

French unions end air traffic controllers' strike

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Air traffic controllers returned to work at French airports Saturday morning after their unions accepted worthless guarantees from the government and ended their four-day strike in defence of jobs and state employee status. Their highly effective action had cut flights by 50 percent at Orly and 25 percent at Roissy (Charles de Gaulle Airport), both in Paris, and stopped flights altogether at many provincial airports. Much of the air traffic due to fly over France had also been severely disrupted.

The unions' decision to halt the walk-out as the controllers were about to be joined on strike by Air France pilots was the outcome of joint negotiations with management and the government on Friday. The Force Ouvrière [Workers Power] union declared that "an important step forward" had been achieved.

The air traffic controllers are opposing a plan to rationalize European airspace control, both civil and military. "Functional Airspace Block Europe Central" (FABEC), the "Single European Sky" project, involves Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxemburg and Switzerland. Workers legitimately fear that it will lead to large-scale job losses and attacks on working conditions.

The July 2008 feasibility study set up by the French Civil Aviation Authority (DGAC), which employs 12,000 staff, including 4,400 air traffic controllers, anticipated making €7 billion in savings by 2025 involving a 50 percent reduction in the cost of air traffic control. An aspect of these savings is a policy of replacing only half of all retiring government employees.

The French government has given only verbal assurances on job security and Jean-Louis Borloo, Minister for Ecology, Energy and Sustainable Development, proposed the setting up of yet another government "social partners" type consultative committee, involving union co-operation on the development of FABEC. It was on this completely worthless basis that the union called off the extension of the strike on Friday. Force Ouvrière delegate Didier Pennes described the new committee's brief as "a mandate to include all points of view." In other words, union officials are trying to make sure their interests are protected.

Only two days earlier, after a meeting with the government, the joint union committee had stated that the strike would be continued, "until it gets the necessary guarantees." Committee spokesman Pierre Meybon had declared: "We have ascertained that the proposed guarantees by the ministries [of ecology and transport] were not sufficient, in particular as regards the maintenance of the DGAC as part of the state's public service."

Borloo has appointed the Socialist Party Euro Member of Parliament, Gilles Savary, to head the committee's work in conjunction with the trade unions. Its job is to stifle any further opposition by air traffic controllers in defence of their jobs and conditions.

The same scenario was played out last week when the unions, led by the CGT [General Confederation of Labor], called off the national strike of Total's oil refineries, leaving the workers at the Dunkirk site isolated in their fight to keep their plant open. The unions gained access to a "roundtable" with the

government and Total to discuss national energy resources in the next period.

Within the context of the massive government debt crisis in Europe and the near bankruptcy of many airlines, the proposed airspace control integration can only be realised at the expense of controllers' jobs, and of cabin crew and air transport workers in general, as well as the travelling public, lowering costs for airlines and also the cost of enhancing the European Union's military capacity.

Air France pilots are continuing their strike by minority unions to preserve jobs and conditions. Between 5 and 10 percent of flights are affected. Air France-KLM recorded a fifth successive quarterly deficit. It expects a loss of €574 million for 2009-10. Air industry analysts cite the heavy bill for petrol and losses on medium and short-haul flights. The pilots' unions say Air France wants to make €120 million savings each year on flight crews, which is part of its price war with Easyjet and Ryanair for the low-cost business. It has put in place a "voluntary departure" for 1,700 personnel in 2010.

By ending the strike, the joint trade union committee of air traffic controllers, composed of the CGT, CGC (General Confederation of Management Employees), FO and Unsa (Union of Autonomous Unions), has now assumed the job of imposing President Nicolas Sarkozy's austerity policies on the controllers and has also isolated the pilots' struggle.

At the point when the strikes were at their most effective, both at Total and in air traffic control, the unions have once more come to the rescue of the corporations and Sarkozy's right-wing government.

The rationalising of air traffic control in Europe, in itself a progressive step, will be paid for under capitalism by European workers to prop up the profits of the ailing aircraft industry and the military preparations of European imperialism. The only genuinely rational plan for air traffic control, which respects the workers' skills and public safety, will come through its implementation under the democratic control of the working class within the united socialist

states of Europe, as part of the establishment of workers' governments throughout the continent.



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