

The European air traffic crisis

Stefan Steinberg
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In the course of history it is often an unexpected event which exposes the real nature of social relations. Such is the case with the eruption of a remote volcano situated on an island on the northern perimeter of Europe.

A century ago, the emissions from such a volcano would have concerned local inhabitants and perhaps a number of foreign scientists. If the plumes were sufficiently big, vulcanologists might have been motivated to send a ship to investigate the phenomenon.

Today, it is impossible to pick up a newspaper anywhere in the world which does not report at length about the clouds of ash emitted by the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland. For nearly a week, the volcanic activity has paralysed air traffic in Europe, with huge knock-on effects on trade and travel around the world.

The consequences of the shutdown of European airspace are staggering and already exceed the dislocations which followed the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. According to the air traffic body Eurocontrol, around seven million passengers have been directly affected by the cancellation of 95,000 flights across Europe.

Behind this bald statistic lies the plight of millions of individuals whose travel, holiday and work plans have been disrupted, often with severe consequences. Stranded at airports across the globe, passengers—including entire families, the elderly and the infirm—have been forced to pay out thousands of euros for emergency hotel accommodation or alternate forms of travel to companies charging extortionate rates.

The loss in income for airline companies is already estimated at €1 billion. The ability of highly indebted European economies such as Greece, Portugal and Spain to avert default has been damaged by the impact on their tourism industries.

In Kenya, 5,000 day labourers were laid off because the ash cloud stopped air freight traffic and prevented the crops they pick—vegetables and flowers—from reaching European households. The Japanese carmaker Nissan declared it will be forced to suspend production at two of its plants because it cannot import tyre pressure sensors from Ireland.

In Germany, carmaker BMW announced its assembly lines could come to a halt if it is unable to find alternatives to air cargo for transporting transmissions and other components.

The disruption resulting from the volcanic ash has underscored the enormous degree to which economic life is globally integrated. Billions of individuals around the world are united in a complex social process of production and distribution and dependent on the most rapid and effective forms of international transportation and communication. The breakdown of one major cog in this vast social mechanism has immense global consequences.

Modern society is mass society. Provincialism is almost a complete thing of the past. But under capitalism, it is impossible to mobilize social resources collectively and internationally to rationally and effectively respond to a volcanic eruption—or to address great social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, disease, hunger. Instead, the social infrastructure stagnates and deteriorates.

Why? First, because all considerations are subordinated under capitalism to profit and private ownership of the means of production. In this case, an effective and humane response is blocked by the profit interests of competing airlines and other corporate interests.

Second, because capitalism is based on the historically outmoded division of the world into competing nation-states, which makes impossible a

rational and coordinated international response to problems that are global in character—whether they be natural disasters, global warming or the social scourges of poverty and disease.

The current crisis has highlighted, in particular, the contradiction of a globalized air traffic system that consists of nationally based and privately owned airlines.

The governments and political establishments have shown themselves to be utterly unprepared for a crisis of this scope and indifferent to the fate of millions of people. After decades of worshipping the market, dismantling public services, glorifying individual enrichment and serving the predatory appetites of the financial elite, they refuse to acknowledge any responsibility for society as a whole.

Virtually no preparations had been made for this type of occurrence, which was not entirely unexpected even if its timing and extent could not have been predicted. No adequate equipment was available to measure the exact location and density of the ash clouds.

Having failed to take adequate precautions for such an event, European governments sat on their hands when it happened.

When the banks were at risk following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, heads of government moved heaven and earth to bail them out. Emergency cabinet meetings were held, special commissions established and parliamentary sessions called on short notice to free up billions of euros of taxpayer funds to provide massive no-strings-attached bailout packages for the banks.

The reaction of European governments to the social consequences of the current crisis was quite different. No efforts were made to establish a central European task force or corresponding national bodies to deal with the impact of the ash cloud on air traffic.

There have been no special sittings of cabinets or parliaments and no funds have been freed up to help passengers in distress. As the crisis was escalating, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on her way back from the United States, was enjoying a winding motor tour through southern Europe, accompanied by an entourage of journalists.

In Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown called a meeting of his emergency planning committee which decided to send three Royal Navy ships to southern

Europe. Brown's decision to evoke the spirit of Dunkirk has far more to do with the current general election campaign than concern for 150,000 stranded British travelers. One of the three warships picked up 500 soldiers who had completed a tour of duty in Afghanistan and a mere 150 ordinary people stranded in Spain.

It took five days after the flight ban had been imposed for European transport ministers to even meet via video conference for consultation on the crisis. Besides Europe's 27 transport ministers, another 180 individuals representing special interests took part in the conference.

Only when major airlines and business interests began publicly demanding that the flight ban be lifted, regardless of safety concerns, did European governments stand to attention. Overnight, German Transport Minister Peter Ramsauer gave in to the pressure from the corporate and airline lobbies. He agreed to open up German air space on a "flight by sight" basis, whereby pilots attempt to steer around the dangerous ash clouds.

Other countries have also eased restrictions on their air space, despite the fact that experts and pilots have expressed fears that a premature resumption of service could endanger passenger safety.

In its own way, the European air traffic crisis has exposed the backward and destructive character of capitalist social relations and the ruling classes whose wealth and power are based on these relations.

Stefan Steinberg



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