

Jospin government threatens to use military to break Air France pilots' strike

Richard Tyler
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Following a meeting with President Chirac on Wednesday, an advisor to Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said that he was “ready for a clash” and a “trial of strength” with striking Air France pilots.

Jean-Pierre Chevènement, interior minister, bluntly announced that it may be possible “for the air force to intervene” to replace the pilots. Socialist Party senator, Michel Charasse, branded the pilots “egoists who do not love their country,” while Economics Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn said that Air France has the “entire support of the government”.

This vicious rhetoric is in preparation for further attacks on the pilots, should their union, the SNPL (Syndicat National des Pilotes de Ligne), fail to secure acceptance of any deal proposed by management. Air France has already started to lease planes from private air companies to mount a strikebreaking operation during the football World Cup. They estimate that the World Cup will produce 120,000 extra passengers on internal flights during the duration of the tournament and requires a further 110 special flights to transport sporting equipment.

In negotiations on Wednesday, Air France CEO Jean-Cyril Spinetta said he was prepared to abandon a two-tier pay system and put a time limit on a 15 percent cut in pilots' wages. But he insisted that the pilots' wage bill must still be cut by 500 million francs. A spokesman for SNPL nevertheless seized on this in order to claim that the two sides were “converging”. Jean-Charles Corbet, the head of the pilots' union, said before entering negotiations, “Every boss of a company must keep their wage bill under control. We know this as well.” The union said it would review whether to continue the strike for the full 15 days after negotiations continue on Thursday.

Fears remain in business circles that the strike will

serve as an example to other transport workers. The pro-government newspaper, *Libération*, warned of the “risks of contagion to other categories of personnel at Air France or to other companies”.

Such fears are not unfounded. Aircraft mechanics organised by the SNMSAC trade union yesterday threatened a ‘long strike’ at Air France. At Roissy airport, baggage handlers are on strike over pay and conditions. On Wednesday they prevented passengers entering the airport for an hour in protest against the use of lorries hired by Aéroports de Paris (ADP) to transport the baggage of foreign airlines. Another group of ground staff employed by ADP at Roissy also struck yesterday.

Industrial unrest is spreading on France's rail network. A strike by ticket inspectors on French state railways, SNCF, starts Thursday night. This comes less than a week before the 24-hour strike announced by the FGAAC rail union for June 10, the day the World Cup commences. Five unions have announced a strike for June 9, which will affect all public transport in the Lyons region. Today workers from several sectors, including the French electricity company EDF, department stores and the Paris Underground, took part in demonstrations.



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