

Air France strike disrupts World Cup football match

Richard Tyler
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The strike by Air France pilots, continuing into its second week, will disrupt the opening of the World Cup football match Wednesday. For a tenth day Air France has only been able to mount about 25 percent of its flights, affecting all its short-, medium- and long-haul routes.

A general meeting held on Tuesday was attended by 1,100 pilots who “voted unanimously to continue the strike,” according to a spokesman for the main pilots’ union, the SNPL (Syndicat National des Pilotes de Ligne).

Air France is the official carrier for the football World Cup, being hosted by France. The company has said that this will not pose a problem for the sponsors. According to management non-striking pilots will fly the 110 special flights needed to transport the teams, their support staff and equipment between matches being played at several venues throughout France. However football fans may face problems travelling to matches. The extra 120,000 passengers expected by Air France to be carried on domestic flights during the month-long tournament will have to transfer to other airlines, or use alternative means of transport.

The company turned down an offer made by striking pilots to fly any fans stranded abroad to France before the start of the World Cup. The pilots had offered their services for free, but the company said the proposal was “impossible to put in place for technical and legal reasons.”

The pilots are on strike in opposition to company plans to cut their annual salaries by 500 million francs. Talks between Air France management and the unions broke down on the weekend. No date for a resumption of negotiations has been set.

Air France president, Jean-Cyril Spinetta, indicated he would convene a board of directors meeting this week to announce “significant measures”. It is likely that the directors will unilaterally impose a new pay scale to implement the cuts without any offer of shares in the

airline when it is partially privatised. This offering of shares had been part of earlier discussions with the unions.

The largest pilots’ union, SNPL, said that such a move would provoke “an irrevocable break” and prolong the strike, rejecting the calls for a “moratorium” made by several of the minor unions.

The last time management acted unilaterally was in 1996 when they imposed a two-tier pay scale on air stewards and stewardesses, worsening conditions for staff with less seniority. Since 1993, a series of cost-cutting measures have been imposed and productivity increases pushed through with the acceptance of the unions.

The SNPL has indicated it would accept an external mediator, which it had previously opposed, saying “we face a management, which does not know how to, does not want to, and undoubtedly cannot conclude an acceptable agreement.”

A spokesman for minority union SNPL-Air Inter, Rene Philippeau, said that he believed the board meeting might be put back until Saturday as “ministers responsible were not in agreement.” According to Philippeau, the delay was necessary in order for the two ministers concerned, Jean-Claude Gaysott (Transport) and Dominique Stauss-Kahn (Finance), to “harmonise” the government position. Answering questions in the National Assembly (parliament), the transport minister, a member of the French Communist Party, said he preferred to “convince” rather than use “force” in reaching a settlement. “We will not spare any effort to arrive at a rapid solution in the interests of Air France and in the interests of France,” he said. Gaysott said he favoured a resumption of negotiations, and that cuts “should not be made solely at the expense of wages.”

Last week an advisor to Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said that he was “ready for a clash” and a “trial of strength” with striking Air France pilots, and

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 Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn said that Air France has the “entire support of the government.”

Other unions representing pilots have indicated their readiness to accept a pay cut in return for a cut in hours.

Nicole Notat, leader of the CFDT union which supports the Socialist Party government, said, “one has to, at a certain point, ask whether the pilots’ demands ... justify this type of action, justify forgetting other staff, and justify the risk to other staff, not to mention the entire company.” In what amounted to a call for management to act unilaterally, Notat said that a negotiated way out of the dispute was “no longer possible”.

Furthermore, Notat called for a “new concept which preserved the right to strike ... but was compatible with a truly public service” modelled on Italy where unions agree not to strike on certain days of the year.

The 10-day strike has impacted on companies providing related services. Servair, the airline caterer, has reported that it no longer expects to make a profit this year and may implement layoffs. Regional airports in France, such as Biarritz, are asking their staff to bring forward their summer holidays because of a lack of work. Aéroports de Paris, which provides baggage handling and other ground services, has lost one-third of its income due to the strike.

Ernest-Antoine Seillière, head of the French employers’ confederation, called the strike “a catastrophe for the national economy at a time of fierce competition. In the name of all employers, I must say I am outraged our country does not know how to manage firms essential for its economic development,” he told the press.



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