

British Airways workers urged to work for nothing

Chris Marsden
22 June 2009

The appeal by British Airways (BA) to its 40,000 employees to volunteer for up to a month's unpaid leave, or even unpaid work, marks a new stage in the efforts by big business to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis onto the working class.

Sent by e-mail and published in BA's in-house magazine, the appeal comes after the airline posted a record annual loss of £401 million, against a record profit of £922 million a year earlier. The company message asks staff to volunteer for between one week and one month of unpaid leave or unpaid work by the end of June. The lost salary will be spread over between three and six months.

BA chief executive Willie Walsh made the call as publicly and provocatively as possible. He could have, as many other employers have already done, called on workers to accept a pay cut or a shorter working week. But he chose to ask his employees to work for nothing-first, to make all other options appear in a more favourable light and, second, to reinforce his claim that everyone has a stake in restoring the company to profitability.

Walsh said, "It's a request-you can take unpaid leave or you can work for free, and the chances of people working for free are very unlikely, but there might be some people who want to take unpaid leave."

This was backed up by warnings that BA was in a "fight for survival." There were "absolutely no signs of recovery.... This is by far the biggest crisis the industry has ever faced." About 2,500 jobs have already been lost at BA and the airline is seeking to cut pay and shed up to 4,000 employees, including 2,000 posts from its 14,000 cabin staff.

Walsh said that those agreeing to work for nothing would be "effectively volunteering for a small cut in

base pay." BA has already offered employees unpaid leave or the chance to work part-time last month and claims that more than 1,000 responded positively.

Against such propaganda, numerous reports gave expression to the anger aroused amongst BA workers-anger that was only fuelled by Walsh and Chief Financial Officer Keith Williams having announced they too would work for no pay during July.

Walsh earns £735,000 a year, while Williams earns £440,000 a year. Forgoing a month's salary costs Walsh £61,000, leaving him to get by on £674,000. Most BA workers earn between £13,000 and £18,000. The best paid, cabin staff, average £29,900.

One airline worker said, "The bosses are millionaires and a month without pay means nothing to them. But it's everything for the majority of us."

The trade union bureaucracy also feigned indignation. Unite's Ciaran Naidoo complained, "It's all well and good for Willie Walsh to say he's prepared to work for free when he earns four times in a month what they do in a year."

The liberal media joined in, with Nils Pratley writing in the *Guardian* "the task of management is to find a way through the problem. If that means reducing payroll costs (as it surely does in BA's case), then put a proper proposal on the table. That is what Honda did when it asked workers at its Swindon factory to accept a 3% pay cut in order to save jobs; the plan received overwhelming support."

Days later, it was revealed that negotiations with the trade unions on a "proper proposal" had already borne fruit for BA. The British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA), representing 95 percent of BA's 3,200 pilots, accepted pay-cuts of around £4,000 a year, 78 voluntary redundancies, and cut-backs on allowances and perks amounting to an annual saving of £26

million. A pilot earns around £80,000.

In return, the BA pilots will be given a worthless promise of a £13 million shareholder stake in the company, a stake that will only be offered in 2011 and only if “certain company targets” are met.

BALPA is balloting with a recommendation to accept. Its actions will only embolden BA to press forward its demands for 4,000 job cuts, one in ten of the workforce, and reductions in pay for all staff.

There is no reason to expect that Unite or the GMB will proceed differently than BALPA. Having postured over Walsh’s “work for nothing” proposal, the two unions will in all probability make an even worse agreement at their members’ expense. The Honda deal cited by the *Guardian*, a pay cut of three percent for 10 months negotiated in face of a threat to sack 490 workers, was endorsed by Unite.

Thanks to the collaboration of the trade unions, pay cuts, and reductions in hours are now commonplace-affecting more than half the UK workforce, according to a June survey by the Keep Britain Working campaign. The survey found that over the last nine months 27 percent of UK workers have had their pay cut, 24 percent have had their hours reduced and 24 percent have lost benefits, the survey found.

The campaign, which has the backing of Labour, the Conservatives and the Trades Union Congress, claims that to save jobs half of all respondents would accept short-time working, 29 percent would accept a pay cut without reducing hours, 31 percent would lose benefits, 6 percent would accept a 3-month unpaid sabbatical, and 19 percent accept a sabbatical on 30 percent pay.

Keep Britain Working was set up precisely to advocate such sacrifices by workers of their wages and conditions, so its figures should not be taken at face value. But they cannot be dismissed either. There are far too many examples of workers being told to accept pay cuts of over 10 percent or face job losses-as is currently happening at Axa Healthcare.

The trade unions are complicit in every case. In regard to British Airways, an Airline Pilots’ Association declared, “We have always said that as a union we would share the pain if our members shared in the gain.”

This standpoint must be rejected. Capitalism faces a protracted and systemic crisis that will see millions of workers made unemployed, wages slashed and vital

services destroyed.

There is no mutual interest between the capitalist class and the working class. If sacrifice is called for to ride the recession, the pain will be for the workers alone to bear. The gain will be for the shareholders and the corporations to take. Every concession will only whet their appetites for more and disarm the working class in face of an onslaught that the employers have no choice but to carry out-with utmost ruthlessness.

We are entering into a period of explosive class struggles. And the working class must recognize this and make that recognition the basis of its own response to the worsening economic crisis. It is not a question of saving capitalism, but of mounting an industrial and political struggle independently of the trade unions and based on the fight for a socialist alternative.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact