

A note on the Air France struggle: Lessons of the 1989 Australian pilots strike

Terry Cook
10 June 1998

When I read the reports on the Air France strike and the invective heaped on the pilots by the leaders of the Socialist Party and Communist Party, it immediately brought to mind the 1989 Australian pilots strike.

Like their French colleagues, the Australian pilots became the target of vilification and slander by the social democratic government of the day. The Hawke Labor Party government, backed by the Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) and the entire trade union apparatus, branded the pilots as “bloody minded,” elite “silver tails” and “greedy mavericks” who were holding the country to ransom. Treasurer Paul Keating declared: “That sort of gross behaviour cannot be tolerated.”

The Labor leaders were joined by the corporate media, which condemned the pilots as “foul smelling”. One particularly rabid commentator compared them to a convicted sodomist and rapist, “who did to his victims what the airline pilots are doing to the aviation and tourism industries”.

The pilots were subjected to this foul abuse because they had the audacity to strike for a wage increase in defiance of the prices and incomes Accord — a pact struck between the ACTU and the Labor government to impose real wage cuts and prevent industrial action throughout the working class.

The frenzied accusations of greed and privilege were designed to isolate the pilots and block support from other workers. This allowed the Hawke government to organise an international strike-breaking operation that included the use of military aircraft, the hiring of scab pilots and the provision of funds to the two domestic airlines, Ansett and TAA (now Qantas), to charter aircraft and utilise overseas airlines.

The government also backed legal action by the airlines to deregister the pilots’ union, the Australian

Federation of Air Pilots, and impose millions of dollars in damages on the union and individual pilots.

Every union official and Labor politician, especially those from the “left”, collaborated with the government and gave the scab operation their unstinting support.

One final word of warning must be made to the Air France pilots and all French workers. Far from the attack on the Australian pilots being a special case, dealing with a pampered minority, their defeat and the smashing of their union was a major political turning point. It intensified the Labor government’s offensive on behalf of big business to discipline the working class and deepen the attacks on wages, jobs and working conditions across the board.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact