

German air traffic controllers prepare strike

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German air traffic controllers have announced that they will take strike action on Monday, in a confrontation with management over wages and workloads. The strike could have a significant impact on air traffic in the region, which has already been crippled by the explosion of a volcano in Iceland this week that released vast amounts of ash into the skies over Europe.

The national executive of the Air Traffic Controllers Union (GdF) voted unanimously in favor of strike action a week ago. This followed a breakdown in contract negotiations with the German air traffic control company, Deutsche Flugsicherung (DFS), and an official announcement that the two sides had failed to reach an agreement.

According to the union, the main issue of contention is so-called “work intensity compensation” for controllers.

GdF executive member Markus Siebers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the workload for air traffic controllers has been rising continuously, fueled by a lack of personnel. The union predicts that an additional 650 air traffic controllers will be required over the course of the next five years. Workers are demanding to be paid for the additional responsibilities they have been forced to shoulder due to the inadequate number of air traffic controllers.

“The question of workload, and working conditions for air traffic controllers in general, concerns not just employees, Siebers noted, “but the broader public.” “It affects the security of passengers. In other words, it is not about the supposed privileges of a particular occupational group, but the well-being of a lot of people,” he continued.

A spokesman for DFS, Axel Raab, has admitted that there is a shortage of air traffic controllers and spoke of the need for an additional 200 air supervisors. In so doing, he indirectly acknowledged the excessively high workload for current air traffic controllers.

Regardless, the DFS’ negotiators have declared that they will not agree to demands for increased compensation for the period from 2009-2010. The head of

personnel for DFS, Jens Bergamann, described the claim made by the GdF as “incomprehensible” and demanded that the union return to the negotiating table.

The company’s profits have soared in recent years. In a business report released in May 2009, DFS boasts of an annual surplus of 49.6 million euros for 2008, a year-over-year profit increase of 18.5 percent. The company report notes that profits would have been even higher were it not for the fact that the global economic crisis led to a fall in returns in the last quarter of the year. These figures make a mockery of the claim by management that DFS cannot afford to compensate overworked air traffic controllers.

Shortly after the company denounced air traffic controllers’ wage demands, the media started a campaign against the employees, labeling them as privileged. The online magazine *Focus* carried a story entitled, “Air traffic controllers earn well and work little. Nevertheless they want to strike for better conditions of work. Their employer regards their demands as unacceptable.”

In fact the demands raised by the air traffic controllers are entirely justified. Only recently a report in *Welt Online* described how a plane belonging to the low-cost carrier Ryanair was forced to land in Berlin because there was no one in the tower at the plane’s destination airport of Altenburg.

The lack of air traffic controllers and intolerable workloads has already caused fatal accidents in the past. In 2002, 71 people died following the collision of two airplanes over Bodensee. This tragic accident could have been avoided if the privatized Swiss air traffic control company, Skyguide, had employed sufficient personnel and the appropriate technical equipment.

These problems, however, have been increasing steadily since the deregulation of European air traffic at the start of the 1990s. Following the decision of the European Commission at the end of that decade to establish a uniform European air space (European Single Sky), airports and air traffic control have been systematically drawn into the ever-fiercer competitive struggle between airlines. The main priority of restructuring the continent’s

air space was not improved security, but rather reducing costs and increasing the competitiveness of air traffic control companies.

Following the Bodensee accident, Marc Baumgartner, the president of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA) declared, "Increased commercial pressure on air traffic control companies everywhere has led to the fact that too few air traffic controllers are trained, and there is not enough investment into important technical equipment. Two thousand extra air traffic controllers are required Europe-wide. Skyguide is by no means an individual case. In the case of many air traffic control companies, such as the German (DFS), many things are no longer done in the way they were when the company was in state hands."

With regard to the excess workload confronting air traffic controllers Baumgartner explained that "under commercial pressure, air traffic control companies will try to become cheaper" by cutting expenditures on personnel, which "constitutes 50-60 percent of operating costs."

The upcoming strike of air traffic controllers' must be seen as part of a broader struggle against the privatisation and commercialization of air traffic control at the expense of workers and the safety of passengers.

Up until 1993, a federal authority (BFS) was responsible for flight safety in Germany. At the start of that year, the authority was semi-privatised, but remained a federal enterprise until an SPD-Green coalition government furthered the process 10 years later.

At the time, Lufthansa and a number of other companies immediately expressed their interest in taking over parts of the BFS but were prevented by a decision from the German president. He balked at the prospect of full privatization, because officially air traffic control involves "sovereign tasks of a special police character" and also covers military operations. The current German government has, however, stated its intention to continue with the process of privatisation. DFS' management is working hand-in-hand with the federal government and the Ministry of Transport on this question.

The political decision to push ahead with the full-scale privatisation of DFS and develop the company into a market leader in Europe is what lies behind management's unyielding and provocative behavior in the current dispute with air traffic controllers. This means that in taking strike action, workers must be prepared for a confrontation with the government, which is undoubtedly aware of the historical lessons of the smashing of the American air traffic controllers strike by the Reagan

administration in 1981.

At that time, US President Ronald Reagan responded to a strike in the industry by declaring it illegal, firing en masse more than 10,000 controllers, and dissolving the union (PATCO). The smashing of the PATCO strike marked the opening shot in a decades-long assault on the jobs, wages and benefits of the industrial working class in the US.

The functionaries in the GdF are attempting to play down the political questions involved in the struggle facing German air traffic controllers today. They are deliberately trying to avoid a confrontation with the government. Instead, the union bureaucracy is offering considerable concessions and seeking to reach an "acceptable settlement." Management, in turn, is using the GdF's readiness to compromise to adopt a hard line stance and hold out for even greater concessions.

In order to defend their wages and working conditions, air traffic controllers must break with the leadership of the GdF and establish independent control over the dispute through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees. Such committees must establish close links to other layers of workers in the airline industry throughout Europe, including pilots, flight attendants, and ground personnel. This must be part of a continent-wide struggle to oppose the assault on workers in the airline industry being carried out by governments and corporations everywhere.

Such a fight will only be successful if it is understood as part of a broader political struggle against capitalist privatisation and the subordination of all social needs to the profit motive on the basis of a socialist program.



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