

Air France pilots' unions end strike

Richard Tyler
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Unions representing Air France pilots have concluded a deal with management and called off the ten-day strike. Talks broken off at the weekend resumed Tuesday evening and continued into Wednesday morning when the deal was announced.

The main pilots' union SNPL dubbed the agreement "a beautiful compromise." Air France President Jean-Cyril Spinetta gave a more frank assessment. He told reporters that it "perfectly expresses the economic objectives of the company ... the economic objectives of the company have been validated by the main pilots' union." He was particularly pleased that "the shares-for-wage cut proposed by the company, on a voluntary basis, which until now was rejected by the pilots, has not only been accepted but signed up to in principle."

The company had initially proposed a two-tier wage scale penalising younger pilots, as well as a 15 percent wage cut in return for a share option once the company is partially privatised. The final agreement upholds the substance of these demands.

Claims that the two-tier pay scale has been abandoned are an exaggeration. Newly qualified pilots will be paid less than their colleagues, receiving only 300,000 francs a year as opposed to the 350,000 francs paid up until now. The union has agreed to the shares-for-wage cut scheme with the sole proviso that it is voluntary. Those pilots who accept will have their wage scale frozen for seven years.

The Socialist Party-led coalition government hailed the agreement precisely because it upholds the interests of Air France. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said it "took into account the objectives of the company which are the control of its costs, in particular its wage costs.... I hope that it is the company which will benefit from this, that is my objective above all and what guided me constantly."

Minister for Transport Jean-Claude Gaysott, a member of the French Communist Party (PCF), said,

"the agreement concluded in the morning fits fully into the objectives laid down and supported by the government, to realise the savings necessary for competitiveness and to allow the development of the company."

The Socialist Party government boasted that it had been involved in discussions behind the scenes continually, through the intermediary of civil servants and advisors.

The SNPL was forced to call a strike because of the widespread opposition from pilots to the company's demands. But the union leaders made clear that they did not intend to challenge the plan to privatise Air France and signalled their willingness to accept savings at the pilots' expense. The SNPL made no attempt to link the pilots' struggle with that of other Air France employees facing attacks. This was used by the government and the other trade unions, which in the majority openly opposed the pilots, to attack them for being "selfish". By encouraging pilots to become shareholders in Air France the union is seeking to encourage the belief that concessions made to improve competitiveness will benefit workers directly.

This attempt to line up pilots behind a pro-company agenda is the essential aim of the SNPL. According to their spokesman, "the agreement signed aims at creating a framework that is conducive to the social stability essential for the development of Air France." Transport Minister Gaysott echoed these sentiments, saying, "If more stable social relations follow, that is a good thing."

So far there has been no significant indication of the reaction from the pilots, who only yesterday voted unanimously to continue their strike. Whether or not the SNPL secures their endorsement, however, the proposed agreement confirms the role of the trade unions as enforcers of social order on behalf of the major corporations.



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