

My experiences in COVID-19 Lockdown – A Tale of a Duplicitous Employer

By Grant Newman

My name is Grant Newman and I work for Air New Zealand Regional Maintenance Ltd at Nelson Airport as an aircraft engineer. Lockdown came as much of a surprise to me and my circle as it did with everyone, but for us at work, things took a little time before the real impact this global condition took hold, bringing uncertainty and career ending implications.

Firstly, a bit of background about what I do and the organisation I work for. I do what's called Line Maintenance, for 'Flight-line', that is, aircraft turn up at the end of the day, passengers disembark, and we take the aircraft away for servicing overnight – it's done at night time because the aircraft are working throughout the day. The other branch of engineering is Heavy Maintenance – this is the side of the business getting all the attention of late – this is when every 18 months to two years an aircraft has a major structural inspection, called a 'C-Check', which can last between two weeks and two months, depending on what is found during the inspection. The two jobs within the business are quite different in terms of the nature of the work and the demands on the staff and are thus treated as such, not just within this company, but in the entire airline industry.

I work for Air New Zealand Regional Maintenance Ltd (RML), a wholly owned subsidiary of the parent company, but a separate business entity designed to provide line and heavy maintenance to Air New Zealand (AirNZ)'s fleet of regional airliners. There are two different types of aircraft we work on; the 50 seat Bombardier Dash 8 Q300 of which there are 23 in the fleet and the 68 seat ATR-72 of which there are 31. Both aircraft are turboprops, i.e., they are driven by jet engines coupled to a gearbox that drives a propeller – I won't go into the detailed differences between a turboprop and a pure jet, suffice to say that in a turboprop the thrust driving the aircraft comes from the propeller, not the hot stuff coming out the engine, like it does in a pure jet. Turboprops are more economical than jets for short routes and low capacity.

Initially, when announcements by the AirNZ CEO about the new future the airline was to take were announced, there was little impact on our side of the business – passenger flights ran as usual, and even when numbers began to fall and the schedule began to change with lower numbers of flights, our workload on nights remained roughly the same. Two weeks into Level Four Lockdown and on nightshift we were not practising social distancing and we were being stood down on a nightly basis on full pay, but with little explanation of planning as to what would happen going forward.

I sent an email to our manager explaining that the teams on nights should be kept apart from each other because we run overlapping shifts and if someone gets COVID-19 on nights, we all get it. I also expressed dismay about the uncertainty of being stood down on full pay every night and that there was nothing discussed with us regarding our futures. This brought about enormous doubt among us because at the time, AirNZ had begun the process of sizing down its fleet and staff numbers in response to the pandemic. Other departments within RML had already seen

enormous change, work on C-Checks ceased and the Heavy teams had been sent home. Office staff had been stood down and even Logistics, suppliers of parts for maintenance had been working on a reduced roster system since the beginning of Lockdown.

In the third week of Level Four Lockdown we began seeing segregation of our night shift teams and more of a plan for what was happening in the future. We were being stood down on accumulated leave and throughout the company staff were offered options regarding their time off from work – we were asked to either use up Annual Leave or Time Off In Lieu, or take Leave Without Pay, or even take a Voluntary Exit – redundancy, as the entire airline was reducing its overall size.

Workwise, the size of the operational fleet was drastically reduced, and we saw some 20 aircraft parked on hard standings around the airport. The southern taxiway to Runway Zero Two was closed and eight Q300s were parked there. Four ATRs were parked on an adjacent concrete pad used to store the Virgin Australia ATRs due for heavy checks – these were all hastily readied for flight and flown back to Australia. A further eight aircraft were parked on the gates outside the terminal and in our hangars. Preparation for grounding these aircraft involved masking over openings and covering cockpit windows, but every week, the aircraft undertook a routine maintenance check, called a Line Check, which involves running the engines and doing visual inspections on crucial areas of the airframe.

This work kept us busy, but there was no need for a full team of between eight to 13 staff on each night, as was normal; our number on shift dropped to four, and still we were finishing all the required work around four to six hours after start time (we work eleven hour shifts beginning at 18:30). Within our teams, we were being stood down for weeks at a time. Throughout the month of Level Four Lockdown I worked two days. When level Three Lockdown was introduced, our times on shift increased and we were seeing three- and four-day weeks. Thank heaven for Annual leave and TOIL.

This is where things at RML began to go pear-shaped. As AirNZ staff around the country faced job losses, the same reality eventually reached us at Nelson Airport. Quite suddenly the announcement was made that Heavy Maintenance in Nelson would cease and the work would be sent to Christchurch. Christchurch is run by AirNZ, not RML and is a separate entity, known as Air New Zealand Engineering and Maintenance (E&M). E&M was facing an enormous staff reduction and its massive facility was going to lay bare and unused. Nelson has less real estate, so the decision to send work to E&M offered those who were there a glimmer of hope for the future.

