spending.

Late last year, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) rammed through a similar 11.2 percent over three year deal covering 16,000 Australian Public Service employees, again after initially advancing a 20 percent claim.

This is line with the harsh wage-cap policies imposed by state and territory Labor governments around the country. Real wage cuts have been imposed upon hundreds of thousands of public sector workers, including throughout public health and education.

This could not have been done without the total complicity and collaboration of the unions, which are not only closely tied to the Labor governments, but serve as component parts of them.

This underscores the need for workers to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, run by workers, not well-heeled bureaucrats, in every workplace.

A rank-and-file committee of Airservices firefighters should call for a “no” vote on the “in-principle” UFUA-management agreement, as the first step in building a democratically run industrial and political campaign, based on the actual needs of workers, not what management, the union or the Labor government say is “affordable.”

Through such committees, airport firefighters can break the isolation imposed by the unions and link up their struggle, with air traffic controllers and other aviation workers, and more broadly.

The fight for real improvements to wages, conditions, staffing and safety requires more than just a big struggle, however. To defeat the current assault, workers will need to take up a political struggle against Labor and the unions, based on the fight for an alternative perspective to capitalism, under which everything is subordinated to profit, including workers’ wages and the safety of the population.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact