

Unions isolate struggle at British Airways

2 April 2010

The present wave of strikes throughout Europe, including the recent general strikes in Greece, Portugal and France, represents the initial expression of an emerging mass movement against the job cuts and austerity measures being imposed by governments and corporations in an attempt to make workers pay for the deepening crisis of world capitalism.

But in all these struggles, the trade unions function ever more clearly as an obstacle to the waging of a counteroffensive by the working class.

A case in point is the action by British Airways cabin crew. After two rounds of four-day strikes, the union is calling for fresh talks with management and has pledged not to hold any strikes over Easter. Tony Woodley, joint leader of Unite, told the BBC, “I would like to think ... that ultimately we can get a settlement that means we don’t have any more disputes”.

In an exchange of letters with BA head Willie Walsh, he wrote, “We accept that BA needs to cut costs to survive”.

Woodley has no basis whatsoever to call for fresh talks. BA has made no change in its demand for £80 million in cuts, thousands of job losses and a two-year pay freeze. It intends to introduce a contract for its budget airline subsidiary with a flat rate of £2.60 per hour flying pay, with no meal allowances, overtime or long-range payments. The Unite leadership simply wants to wind up opposition and resume its long and, for itself, lucrative working relationship with management, which has already resulted in thousands losing their jobs.

The same picture is being repeated throughout Europe. If the working class had any genuine leadership acting in its interests, the BA strike would be just one part of a continent-wide offensive by airline workers—pilots, cabin crew and air traffic controllers—who all face similar attacks, as the airlines seek to slash costs in a cut-throat competition for passengers and routes. Instead, the unions have left the

BA workers to fight on their own as disputes in one country after another are either sold out or called off.

Last weekend, a four-day strike of Air France cabin crew was abandoned, as was a strike in February by air traffic controllers, isolating an Air France pilots strike against hundreds of job cuts. A planned six-day strike between March 26 and 31 by pilots at TAP Portugal was abandoned on the basis of a below-inflation 1.8 percent pay agreement.

Even when strikes do take place, such as those by BA and Alitalia cabin crew, as far as the unions are concerned international solidarity action is anathema. Instead, the unions are seeking agreements with management by offering to collaborate in the struggle for market share.

This was summed up by Jorg Handweg, spokesman for the Vereinigung Cockpit union at Lufthansa, which is again threatening action after calling off a strike in February. Reiterating the union’s readiness to accept a 21-month pay freeze and increased productivity, he complained that Lufthansa wants to expand its foreign subsidiaries in order to cut labour costs. “We have worked for years to drive competitors out of our markets, and shortly before these ailing companies leave, Lufthansa buys them up with the money we’ve contributed to earnings”, he said.

The efforts of the trade unions to demobilise the working class find their full measure at Ireland’s Aer Lingus. Last week, cabin crew at Aer Lingus voted by a 92 percent majority to accept a €97 million cost-saving plan that threatens 600 jobs. The vote came only a month after the package was rejected in a previous ballot, and represents a massive vote of no confidence in the Impact trade union leadership, which stressed its happiness that “this result was achieved through a joint negotiating process” and “without any recourse to, or threat of, industrial action at any stage of the negotiations.”

It is significant that BA head Willie Walsh cut his

teeth as chief negotiator for the pilots union IALPA at Aer Lingus before joining management and slashing 2,000 jobs when he became Aer Lingus CEO.

Ever since the 1980s, as exemplified by the betrayal of the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike in the United States and the 1984-85 miners' strike in Britain, the unions internationally have presided over one defeat after another, while integrating themselves into the structures of the major corporations and the state apparatus.

The trade unions today, three decades later, are not workers' organisations in any sense, but a second arm of management, tasked with policing their own members and imposing the dictates of the ruling class. This transformation is rooted in the essentially nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the trade unions, which historically provided the basis for the development of an ossified and privileged bureaucracy that controls the union apparatus.

Whereas in previous periods it was possible for these bureaucratic organisations to secure certain concessions and reforms for their members, through limited mobilisations against the corporations and the state, this has long since ceased to be the case.

Under conditions of an historic crisis of the profit system, the ruling elites demand of the trade union bureaucracy that it ruthlessly suppress the class struggle and line up behind the cost-cutting measures and cull of jobs dictated by global recession and the mounting conflict between corporations and states over dwindling markets.

The working class is faced with the urgent and unavoidable need to build new rank-and-file organisations through which to conduct the class struggle. But this demands above all the building of a new socialist and internationalist leadership that will set out consciously to forge the closest bonds between workers in every country.

As the BA strike has demonstrated, this fight cannot be limited to the industrial arena. From the outset, cabin crew have faced a united offensive by management, government and the media, including High Court Action last December that attempted to prevent their strike from taking place. Yesterday, the same procedure, alleging ballot irregularities, was used by the High Court to prevent signal workers in the Rail Maritime and Transport union from striking Network

Rail for four days next week. The strike on Tuesday was set to coincide with Prime Minister Gordon Brown calling a general election.

Faced with a deepening crisis of its entire system, the ruling class cannot tolerate any expression of opposition to its austerity measures and will act with utmost ruthlessness. The working class must respond in kind, by waging a political struggle for socialism.

Chris Marsden



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact