Union-busting at Qantas

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A bitter dispute between the Australian airline Qantas and its workforce over job cuts and outsourcing took a dramatic turn on 29 October when the company threw down the gauntlet and announced that it would ground all flights immediately and lock out all staff from 31 October.

The Australian Labour government has subsequently intervened to force a resolution of the dispute, one which could see the unions forced to climb down.

The dispute began in August when Qantas revealed plans to cut 1000 jobs and outsource operations to Asia. Three unions representing engineers, pilots and baggage-handlers have staged a series of strikes ranging between 1-hour stoppages to hold mass meetings of workers to 4-hour walk-outs. These small strikes (for example the baggage-handlers have only actually struck for eight hours in total) have so far cost the airline A$68 million, demonstrating an industrial power that has shaken the Chief Executive of Qantas, Alan Joyce.

Following a shareholders meeting where Joyce was awarded a pay rise of 71 per cent, inflating his salary to A$5 million a year, the company announced the lock out with Joyce stating ?We are locking out until the unions withdraw their extreme claim and reach an agreement with us?. The company estimates that this decision will cost them A$20 million (£13.3 million) per day, but clearly this is a price they are willing to pay to smash the unions so that they can cut jobs and outsource the airline without resistance from staff.

The company has been hit by the global economic crisis, but even taking into account the losses suffered by its international wing its profits last year stood at A$444 million. The Australian government has decided to intervene by convening a Labour Relations Tribunal and the baggage-handlers? union, the TWU is now calling on the Federal Government to intervene in the public interest and to preserve the jobs that Alan Joyce and his over-remunerated Board members are wilfully trying to destroy.? Qantas has a 61 per cent share of the Australian domestic market and the intervention needed from the government is nationalisation of Qantas to take it out of the greedy hands of Alan Joyce and put it into the hands of its 35,000 workers.

The lock-out is a desperate act of union-busting from Qantas bosses and if they are allowed to get away with it then all Australian workers could face the same threat. Unemployment has been rising in Australia despite a slow return to economic growth, with 9,700 jobs lost in August alone. If Qantas wins this dispute then lock outs could be used against other unions organising to resist the cuts. This dispute goes far beyond the 35,000 workers and three unions involved and the lock out must be met by protests and occupations aimed at Qantas, but also by solidarity strike action in other industries demanding an end to the lock out and around the call for nationalisation of Qantas under the control of its workforce.

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