

Strike by Air France pilots disrupts preparations for World Cup

Socialist Party denounces pilots' action

Richard Tyler
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A strike by Air France pilots grounded up to 90 percent of the airlines' long-haul flights on Monday, June 1. Some 80 percent of short- and medium-haul flights were also cancelled. On Tuesday most flights were cancelled, although one in six long-haul and one in three internal and European flights did take place.

The pilots are scheduled to continue their action until Thursday, when they will decide whether to extend it for an indefinite period. If the strike continues it could cause severe disruption to the football World Cup, which starts June 10 and is hosted by France.

Talks between Air France management and SPNL (Syndicat National des Pilotes de Ligne), the union representing 70 percent of the airline's 3,200 pilots, had broken down at the weekend. A new meeting was rescheduled for Tuesday afternoon.

As part of the privatisation of the airline, pilots face a 15 percent cut in pay. Management says this will be offset by shares in the privatised company. The pilots are also calling for the scrapping of a two-tier wage system introduced when Air Inter and Air France merged, but then suspended in face of massive opposition from the pilots.

Management is also seeking to make reductions of 500 million francs a year through cuts in pilots' wages and the implementation of a two-tier salary structure paying new pilots 240,000 francs a month, against the 350,000 francs they would have earned previously.

The spokesman for SPNL told the press, "We are not demanding anything. I repeat that the pilots are not making any claim. Look at the 10 years in which we have accomplished much together with the rest of the company, the business has been straightened out. Last Wednesday the best economic result in the history of

Air France was announced. This is a very bad time to demand that the pilots give up two months' salary."

Indeed, the union leaders have collaborated with Air France to boost productivity and profitability, telling workers their sacrifices would be rewarded once the company's bottom line improved. The opposite has been the case. Pilots can be on duty for up to three days on domestic flights, and it is not unusual on long-haul routes to be on duty for four days. Duty times can be up to 21 days without days off.

The pilots action has been attacked in *Libération*, the left-wing daily which supports the Socialist Party-led coalition government of Lionel Jospin. Monday's edition wrote that the pilots were "shamelessly using a minority position. With a clear conscience they are insulting public sentiments. They believe they can neglect the examples of other groups of Air France workers who have shared the painful sacrifices in the common interest."

After pointing out that the pilots were paid "from the public purse," the article accuses the strikers of spurning "any sense of civic responsibility." The conservative *Figaro* fumed that the country had been "taken hostage" by "Machiavellian pilots."

Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gaysott, a member of the French Communist Party, echoed this line. He told the press, "France, the airline company and the World Cup must not be taken hostage. It is necessary to negotiate."

Before entering the talks with management on Tuesday, the Air France bureau of the SNPL called for the creation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the company's accounts, with particular reference to "the unreasonable demands made on the pilots."

The action by the French pilots follows a weekend of disruption by their Spanish colleagues, who refused to work overtime and carried out a work-to-rule in protest over the poor level of air safety. They called for the employment of 700 more staff in air traffic control.



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