

French air traffic controllers' strike strengthens on second day

Antoine Lerougetel, Alex Lantier
25 February 2010

The strike of air traffic controllers in France spread yesterday, amid widespread opposition of workers throughout the European air transport system to rationalise the industry at their expense.

The controllers had struck for two days in January and they have followed up with the current four-day strike launched on Tuesday, at the height of the winter holiday season. It followed on from a two-day strike in January. On its first day, Tuesday, it hit the Paris airports, grounding 50 percent of planes at Orly and 25 percent at Charles de Gaulle airport. In the provinces, Pau, Grenoble, and La Rochelle airports were shut. At Lyon-Saint Exupéry, 43 of 345 flights were cancelled.

The strike also disrupted flights due to pass through French air space from other hubs, including Amsterdam, Brussels and Geneva. Lufthansa also reported delays on flights due to overfly France.

On Wednesday morning the figures were similar in Paris, while no planes took off from Rennes, Lille, La Rochelle and Biarritz airports and there were 44 cancellations in Lyon, 25 in Marseille and 34 in Nice. Air traffic controllers in Greece also struck on that day, as part of the general strike against the harsh austerity measures being forced on the Greek social democratic government by the European Union, in order to reduce Greece's debt and avoid sovereign default.

Air traffic controllers will be joined by Air France pilots on a four-day strike starting Friday against reorganisation of the company and raising the retirement age. Serious disruptions of flights are expected during this holiday weekend.

There is a further strike ongoing by unionised sailors of the SNCM and CMN companies that link France, especially the Marseille port, to the Mediterranean island of Corsica. Funds were cut by 10 percent in 2009, leading to the elimination of 108 crossings from a yearly total of 400.

The air traffic controllers joint union committee was called in by the government on Wednesday to attempt to end the strike. The committee has stated that the strike will be continued "until it gets the necessary guarantees."

This came as the trade unions announced the lifting yesterday of the strike against oil company Total, even though the government and management had not agreed to the strike's central demand: that all six Total refineries in France remain open.

Workers are striking against a plan to rationalize European airspace control—the "Functional Airspace Block: Europe Central" (FABEC) project—amid fears it will lead to large-scale job losses and attacks on working conditions.

Air safety in France is the responsibility of the public General Directory for Civil Aviation (DGAC). Workers fear that the project will lead to the dismantling of the DGAC and threaten the jobs and civil service status of its 12,000 staff, of which 4,400 are controllers. They also oppose the large reduction of jobs planned for 2010 and 2011 as part of the RGPP—the general revision of public policy, part of which is the non-replacement of half of all retiring government workers.

The FABEC plan was announced after a European civil aviation summit on November 18, 2008. An account of the summit proceedings noted that "in the context of the current financial crisis and economic slowdown," the airspace of six European countries—Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and Switzerland—should be merged.

The military is closely involved with FABEC. The DGAC noted: "The civil and military state authorities in charge of airspace and air traffic management, Air Chiefs of Staff and [air traffic management] directors met in a high-level conference in Paris on January 21, 2010 to reflect on the major issues in the military-civilian interface that are at stake in the FABEC project."

Currently, the European sky remains broadly divided into 27 different national airspaces under the control of national governments: “This fragmentation forces airlines to zig-zag between 27 different airspaces—each serviced by a different air navigation service provider on the basis of different rules and requirements—making them fly further and thus increasing emissions and costs for operators.... [The FABEC plan includes] binding performance targets for air navigation service providers and a target date of 2012 for member states to establish cross-border cooperation among themselves through ‘functional airspace blocks’ (FABs).”

The FABEC plan clearly threatens large-scale cuts, despite a surge in air traffic. The FABEC area is expecting a rise in aviation traffic of some 50 percent by 2018. The plan, according to the DGAC feasibility study of July 2008, is to save “€7 billion by 2025, halve the cost of air traffic control, increase safety by a factor of 10 and reduce the impact on the environment by 10 percent per flight.”

The DGAC notes that job losses will depend on how the integration proceeds: “In a model using contractual cooperation only, impact on working conditions and staffing will be limited. If integration into an alliance is considered, some functions may be centralised, and impact at the level of individual organisations need to be determined.” The DGAC called for the “involvement of social partners in the social dialogue process,” i.e., for the trade unions to negotiate with management to plan the implementation of cuts.

Government ministers tried to downplay the risk of further job cuts arising from the FABEC plan, and called for a rapid end to the strike.

The political context for the air traffic controllers strike is the European debt crisis centered in Greece. With Germany and France demanding austerity measures against Greece in exchange for a bailout, the question is directly posed: can European institutions be left at the hands of the financial aristocracy, or must they be subordinated to the social needs of the working class?

As workers’ recent experience at Total demonstrates, a major obstacle facing the working class in its struggle to defend its living standards is the political treachery of the trade unions, who seek at all costs to isolate and shut down different workplace struggles. This underlines the critical importance of a socialist perspective to unite the European working class in struggle against governments and trade unions.

The French government still hopes the trade unions will

be able to isolate and sell out the air traffic controllers’ strike. After a meeting with trade unions, Ecology Minister Jean-Louis Borloo said: “We must reassure the personnel that their public-sector status will be maintained, we must reassure them on the future status of the European body that will be discussed, and listen to all the actors in the French air system to see what they have to propose.”

Earlier that day, Borloo had said he hoped “that in the coming hours, this conflict ... will be resolved, I hope by the end of the day.”

A February 23 article in the conservative daily *Figaro* accused air traffic controllers of organising illegal work schedules, reducing their workloads and endangering airplane safety. The article was based on a hostile report by the state finance watchdog, the *Cour des comptes*.

Significantly, government officials did not dare openly criticize the strikers. In response to the *Figaro* article, secretary of state for transport, Dominique Bussereau, said: “The controllers are elite government workers, very conscientious people.” He added that “since 1973 no accident involving air traffic controllers had happened in France.”

It is clear, however, that the government and airport management hope to push through cuts by waiting out the strike. On February 22 the Union des Aéroports Français issued a statement warning: “This strike will have heavy consequences for passengers, airlines and the airports.” It stressed that “French air traffic suffers from a lack of competitiveness,” noting that France “is in fourth place in Europe in terms of air traffic volume.”

It haughtily concluded: “Civil aviation personnel should get over their ‘siege mentality’ syndrome and come to grips with reality.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact