

Management and pilots' union attempt to block British Airways strike

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Both British Airways (BA) management and the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) are involved in desperate last-minute efforts to block a series of strikes by cabin crew.

Today BA is in the High Court seeking a legal injunction to prevent 12,000 cabin crew from beginning fresh strikes spanning 20 days in total.

Members of Unite are due to walk out for five days from Tuesday in an ongoing dispute over management attempts to cut jobs and workers' pay and benefits.

The resort to the courts is the second time in six months that BA has sought to block strike action by means of a legal technicality. In December, the company used the anti-union law brought in by the Conservative government in 1992, the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act, to halt planned strikes over the Christmas period.

Among other things, the act states that trade unions must provide a detailed breakdown of ballot results to its members, something that BA claims has not been done. Speaking prior to today's hearing, a company spokesman declared, "We make no apology for looking at every option possible to protect our customers and our company from this completely unjustified strike and the union's cynical attempts to destroy our airline."

The unions have consistently refused to challenge the previous rulings, and have done all they can to isolate the dispute.

BALPA has written to the newly installed Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, appealing for it to intervene to avert the strike. General Secretary Jim McAuslan claimed that the right-wing coalition had "changed the face of British politics with erstwhile political opponents coming together for the common good. We call on government to use that political

momentum to help solve what are tired 1970s-style industrial relations."

He went on to urge the injection of some "Cameron/Clegg magic" to suspend the strike, claiming that this would allow a deal to be "hammered out".

BALPA's statement is overtly hostile to cabin crew. It complains that they have betrayed their responsibility to make "significant concessions to help BA, as pilots have done and as is required by "the Company Business Plan," and that their planned strike "undermines the interests of all employees".

McAuslan also promised that "Pilots will be working normally throughout any strike and will ensure that a professional service is maintained."

This is tantamount to a pledge to break the strike. BA has leased 25 fully crewed planes and asked for volunteers to scab, with reports that at least some pilots have agreed to take part in this operation.

The "Cameron/Clegg magic", which McAuslan hails, will see public spending slashed across the board in the coming period, costing thousands of jobs. Additional spending cuts of £6 billion for this year have already been announced. The government has given BA its full support in its bid to break the strike.

Transport Secretary Phillip Hammond is to host last-minute talks today with Unite General Secretary Tony Woodley and BA Chief Executive Willy Walsh. Hammond labelled the BA strike "self defeating", adding, "This strike is extremely bad news for passengers, British Airways and its employees."

The willingness of Unite to pursue talks aimed at halting the walkout reflects its role throughout the dispute, determined to contain any opposition amongst BA workers to management's cost-cutting agenda.

Unite and its cabin crew arm, BASSA (British

Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association), reluctantly called the latest round of strikes, having put earlier action “on hold” in spite of overwhelming votes in favour of action.

Unite’s members are becoming increasingly disillusioned by the way in which the union has conducted the campaign. Although there is still a clear majority in favour of strikes, this has declined to nearly 60 percent compared to the near four to one majority in favour of the aborted strike in December.

In the lead-up to the May 6 General Election, the unions agreed to suppress a number of strikes, including postponing planned action at BA.

In contrast, BA has mobilised an international strike-breaking operation, by hiring volunteers to act as scabs and chartering aircraft from other airline firms. As a result, it is expecting to be able to run its normal schedule from Heathrow during the first five-day stoppage. It has also pledged that at least one short-haul flight to all destinations will depart daily from Gatwick.

The *Telegraph* noted that BA shares had risen 5 percent last week, and would have been higher were it not for a market downturn on Friday. The “simple reason,” it wrote, “that investors are maintaining their faith in Mr Walsh is because there is a bigger, strategic prize here to be won. BA is facing not just a cyclical problem with losses but a structural one. It is one he is determined to sort out.”

“BA must cut its costs and staffing is one of the key ones”, it continued. “Civil Aviation Authority figures comparing cabin crew costs for 10 UK airlines show that BA crew are easily the most expensive, costing twice as much as their Virgin Atlantic counterparts. Such a disparity, Mr Walsh believes, cannot be allowed to continue.”

More than 1,000 jobs have been lost at BA since last year, the first casualties in an £80 million programme of savings. A unilateral decision by BA was made in November to reduce the number of cabin crew on long-haul flights. In February, management announced that a further 4,900 jobs would be cut.

The lie that the BA workforce is overpaid has been coupled with claims that cabin crew are selfish and entirely unjustified in their demands. Walsh has threatened workers with victimisation if they participate in the upcoming walkout by removing permanently the free travel benefit that BA employees

enjoy and which many rely on to reach their place of work.

The business community has rallied behind BA, conscious of the fact that the defeat of the strike will set an example for the intensifying attacks against the working class. Baroness Jo Valentine, head of London First, claimed that the strike was an example of “insular thinking divorced from economic reality”.

It is the business and financial elite, not BA cabin crew, who are truly “divorced from economic reality”. Having precipitated the global economic downturn that is driving the current crisis in the airline industry through speculation and outright criminality, big business and the banks are calling for working people to pay the price for the massive debts that have been accumulated.

Opposition to this strategy cannot succeed if it remains within the confines of the trade unions, which at each step seek to isolate the struggles of their members. As a period of renewed social struggles develops, the unions are proving themselves to be the most determined defenders of the interests of the corporations.



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