

BA strikers: “It is time to stop this rush to the bottom”

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking cabin crew staff at Heathrow and Manchester airports. Strikers wish to remain anonymous in order to avoid being victimised.

At Manchester, one worker said, “I’ve worked over 20 years at BA and I work out of Heathrow. When they shut the bases at Manchester, Glasgow, Belfast, a lot of people were forced to work long haul. There’s always been a big North West community. The job has always paid a semi-fair wage but never a big London wage, so a lot of people lived outside of London.

“On jobs cut on aircraft, you had four cabin crew and now you have three. On an aircraft where you had 11, you’ve now got 10 and on the jumbo where you had 16, you’ve now got 14. So already on some aircraft, they are saving 25 percent in crew savings. On the jumbos and triple 7s they are saving 12 to 15 percent because of the seniority and the pay scale.

“That’s not enough for them. They just want to smash the union. We have concerns over our right and safety practise that just don’t work as well with fewer people. And the customer doesn’t do as well with 25 percent fewer people to serve them.

“We had a first ballot in which we got 92 percent in favour of the strike. I know someone who is a teacher, and he said that his union has never got such a large support in favour of action. And yet a bunch of really non-politicised women and men, who are not historically really militant, have voted by 92 percent in favour.

“In the press today, apparently I’m earning £250 an hour. Well if I did, I would not be driving the car I am with a lot of miles on the clock. What I am seeing is that when you are involved in a dispute, you do get politicised quickly. I think it’s important that people like you come out and support us, and that people have to maybe stop reading the front page of the *Daily Mail*. I think what we need is for the workers of this country to stand up now and again against oppression.

“We are being played by the Tory media as the pariahs. But what really sticks in my throat is that we pay a political levy to the Labour Party and we haven’t seen anything from it apart from Lord Adonis calling us deplorable and despicable. Meanwhile he’s a ‘taxi cab for hire’ with his mate Stephen Byers. And we have had Gordon Brown attacking the strikes.

“At the end of the day if 92 percent of the workforce has voted in ballot something is wrong and this is in the middle of a recession. What really annoys me is we have banners up here today saying we are willing to take a pay cut. We have bent over backwards. They will save massive money, yet we are still here saying we are willing to work for less.

“It is time we stopped this rush to the bottom. It’s a recession, and we are all struggling. I agree with you that worker’s shouldn’t pay for this. It came out in the company report this week that our top seven managers between them got £4 million in share options. Now apparently this strike is all over £10 million. That is rubbish. I think they want to smash the unions and get us all on Easyjet wages, and once that is done to merge with Iberian Airlines.

“Then there is the £3.7 billion pension deficit behind this company. Now if the company was to go bust then that would go overnight, and they would get rid of that.

“There have been millions given to a union busting firm in the United States. There was an operation called Operation Columbus, which was about how they could get a cheaper and more flexible crew. This was three years ago, and we found out two and half years ago, and our mistake was not to strike then.

“Back in the day we had this place pretty sown up. In the 1970s and even the 80s we had this place pretty solid. Back then nothing would have moved out of Manchester if we were on strike. The firemen wouldn’t have turned up. The baggage people wouldn’t have turned up. I really don’t think we have anything to lose on this. This is win or bust. You can accept the way of the world or try to change it like you guys.

“A mate of mine in the union said last year this is going to

be like the miners' strike of the 2010s. And having lived through that and done my bit for the miners, I think he is right. We have to stand up and be counted."

Another flight attendant said that his base pay was around £11,000 a year, "We don't want to be out on strike, but we have been pushed into a corner by management."

"The media is very one-sided. There was a lunch put on by the company last year, where BA gave journalists free airline tickets, etc. [BA boss] Willie Walsh is on £740,000, with perks, bonuses and shares. It's not about money. They don't want us. They can get cheap foreign labour, gap year students, young people living with mum and dad."

"They're going to cut salary for new hires and create a new kind of job, with £2.40 expenses. This will result in staff flying long haul flights to places like Tokyo, where the cost of living is high. It's going to be expensive. Take home salary could be £1,200 a month, but you've got to commute to Heathrow, or find a flat in West London. So living in a two-bedroom flat with another worker, the rent is £800."

Another striking attendant said, "What is at stake is my job, the future, my family, my income. I have been at BA more than 20 years. Basically Willie Walsh wants to break the cabin crew community and the union."

"We have been involved in two or three strikes over the years, but I've never felt as intimidated as this. We have got 20 or 30 colleagues that have been suspended just for using freedom of speech on Facebook, personal texts or elsewhere. They have taken staff's travel away from them."

"There is about a third of the workforce that commutes from Spain or France, and they have taken their staff travel away from them. They use this to actually get to work. I don't even know how that is going to work."

BA cabin crews at Heathrow have set up a strike headquarters at Bedfont Football Club and are maintaining five picket lines, restricted to 12 strikers, around the airport perimeter.

One picket explained that Willie Walsh was once chief negotiator for the Irish Airline Pilots Association, before becoming CEO of the Aer Lingus subsidiary Futura. "He learnt the tricks of the trade in IAPA. He was a poacher turned gamekeeper. He sacked thousands in Ireland and turned Aer Lingus into a low cost carrier. Now he's out to do the same here. He has to smash the union," he added.

Maria criticised the £734,000 salary that Walsh earns. She has worked for the company for 13 years and still earns less than £20,000 a year. She does not get any other allowances or other "perks." "Few people get the £30,000 that the newspapers keep talking about...as if that is a high wage anyway."

"What the media is saying about us is all fiction. No one is telling the true facts. Crew only get a free flight after 10 years of service."

She explained that BA recruited cabin crew from across Europe who often had to fly to Heathrow to start their shifts. Now BA have stopped paying for them, saying, "Make your own way in!"

Maria criticised the British Airline Pilots' Association for negotiating with BA a £500 incentive for pilots and other flight crew to work as cabin crew. It was particularly disgusting, Maria added, that flight crew were scabbing on the cabin crews as BALPA is in dispute with BA over £600 holiday pay for pilots. Last Wednesday the Supreme Court allowed the union's case to be referred to the European Court of Justice. Maria pointed out that Virgin Airline pilots are also considering strike action over a pay freeze.

J. said it would be "brilliant" if all Unite workers at Heathrow came out on strike in support of cabin crews. "The support from ground staff and bus drivers is 'unbelievable,'" she said. "But I don't know how we are going to get [Unite General Secretary] Woodley to get everyone out. They should have balloted everyone at the beginning."

"Walsh doesn't want to back down. He's taken away the original offer BA made."

J. said that she had worked for BA for 23 years. "It has been my life. At one time I would have gone in to work despite all sorts of family problems, but not now. One crew member has asked for compassionate leave next Tuesday to go to her father-in-law's funeral, but this was refused."

Another picket added that he had been refused such requests in the past: "It just goes to show that this job isn't as easy as the papers say."

Our reporters received a friendly response from the picket lines, but when one went into the strike headquarters to hand out leaflets, a union official stormed up shouting aggressively, "Haven't I told you to stay outside the gate with the other lot? Stop trying to hijack this strike. Get out now."



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