

Qantas illegally dismissed 1,700 staff during pandemic, says Australia's top court

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Sydney : Australia's highest court has rejected a bid by Qantas to overturn a ruling that it illegally outsourced 1,700 jobs during the pandemic.

The court unanimously upheld that the carrier had unlawfully laid off staff at 10 airports in November 2020.

The ruling found that Qantas breached Australia's Fair Work Act, which protects employee rights.

Qantas apologised for the outsourcing, but maintained it was a necessary financial measure during Covid.

The airline fired baggage handlers and cleaners at airports across Australia at a time when the nation had closed its borders and business was plummeting.

"As we have said from the beginning, we deeply regret the personal impact the outsourcing decision had on all those affected and we sincerely apologise," it said in a statement on Wednesday.

The High Court of Australia upheld that while Qantas had "sound commercial reasons" for the move, it had deprived workers of their rights to "engage in protected industrial action and... bargaining."

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Workers and unionists described the outcome as a "huge win" after a "David and Goliath" struggle.

The Transport Workers' Union said the finding was proof that "the entire Qantas board must be replaced by new directors including a worker representative".

Its national secretary Michael Kaine called the carrier's actions "the largest sacking found to be illegal" in Australian history and promised that workers would now seek compensation in court.

Qantas has faced public outrage in recent weeks, after reaping record profits amid a series of scandals related to its actions throughout Covid - including allegations it sold tickets on thousands of flights that it had already cancelled.

The airline also been accused of supporting a government block on the expansion of Qatar Airways flights to and from Australia - a move which critics say would have made the market more competitive and driven down fares.

Alan Joyce, the long-time boss of Qantas, announced his early departure from the airline last week amid the mounting controversies.

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Mr Joyce's final payout has been valued at about A\$22m (\$14m; £11m), according to the ABC.

His successor Vanessa Hudson is the airline's first ever female leader and has promised to restore its bruised reputation.

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