



Tourism begs PM to step in on Qantas

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THE tourism industry has stepped up calls for the Gillard government to intervene in the long-running row between Qantas and its unions despite a move by engineers to call a three-week halt to industrial action.

The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association yesterday lifted the ban on overtime that Qantas said had been crippling its maintenance operations, after a meeting in Fair Work Australia.

ALAEA federal secretary Steve Purvinas said the union made the move to ensure Qantas could get grounded aircraft back in the air and to "facilitate future meetings".

"As a direct result . . . I would like to see those aircraft back up and flying after the three weeks," Mr Purvinas said.

"Qantas said our overtime bans were damaging the airline most, so now they are called off there should be no more problems."

The airline rejected the move as a temporary postponement that did not provide certainty and would not adequately address the maintenance backlog of 60,000 man-hours.

"The real damage has already been done," said Qantas spokeswoman Olivia Worth. "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.

"The one and only reason why we have cancelled these flights is because the union's industrial action caused a significant backlog of maintenance."

The continuing row between Qantas and unions representing long-haul pilots, licensed engineers, baggage handlers and caterers has prompted renewed pressure from the travel and tourism industry for government intervention.

Even as the engineers backed off on their action, the Transport Workers Union said it would hold strikes on Wednesday in Sydney, Canberra and Cairns after rejecting a pay offer by the airline. This is in addition to already announced strikes on Tuesday.

Calls for action by online travel retailer Webjet were yesterday backed by Flight Centre and Tourism Accommodation Australia, which said there were fears the action could affect the upcoming Melbourne Cup carnival.

TAA managing director Rodger Powell said hotels had experi-

enced a significant drop in room occupancy for last weekend's Caulfield Cup. "Hotels and the tourism industry are innocent victims of this," he said. "The impact of strike action against Qantas is not limited to Qantas; it is felt by all parts of the tourism industry."

Flight Centre managing director Graham Turner said the government should step in to force a solution to the dispute.

"If they can't do that, it makes you wonder why we elected a government," Mr Turner said. "This is exactly the sort of situation where they should be actively searching or forcing a solution."

The Gillard government last night urged Qantas to respond positively to the olive branch from the engineers union, but warned that intervention remained an option unless there was genuine negotiation between the warring parties to resolve the dispute.

Julia Gillard reiterated yesterday that she was concerned about the impact of the dispute on businesses and passengers. And Workplace Relations Minister Chris Evans emphasised that the company and unions were opposed to the government getting directly involved.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING:
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