Australia: Qantas ground workers set to strike

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Up to 650 Qantas ground workers plan to walk off the job later this week, with 24-hour strikes called for Wednesday in Victoria and Thursday across the rest of the country. The industrial action, which will affect Qantas Freight services and regional passenger carrier QantasLink, follows an overwhelming 97 percent vote to strike in late August.

The dispute centres on wages, conditions and job security. Qantas claims it is offering annual pay increases—although it has not publicly quantified them—and "more full-time opportunities." But this is a workforce the airline has systematically dismantled and outsourced, most dramatically with the 2020 sacking, subsequently determined to be illegal, of 1,800 baggage handling workers.

The workers are currently paid a base rate of $26–$30 per hour, essentially minimum wage. Over the past decade, enterprise agreements brokered between Qantas and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) have delivered massive real wage cuts. While the official cost of living has surged 31.4 percent, workers' pay has risen just 19.4–25.6 percent. Over the same period, median capital city rents have increased by 45 percent.

The TWU has called for (also unspecified) pay increases, secure employment and a unified enterprise agreement spanning Qantas Ground Services (QGS), Qantas Freight, legacy Qantas operations and labour-hire workers. The latter claim is ostensibly directed against the airline's practice of using subsidiary companies, as well as outsourcing contractors, to divide its workforce into separate components, all with different pay, conditions and enterprise agreements. In 2023, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) calculated that Qantas "split its workforce across 21 external companies and a further 17 subsidiaries."

Under Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, solidarity strikes are illegal, unless all workers involved are currently involved in enterprise bargaining. The TWU bureaucracy does not oppose these laws—along with the rest of the trade union apparatus, they were centrally involved in drafting them in collaboration with the Keating and Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, and have enforced them ever since.

Instead, the demand for unified enterprise agreements, enabling joint bargaining in certain, carefully controlled circumstances, is aimed at preventing a rebellion against the harsh anti-worker laws.

While the TWU and other aviation unions denounce the airline's divisive structure, their conduct in every industrial dispute is to isolate workers and prevent unified action, even when it would be legally possible.

At Jetstar, Qantas' lower-cost subsidiary, airport operations workers represented by the Australian Services Union have voted to strike over real wage cuts. Qantas employees represented by Professionals Australia voted to strike last month. Workers covered by the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) have approved a protected action ballot at Network Aviation, another arm of the Qantas operation. Qantas long haul pilots voted overwhelmingly to strike in August, but even before the ballot was complete, the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) declared they had reached in-principle agreement with the airline, preventing any industrial action.

All of these workers are up against the same company, but the union bureaucracies that represent them are determined to ensure their struggles are kept entirely separate. Moreover, Qantas workers are being isolated from their counterparts across the aviation sector, in Australia and globally, who confront similar attacks on their pay and conditions, and throughout the broader transport and logistics industry.

The TWU has heavily promoted its current industrial action campaigns at FedEx and other trucking companies, some of them with operations closely related to those of Qantas Freight, but is ensuring that no connection is forged between these two key sections of logistics workers.

The TWU bureaucracy’s isolation of Qantas workers should be a major red flag that a sellout is being prepared. But it is only the latest warning sign in a track record of betrayal. The sharpest example is the TWU’s response to the 2020 mass sackings.

The illegal outsourcing operation, while carried out under the pretext of a sudden downturn in aviation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, was explicitly aimed at preventing industrial action over wages. Qantas could not have carried this out without the assistance of the TWU, which blocked any struggle by workers and ensured the matter was confined to the legal system.

Over an enormously protracted period, Qantas lost in the Federal Court, the Full Federal Court and, ultimately, the High Court. But the legal victory did not restore the jobs. The Federal Court refused to order reinstatement, concluding it was “impractical,” because the operation had been dismantled and QGS no longer existed in the form in which the workers had been employed—in other words, because they had been sacked. Qantas was allowed to retain the central practical outcome of its unlawful conduct: the destruction of the jobs and the remodelling of ground operations around outsourced and fragmented employment.

The compensation process has proceeded at a similarly glacial pace. Almost six years after the sackings, workers are still confronting delays in receiving individual compensation, with Justice Michael Lee criticising union-affiliated law firm Maurice Blackburn for failing to meet a timetable for a payment schedule.

Qantas agreed to a $120 million compensation scheme—around $66,000 per worker on average, less than the median annual wage—and the Federal Court later imposed a $90 million civil penalty. Of the $90 million, $50 million was directed to the TWU and just $40 million earmarked for the affected workers.

The massive court-ordered payout to the TWU was a reward for services rendered. The bureaucracy earned this by ensuring that the substantial anger of workers, at Qantas and more broadly, over the illegal sackings did not result in strikes or other industrial action, but was safely diverted behind the court case.

In doing so, the TWU was not just protecting Qantas, but the entire political establishment, including the then Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison, which, with the support of Labor, gave the airline more than $2 billion in handouts, even while it carried out its mass sackings.

These experiences should be a stark warning for Qantas ground workers: Left in the hands of the TWU bureaucracy, their struggle is headed for betrayal.

New organisations of struggle must be built—rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the TWU or any trade union. Through such committees, workers can break the isolation imposed by the unions and link up with workers through aviation and more broadly.

Such committees would fight to unify disputes across companies, occupations and unions; oppose the Fair Work restrictions that criminalise most industrial action; and make secure well-paid employment and the reinstatement of illegally dismissed workers central demands.

But a unified struggle alone is not sufficient. A political fight must be taken up against the union bureaucracies, the courts, the Labor Party and the capitalist system itself. The struggle for decent conditions in aviation is inseparable from the fight for socialism—for the airlines, other major corporations and banks, to be placed under democratic workers’ control and ownership, to serve the needs of the working class rather than the profits of a wealthy elite.