

Australian Broadcasting Corporation staff strike over pay and conditions

Our reporters
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Over 2,000 journalists and staff at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) walked off the job for 24 hours Wednesday morning, in their first stoppage in twenty years. The strike was part of an ongoing dispute over pay and conditions at the publicly-funded national broadcaster.

In negotiations for a new enterprise agreement, ABC management has offered annual wage increases of just 3.5 percent, 3.25 percent and 3.25 percent, and a one-off \$1,000 payment that excludes casual staff.

The pay “increases” are scarcely above the current rate of inflation, which is predicted to surge to over 5 percent this year partly on the back of price hikes flowing from the criminal US-led war against Iran. The management offer does nothing to address untenable workloads, growing casualisation or other working conditions.

Staff at more than 60 ABC offices joined strike rallies, including in the capital cities and regional and rural centres. A protest outside ABC headquarters at Ultimo in Sydney was attended by several hundred, with a hundred or so rallying in Melbourne.

While there was a mood of defiance among staff, short speeches by union leaders were bereft. The Sydney and Melbourne rallies were addressed by officials from the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) which covers journalists and editorial employees, and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) which covers other staff.

The MEAA and CPSU leaders mouthed generalities about the importance of the public broadcaster and the need for “fair” pay and conditions. They said little about decades of funding cuts by successive governments, which continue under the current Labor government, presenting the issue as being one of current management. The union leaders could not explain how casual and contract work has soared over the years, because it is a consequence of the previous sellout enterprise agreements that they have enforced.

No perspective was presented as to what would be done next. In a sure sign of preparations for another sellout, the unions had lowered their own wage claim from an already

inadequate 5.5 percent per annum to 4.5 percent at the beginning of the week. They are returning to negotiations with ABC management this coming Monday.

Socialist Equality Party members campaigned at the Sydney and Melbourne rallies, placing the dispute in the context of broader struggles by workers, including teachers, health staff and academics, who all face sub-inflationary real wage cuts and increasingly onerous conditions.

They raised the need for staff to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to link up with workers more broadly and to wage a genuine industrial and political struggle, not only against management but against the Labor government that is overseeing the cuts at the ABC.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of striking staff.

Salome, a producer in Sydney, said: “I’m on a year-long contract—covering for someone who is on leave. I was very excited to get this job and am looking forward to a future at the ABC. This is an institution that I love and believe in, but I’ve seen so many people who have been here for years who are still on short-term contracts. There’s no stability in that.

“Lots of ABC workers are struggling to make ends meet and put food on the table, which is becoming more difficult because of inflation and rising housing and living costs.

“ABC management says they can’t afford to pay us what we need to live, but what about the people higher up the ladder who are getting big bonuses while we do the grunt work at the bottom?

“Before this job, I worked as a casual teacher, and before that full-time in a cinema. I then started doing creative work and making films. I was very excited to get a start at the ABC, but people should be able to progress their careers and make a real contribution to society. It isn’t possible if you don’t know what’s going to happen when your contract ends.”

Isabella, from ABC marketing, said: “Management’s wage offer is not good enough and is frankly insulting. [Managing director] Marks says that if they give us what we are asking for, he will have to cut jobs. But they’re already doing this and have been for decades. We had a restructure

in our department at the beginning of this year, and they will continue to cut jobs regardless.

“I took a pay cut to come and work at the ABC, which is fine because I support the ABC and the services it provides for communities that commercial networks don’t. The problem is management does not value our work and doesn’t care about job security. The public would be deeply shocked if they knew about the way this public service treats its employees.

“I remember being in high school about 20 years ago, and the big public campaign then was ‘Hands off the ABC,’ but job cutting is still going on.

“ABC workers, like others in the public sector, face the same issues—short-term contracts, limited career progression, and wages that don’t keep up with inflation. The public sector workforce should band together and make clear to government and management what society needs. We need to speak with one voice.”

Catherine, a radio producer, said: “We’ve been told at Radio National that we won’t be backfilled if we take leave, which means there will be no one to fill in for us. How are we supposed to produce a decent radio show like this? Meanwhile, the senior executives are on hundreds of thousands of dollars, even as people are kept on rolling contracts over and over again. At the same time, ABC management has spent millions of dollars in the courts trying to justify its illegal sacking of Antoinette Latouf in 2023.

“I’m proud of the fact that many of the people on strike today have long-term permanent jobs but have come out because they want to fight for those on short-term contracts. We are fighting for a decent future for them.

“I’ve been here for 10 years, and what I’ve seen during that time is people being asked to do extra work—another task, more overtime—and it goes on and on. If you’re on a short-term contract, you’re under this pressure all the time. Everybody is stressed, but we can’t pull our socks up any higher.

“Management always threatens to cut jobs when we ask for a pay rise. If we accept a lower pay rise, management will get rid of jobs anyway. Look at all the positions that have been lost over the years—hundreds of jobs have been eliminated.”

Harold, who has been at the ABC for more than 30 years, said: “Wages for journalists have fallen in real terms very heavily. They used to be quite well paid.” He described the unions’ revised demand of a 4.5 percent rise per year as “a flea bite compared with what we really need. Journalists’ wages need to rise substantially to match what we do. We are dealing with an incredibly complex world. It takes a lot of experience, knowledge and skill to report the news as we do.

“If the management offer is accepted, it will further erode the position of working journalists. And the endless shadow of cuts is very unpleasant. You never know what’s going to happen. You never know who is going to be next.”

Luigi said: “I am here for solidarity. For all the people that this agreement hurts the most. A lot of people are on seasonal and contracted work, and they don’t even get to vote on the agreement. Management plays on this division. When there are cuts, the conditions of contract workers are often what goes first.

“An offer of 4.5 percent is roughly where inflation is at. In the previous 3 years we agreed to a pay package that was a poor pay offer compared with post-COVID inflation. That was under the expectation that inflation would go down, but it hasn’t.”

In Melbourne, **Kelli** said’ “I’ve walked out because even though I’ve worked here for 10 years, I am on an insecure contract. I’ve earned my stripes, have worked at lots of different teams, and am currently working with one of the most senior teams, but I’ve only got work until June.”

Kelli said that her contracts had been as short as 6 months. “That just leads to getting to the very final day of your contract and then sometimes still not even knowing if you’ll get another one.”

“I don’t work here for the pay. I work here for love. The pay is a struggle. A lot of people, myself included, would be in a really terrible financial situation if they didn’t have partners that worked in other industries. If I didn’t have a partner that earned a wage that keeps up with inflation, then paying the rent would be difficult.”



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