

British Airways strike provokes fury in media and political establishment

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A ferocious campaign is under way by the political establishment and the media against the strike by British Airways cabin crew, scheduled to begin this weekend.

Its aim is not only to intimidate the 12,000 BA workers immediately involved, but to threaten any workers seeking to defend their jobs and conditions in advance of the massive austerity measures now being drawn up by all the official parties.

Earlier this week the Conservatives unveiled a dossier entitled “Charlie Whelan’s New Militant Tendency,” purporting to show that Prime Minister Gordon Brown is “in hock” to trade union militants and leftists. Using the fact that Labour receives much of its funding from the trade unions—and the Unite union in particular, which organises BA cabin crew—the Tories claim to have discovered that Brown is a “wholly owned subsidiary of the big trade unions,” who they say are intent on class war.

The accusations are absurd on their face. The Militant Tendency was a centrist organisation that worked for decades in the Labour Party as a loyal pressure group. In the mid-1980s it became the target for a witch-hunt by the Labour bureaucracy—supported by the trade unions—as it sought to finally sever any connections between the party and its previous reformist policies.

Much of the present-day leadership of the Labour Party, and not a few amongst the trade unions, earned their spurs in this campaign, which culminated in the creation of “New Labour” as the political representative of the financial oligarchy.

The Charlie Whelan of the dossier’s title is a typical representative of this layer. A former public school boy and City trader, he became a member of the Stalinist Communist Party during the 1980s when it was playing the leading political role in fashioning “New Labour.” In 1992 he joined Labour where, as one of its “spin doctors,” he played a key role in helping consolidate the party’s rightward trajectory as it renounced any connection with the working class and sought to consolidate its relations with big business.

So complete has been this transformation that the Tories

now declare it is they who represent the best traditions of “New Labour.”

The government has, moreover, made clear its absolute hostility to the strike at BA, with Brown describing it as “unjustified and deplorable” and Transport Secretary Lord Adonis decrying Unite for planning a “totally unjustified” series of strikes.

That Whelan himself combines support for New Labour with his employment as political director for Unite only confirms the integral role of the trade unions in maintaining Labour in power, despite popular opposition to its militarist agenda in Afghanistan and Iraq and the privatisation of large sections of the public sector.

As for Unite being bent on class war, its record in the BA dispute shows that the class on whose behalf it really functions is the property-owning class. It is doing everything possible to prevent a strike, holding last-minute talks with BA throughout yesterday. This is in line with its past record.

The cabin crew dispute began in November, after management unilaterally reduced the number of staff on long-haul flights from London’s Heathrow Airport. The reduction was part of the airline’s £80 million cost-cutting drive, which has already seen 1,000 jobs lost since last year.

A strike ballot in December returned an overwhelming vote for action, which was called off after a High Court ruling. A second ballot in February again registered a four-to-one vote in favour of strike action. But while BA openly set about organising a scab force to break any strike, Unite bent over backwards to accommodate management demands.

For weeks, Unite refused to set any strike date, hoping that talks with the arbitration service, ACAS, brokered by the Trades Union Congress, would enable it to present a supposed “compromise” to its members. According to the *Guardian*, Unite and its Bassa cabin crew branch had presented their own cost-cutting package to BA, said to be worth £10 million a year, including a 2.6 percent pay cut. Unite was also reported to have agreed terms that would enable BA to create a separate fleet, staffed by cabin crew on lower wages, and had revised its earlier call for the

reinstatement of 1,000 jobs down to just 184.

On Wednesday, BA upped the ante when it refused to drop disciplinary charges against 38 flight attendants. Management is said to be “frustrated” at Unite’s inability to bring its members to heel and is demanding that the union guarantee acceptance of its cost-cutting measures—i.e., that it impose management diktat irrespective of the mandate from cabin crew.

As another signal of union goodwill to management, it was announced this week that the trade unions at BA agreed a separate deal with the company over the £3.7 billion “hole” in the airline’s pension schemes, under which staff will have to pay an additional 4.5 percent of their salaries into the scheme or face a reduction in the final pay-out.

Both the pension deal and the reduction of staffing and wage rates are crucial to BA’s planned merger with Spain’s Iberia airline, which is now set to be agreed on March 25.

Behind the scenes, Unite and the government are doing their utmost to find a resolution in BA’s interests. Unite leader Tony Woodley has repeatedly requested that BA retract its original cuts package in return for an immediate suspension of strike action.

The *Daily Mail* complained that their efforts are “hampered by the fact that Unite bosses seem unable to control militant shop stewards.”

Writing in the *Sun* newspaper, Trevor Kavanagh went further, describing the threatened BA strike as a “campaign of industrial terror” being conducted by the “terrorist wing” of the trade union movement.

What accounts for this hysteria? After all, should the strike go ahead despite the union’s best intent, it will see the first picket lines at Heathrow in 13 years.

In the first instance, the stand by BA cabin crew is seen as jeopardising BA’s attempts to use the global economic crisis to restructure its business at workers’ expense, and thus consolidate its market share against its major competitors.

The dispute must be seen in the context of efforts across the airline industry globally to destroy working conditions and tens of thousands of jobs.

Air traffic controllers in France and Lufthansa pilots in Germany have been involved in strikes against such measures. At Gatwick, 120 workers were told they face layoffs and being made to reapply for their jobs on reduced conditions, as part of the restructuring plans of the airport’s new owners. Earlier this month, Republic of Ireland airline Aer Lingus announced 670 job cuts as part of an £88 million cost-cutting exercise. After cabin crew voted to reject compulsory redundancies, the airline issued 230 workers with 30 days notice of their sackings.

More ominous still, in Spain 27 airport workers face possible imprisonment on sedition and disorderly conduct

charges—drawn up under the Franco fascist dictatorship—arising from their role in a 2006 strike at Barcelona airport. The workers are employed by Iberia—BA’s planned partner.

Such attacks are on the agenda of all the global capitalist concerns and their political representatives in government. Having spent billions bailing out the banks and financial institutions, the cost is to be recouped from the working class.

In Greece, the PASOK government is implementing draconian austerity policies against workers’ living standards, wages and public services in what is regarded as a test case for similar measures being replicated across Europe.

In Britain, all the official parties are preparing to impose public spending cuts of up to 20 percent after the General Election expected May 6. As a consequence, it is by no means certain that any of the official parties in Britain will command enough popular support to form the next government.

The *Telegraph* complained that, according to a recent opinion poll, “50 percent of voters do not think any cuts are necessary”, while “alarmingly, 48 percent think spending should increase.”

Denouncing such public “complacency,” it continued that the country is “in for a grim few years for which we have not been prepared.”

In a separate comment, the newspaper queried whether any of the official parties were prepared for what is to come. “Is there a Tory strategy for dealing with the risk of widespread strike action,” it asked. “What has the front bench learnt from those early Thatcher years of unrest? Any repeat of those scenes, or indeed of [Labour Prime Minister] Jim Callaghan’s final year in office [the “Winter of Discontent], would be seen, quite rightly, as a failure of foresight and planning on the part of Tory high command.”

Workers must take a sharp warning these events. The powers-that-be are aware that their class-war agenda will meet with widespread disaffection and resistance, which they fear the trade unions will not be able to continue to sabotage in their usual fashion. Kavanagh’s equation of a strike by BA cabin crew with “terrorism” is a sinister indication of the “foresight and planning” under way within sections of the ruling elite.



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