

Qantas Australia sacks another 500 maintenance engineers

By Patrick O'Connor
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Qantas yesterday unveiled another round of layoffs, this time affecting 500 engineering and maintenance workers in Sydney and Melbourne. The sackings form part of the airline's previously announced restructuring agenda that will see its 36,000-strong workforce reduced by more than 10 percent. Enjoying the support of the federal Labor government, and with the collaboration of the trade unions, Qantas this year has imposed successive rounds of retrenchments on a near-monthly basis.

The latest cuts affect more than 200 line maintenance engineers—skilled workers who service planes between flights, in Sydney. Also in Sydney, about 40 jobs will be cut from Qantas's defence services operation at RAAF Richmond. Another 263 workers, mostly engineering contractors, will reportedly lose their jobs in Melbourne's outer-west Avalon airport. These workers have been reconfiguring Qantas's new Boeing 747-400s, but the last aircraft will be completed later this month and no further work will be directed to the Avalon facility.

Qantas is progressively shutting down all its maintenance work outside of Brisbane. In August, the airline's maintenance facility in Melbourne's Tullamarine airport was closed, with 422 workers losing their jobs. More than 1,200 jobs have been slashed from Qantas's engineering operations this year. There are now just 340 engineers at Avalon, almost 50 percent fewer than at the beginning of the year. Those left are expected to be sacked in the coming months.

Qantas claimed the cuts to the Sydney line maintenance engineers were due to new models of aircraft requiring less servicing. "Our cost base in heavy maintenance is more than 30 percent higher than our competitors, who do the vast majority of their maintenance overseas," Qantas domestic CEO Lyell

Strambi declared. "We must close this gap to secure Qantas's future viability."

Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) secretary Steve Purvinas declared that the line maintenance cutbacks were an "absolute shock." He continued: "It beggars belief that Qantas management's answer to a recent spate of maintenance errors, many being investigated by CASA [Civil Aviation Safety Authority], is to sack more staff... they certainly can't equip their work with the existing number of engineers, so how the hell will they do that with 200 fewer?"

Qantas once enjoyed the reputation as the safest airline in the world, but years of cutbacks and outsourcing have triggered mounting problems. Purvinas revealed that the airline's chief of line maintenance recently sent a memo to engineers warning of "basic errors that could be the starting point of a serious operational event" and listing a series of incidents, including parts being left off aircraft and mandatory inspections not occurring.

The company has responded to safety concerns with contempt. Lyell Strambi insisted there were too many line maintenance engineers, and provocatively declared: "Frankly, having people sitting around doing nothing has got nothing to do with safety." Strambi made clear there would be further layoffs, saying: "Qantas will continue to make further changes to our engineering division as newer technology and improved processes enable us to become more efficient."

The airline claimed that before this year's restructuring measures, it employed about 40 engineers per aircraft, compared with about 20 per aircraft at competitors such as British Airways. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, Qantas chief Alan Joyce

aims to slash annual labour costs by \$70-100 million from the airline's engineering operations.

The cost-cutting drive is aimed at returning the airline's international division to profitable status, and boosting the returns generated from its domestic operations and its Jetstar budget subsidiaries, which are now focussed on the Asian market. Joyce has specifically stated the need to shift a major portion of Qantas's workforce offshore, exploiting far cheaper Asian-based engineering, maintenance, and crew staff.

At the same time, the airline has sought to develop new partnerships to orient to growth markets. Last month Qantas ended its 17-year partnership with British Airways and signed an alliance deal with Emirates airline, allowing wider access to the Dubai hub and destinations in the Middle East and Europe.

Qantas is desperately attempting to stay afloat amid a continued crisis of the global airline industry. Airline workers of every country are being pitted against one another in a brutal race to the bottom in wages and conditions. Mass job cuts have affected engineers, baggage handlers, pilots, cabin crew, and administrative employees of every carrier. In the latest round of layoffs, Spanish airline Iberia is tomorrow expected to announce 7,000 job losses, while Air France is pressing for more than 5,000 sackings, 10 percent of its workforce.

The trade unions internationally are responsible for enforcing the cuts and sabotaging all resistance among airline workers.

In Australia, the unions' complaints about safety are utterly hypocritical. They are playing a critical role in enforcing Qantas's cuts. In October last year, the airline grounded its entire fleet and threatened an indefinite lockout of its workforce, prompting the Gillard government to intervene on behalf of the company and outlaw all industrial action. The unions, which had clearly become alarmed by the determination of Qantas workers to resist the threatened restructuring measures, welcomed this move and enforced the no-strike edict. The ALAEA, the union covering the engineers, subsequently signed a new enterprise agreement that imposed the company's demand for a 3 percent annual pay rise cap—effectively a cut in real wages—while dropping any opposition to the outsourcing of engineering work.

At the time, ALAEA chief Purvinas boasted of the

agreement's "job security" clauses. The latest cuts underscore the worthlessness of these provisions. Both the ALAEA and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union made clear that no action would be taken to fight the layoffs.

On November 2, Alan Joyce boasted to Qantas shareholders at the company's annual general meeting: "The grounding of the Qantas fleet and subsequent termination of industrial action by Fair Work Australia brought stability and certainty for our customers, employees and shareholders. And the agreements subsequently reached with these unions, and endorsed by Fair Work Australia, have reinforced management's right to manage."

The Labor government has backed Qantas to the hilt in its campaign against its workforce. While it is yet to comment on the latest layoffs, Gillard and her workplace relations minister Bill Shorten have responded to previous sackings by feigning sympathy for the affected workers, while declaring their support for all measures deemed necessary to boost profits.

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