

Unions signal readiness to settle in Air France strike

Richard Tyler
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The strike by 3,200 Air France pilots has provoked threats to recruit strike-breakers, and for the state to intervene. The response by the unions involved has been to signal their readiness to accept the substance of the company's demands.

Talks between Air France management and the unions resumed on Wednesday afternoon after they were suspended Tuesday evening. They took place against a background of vehement denunciations of the pilots by the Socialist government of Lionel Jospin and the conservative opposition. Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gaysot, a member of the French Communist Party, warned the pilots not to hold France and the World Cup tournament ransom. The joint head of the World Cup organising committee, Michel Platini, said, "You can all moan to your bosses, but you cannot take a country hostage."

After a meeting of the Council of Ministers, Minister for Parliamentary Relations Daniel Vaillant lent his support to any plan by Air France to "hire pilots or other personnel." Hervé de Charette, minister in the previous conservative administration, demanded that the Jospin government review the right to strike in the transport industry and said if the pilots do not end their strike the government should intervene.

A continuation of the strike could lead to the loss of billions of francs in revenues from the World Cup, which starts June 10. It is already costing Air France 100 million francs a day. Two-thirds of short- and medium-haul flights were cancelled on Wednesday and over 80 percent of long-haul flights. Despite this, Air France management insists they must press ahead with 3 billion francs in cuts, of which 500 million must come from pilots' wages. This, officials of the state-owned company say, is required to prepare for privatisation and to remain competitive.

The company initially demanded a 15 percent cut across the board in pilots' pay and the introduction of a two-tier wage system discriminating against younger pilots. In return management offered pilots a share option following privatisation. The union representing 70 percent of Air France pilots, SNPL (Syndicat national des pilotes de ligne), made clear that they wanted a settlement of the dispute and were prepared to concede the main thrust of management's demands. Their only proviso is that the 15 percent cut/share option be voluntary and limited to five years and that the two-tier wage system be scrapped. Air France company president, Jean-Cyril Spinetta, said a single pay scale could be envisaged as long as it permitted "economies" to be made from the pilots' salaries.

Spinetta has been in constant contact with the minister of transport, but the government has been reluctant to openly intervene so far. Jospin came to power less than a year ago promising to reverse the social attacks of the outgoing conservative coalition. For his Socialist-led coalition to now openly support strike-breaking would be a dangerous step. An editorial in Wednesday's edition of *Libération*, which supports the government, noted that Gaysot had been obsessed with "getting out of this conflict as quickly as possible, which is very dangerous for him. Dangerous because the social risk is immense. If the strike carries on for more than a day or two this would transform the conflict into a veritable national catastrophe with planes stranded on the ground, discontented passengers, a World Cup more and more endangered, and the risk that this movement could extend to other categories of personnel at Air France."

Events have demonstrated that it is not just Air France workers who may become embroiled in this conflict. What makes the situation even more

dangerous for the government and the employers is the possibility of the dispute becoming a focus for the grievances of other transport workers.

Marseilles rail workers struck on Wednesday disrupting traffic throughout the south of France. The CGT union, representing workers on the Paris underground, the Metro, called a 24-hour renewable strike for Thursday to press demands for extra staff during the World Cup. Several rail unions are threatening a 36-hour strike Friday. The FGAAC, which represents 30 percent of train guards (conductors/ticket collectors) in Paris, announced their intention to strike June 9-15 over pay. Guards organised by the Communist Party and Socialist Party unions are to strike for one day on June 5. Action was already taken by road hauliers last week.



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