

# Australia: ABC workers to strike for the first time in 20 years

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Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalists and staff will strike for 24 hours, starting at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, after voting by 60 percent overall to reject a three-year, below-inflation pay rise offer. It is the first combined strike by ABC journalists and technical and production staff since 2006.

The government-funded network, which reaches up to 13 million people weekly through its television, radio and digital services, employs about 4,400 people, including about 2,000 in news, its largest division, but has suffered repeated funding and job cuts for decades.

With Australia's inflation rate at 3.8 percent in January, and forecast to reach 5 percent this year due to the impact of the US-Israeli war on Iran, ABC management has offered only annual wage increases of just 3.5 percent, 3.25 percent and 3.25 percent, and a one-off \$1,000 payment that excluded casual staff.

The offer failed to address rising workloads, increasing use of short-term contracts or guarantee that jobs would not be replaced by AI. The decision to strike followed protracted negotiations with management which began prior to expiry of the previous enterprise agreement last October.

The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which cover ABC journalists and technical and production staff respectively, proposed pay rises of 5.5 percent each year of the agreement—a claim that will not make up for previous sub-inflation pay increases. On Monday, the MEAA reportedly reduced that claim to 4.5 percent a year.

The MEAA and CPSU, which estimate that one-in-ten ABC workers are on insecure short-term contracts, have called for improved job security, changes to staff appraisal and career progression, limits on the number of short-term contracts, job protection commitments

related to AI, payment of night shift penalty rates, better reproductive health leave and disability allowances.

ABC managing director Hugh Marks, a former CEO of Nine Entertainment, declared management's offer was "sustainable and financially responsible." He provocatively stated: "Inflation is not my job as the MD of the ABC to be able to address. Our funding, I think goes up on average of 2.7 or 2.8 percent a year. If I allow my costs to increase significantly faster than that, I will be cutting cost content and services."

In other words, if ABC workers refuse to accept below-inflation pay and ongoing and increasingly insecure employment and casualisation, there will be more job and programming cuts, as a result of the Albanese Labor government's below-inflation funding.

Foreshadowing further attacks, Marks said: "The ABC wants to move to a system that reflects rewarding staff based on their performance, rather than automatically progressing due to tenure. We are prepared to invest in staff but doing that solely based on automatic progression ultimately limits individual career options rather than encouraging them."

MEAA chief executive Erin Madeley said ABC management had forced "experienced journalists and media workers" to do more with less, with fewer opportunities for pay progression, less certainty about their future, and growing workloads.

These complaints are hot air, designed to give ABC workers the impression that the union leaders will fight these conditions. In reality, the situation confronting ABC journalists and staff is a result of systematic funding cuts to the ABC by Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments alike and imposed by the network's management in collaboration with the union officials, who have repeatedly stifled opposition.

This has led to the destruction of hundreds of jobs, program closures, increases in short-term contracts, casualisation and other cost-cutting. ABC staffing has fallen from over 6,000 in 1986 to about 4,400 today, with an estimated 1,700 lost in the past decade alone.

Since the Labor government took office in May 2022, the job cuts have included 120 in June 2023 after news division cuts and restructuring, and 50 last June, accompanied by the shutting down of the “Q+A” television show.

The MEAA and CPSU leaderships have always feigned opposition while blocking industrial action and cooperating with management to impose “voluntary redundancies,” the expansion of short-term contracts and other cost-cutting measures.

The fact that Wednesday’s walkout is the first combined national strike of MEAA and CPSU members in two decades speaks volumes. It shows a determination to fight the low pay and poor working and employment conditions facing ABC workers as the direct outcome of these past betrayals.

In 2023, more than 1,000 ABC workers prepared to vote on strike action after overwhelmingly rejecting a contemptuous 3 percent wage offer from management, when inflation had soared to nearly 8 percent. Workers were prepared to take industrial action on several occasions.

The MEAA lodged a claim for an annual 6 percent rise, publicly admitting that constituted a real wage cut, but then settled on an overall rise of 11 percent over three years—a below-inflation increase—and a \$1,500 sign-on bonus. As MEAA media director Cassie Derrick acknowledged in 2023: “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.”

Throughout 2023, the union bureaucracies diverted workers’ anger over ongoing cuts to jobs, wages and resources into toothless petitions and plaintive appeals to the same parliamentary parties that have slashed the network’s budget repeatedly over decades.

When ABC management announced the axing of 120 jobs in mid-2023, decimating news, arts and other vital services, the unions issued statements of “shock,” while having already known the cuts were coming. A planned MEAA-CPSU strike was torpedoed on March 22 that year when the MEAA leaders decided at the

eleventh hour to accept a slightly higher pay rise. The CPSU leadership went ahead with a token walkout to let off steam and before accepting the same deal.

The record shows that ABC workers cannot advance their struggle through appeals to ABC management, the Albanese Labor government or the trade union apparatuses, which function as industrial police forces for management. The past betrayals are a warning that the MEAA and CPSU bureaucrats will attempt to limit Wednesday’s strike to a single 24-hour stoppage, and appeal for further negotiations to demoralise and undermine workers’ determination to fight.

The sub-inflationary pay claim presented by the CPSU and MEAA, and their long history of complicity in job destruction show that ABC workers have to take a new path of struggle. To defend their jobs, wages and working conditions, ABC workers need to break out of the union straitjacket and build independent rank-and-file committees.

These committees must be controlled by workers themselves, decide their own demands and fight to extend their industrial action beyond Wednesday’s walkout. This means linking up with other public sector workers, including teachers and health workers, fighting the Albanese Labor government’s and state governments’ sub-inflation pay laws and escalating attacks on jobs and conditions.?

Workers should recognise that they are in a political fight against the Labor government which is implementing major cuts across essential social services, including the ABC, to fund military spending, provide tax cuts for the wealthy and to prop up a crisis-ridden capitalist system. A genuine fight for the social rights of ABC workers and the working class more generally needs to be guided by a socialist perspective.



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