

Unite bureaucracy seeks to end British Airways strike on management's terms

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British Airways cabin crew staff began a five-day strike on Monday, the latest action in an ongoing dispute with the airline. The strike went ahead following a successful May 19 appeal by the Unite trade union against a previous court injunction that banned it on the spurious grounds that the union had not declared 11 spoilt ballot papers.

After their court victory, however, the union bureaucracy did everything possible to prevent a strike from going ahead. It sought to impose an agreement on cabin crew that would not challenge BA's £80 million in cuts, the threat to more than 5,000 jobs and lower-paying contracts for new recruits.

Talks began after the court ruling. Their failure was blamed firstly on events last Saturday, when members of the Socialist Workers Party entered Euston Towers, London, where the talks were taking place between Unite and BA CEO Willie Walsh hosted by the arbitration service ACAS. The incident was minor in every respect. The SWP members had just attended a "Right to Work" conference and planned to hold a token demonstration outside the building. But when they found that security were not present and the front door open, some of them took the elevator. They got off on the wrong floor, stumbled upon Walsh and chanted a few slogans.

Unite's co-leader Tony Woodley confronted those involved and told them to leave, which they did. Nonetheless, Walsh chose to use the encounter as an excuse to call off the talks, describing the incident as "catastrophic".

Woodley never challenged this ruse, instead describing the SWP members as "lunatics" and "idiots". Within hours Woodley made a last-minute pledge to call off the planned strike, providing only that Walsh agree to restore travel allowances it had rescinded from employees involved in the dispute. As regarding the more substantive package of attacks, Woodley declared, "We have already made it clear that we have got an agreement on the business issues in principle."

It later emerged that Unite's co-leader Derek Simpson was sending out updates on the progress of the talks via his

Twitter account. The media rushed to claim that this too was responsible for souring relations.

The reality is that Walsh refused to accept a deal with Unite because he is intent on not only destroying the pay and conditions of cabin crew, but wants to be seen to have imposed a decisive, lasting defeat on them. That is why Walsh said that travel allowances would not be restored until the agreement itself was signed.

A significant by-product of the SWP's encounter with Walsh was the craven response it solicited from the Socialist Party (SP). It posted a May 22 article just hours after the incident, depicting the SWP's pathetic stunt in the most lurid terms as an "occupation of British Airways talks" and accusing the SWP of having "invaded" the building.

There followed a pledge of loyalty to the Unite bureaucracy, with the SP writing that "*Whatever the nature of the deal being negotiated* it is not for a group like the SWP to decide to break up talks. A decision to accept or reject a deal is solely the property of cabin crew and their *democratically elected representatives*" (emphasis added).

"This has always been the method of the Socialist Party," the article continued.

The impact of the efforts of Unite and other unions to wind down and betray the dispute can also be seen in its reduced impact. According to an article in the *Herald*, BA has "amassed a £1.7 billion war chest to combat the impact of strikes". On Monday, BA said that some form of service flew to 85 percent of its long-haul destinations and 100 percent of short-haul destinations. More than 60 percent of long-haul and more than 50 percent of short-haul flights went ahead from Heathrow Airport in London, the airline said. At two other London airports, Gatwick and London City Airport, BA said that no flights were disrupted at all. According to BA more than 60,000 customers (70 percent of the normal number) would travel on its flights during each day of this week's strike.

The BBC reported that some 200 flights in and out of Heathrow were cancelled on the second day of the strike. According to Unite, 473 long-haul cabin crew did not work

on Monday, but 361 people did. These included “temporary crew, international crew, ground volunteers (strike-breakers). This is around 56 percent on strike.”

Planes were piloted by members of the BALPA union, which publicly declared its opposition to the action by cabin crew and promised that its members would work “normally”.

In every other dispute it has been involved in over the past period, Unite has collaborated with management to impose job losses, wage cuts, productivity increases and plant closures. Unite agreed to rationalisations at Ford in Luton and Ellesmere Port and at Vauxhall and Toyota. It oversaw the closures of the LDV van plant in Birmingham last year and the mothballing of the Redcar steel plant in Teesside this year.

Some 93 percent of the 13,000 cabin crew staff are members of the British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA), a sub-branch of Unite. BA has broken off relations with BASSA and has not met with the union for more than a year. Earlier this month, BA even sacked Duncan Holley, the BASSA branch secretary, one of five union officials to be dismissed during the dispute.

Reportedly BASSA has some disagreements with the proposed deal that Unite are prepared to accept from BA. The May 19 *Times* commented that at issue in the dispute is the fact that “that BASSA is unique and involved in a one-off matrix of grievances old and new at an airline that never got around to reforming working practices in its 20 years since privatisation”.

The *Times* has also compared Unite unfavourably to the Communication Workers Union, writing on May 25, “It could all be so different. The other significant industrial dispute of recent months was the Communications Workers Union walkouts at the Royal Mail. In the case of the posties, both sides agreed to park their apparently irreconcilable differences with an arbiter, Roger Poole.”

Pointing to the coming confrontations as the new Conservative/Liberal government begins to make huge cuts in the public sector budget, the *Times* warned, “The public sector disputes that are surely coming this year will need more Crozier-Hayes entente and less Walsh-Woodley stand-off.”

It may be true that were the cabin crew staff just members of Unite, the dispute might well have been ended already by the simple expedient of swamping a strike vote with those against action by other sections of workers. But whereas the *Times* attributes its continuation to BASSA’s involvement, it would be a grave mistake for workers to believe that the cabin crew union offers a genuine alternative to the rest of Unite.

In February 2007, the BASSA executive voted by a

majority of six to three to accept a deal negotiated by Woodley after Unite called off a three-day strike in order to hold talks with BA. The deal included attacks on working conditions and changes to the staff sickness policy. According to a report in the *Independent* at that time, such was the anger of staff to this “sell-out” that BASSA was forced to close its web site forum for a week due to the volume of angry comments from cabin crew.

According to the May 25 *Times*, BASSA has already accepted that BA will win the current dispute. The *Times* reported that one of BASSA’s nine-member executive said of Walsh, “He will win. How can he not? To be honest, he has already done it. He has already destroyed the union.” The union official bemoaned the fact that relations with BA have been soured. “We have never met them at any level for a year. It has all gone,” he said.

For its part Unite will do everything it can to restore its good standing in the eyes of corporate management and the media, even if this includes the destruction of BASSA. On Tuesday the *Guardian* reported that Walsh, Woodley and Simpson, were planning to meet “at an unannounced location” in a further attempt to end the dispute.

Unite’s desperate attempts to reach a sell-out deal with BA is one more shameful episode in the experience of the British and international working class with the trade unions.

A precondition for cabin crew to defeat the attacks of BA is a break with Unite/BASSA and the building of new rank-and-file organisations. The unions are not a workers’ organization, subject to the democratic control of their members. They represent an arm of management. Jobs, wages, pensions and other hard-won working conditions can be defended only on the basis of an independent political struggle of the entire working class based on a socialist programme.



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