

Britain: Strike mandate at British Airways put “on hold” by Unite union

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On Thursday, the Unite trade union announced that it had put any industrial action against British Airways (BA) “on hold” while it continues negotiations with airline management under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress.

The announcement comes despite a massive vote for strike action by BA’s 12,000-strong cabin crew staff in response to the ongoing assault on their jobs, wages and working conditions.

When the ballot result was announced Monday, Unite refused to set any date for action and instead promised that a strike would not take place over Easter. It now claims that it is possible to arrive at an equitable solution with BA management through negotiations. But while the union claims that conciliation is possible, the airline is pressing ahead with its plans to shed a further 4,900 jobs in addition to the 1,000 already lost, as part of its £80 million cost-cutting drive.

The dispute began in November last year, after BA unilaterally imposed new working practices, reducing cabin crews on long-haul flights from London’s Heathrow Airport—where the majority of its cabin staff work—from 15 to 14.

A strike ballot over these changes in December returned an overwhelming vote for action. But the planned 12-day walkout over Christmas was barred by the High Court, after BA successfully mounted a legal challenge, arguing that some of those balloted were not entitled to vote because they had already accepted redundancy.

The High Court intervened again on BA’s behalf last week when it dismissed a challenge by Unite that changes to working practices and the imposition of a pay freeze were illegal. The court ruling meant that “the modest changes we made to onboard crew numbers on flights from Heathrow were reasonable, did not breach crew contracts and can remain in place,” BA said.

The company has denounced the second strike ballot

result as “very disappointing” and said that any action is “unjustified.” It suggested that it might seek to have the vote quashed judicially once again. In a statement, management warned, “The vast majority of crew who voted in this ballot will have done so before the High Court decision [on changes to working practices]. We hope Unite will bear this fact in mind as it considers its next steps.”

It threatened, “We will not allow Unite to ruin this company. Should a strike take place, we will do everything we can to protect our customers’ travel plans as far as possible.”

BA has been training staff to act as strikebreakers in the event of industrial action. According to Ken Abard, an official of the British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA—a section of Unite), BA has established the Professional Cabin Crew Council as a scab union and suspended 20 employees on charges of gross misconduct for criticising the company on Facebook.

BA and the media, which is universally hostile to any strike, have made much of the slight percentage differences in turnout and the “yes” vote between December’s ballot and that in January. Such claims are meant to conceal the fact that, despite the passage of more than a month and a hostile campaign by BA, the courts and the media, cabin crew staff voted by four-to-one in favour of strike action. An on-line poll indicated that more than a third of the workers wanted any strike to last at least 10 days.

In the face of such overwhelming solidarity, management and the media are seeking to undermine public support for a strike by portraying BA cabin crew members as an overpaid section of workers who are wilfully biting the hand that feeds them. According to this propaganda, BA faces a severe financial crisis that jeopardises its future. But rather than helping “save” the company, its cabin crews, by raising the threat of

industrial action, are further undermining the firm and ultimately destroying their own jobs.

In reality, many BA cabin crew workers have a starting salary of just £11,000 a year, rising to “barely £20,000 after 12 years’ service,” according to union figures. Yet, BA chief executive Willie Walsh, who earns more than £740,000 a year, insists that they should be prepared to accept pay freezes.

It is indisputable that the airline industry internationally is in crisis, as part of the global economic downturn. But the major carriers are seeking to utilise this to restructure the industry at the direct expense of workers’ jobs and conditions, not to protect the workers’ interests, as the apologists for the airlines claim.

In a separate case, the pilots’ union BALPA has gone to the Supreme Court to argue against changes to BA’s policy on holiday pay. BA has rejected that holiday pay should be calculated on total—as opposed to basic—salary. Claims are also in against Virgin, BMI, Easyjet and Cityflyer.

The BA vote must be seen in the context of a European-wide battle between the continent’s major airlines for market share. French air traffic controllers are currently engaged in a five-day strike against plans for deregulation under the European Union’s “Single European Sky” initiative. A treaty due to be signed by France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland later this year provides for the merging of control centres and elimination of “surplus” workers.

European-wide efforts to restructure the air industry were at the heart of a planned four-day stoppage by Lufthansa pilots, which was aborted on Monday by the German Cockpit union. Lufthansa is amongst the most profitable airlines in the world. Since 2008, it has bought up several others, including Brussels Airlines, Austrian Airlines (AUA) and BMI, and has started up its own carrier in Italy, Lufthansa Italia. Its expansion is intended to enable it to compete against low-cost airlines, in part by transferring jobs to its lower-paying subsidiaries.

BA has the same goal. Through pay freezes and other cost-cutting measures, the company returned a £25 million profit for the last three months of 2009. It now intends to push this further.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Gregor Gall suggested that the company was not only indifferent to the impact of its actions on staff morale, but hoped to exploit employee anger and disgust for its own ends. Employee dissatisfaction could “end up with staff either leaving or being so demoralised that they are unable to deliver the

necessary ‘service with a smile,’ ” he wrote. “...But that, ironically, might be just what BA is after—because what it really wants to do is open up a non-union, low-cost operation that can compete with the likes of easyJet and Ryanair.”

For all BA’s repeated threats against the unions, it is Unite that is playing the critical role in facilitating such plans. Like Cockpit, a major factor determining its actions is concern that the struggles of its members could become part of a European-wide movement. Without the intervention of the unions, air travel across much of Europe would have been significantly reduced this week under the impact of strikes in France, Germany and Britain.

Even more worrying for the trade union bureaucracy as a whole, such action would act as a lightning rod for the discontent of all sections of the working class across the continent now under attack by governments seeking to impose austerity measures.

No doubt, behind closed doors, BA has warned the British unions that any strike would undermine its competitive position against its major rivals, while in Germany Lufthansa will have done the same.

Unite has already made a series of concessions to management. Last year, it proposed a major package of “negotiated efficiencies,” with Unite National Secretary for Aviation Steve Turner pledging that until an “upturn in the global economy,” the union “will work with the company on the introduction of temporary measures aimed at ensuring stability and security of employment for our members and their families.” The union’s proposals included a company-wide deferral of the pay award due for 2009/2010 and “headcount efficiencies.”

BA rejected the union’s presentation of these concessions as “temporary” exigencies that could be repaid in the future. As far as BA is concerned, there is to be no future payback in return for supposedly “shared” sacrifices.



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