

British Airways strike: What happened to the pledges of international solidarity?

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If one wants to understand how businesses and governments are able to impose job and wage cuts and other austerity measures, despite popular opposition, the dispute at British Airways provides the answer.

BA cabin crew are involved in a series of strikes against the airline's attempts to rip up existing conditions. As part of its planned merger with Spain's Iberia airline aimed at consolidating their market share, BA is seeking to impose £80 million in cuts and shed thousands of jobs. The airline began its offensive in November when it arbitrarily reduced the number of crew on long-haul flights. BA also plans a two-year pay freeze, as well as introducing new contracts on lower rates of pay for new recruits.

According to a BBC interview with a cabin crew member, who has worked for the airline for more than 30 years, "If existing staff want promotion, they will have to join the new fleet which earns only a flat rate of £2.60 per hour flying pay, with no meal allowances, overtime or long-range payments paid."

The management's offensive has the support of the Labour government. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has denounced the strike as "unjustified", while Foreign Secretary David Miliband said the government "deplored" the action. The strike has also been opposed by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, with Tory leader David Cameron calling for political backing to strike breakers.

The media too is overwhelmingly hostile. Despite two separate ballots receiving a massive majority in favour of action, cabin crew are routinely denounced for holding the company to ransom. One commentator even equated the strike with terrorism.

More important from a practical standpoint, BA has been able to draw on vital support from its business partners. During the three-day strike over the weekend,

the airline spent millions mounting a strike breaking operation. BA hired some 25 planes from other airlines and charter companies, together with pilots and crew, to enable it to run some of its short-haul services from Heathrow.

The budget airline Ryanair is one of those providing "wet lease" charter assistance—aircraft, crew, maintenance and insurance. Similar arrangements have been entered into with other low-cost airlines such as Jet2, Astraus, Titan, Euro Atlantic, Transavia, Viking and Arkefly. Iberia laid on support to run plans between Heathrow and Madrid.

Contrast this with the response of the trade unions covering the global airline industry.

On paper at least, the Unite trade union has more extensive international contacts than BA. These connections potentially have far more clout than BA CEO Willie Walsh could even dream of. Ostensibly representing the very people that enable the various airlines to run efficiently and safely on a daily basis, the unions could bring the entire industry to a standstill and wreck the best laid plans of BA and any other airline.

This is especially vital at a time when airline workers internationally are facing a combined assault on their jobs and conditions. French, German and Italian airline personnel have been involved in industrial action against the same type of attacks as those being forced through at BA. In Ireland hundreds of cabin crew employed by Aer Lingus have been summarily sacked.

Unite briefed its overseas counterparts on the BA dispute as far back as November, just four days before the first ballot by cabin crew returned an overwhelming majority in favour of industrial action. A meeting of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), involving 751 unions, in 154 countries with a combined membership of nearly five million took place that

month. Further discussions were held at the European Transport Workers Federation (ETF) conference in Spain in December and again at a conference of the ETF's cabin crew section in Belgium in February.

Numerous pledges of “solidarity action” with BA staff and “sympathy” for their cause were made. In addition to the ITF and ETF, the Australian Transport Workers Union, Germany's Ver.Di, along with their counterparts in Europe, North America and Asia were said to have expressed their support.

Just days before the first BA strike commenced, Unite's national officer for aviation, Steve Turner, flew to the United States to hold talks with Teamster officials. A statement from the Teamsters pledged to “stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters at Unite who are fighting for a fair contract at British Airways... ITF affiliates around the world are mobilizing to support British Airways workers in their fight for passenger safety and worker respect.”

There is widespread sympathy and support amongst airline workers internationally for their British colleagues and this is an important factor in the pledges made by the various unions. But whatever else was discussed between Unite and the Teamsters, or any of the other unions, solidarity action was definitely not on the agenda. While BA management organised a European and global wide strikebreaking effort, the unions ensured there was no co-ordinated international response by their members.

Using typical weasel words, ITF aviation secretary Gabriel Mocho had pledged that member unions would “mobilise to support” the BA strikers.

“That means whatever expression of solidarity they feel is within their power and within the laws of the land where they are located. The cabin crew are being supported in this by everyone from air traffic controllers to refuellers to ground and flight staff, and they want to do what they can to back their colleagues in BA.”

The reference to the “laws of the land” is a red herring. All it means is that while BA management acts with impunity to break a democratically-mandated strike, the unions have allowed it to get on with the job.

BA could boast in a statement at the weekend that its strikebreaking operations were “continuing to work well... around the world. There has been no evidence of industrial action at any overseas airport directed at

British Airways flights.”

Earlier this week, the British media reported that workers employed by Air France were to strike later this week in solidarity with staff at BA. In reality, the trade unions involved—which include the Stalinist-led CGT—are working to ensure that any walk-out is conducted entirely separately from the action in Britain, and is strictly limited to supposedly “French” issues. No doubt the union bureaucracy hopes to utilise Air France's desire to seize competitive advantage from the BA dispute to achieve a deal with the company.

This is in line with the policies of the trade union bureaucracy internationally which works to suppress and sabotage the resistance of the working class. The objectively necessary, and crucial, development of an international offensive by the working class against the attacks of global capital can only take place through a political and organisational rebellion against the trade unions.



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