The capitulation of the German pilots' union

Peter Schwarz
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Lufthansa pilots, who originally planned to strike for four days, broke off their action after just one day. On Monday, the pilots' trade union, Cockpit, capitulated to the combined pressure of management, the media and the German government. Before the Frankfurt industrial court, the union pledged to return to the negotiating table and suspend its strike until March 8 without preconditions.

This means that Cockpit has renounced the original aim of the strike. The only issue to be settled now is the remuneration of pilots in the wage area covered by Germany. The purpose of the strike—to prevent the farming out of jobs to low-wage subsidiaries of the company—has simply been discarded.

One reason above all lay behind the capitulation of Cockpit. Unexpectedly, the pilots union emerged as the spearhead of a European-wide movement which threatens to directly confront European governments and the institutions of the European Union. The union was neither prepared nor willing to support such a movement. This is why it eagerly grasped the initiative offered by the government and the Frankfurt industrial court, which called for an immediate resumption of negotiations.

In violation of German industrial law, Federal Minister of Transport Peter Ramsauer of the Christian Social Union (CSU) intervened in the Lufthansa dispute last weekend, demanding a return to the negotiating table. The same demand was raised on Monday by the Frankfurt court, where Lufthansa had lodged a provisional claim against the strike.

The presiding judge hesitated to ban the strike in what would have been a clear breach of the right to strike. Instead, she urged both parties to voluntarily return to negotiations.

Cockpit immediately took up the offer. In a press statement, the union welcomed "the resumption of the negotiations without preconditions" and "the mediation efforts of Transport Minister Dr. Peter Ramsauer."

The pilots were in an extremely strong position at the point when the union called off the action. Almost 100 percent of the pilots had walked out and more than half of Lufthansa's flights were grounded on Monday. Lufthansa was able to fly the remaining flights only by chartering replacement planes from other airlines at considerable expense, and by using management personnel who were trained pilots. A continuation of the strike would have had a severe financial impact on the company.

Even more significant is the fact that the pilots' strike was the first of a series of cross-border actions in opposition to European-wide efforts to restructure the air industry at the expense of airline staff.

On Monday, the Independent Flight Attendants Organization (UFO), which represents 16,000 cabin crew at Lufthansa, threatened to begin token strikes if the company refused to immediately conduct negotiations on working conditions and salaries.

In Great Britain, 12,000 cabin crew at British Airways voted on the same day by 80 percent for strike action against threatened cuts.

In France, air traffic controllers began a four-day strike on Tuesday to oppose attacks on working conditions and job losses due to the amalgamation of the European air traffic control system.

On Saturday, pilots at Air France are due to strike against rationalization measures and job cuts, while in Greece a general strike against the economic policy of the Papandreou government threatens to paralyze the country's entire air traffic network on Wednesday.

The German media went on the offensive to slander the Lufthansa pilots as a privileged group seeking to defend their lavish salaries and soft working conditions at the expense of others. In fact, the reality is very different. The pilots' strike was part of an effort to prevent the transformation of the air industry, which formerly offered relatively secure and well-paid jobs, into a center of cheap wages and miserable working conditions.

Such a transformation has long since taken place in the US. The precondition for this was the defeat of a number of bitter strikes and industrial actions which were suppressed by the government and sabotaged by the

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unions.

A similar transformation is now in full swing in Europe. The European Commission has been encouraging the deregulation of air traffic. Numerous low-cost airlines have been established, which serve as a lever for attacks on the wages and conditions at the mainstream airlines. In the meantime, companies such as Ryanair, Easyjet and Air Berlin have emerged as the continent's biggest airlines.

The international economic crisis has only served to intensify the price war in the air industry. Passenger numbers have decreased, and many companies which formerly funded expensive Business Class flights for their employees now use low-cost airlines. The airlines have repeatedly imposed new rounds of cuts.

Lufthansa plans to cut its costs by one billion euros per year through 2011 and reduce its work force annually by 5 percent in its passenger division and 10 percent in its freight division. British Airways wants to cut 1,700 posts from its total of 13,000 flight attendants, while Air France plans to reduce its personnel by 4.4 percent per year by not filling vacancies and encouraging 1,700 employees to voluntarily quit their jobs.

The trade unions are completely unable to counter such attacks. They accept the conditions dictated by the capitalist profit system, which forces the companies to undertake new rounds of cuts to satisfy the demands of shareholders. The unions strive for the closest possible cooperation with their respective governments and managements and support their efforts to increase the profitability of their national economy in the face of international competition.

They are hostile to any labor disputes, which stand in the way of their collaboration with management and the government. This is why Germany's biggest public sector union, Verdi, which represents ground personnel at Lufthansa, publicly attacked the pilots' strike.

When questioned by a German newspaper, Verdi spokeswoman Cornelia Hass refused to declare her solidarity with the striking pilots. She told the *Junge Welt*: "When it comes down to it, the pilots are only concerned about themselves," and then sought to justify Verdi's claim to be the sole representative for air personnel: "Perhaps Lufthansa realizes in such disputes that it was not the most intelligent strategy to involve three trade unions in the company."

The perspective of the Cockpit union does not differ fundamentally from that of Verdi. As a specialized trade union, Cockpit shares the corporatist outlook of Verdi and regards the problems of pilots from a limited, national standpoint.

This was apparent from an interview with chief Cockpit negotiator Thomas von Sturm in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* directly before the strike began. Sturm stressed that in the name of "competitiveness," Cockpit was quite ready in principle to agree to a "modernization" of contract agreements, but added, "That has to take place through agreement by both sides and not just because Lufthansa no longer recognises the contract."

He then said he was also prepared to allow the validity of the existing contract "to be checked judicially" and to agree to a "ceasefire" until then—a proposal readily adopted by the Frankfurt industrial court.

Cockpit had neither reckoned with, nor desired, the international resonance to the pilots' strike. It reacted with shock and immediately called off the action.

Two important lessons must be drawn from this development. First, the defense of jobs, wages and working conditions requires the international unity of the working class. The perspective of the trade unions, which subordinates the interests of workers to the competitive needs of an individual company or nation state, is utterly reactionary.

Second, the defense of social gains can be carried out only on the basis of a political perspective which challenges the foundations of the capitalist system. The only way to halt the current spiral of social decline and secure reasonable incomes is the reorganization of the entire economy on the basis of satisfying social needs, rather than the profit interests of big business. This requires above all the building of a new workers' party, which fights for an international socialist program.

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