On nights, we predicted in advance that something like that might happen, but we did not think that our Heavy guys would all lose their jobs. The future suddenly looked quite sad. On the projected plan information sheets we were being sent, we were gratified to see that the Line Maintenance structure was going to remain the same. The number of staff, the number of teams and the reporting line was not changing from what it was before COVID-19; there was a catch, however. RML management had decided that all of us engineers, including the Heavy teams were

going to be pooled together and out of the nearly 120 engineers, a selection was going to be made to fill the 34 Line Maintenance jobs.

We all felt awful. For a moment, we on nights felt our jobs were secure, and we even offered suggestions to the Heavy guys who were concocting proposals to keep some form of heavy maintenance in Nelson, but *all* our jobs were on the line now. The Heavy guys didn't want to take our jobs from us but admitted that they would rather work nights in Nelson than go without a job. When we requested clarification as to why this was happening, RML management argued that it wanted (in its words) 'the best team going forward'. We were astonished; what was wrong with the team already in place? There was never any criticism of the work we were doing from management in the past!

When this was put to the RML Line Maintenance Manager, inexplicably, he felt we were doing an excellent job, but that he could make a better team! Utterly perplexed, we felt betrayed; the Heavy guys, despite their undoubted skill in doing the job they do, could not just walk in and do our jobs, because the type of work is completely different. The time pressures, the nature of the work, the qualifications required to do the job, everything – even our employment contracts were different. How could we accept from our own management team that we are going to be replaced with people who have less experience than us at our own jobs, and a 'better team' result?!

Then there was the legality of how RML proposed to do this. We were effectively to be replaced and made redundant, but New Zealand employment law stipulates quite firmly that staff cannot just be replaced one-for-one – redundancy can only take place if a position is disestablished and a new structure is implemented. If a staff member is to be removed for any reason other than redundancy, it qualifies as dismissal, under which again, there are stipulations. These rules were put in place to prevent management from removing staff on a whim and apply to all New Zealand's workforce.

As previously mentioned, the Line Maintenance structure remained as it did before COVID-19. When we began working for RML, we signed individual contracts that stated whether we were shift workers reporting to the Line Maintenance Manager or day workers reporting to the Heavy Maintenance Manager. The two roles and responsibilities are exclusive, but we were being thrown into a collective pool to be chosen to do what were clearly Line Maintenance roles. Enter the unions.

There are two unions that service our industry, both of which chose different courses of action to deal with this. The first, ETu decided from the start to challenge the legality of the action and set to work almost immediately; the second, AMEA decided to support the company and assist with the selection criteria. A meeting was held between the RML management, AirNZ HR head and Heavy Maintenance staff. The news that heavy work was being moved to Christchurch was a blow to them, but they were offered a lifeline of sorts, with the possibility of work in a Line Maintenance team or 15 jobs in Christchurch for Q300 experienced personnel.

Meanwhile, a similar meeting with RML management and night shift had not been arranged, so the union representatives pushed that this happen, with explosive results. With the Line Maintenance Manager and AirNZ HR Manager in attendance,

the meeting was heated, as we put our case forward. Representatives of the unions expressed their views on the legality of what they were attempting to do, but it appeared to us that their decision was final – this was going to go ahead.

The removal of heavy maintenance from Nelson caused a backlash the company wasn't expecting. Representatives of Nelson Airport PLC, Nelson City Council and other civic dignitaries expressed their displeasure at the move and a meeting was held between them and AirNZ representatives to save jobs in Nelson, unfortunately to no avail.

To date, as airline services increase to match growing passenger numbers, which means our workload has naturally increased, we await the results of the union's legal action against RML for attempting to subvert NZ employment law and remove us from our positions and replace us with Heavy staff. At this stage, both parties have been invited to attend legal mediation, then following the failure of that a court injunction will be served to RML to cease its course of action. Things are heating up as I write this. The offer of 15 Q300 experienced jobs in Christchurch for Nelson Heavy staff has also met with a legal challenge as E&M staff are not happy about losing their jobs to staff from Nelson doing the same roles as they were made redundant from.

As I write this, the path ahead is clouded with uncertainty and all of us at work feel enormous apprehension about our futures. This turn of events has soured relations between the staff and management within one of New Zealand's most respected brands; COVID-19 can be blamed for the loss of Heavy jobs in Nelson, but it cannot for the little mess between Line Maintenance personnel and RML management. All that can be done is to await the results of the legal actions against the company.