

German trade union officials attack striking Lufthansa pilots

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Lufthansa pilots continued their ongoing industrial action against the German airline with a 24-hour strike May 17. A Lufthansa spokesman confirmed that more than 600 of the airline's 1,100 scheduled flights had been cancelled by early afternoon.

Two weeks ago, the Cockpit Union (VC)—an organisation of about 4,200 pilots—struck Lufthansa and its subsidiaries, Condor and Condor Berlin (holiday flights), as well as the company's air freight division, Lufthansa Cargo. According to its own figures, the airline is suffering a loss of 50 million marks every day of the strike.

In recent negotiations, the pilots retreated from their initial demand for a total wage increase of 32 percent and are now asking for a 24 percent raise, extra payments linked to company profits and a reimbursement period of 12 months. In its last offer, Lufthansa proposed a salary rise of around 10.6 percent over a period of four years and an additional varying, annual remuneration. According to the Cockpit Union, this corresponds to a yearly salary increase of about 5.5 percent, which the union said was unacceptable.

Lufthansa pilots accepted salary freezes and pay reductions in the early 1990s when the airline was in difficult financial straits. In 1992 the unions accepted cuts for all Lufthansa personnel in the “financial recovery agreement.” According to the Cockpit Union, salaries were reduced by 28 percent from 1991 to 1992 alone. Moreover, the trade unions ÖTV (Public Transport Association) and DAG (German Employees' Union) agreed at the time to the destruction of 8,000 jobs at Lufthansa.

Based on these measures, company profits have soared. Jürgen Weber, head of Lufthansa, has been stressing for some time now that he runs one of the most profitable airlines in the world. In the year 2000 the concern increased its turnover by 14 percent, or 1.1 billion marks. The company's pre-tax earnings rose by 4.4 percent or by 8.5 million euros, which amounts to about 17 million marks more profit than in 1999.

Pilots have been demanding reimbursement for several years of salary losses. But the German Employees' Union, which formerly represented the pilots, refused to assist them and even hindered their claims. After that, the pilots sought support from their own professional association, Cockpit, and achieved its recognition as a trade union in 1999.

Unions belonging to the German Association of Trade Unions (DGB)—especially Verdi, the new giant service industries union incorporating the ÖTV and DAG, among others—have vehemently condemned the pilots' strike and placed themselves on the side of Lufthansa management. Margret Mönig-Raane, Verdi's deputy chairperson, said that the pilots were pursuing their interests without consideration of the company or its staff. In an interview with Reuters

news agency, she accused the pilots' captains of “social Darwinism”.

Her outburst was echoed by Dieter Kretschmer, the DGB state chairman for Rhineland-Palatinate. He told the *Rhein* newspaper that it was a case of a group trying “to cut the biggest possible piece out of a cake for itself”. If the pilots were to succeed with their demands it would be at the expense of the rest of the staff, he said.

The trade union bureaucracy has even organised strike-breaking efforts on behalf of Lufthansa management. At Frankfurt Airport the works committee and the union went so far as to encourage several hundred Lufthansa employees to protest against the pilots' strike during their lunch break, and to provide them with placards representing the initials of the Cockpit Union (VC) with the German “Viel Cash” (a lot of cash).

While the DGB unions present the striking pilots as a greedy minority, who are acting unilaterally, the reality is these unions isolated the pilots' industrial action from the very beginning. On March 24, Verdi concluded a wage agreement for the approximately 50,000 Lufthansa employees, committing them to a wage rise starting at 3.5 percent over 19 months. There was certainly no intention of using the pilots' readiness to strike in order to achieve—for all the employees—significantly higher wage and benefit gains commensurate with sacrifices workers made earlier to bring the company back to profitability.

The Verdi union officials now fear that their own wage agreement—which compelled the workers to accept such a minimal wage increase while inflation is running at 2.9 percent—will be exposed as paltry by the pilots' strike. Not only the pilots, but also air traffic controllers, technicians, crew members and others, would be able to enforce far higher pay settlements and much better working conditions.

Klaus Zwickel, chairman of the IG-Metall (engineering union), also warned that a salary agreement to the extent of 30 percent could trigger “claims based on precedent from other branches of industry”. This, he said, “would no longer be in the interest of the common good,” he stressed to journalists on May 14.

On May 15 the ground staff of German BA (German British Airways) participated in a two-hour warning strike aimed at winning more days off and limiting in-flight periods to no more than 85 hours per month. The strike by 140 of the 331 workers led to the cancellation of seven flights and delays mainly affecting BA's German inland schedules.

In addition to the spreading of strikes to other German airlines, the airline companies are afraid that the industrial action may become international and have a far greater impact. The strike by Lufthansa pilots is certainly being followed with international interest. Both the

Association of Star Alliance Pilots (ASAP, the international pilots' association to which VC belongs) and the Air Canada Pilots Association (APAC) have already sent messages of support and are refusing to cooperate in special flights aimed at filling in for the cancelled Lufthansa schedules.

