

Australia: 500 journalists at Nine Entertainment strike over jobs and pay

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Around 500 journalists at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Age*, *Australian Financial Review*, *Brisbane Times* and *WAToday* began a five-day strike on Friday, opposing recently announced job cuts and demanding a real-wage increase.

The action was scheduled to coincide with the opening of the Paris Olympics, and some 15–20 journalists assigned to cover the sporting event are among those taking part in the strike.

The former Fairfax print and online newspapers now constitute the publishing division of Nine Entertainment, a media conglomerate that also encompasses television, radio and streaming video.

The company announced late last month that up to 200 of its 5,000 employees would be made redundant. Up to 90 of the planned cuts are in publishing, meaning more than one-sixth of the division's staff face the scrapheap.

Earlier this month, more than 85 percent of the 456 Nine Publishing employees covered by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) voted in favour of “an unlimited number of stoppages of all work for an indefinite duration.”

Journalists walked off the job at 11 a.m. Friday morning, after they overwhelmingly rejected a “new and improved” proposed enterprise agreement from management on Thursday afternoon.

The company, which previously proposed a 2.5 percent per annum pay “rise,” offered a nominal wage increase of 10.5 percent over three years, less than the current inflation rate of 4 percent. Even this meagre offer, which is a pay cut in real terms, would come with concessions: Nine is also demanding scheduling changes that would reduce the take-home pay of sub-editors.

At rallies outside Nine premises in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth last week, the MEAA did not advance a concrete wage demand, merely calling for a “fair” increase in line with the consumer price index (CPI).

The union has been similarly hazy in all public statements, although one striking journalist told the *World Socialist Web Site* workers had initially demanded a 7 percent increase this year. The *Australian* reported that the union is calling for a 20 percent rise over three years, but has provided no source for this claim.

The reality is that Nine journalists would need an immediate pay rise of 10 percent just to make up for real losses imposed since 2019 in enterprise agreements brokered by the MEAA.

Starting with a pay freeze in July 2020, the last two union-management deals have delivered nominal pay increases of 2 percent in July 2021 (with CPI at 3.8 percent), 4 percent in 2022 (CPI 6.1 percent) and 3.5 percent in 2023 (CPI 6 percent).

Journalists, artists and photographers starting as first-year cadets at Nine are currently paid just \$1,018.71 per week. A more senior Grade

Five employee can earn as little as \$1,867.79 a week.

In addition to wages, the MEAA is seeking “a genuine commitment to better workplace gender and cultural diversity, improvements to grade progression, and adherence to the MEAA freelance charter of rights,” as well as agreements on the use of artificial intelligence.

The MEAA is also calling for “formal recognition of the charter of editorial independence.” What hypocrisy! Over the past ten months, as journalists, including at Nine, have faced persecution for expressing even the most limited opposition to the media establishment's role as a propaganda arm of Israel's genocide in Gaza, the MEAA has issued only token statements against the censorship of reporters.

Another union demand, for Nine to adhere to the MEAA's freelance charter, will serve only to codify and legitimise what has been carried out with the aide of the union, the destruction of full-time jobs and increasing use of freelancers to provide cheap content.

The MEAA leadership's vague call for a “modest wage increase,” under conditions where jobs are being slashed and workers will inevitably be asked to step up productivity, should be a stark warning that yet another sell-out is being prepared.

While the MEAA has publicly criticised the job cuts, it has not demanded that Nine reverse them as a condition of this enterprise agreement. By continuing to negotiate without any guarantee against these or future cuts—which workers have already been told by management to expect—the union is effectively endorsing the redundancies and presenting them as a fait accompli.

A “motion of no confidence” prepared by the MEAA after the job cut announcement complained that the publishing division (where union density is highest) had been disproportionately targeted for cuts. This is a deliberate ploy to divide workers and prevent a unified struggle by Nine employees against the slashing of their jobs, wages and conditions.

The reality is that the MEAA is not opposing, but overseeing the destruction of Nine Publishing and the broader media industry, as it has done for decades.

The fact that Nine did not hesitate to announce the destruction of hundreds of jobs while enterprise bargaining was underway—the only time that workers can legally take industrial action under Australia's draconian anti-strike laws—demonstrates management's confidence that the MEAA will keep the disruption to a minimum and deliver the cuts demanded by shareholders.

Just a few examples of the union's track record at Nine/Fairfax alone show that this confidence is well-founded:

- In 2017, the MEAA shut down a seven-day strike against the slashing of 125 editorial jobs at Fairfax after directing the action into appeals to the company's investors, calling on them to reinvest in

newsrooms, “because it makes sound business sense.”

•A year earlier, dozens of Fairfax editorial staff were sacked on the spot after the MEAA claimed it had “negotiated down” proposed job cuts from 120 to 82. Hundreds of Fairfax workers carried out an “illegal” three-day strike against the proposed redundancies despite the insistence of the MEAA leadership that they comply with the draconian Fair Work Act.

