

MEDIA RELEASE

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**ACTU PRESIDENT SHARAN BURROW
TWU NATIONAL SECRETARY TONY SHELDON**

UNIONS TELL QANTAS: FIX SEX-DISCRIMINATION FIASCO NOW

The Transport Workers Union has filed an application for a general protections dispute with Fair Work Australia that seeks to reverse a recent decision by Qantas to bar all women from 47 new permanent positions created at Sydney Airport.

Qantas recently replaced 67 temporary positions with 47 permanent staff after it merged its cabin cleaning and ground handling operations at its international division.

The TWU will argue that Qantas indirectly and directly discriminated against the 14 sacked female employees because Qantas froze all the women out from retraining while male employees were offered that opportunity, and subsequently hired.

The ACTU has voiced its support for the TWU's application.

"I've been working faithfully for Qantas," sacked worker Jessica Wang said. "We thought we would be rewarded with a permanent job, Qantas has slammed the door on us."

TWU National Secretary Tony Sheldon said the move illustrated a cascading culture of impunity in Qantas.

"Where is the accountability at our national airline? The airline's growing culture is one where they believe they are not accountable to the law, not accountable to employees, not accountable to passengers, and not accountable to shareholders.

"Qantas is running a bubblegum HR operation: employees are chewed up and spat out.

"These fourteen women, these breadwinners for Australian families, are bravely standing up for women at Qantas and every woman in Australia.

"The Australian community will not tolerate their mothers and sisters and daughters being thrown on the scrap heap simply because they are women.

"In denying justice to these women, our national airline stands condemned before the Australian community."

ACTU President Sharan Burrow said the peak union body backed the TWU's case.

"Women face considerable barriers to greater participation in the workforce," ACTU President Sharan Burrow said.

"The union movement is committed to structural changes to remove these obstacles, such as better childcare, flexible working arrangements and pay equity.

"But employers must lift their game, and the behaviour of Qantas is disgraceful.

"We are steadfastly committed to ensuring that all forms of discrimination at work are eliminated.

"Qantas is an Australian icon, and I expect them to play a lead role in providing a workplace that is free from discrimination.

"The new Fair Work Act provides for the fast resolution of this kind of dispute and I expect the independent umpire take a hard stand on this kind of outdated behaviour.

"If the CEO isn't prepared to step in and ensure some common sense in this matter then the independent umpire should ensure that these women get a fair go."

Test for new laws after Qantas fires female staff

Kirsty Needham

SOCIAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT
QANTAS has been accused of sex discrimination after sacking 14 female aircraft cleaners and replacing them with male baggage handlers in a restructure that saw no women offered retraining in jobs traditionally done by men.

A complaint was lodged yesterday with Fair Work Australia under new workplace laws which make it easier for the regulator to consider sex discrimination disputes.

The case, brought by the Transport Workers Union on behalf of 56-year-old Hurstville mother Souad Palmer and her co-workers, is the first to test the new law as unions gear up to push gender equity and discrimination cases this year.

The president of the ACTU, Sharan Burrow, said Qantas' treatment of the women was "disgraceful" and called on its chief executive, Alan Joyce, to step in.

A Qantas spokeswoman said: "We absolutely deny this is about excluding women from Qantas ... 40 per cent of our employees are women."

Ms Palmer was told this week

that Monday will be her last day, and she must hand in her uniform. She is upset she was asked to train her replacements, men moved across from baggage and ramp duties into aircraft cleaning, under a merger of the two sections.

It takes up to 1½ hours to clean a plane, where temperatures can be hot, and the work physically hard as she bends over repeatedly to pick through 300 seat pockets, vacuum and clean toilets.

"When we walk onto a plane it looks like it has been hit with a tornado. There is heaps of mess," Ms Palmer said.

She says she would have "loved to give it a go" taking on a role that would also see her working in the baggage area with the men, instead of being automatically terminated.

"This is an outrageous double standard as Qantas have simply presumed that we can't do the [men's work], yet they believe that the ramp guys can do our job."

The national secretary of the Transport Workers Union, Tony Sheldon, said: "Women have been directly discriminated against. They are multiskilling

men into jobs done by women and no woman has been given that opportunity, despite glowing references."

The women had been employed on rolling six-month contracts. Despite a convention that after 12 months temps are made permanent, none of the women were offered roles, while all 47 male temps in baggage handling became permanent.

If mediation by the commission does not resolve the case, it will go to Federal Court as the first test of sex discrimination provisions under Fair Work.

Unions would seek redress on gender workplace issues using powers restored to Fair Work Australia and the Fair Work Ombudsman, Ms Burrow said.

The Qantas spokeswoman said Qantas lost a cleaning contract for another airline, and had dismissed the temporary workers to protect the jobs of permanent workers.

Ms Burrow said there was a need for "a long overdue culture shift" as there were only "a pathetic number" of women on boards in Australia, and chief executives did not see or value the work of women.

WORKPLACE LAWS Qantas sexism claim

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The Age 13 February 2010

Women claim 'jobs for the boys'

SYDNEY

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SYDNEY MORNING HERALD