

Unions desperate to secure a deal in Air France strike

Richard Tyler**6 June 1998**

The strike by Air France pilots entered its fifth day on Friday. The expected agreement between pilots unions and Air France management failed to materialise on Thursday evening, despite a third round of late-night talks.

Earlier on Thursday Jean Claude Corbet, president of the pilots' union SNPL, spoke of an "advance" in the negotiations with management. "The SNPL is looking for an end to the conflict in the not too distant future," he said, "our points of view have converged." But later, SNPL spokesman Christian Paris said "I am afraid to say 'that we have gone back to square one', but that is almost the case."

Reports of the negotiations only raise what appear to be minor differences between the two sides. The trade-off under discussion involves the pilots accepting a 15 percent cut in pay, in exchange for shares in a privatised Air France. This is modelled on a scheme introduced by United Airlines in the United States in 1992.

The unions have signalled their acceptance of this in principle, provided that original wage rates are then restored over a period of time. Initially the union had also called for the scheme to be voluntary but the SNPL leaders have now accepted that it is compulsory. A union spokesman said that pilots were ready to buy shares in the company in order to express their confidence in the business, but refused to pay an "exorbitant" price.

The difficulties for the unions are not in the detail but in convincing pilots to accept the equivalent of a two-month loss in pay. During Thursday's negotiations, 800 Air France pilots attended a general meeting called by the unions. Air France President Jean-Cyril Spinetta's address to the pilots was greeted with stony silence.

All the unions in France fear that their influence is being undermined among broader layers of workers. Whilst most Air France flights were grounded, 50,000 workers from France's electric and gas companies took part in a demonstration in Paris on Thursday afternoon. At the same time, in Toulon 20,000 supported a demonstration against privatisation. On Friday ticket inspectors on the state railway system struck, hitting the high-speed links between Paris and north and south France. Only one in three trains ran between Paris and the provinces.

The support offered to management by the Socialist-led government is already creating problems for the coalition parties. Divisions have emerged within the French Communist Party (PCF) between the advocates of an overtly pro-business agenda and those who fear that this will provoke a backlash from workers.

Earlier this week the government's Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gayssot, a member of the PCF, openly supported Air France management. By the end of the week Robert Hue, PCF national secretary, was forced to declare, referring to the strike, "I am not one of those who thinks that such a movement inspires shame." At a meeting of the national committee of the Stalinist party he warned Socialist Prime Minister Jospin against "Blairism of the left." His statement came in response to criticisms within his own party that by supporting Jospin, the PCF was adapting itself to the economic laws of the market and the policy of privatisation, following the model of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The French press commented that the strike at Air France has provoked "turbulence on the left." The French AP newswire noted that the pilots' strike, together with demonstrations by the unemployed earlier in the year, had put the PCF and its trade union wing,

the CGT, “on their guard.” “The Jospin government faces a new disintegration in the social climate, threatening the cohesion of the majority,” the article stated.

Enormous pressure will be placed on the pilots to accept a deal this weekend, before the World Cup begins in France on Wednesday, June 10.



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