

Growing opposition to company-union attacks at Qantas Australia

By Terry Cook
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In an aggressive operation that includes threats to source a lower-cost replacement workforce, Qantas is attempting to bludgeon its long-haul pilots into accepting a new enterprise work agreement, dubbed EBA10, which cuts wages and working conditions.

Earlier this month, the company abruptly terminated negotiations with the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) and announced its “offer” would be put directly to the pilots in a company-imposed ballot to be held between March 20 and 30.

Qantas’s determination to drive down the pilots’ conditions is bound up with the implementation of the company’s so-called “Project Sunrise.” It is centred on the introduction of new grueling flights to operate non-stop from Australia’s east coast to London and New York from 2023. The flights mean pilots will spend far longer hours in the air, adding to dangerous fatigue levels and forcing them to be away from home and family for even greater periods.

The company has set the March 30 deadline, claiming it must place a firm order with Airbus for new A350-1000 aircraft before the end of March or forfeit its time slot for the planes’ delivery.

Qantas’s attack on its long haul pilots, along with its drive to slash the conditions of pilots and ground crew at its low-cost subsidiary Jetstar, is part of an ongoing offensive by airlines internationally to drastically slash costs primarily at the expense of their workforce amid ever more ruthless competition.

This global offensive is intensifying as airlines across the world prepare to implement measures designed to offload the impact of the coronavirus onto the backs of workers.

This week, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce announced that the airline will reduce capacity by almost a quarter for

the next six months and turn to smaller aircrafts due to a “sudden and significant drop” in the demand for flights.

Joyce is notorious for grounding the entire Qantas fleet in a 2011 dispute to impose an agreement slashing jobs and conditions. That action, making use of the then federal Labor government’s draconian Fair Work industrial laws, was followed by a sell-out deal brokered by the unions,

Signalling that Qantas will be seeking even greater concessions, Joyce declared at the press conference that “this will be a survival of the fittest.”

In a cynical move designed to create the conditions for another round of wage freezes and direct cuts, Joyce also announced his senior leadership team would take a pay cut of 30 percent and he will forgo salary for the remainder of the financial year.

Such pay reductions for the highly-paid Qantas executive team are a drop in the ocean. Joyce raked in a \$23.88 million salary in 2018, or more than 275 times the full-time average wage.

Realising that further attacks being planned could spark broad opposition by Qantas workers, who are already seething over the decades-long destruction of jobs and working conditions, Joyce also issued a thinly-veiled threat. He stated that “while redundancies are the last resort,” the announced reduction in capacity meant about 2,000 jobs were now surplus to requirements.

There are already signs of growing opposition among long-haul pilots, some of whom are calling on colleagues to decisively vote down the EBA10 agreement. To this end, they also demanded the immediate convening of a special general meeting.

This call is in open defiance of the AIPA’s recommendation for a “yes” vote. An email from the

union's president Mark Sedgwick stated: "I understand the disgust and willingness to fight. I am of the view that the best way to fight this is to stay in the tent, accept the deal, stay united and give the pilot body the opportunity to find a better way sometime in the future."

The advocacy of a yes vote by the AIPA is the latest stage in its protracted attempt to impose the company demands on the pilots. From the beginning of the dispute, the union has sought to keep long-haul pilots isolated. It has suppressed industrial action and proceeded with closed-door negotiations with the company.

Even as Qantas issued threats to hire an alternate workforce to man the Project Sunshine routes, the AIPA rejected calls for a unified campaign with the pilots and ground staff at Qantas's low-cost carrier Jetstar, who are also facing attacks on working conditions and jobs. In this they were assisted by the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) and the Transport Workers Union airline, which covers Jetstar ground workers.

At the end of last month, the Jetstar ground staff and baggage handlers were forced to accept an enterprise agreement with a pay increase of just 12 percent over four years, far below increased living costs. The sell-out deal excluded the workers' essential demand for an increase in the minimum hours that Jetstar is required to offer from the current 20 to 30 hours.

In an attempt to cover its role in imposing the betrayal, the TWU claimed that its members were "blackmailed" by the management into accepting the agreement by a threat that any wage outcome would not be backdated to March 2019 when the previous enterprise agreement expired.

In reality, the workers acceptance of the deal amounts to a vote of no-confidence in the TWU, which worked from the outset to isolate the dispute and limit all opposition to sporadic stoppages while it brokered a deal with the company.

The betrayal of the ground staff will strengthen the hand of Jetstar against its pilots and will provide the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) with the means to pressure them into dropping their demands for improved pay and conditions.

After calling limited stoppages during December that were designed to let off steam, the AFAP rushed back

into negotiations where, as the record shows, it will work to put together a deal acceptable to Jetstar.

In all the disputes, the main concern of the airline unions has been to maintain their position as an industrial police force whose privileges are directly tied to the imposition of ever-greater attacks on workers' wages and conditions.

Qantas and Jetstar airline workers can only take their struggle forward through a complete break with the unions and the establishment of independent organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees. These would be tasked with turning out to airline workers internationally, as part of the fight for an industrial and political counter-offensive against the cost-cutting drive of the global airlines.

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