

British Airways: Unions collude with management to avert further wildcat strikes

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Last month hundreds of British Airways workers at Heathrow airport walked out in opposition to the introduction of a new electronic swipe card clocking-in system that they feared would lead to dramatic changes in working practices, including the possibility of employees being sent home at slack periods and recalled at busier times.

The walkout came as a complete surprise to management and unions alike. None of the three unions at British Airways—the General and Municipal Boilermakers (GMB), Amacus or the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU)—had called for strike action. The GMB had stated its opposition to the introduction of the swipe cards, while the TGWU was prepared to accept their introduction if guarantees were given that there would be no changes in working practices. Amacus was somewhere between the two positions.

While the unions were engaged in months of fruitless discussions with management on the issue, it was left to the workers themselves to take action when the system came into effect on Wednesday July 23.

The resulting two days of unofficial action was described by the *Observer* newspaper as the “worst internal problem BA has suffered since the 1997 cabin crew strike that did for [CEO] Eddington’s predecessor, Bob Ayling.” The cancellation of 500 flights left thousands of passengers stranded, some for days, severely damaging BA’s reputation.

With threats of further walkouts during the busy August holiday season, the unions were hastily assembled for talks with management. But when the outgoing leader of the TGWU, Bill Morris and Amacus leader Roger Lyons gathered around the negotiating table with the GMB’s new leader Kevin Curran, a prominent member of the so-called “awkward squad”

of left union leaders, it was not as the genuine representatives of the workers involved in the action but as advisers to BA.

There had been much press coverage prior to the talks of the “uncompromising” stand taken by the GMB in contrast with the other two unions. The *Observer*, July 27, reported that, “The GMB refuses to negotiate over the ‘imposition’ of the swipe card system, and accuses Morris of abandoning this position. ‘We will not have this imposed on us. It looks like Bill is prepared to negotiate,’ said a source.”

By Wednesday July 30, however, the *Guardian* reported, “The prospect of a resolution to the damaging dispute emerged after [TUC General Secretary] Barber persuaded the three unions involved... to bury their differences and present a common agenda to the company.”

The common agenda agreed between the three has led to BA getting exactly what it wanted, albeit delayed until September.

The unions have prevented the deal as a management climb down but BA’s director for Heathrow, Mervyn Walker spelt out that the controversial swipe cards had been agreed “in principle”. Use of the cards is to remain voluntary until September, when it will become compulsory. The company also agreed to separate out a proposed 3 percent pay rise from the swipe card issue.

While the latter was presented by the unions as a further concession, it is more likely in the interests of BA as the unofficial action is widely believed to have been the result of accumulating anger by a section of workers who earn as little as £10,000 per year and face a restructuring programme that will lead to the destruction of some 13,000 jobs, 10,000 of which have already gone.

The other claim to victory was an undertaking from

BA that it will not use the new system to change working practices and shift patterns. Morris described the talks as “tough and difficult,” claiming to have “managed to secure limitation on the use of swipe cards. This is a good day for employees, a good day for the company but an even better day for passengers.”

Curran said: “It remains our view that this dispute has fundamentally been about achieving a manageable work-life balance.

“It was a 21st century dispute where low paid, mainly women workers stood up and demanded dignity, respect and consultation from their employer.”

Paul Talbot, the assistant general secretary of Amicus, claimed the unions had achieved everything they wanted, including a pay deal without strings that will be backdated to January. He said: “We have a framework for future working practices and most importantly the threat of strikes has been removed.”

An indication of the nature of this framework is given by the setting up of a joint working party, proposed as part of the deal that will produce a report by mid-September on further “efficiency savings” at BA.

BA have insisted since the unofficial stoppage that the new system is not about changing working practices but simply presenting a more modern clocking-on system than the current method of workers signing in and out. But a BA document leaked to the *Telegraph* newspaper speaks of “near-anarchy at Heathrow and Gatwick, with check-in, ticket and customer service staff often arranging between themselves who should work particular shifts, what time they start and finish, and when days off or annual leave should be taken.”

The paper says a “Lack of basic management information also resulted in ‘imbalances’ between numbers rostered and airport workloads, poor monitoring of time taken off in lieu, and excessive overtime payments” and says “supervisors apply ‘inconsistent rules’ in relation to shift-swapping, time off, overtime and leave, so staff ‘shop around’ until they find a manager willing to approve their request.”

According to the *Telegraph*, BA did not challenge the report, which was drafted in October 2002 after several months of negotiations with unions on the introduction of the swipe cards had already taken place. But an airline spokesman said “the solutions it suggested, including split shifts and annualised totting-up of hours, were ‘obsolete’ and not part of negotiations at TUC

headquarters.”

BA claims the dispute has cost it between £30 million and £40 million. These are in addition to a pre-tax loss of £45 million for the April-to-June period. The Iraq war and the outbreak of the SARS virus has been blamed for the loss, which compares with a profit of £65 million in the same period last year. Revenue fell 10.7 percent from last year to £1.8 billion.

The airline was privatised in 1987 and embarked on a major restructuring programme in February 2002. The unions cooperated with the loss of 10,000 jobs and have raised no opposition to 3,000 more scheduled by September. The airline is also faced with a hefty debt incurred with the purchase of new planes prior to the downturn in the market brought about by the terrorist attack in the United States in 2001. In the midst of a severe worldwide slump in air travel, BA faces stiff competition from so-called no-frills carriers such as easyJet and Ireland-based Ryanair.

The precarious economic position of BA and the further attacks upon workers it portends makes the drawing of the political lessons of the recent dispute all the more urgent. The unofficial walkout by the ground staff reflected not only the anger at BA management, but the frustration of increasing numbers of workers with the failure of the unions to represent their interests.

Spontaneous as it was however, and bereft of an alternative political perspective, it was possible for the unions to take control of the situation and impose a deal that is diametrically opposed to workers interests.

To prepare for the upcoming struggles in defence of their jobs, working practices and living standards, BA workers must not only organise independently of the trade unions. More importantly, they must take up a conscious struggle for a genuine socialist perspective in opposition to the pro-business agenda of the union bureaucracy.



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