Employees of other airline companies are also observing the wage negotiations in Germany with interest. The current wage agreement at British Airways will run out at the end of the year, and the pilots of Spain's Iberia airline have only just ended their go-slow strike that began in March.

The German media has also presented the pilots as privileged and pampered employees, earning on average hundreds of thousands of marks. But the gruelling training and qualification procedure the captain of a large passenger aircraft must go through is long and expensive. After passing tests to qualify for the profession and for the particular airline company—tests failed by about 90 percent of candidates—a pilot must submit to 18 to 24 months of training, which the prospective pilot must pay for himself. The costs, depending on the quality of instruction—which substantially influences the chances for a job with a large airline—amount to 80,000 to 130,000 marks, although this does not include costs of living and accommodation during this period. Sometimes airline companies demand an additional internal qualification, which swallows up another 50,000 marks.

Thus many pilots begin their professional careers with a mountain of debt. At the same time initial salaries are comparatively low, beginning—depending on the company—at 3,500 to 7,000 marks. Following training as first officer, a pilot must successfully complete up to 12 years as a co-pilot before he is able to move up to the position of captain. Only as captain, as the person responsible for hundreds of passengers on each flight, does he earn a basic income of about 14,000 marks a month with a large airline, or only around 6,000 marks a month with a small one. Even with Lufthansa, a captain only earns over 300,000 marks in his twenty-fifth year of service, thus attaining only shortly before the end of his career the kind of salary trumpeted in the media as standard earnings.

But obtaining a job directly after the training is in no way a certainty. Even training at centres affiliated to airlines is no guarantee of securing employment. The state of this labour market is constantly changing and it can force well-trained, though highly indebted, pilots into long periods of waiting. Large companies also demand a minimum of between 1,000 and 2,000 in-flight hours from job applicants, although a pilot attains only about 170 hours of flying time during his training.

Therefore, a good number of newly trained pilots are forced to sign on with the smaller companies whose salaries are sufficient to pay off their debts, but certainly not enough for the life of luxury ascribed to them by the outraged media.

Furthermore, the salary cuts made in 1992 have left Lufthansa pilots' pay rates lagging behind salary increases at other airlines. With an average yearly job performance rating 5 percent higher than those of similar employees internationally, Lufthansa pilots earned 27 percent less than the international average in 1999, and increases to their salaries have remained 30 percent below the increases to the national German average income since 1991.

Pilots are also subject to enormous workloads. Working periods range from 12 consecutive hours a day over four days in succession to 14 hours a day over two days. In order to facilitate the destruction of jobs, the airline companies demand that pilots perform types of work that do not belong to their profession. Not too long ago, an additional

training period of three years was required for the so-called ramp agent, who controlled the loading of the plane, catering and the boarding of passengers. Now these tasks are increasingly being assigned to the pilots. They have to perform this additional work as well as make preparations for the upcoming flight, control the refuelling and check the technical safety of their aircraft. The consequence of all this is shorter and shorter work breaks and recovery periods, which—combined with the long working hours—constitute a threat to the safety of all air traffic.

Pilots are constantly under threat of compulsory termination and the end of the careers if they suffer health problems. In order to assess their fitness, pilots have to submit to medical examinations every six months from the age of 40. They only have the chance of insuring themselves against the risk of becoming unable to work if they do so privately, and the high monthly premiums of between 600 and 800 marks make it apparent the insurance firms see this risk as great.

Working in the flight deck of an aircraft involves dangers to one's health. Cosmic radiation (high energy neutrons, electrons, gamma rays, etc.) presents an enormous health risk. The higher a person rises above earth into the atmosphere, the less protection he has from this cosmic radiation. Consequently, people travelling at altitudes reached by civilian aviation are 120 times more at risk than those on the ground. The statistical average of a flight crew's exposure to radiation is five times greater than that of workers in atomic power stations (excluding cases of nuclear accidents).

Influenced by the sun's activity and also varying in relation to its geographical position, this radiation has an extremely damaging biological effect. Birth defects are eight to ten times more frequent in the children of flight crews compared to the population average. Similarly, various forms of cancer—like skin, breast, bone, brain or testicular cancer—are up to 15 times more common. The radiation exposure is so high that a single transatlantic flight—depending on the flight path and the activity of the sun—corresponds to an exposure to two to four x-rays of the chest (thorax). Accordingly, the annual exposure to cosmic radiation suffered by pilots and aircraft personnel corresponds to an average of 150 to 300 x-rays.

These facts make all the more outrageous the slander campaign by the trade union bureaucracy and the press. The Lufthansa struggle has exposed the utter bankruptcy of the DGB trade unions and shown that the Verdi service industry union—launched with so much pomp and ceremony by the media only a few months ago as the biggest trade union in the world—is a bureaucratic monster and straitjacket for workers.



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