

Unions set Air Canada flight attendants against each other

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28 January 2003

The corporatist policy of the union bureaucracy—lining up workers behind rival capitalist interests and against each other—has led to a fratricidal dispute among Air Canada’s 8,500 flight attendants. As a result, at the very point when Air Canada executives are preparing a new assault on airline workers’ jobs and working conditions, the flight attendants are busy struggling with each other, trying to avoid being the first on the chopping block.

The present Air Canada is the result of a January 2000 merger in which Air Canada took over its long-time rival—Canadian Airlines International. At issue in the dispute among the flight attendants is the merged airline’s seniority list. Given Air Canada’s troubled financial situation, its stated intention of shedding thousands of jobs, and the airline unions’ repeated acceptance of job cuts and concessions, seniority will dictate who keeps their jobs and who doesn’t. It also has a large bearing on working conditions since seniority determines who works what routes.

Air Canada recently warned of substantial financial losses for the fourth quarter of 2002—losses that are expected to be \$250-300 million. The airline is saddled with a total debt of some \$12.8 billion and faces upcoming debt payments of \$400 million in the third quarter of 2003. Management has convened union leaders to a meeting February 6, at which it is expected to demand significant job and wage cuts. Some sources have indicated that as many as 1,500 management and 8,000 unionized workers could be laid off, although the airline has dismissed these figures.

Flight attendants at Air Canada are represented by the Canadian Union for Public Employees (CUPE). The contentious seniority formula, which was designed and imposed by a CUPE-appointed arbitrator, assigns seniority to flight attendants not based on their years of service at Air Canada and the now defunct Canadian Airlines, but rather on the basis of their relative seniority at their pre-merger employer.

At the time of the merger, Air Canada had been expanding aggressively, at the expense of its weaker rival. Thus

Canadian Airlines employees generally had more years of seniority and tend to be older than the pre-merger Air Canada attendants. As their years of service count for relatively less than the years of service of those originally hired by Air Canada, the former Canadian attendants stand to lose under the CUPE-imposed seniority system and have been in the forefront of demands that it be scrapped.

At least some of the original Air Canada attendants defend the CUPE-imposed seniority list on the grounds that it was “their” air line that prevailed in the struggle between Air Canada and Canadian Airlines International.

No faction—and least of all the union leadership—challenges the need for Air Canada to downsize its workforce and ensure corporate profitability.

The divisive seniority system is a logical extension of the policy pursued by CUPE and the other airline unions in the corporate war that preceded the merger. During the 1990s, as competition between Air Canada and Canadian Air Lines intensified in a newly deregulated Canadian air travel industry, CUPE, the International Association of Machinists, (IAM, Canadian Auto Workers Union and the pilots associations incited Air Canada and Canadian workers to support their respective employers in the struggle for market share and profitability. Frequently, this meant contract concessions and job cuts. These were no sooner given than the rival airline began pressing for its employees to match them.

Accepting the inevitability of industry restructuring and a massive loss of jobs, the union bureaucrats likewise backed one or another of the rival camps of capitalists in the financial maneuvering that culminated in Air Canada fending off a takeover bid by a group of Canadian Airlines investors, then snatching up its long-time rival. Most conspicuous was Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Buzz Hargrove, who aggressively supported a bid by Canadian Airlines investor Gerry Schwarz and his Onex corporation to take over Air Canada. In explaining the rationale behind his support for Onex, Hargrove said the CAW recognized that there were too many workers in the

airline industry and therefore believed its proper role was to assist in an orderly downsizing.

The CAW's support for the Onex bid was considered to be a coup for Schwarz, all but guaranteeing him success. However, the Onex takeover fell apart when a Quebec Superior Court Judge ruled that its bid violated a stipulation in the Air Canada Public Participation Act—the legislation under which Air Canada was privatized—that bars any single shareholder from owning more than 10 percent of Air Canada's common voting shares.

Since the unions urged their members to identify with the airline they worked for and to view workers at the rival airline as the enemy, it is hardly surprising relations between the former Canadian and pre-merger Air Canada employees have proven to be fractious. Indeed, such is the bitterness among the flight attendants that to this day cabin crews remain segregated—that is to say, crews are comprised of either exclusively former Canadian employees or pre-merger Air Canada attendants.

This same bad blood was in evidence at a series of recent union meetings and in the ratification of a new contract. The union hired police officers and private security officials for a November meeting in Toronto, held to elect delegates to CUPE's airline division, because of fears that there would be fist fights among rival groups of attendants, as there reportedly had been at previous meetings.

In late December, CUPE succeeded in winning 68 percent approval for a new collective agreement with Air Canada. But many former Canadian flight attendants denounced the new contract, saying it discriminates against them—bonuses went only to the original Air Canada employees—and perpetuates a two-class system of attendants

Two of CUPE's most senior officials have traded polemical letters on the issue of the flight attendants, as well as allegations of fraud and mudslinging. Sid Ryan, CUPE's Ontario president, has advocated on behalf of the former Canadian Airlines flight attendants, accusing union President Judy Darcy of “shameful” disregard of their interests. Darcy, for her part, has accused Ryan of needlessly “fueling the flames of discontent” and playing into the hands of those who want to defect to another union. Shortly after this exchange, Darcy revealed that Ryan's campaign to win the post of CUPE secretary-treasurer was being investigated by the union for financial improprieties.

The phenomenon of airline unions mobilizing workers behind “their” employer against the “competition”—be it local or foreign—is an international one. Around the globe, as the airlines have insisted on massive job cuts and industry rationalization, union leaders have maintained that workers' interests are inseparable from and subordinated to those of the airline bosses. Any working class opposition is

suppressed on the grounds it would imperil corporate profitability. Instead union officials implore workers to accept management demands for increased productivity and wage rollbacks, in the hopes that the lion's share of job cuts can be forced onto fellow workers at other air lines.

At the same time, the unions have done little to oppose the outsourcing of work to lower wage discount airlines and subsidiaries. When Air Canada created a discount airline, Zip—where the discount comes directly as a result paying Zip employees lower wages and the routes explicitly replace Air Canada routes—the unions quickly capitulated. In September 2001, CUPE agreed to withdraw its labor board application for common-employer status between Zip and Air Canada, in exchange for promises that layoffs of cabin personnel would be reduced.

From the third quarter of 2001 to the third quarter of 2002, Air Canada laid off 2,600 workers, representing 6 percent of its total workforce. The only response of the union bureaucracy to this massive destruction of jobs was to negotiate workshare agreements, with the assistance of the federal government. Under these agreements, workers accept a reduced workweek, with the government providing some compensation from the unemployment insurance fund. At most a few hundred jobs have been preserved

The internecine struggle among the Air Canada flight attendants is a stark illustration of how the union bureaucracy's corporatist policy is fatally undermining even the most elementary worker solidarity. If workers are to defend past conquests, let alone make new ones, they must adopt a new strategy of industrial and political struggle based on the unity of the international working class and the explicit rejection of the subordination of workers' interests to corporate profitability.



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