

Britain: ServisAir staff end nine-day strike at Liverpool's John Lennon Airport

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2 September 2009

ServisAir employees at Liverpool's John Lennon Airport returned to work September 1 following a nine-day strike over the threat of 23 compulsory redundancies.

The action affected the operations of airlines including Ryanair, KLM, Flybe and Thomson. It ended after the General Municipal and Boilermakers (GMB) union reached an agreement with management through the government arbitration service ACAS. At this stage, no details have emerged regarding the agreement.

The threat of redundancies was the latest attack on the 150 baggage handlers and apron staff, who have consistently complained that ServisAir have ridden roughshod over them since taking control of contracts from the owners of the airport, Peel Holdings plc. The dispute began after the staff were handed written confirmation of the company's proposals.

ServisAir had demanded that 50 of the existing staff reapply for just 27 jobs. Workers feared that those who kept their jobs would have been reemployed on new and more onerous contracts, with 23 workers made redundant. A ballot organised by the GMB resulted in a high turnout and returned a near 90 percent vote for strike action. The strike began on August 20.

During the action, the company claimed there was very little disruption to services at the airport. This is contradicted by the fact that Peel Holdings attempted to break the strike action by bringing in replacement workers.

This included the drafting of managers from operations at other airports. This served to anger other GMB members at the airport, including fire fighters. A ballot of the non-striking GMB members was taken last week to decide what action they should take against Peel Holdings. If the ballot were successful, the

removal of fire fighters would cause the airport to close down. The local *Liverpool Echo* stated that "it is understood that ballot will not go ahead now."

Peel Holdings (also known as the Peel Group) is a multibillion-pound company with diverse interests across northern England and Scotland. The firm owns an estimated £4.5 billion in assets, including John Lennon Airport, City Airport Manchester and Robin Hood Airport Doncaster/Sheffield.

They are the joint owners of Durham Tees Valley Airport with a 75 percent holding. Peel Group owns the Trafford Centre, one of the largest and most popular shopping centres in the northwest of England. The company also has interests in land and wind farms. Peel Ports controls Clyde Port Authority, Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, and the Manchester Ship Canal.

Through its subsidiary Marine Terminals Limited, Peel Group is currently in a five-month industrial dispute with dockworkers at its port in Dublin, Ireland. The dispute is over the company's attempt to enforce compulsory redundancies on 13 of its crane drivers, without negotiating the redundancy package with the union, SIPTU.

A further 9 crane drivers have since been issued redundancy notices, bringing the total to 22. Peel Ports has now issued redundancies to virtually all of the staff on strike and have said it wants to reduce the number of crane operators from more than 40 to just 15.

ServisAir is also a large multinational company. Its web site claims to have a team of "dedicated employees who work around the clock to look after the needs of our 700 customers, handling 1.1 million aircraft movements, 81 million passengers and 900,000 tonnes of cargo per year." The company has operations in 138 locations, including the United States, Canada and

Europe. This includes its 30 locations in the UK and Ireland. Its turnover last year was €4.34 billion.

The GMB is on record as being ready to accept redundancies. On August 29, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter spoke with GMB official Eddie Parker. He was asked if the union would accept voluntary redundancies if offered by ServisAir. “Yes we would,” he replied. The secretary of the GMB branch at the airport also stated, “Our fight is to have no compulsory redundancies and keep our terms and conditions.”



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