

Peace breaks out at Qantas – almost

Mark Skulley and Andrew Cleary

Qantas Airways engineers have called off all industrial action for three weeks, but the airline disputes the ceasefire will lead to seven grounded planes returning to the air quickly.

After talks in Fair Work Australia yesterday, the engineers said they would remove overtime bans which the airline said had led to the groundings and scores of cancelled flights.

“As a direct result of lifting those overtime bans, I would like to see those aircraft back up and flying after the three weeks,” said union leader Steve Purvinas.

Workplace Relations Minister Chris Evans said he hoped Qantas would react positively to the move by the engineers because the government was concerned the dispute was dragging on.

Senator Evans said there was distrust between Qantas and the unions and that both sides had engaged in a “lot of positioning in the media” rather than negotiating privately.

Qantas argued it would take months to clear the maintenance



Qantas claims it will take months to clear the maintenance backlog; engineers say three weeks.

Photo: ROB HOMER

backlog and the suspension of industrial action was a temporary postponement which did not give certainty for the company, its passengers or employees.

“The real damage has already been

done,” said spokeswoman Olivia Wirth. “Qantas has already had to ground seven aircraft and cancel 500 flights as a direct result of the industrial action by the union which has been ongoing since August.

“As recently as this morning, the union was telling Qantas passengers to book with other airlines until Christmas which is having an impact on domestic and international forward bookings.”

In another twist, the Transport Workers Union announced stoppages of between one and three hours in Sydney, Canberra and Cairns on Wednesday.

The union previously announced one-hour stoppages in Brisbane and Melbourne on Tuesday.

TWU federal secretary Tony Sheldon accused Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce of trying to divide the airline’s workers by talking of possible job losses if the dispute continued.

Tourism Accommodation Australia has written to Prime Minister Julia Gillard to highlight the impact of travel disturbances on hotels and the broader tourism industry, asking for it to intervene in the dispute.

TAA managing director Rodger Powell said hotels and other tourism businesses were “innocent victims” and the disruption could hit big events such as the Melbourne Cup carnival.

“To hear unions say they are prepared to continue industrial action for the next 18 months is alarming for affected industry sectors like accommodation,” he said.

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