•In 2008, Fairfax workers struck for three days in opposition to the axing of 550 jobs. The MEAA deliberately isolated the dispute, making no appeal to Fairfax printshop employees for support, and rejecting calls for the setting up of picket lines at the company’s major print works at Chullora in Sydney and Tullamarine in Melbourne. The union then brokered a deal to end industrial action, allowing the job cuts to proceed in exchange for pay increases of between 11 percent and 12.25 percent over three years, barely in line with inflation.

The MEAA has carried out countless other similar operations at Nine/Fairfax and throughout the media industry.

These previous experiences underscore that journalists cannot defend their jobs and fight for real improvements to wages and conditions as long as they are within the stranglehold of the MEAA or any other union bureaucracy.

This means that journalists at Nine need to take matters into their own hands and fight to build rank-and-file committees, led by workers themselves. To take their fight forward, they will need to link up with other sections of workers throughout Nine Entertainment and more broadly. This includes employees of News Corp and Seven West Media, where sweeping job cuts have been announced in recent months, as well as wider sections of the working class.

The concerns expressed by striking journalists over the soaring cost of living reveal that there is no brick wall between the issues confronting professional layers, whose position was once considered relatively comfortable, and those facing the working class as a whole. As Nine workers interviewed by the WSWs below note, the industry is in the midst of a sweeping transformation associated with the growth of digital content and increasingly precarious conditions.

This poses broader political questions. Amid an escalating drive to war and intensifying social tensions, the capacity for journalists to carry out more critical investigative reporting has been greatly diminished as media ownership has become ever more concentrated, editorial censorship has intensified and content is increasingly subordinated to advertising revenue and clicks.

Mark, a journalist, editor and sub-editor who previously worked for Fairfax- and Murdoch-owned newspapers, and recently started working for Nine spoke to the WSWs at an MEAA rally last Friday marking the beginning of the strike.

“I worked with News Corp for 19 years, until I was made redundant after Covid-19. Having worked at home they then made me redundant, so thanks for that. It just showed how much they thought of us,” he said.

“When I began at that place we had [union] house committee meetings about half the size of this [rally], but by the time I’d left you would be lucky if you could get three people to come. It was a question of fear, and maybe apathy, but now they’ve been hit by mass redundancies and conditions are really bad, which is what is being planned here.

“We used to have 23 people in the features section—a chief sub, with five or six deputy subs—now there’s only one, who is part of a pool

spread across the country. The sports team had five or six editors, now it’s just one guy. One of my friends has even worked seven days a week, 14 hours a day.

“We have to stick together, fight for all our jobs here, and tell management, ‘Stop running around Paris holding Olympic torches and treating us like a joke,’” he said.

Wendy previously worked for the ABC but has been freelancing for several decades. She told the WSWs that she came to Friday’s rally in Sydney in solidarity with strikers.

“The ninety or so people that are going to lose their jobs here will face trying to work as freelancers, and I can tell you from the years I’ve been in the world of freelance journalism is that it’s a jungle.

“You’re constantly fighting to get paid and even if you’ve been commissioned to write something and you do all the work, all you get paid for is what’s published. There’s no minimum rate and so people are paid 35 cents a word, which you can’t live on. If you want to earn \$100,000 a year then you’d have to write, and have published, 300,000 words. That’s impossible.

“Most freelancers are working other jobs to subsidise their journalism, which is what’s facing these people if they are sacked. That these people have decided to strike for five days just shows how angry they are with management and how determined they are to fight for a decent wage and to maintain their conditions,” she said.

An editor at the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), who wanted to remain anonymous, said: “I first went on strike in 1990 as a teenage cadet. Collective action has always been the best way to get our message across to management. The first recourse is also that management ignores us, that’s why we are out here today.”

She explained that during COVID they accepted a 0 percent pay increase and all staff at Domain, a section of the SMH, “were put on a four-day week, a 20 percent pay cut, for six months.” Part of the demand is catch-up pay for that period.

She continued, “we haven’t made huge headway [in the negotiations]. When we started, they offered 2.5 percent and we asked for 7 percent. They offered us 3.5 percent. A lot of people felt that it was a bit insulting.”

Another editor said, “I started at Broadway in 1988, when it was an afternoon newspaper. The way the newsroom operates is different. With the internet, which is an important tool at our disposal, it’s a constantly rolling deadline; 24/7. You need more people to keep the quality up; you don’t need fewer people.”

On the redundancies she said that “what is really significant at this point is that they will remove all the people who are on a reasonable to decent wage. They will keep people who are lower paid and anybody new that comes in will always remain on a lower rate of pay, to do more work essentially.”



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