

Air France threatens to impose pay cuts on striking pilots

Richard Tyler
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Talks between Air France management and pilots' unions broke down Saturday as a top bargainer for the company declared, "there is nothing left to negotiate".

More than three-quarters of all flights have been cancelled and it is expected that the carrier would be completely grounded by the strike when the World Cup football match, hosted by France, begins Wednesday. The strike by 3,200 pilots, now in its second week, has cost Air France one billion francs.

The president of the company, Jean-Cyril Spinetta, has called an extraordinary meeting of his board of directors for Wednesday or Thursday. He intends to present a proposal to unilaterally impose a new pay scale without the unions' agreement.

According to the newspaper, *Les Echos*, the airline is planning to drop a proposed exchange of pay cuts of 15 percent in exchange for 10 to 12 percent of the shares in the airline when it is partially privatised this year. Management has reportedly also dropped its demand for lower wages for newly hired pilots. Instead the company intends to impose a single lower wage scale for all pilots.

The effect of the new pay scale would be to lengthen the time it takes a pilot to be promoted. In this way the company hopes to reduce its wage costs by 500 million francs a year. Such an action would require amending the special regulations governing pilots' pay and conditions.

The other 18 unions representing Air France employees insisted that a comité central d'entreprise (central committee meeting of the company) be held over the weekend where management and all unions representing all Air France employees were represented. Following the meeting, the president of the SNPL, Jean-Charles Corbet, said, "we will see this conflict through to the end ... the ball is in the Air

France management's court."

Corbet rejected the call of the CFDT union (aligned with Prime Minister Jospin's Socialist Party-led government) for a one-month moratorium until after the football World Cup. However, following the meeting, Corbet offered to have Air France pilots fly to pick up stranded World Cup ticket holders and declared the pilots would work for free.

The Air France pilots have remained determined. Of 2,000 pilots questioned by the Air France "works council," 98 percent said they opposed the deal to trade a pay cut for shares in a partially privatised Air France. One pilot called it "a fools bargain"! The SNPL proposed a settlement based on the model of the United Airlines deal with more shares for the pilots and the pay cut being phased out within four to five years. However, they were unable to overcome opposition from their members. A union spokesman said that if management unilaterally imposed new conditions following a board of directors meeting this week he feared "an irreversible fracture".

With the SNPL leadership so far unable to secure an agreement, the CFDT union has come forward to give the company direct support. The CFDT has called on the government to appoint a mediator. It says that it is "scandalised" by the pressure on the rest of the staff that a blockage in discussions between the pilots and management has created.

François Cabrera, general secretary of the CFDT Air France group, said, "That makes a week in which the company has been blocked. Our sales are in a catastrophic state. If it lasts much longer customers will not return. One cannot leave the future of the company in the hands of negotiations in which the representatives of 42,000 workers are excluded", referring to other Air France staff.

This line was supported by Marc Blondel, leader of the Force Ouvrière union, who said the pilots' strike should "not be allowed to block the whole operations of the company, with the consequent financial losses."

The union leaders are acting as spokesmen for the Socialist Party-led coalition government of Lionel Jospin. Prime Minister Jospin reiterated his support for Air France president Jean-Cyril Spinetta at the weekend. An official statement issued said, "the Prime Minister stresses that the future of this national company lies in improving its competitiveness." Any agreement "must permit the necessary economies to develop the company," the statement went on.

First secretary of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, said on Sunday, "pilots must understand that if they continue then the very future of the company is questioned. It is not normal for 3,000 pilots to decide the fate of 45,000 people."

The CGT union federation that is affiliated to the French Communist Party (PCF) claims to support the pilots. However Robert Hue, leader of the PCF, called for "negotiations to recommence without delay." He supported Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gaysott (also a PCF member), saying that the economies Air France wishes to make could be achieved other than by cutting pilots' wages. He added that Air France had to be competitive, but that should not be achieved "necessarily through privatisation or cuts in wages and manpower".

For its part, the SNPL continues to stress that it is not opposed to economies in principle. Its spokesman, Christian Paris, said, "It is not the principle of making economies and tightening the budget that we do not agree with, it is the methods of carrying them out, which seem completely inequitable to us."

The unions further proposed that young pilots should pay back the cost of their training, which can amount to more than a million francs. This would, they claimed, save Air France 40 million francs a year.

The company constantly complains that Air France pilots receive 19 percent more than pilots with British Airways and 40 percent more than Lufthansa. But this is because flight crews for both these companies accepted pay cuts some time ago as part of company restructuring. In 1992 Lufthansa pilots accepted a 24 percent pay cut as part of a move to make the German airline more competitive. Air France pilots have

increased productivity by 30 percent since 1993. French pilots fly 645 hours a year, as against 597 by Lufthansa and 511 BA.

Pilots described the stress these long hours bring. "It is hell. I get up at 4 a.m. every morning and make five flights in the course of a day," said one. "It is a profession that costs one dearly," said another who regularly flies the Paris-Tokyo route. "When I return from my tour of duty, my two-year-old son does not recognise me," he added.

Air France made 1.8 billion francs profit this year.



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