

Air India unions call off “flash” strike in face of state repression

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A flash or wildcat strike involving about 20,000 ground staff and engineers (mechanics) at Air India, India’s national airline, ended during its second day, Wednesday May 26, after the unions bowed before a reactionary ruling of the Delhi High Court that proclaimed the strike illegal.

The court also forbade the Air India workers from proceeding with a previously announced strike set to begin Monday, May 31, although the unions had given the airline the requisite legal notice. Announced in the middle of May, the May 31st walkout was to protest the airline’s repeated failure to pay its employees on time. Indeed, the airline, which is facing mounting losses, has frequently been weeks late in meeting its payroll.

The Delhi High court scheduled its next hearing on possible job action by Air India workers for July 13, thereby making the unions and workers liable to contempt of court charges if they walk off the job before then.

The Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which had bitterly denounced the strike, joined Air India management in applauding the Delhi High Court ruling.

“The court has imposed a stay on the ongoing strike and also on the one they had proposed to undertake from May 31,” crowed Arvind Jadhav, Air India’s chairman and the managing director.

During the strike, minister of civil aviation Praful Patel publicly instructed Air India management to mount a vicious campaign of reprisals against the workers. “Air India management,” vowed Patel, “will take decisive action and respond to the situation adequately and firmly.” His civil service deputy, civil aviation secretary M. Madhavan Nambiar, was no less blunt. “We will ensure,” said Nambiar, “that such an event is not repeated in the future.”

According to press reports Patel and Nambiar were acting on orders from finance minister Pranab Mukherjee.

The number two man in the government, Mukherjee is spearheading a drive to reduce the government’s burgeoning deficit by slashing social spending, raising fuel and fertilizer prices, and pressing forward with disinvestment and privatization.

The UPA government did not have to wait long to see Air India act on its wishes. No sooner did the unions terminate the strike, than Air India management launched a victimization campaign. To date, at least 58 union officials and workers have been fired and 24 suspended.

In what can only be interpreted as management throwing down the gauntlet to the union, Air India also “de-recognized” the Air Corporation Employees Union (ACEU) and All India Aircraft Engineers Association (AIAEA), the two unions that spearheaded the strike.

All offices that the two unions’ have on Air India premises have been locked and “sealed”, i.e., barricaded, by management so as to prevent the unions from operating.

Last week’s strike came just two days after a deadly crash of an Air India Express plane, flying from Dubai to the southern Indian city of Mangalore, and arose from a management attempt to impose a gag-order on workers so as to prevent them from speaking to the media about their concerns about the airline’s safety record and practices.

158 of the 166 persons aboard the May 22 Air India Express flight died and three of the eight survivors have suffered severe life-long injuries. Air India Express is the low-cost, no-frills subsidiary of Air India (see: “Indian air disaster kills 158”).

India’s most deadly air crash in a decade, the Mangalore

airport disaster provoked widespread media discussion about whether Air India pilots are given sufficient rest time and about the airline's and India's generally poor safety record.

Management found such attention distinctly unwelcome, especially since it is currently seeking to force through regressive changes in work-rules to make-up for large losses incurred as result of the world economic slump. These changes include forcing employees to work longer hours and hiring non-Indian pilots on contract.

Apart from long-simmering resentment and anger towards an aggressive and abusive management, what triggered last week's flash strike was Air India's attempt to enforce an order forbidding its employees from speaking to the press without management permission.

Air India is claiming that it first issued this gag-order last July. But what provoked last week's wildcat was its brazen attempt to invoke it after an AIAEA official, acting on complaints from his members, spoke out about Air India management's casual, if not indifferent, attitude towards air-safety as demonstrated by an incident that occurred a few hours after the plane crash in Mangalore.

On the day of the crash, an Air India Airbus A320 flight from Bangalore to New Delhi was diverted to Mangalore to pick up a relief crew.

But in Mangalore Air India does not employ engineers who are qualified to inspect and certify for the safety of the European-made Airbus A320 aircraft. According to existing Air India procedures, the flight to New Delhi should not have proceeded onward until either a qualified Air India engineer was flown to Mangalore to inspect the plane or Air India's Quality Control Manager certified the credentials of a non-Air India engineer who could then inspect the plane.

Instead of following the established practice, management obtained a "flight-worthy" certification of the Airbus from an engineer of the rival private Kingfisher Airlines. According to the AIAEA, this engineer was not qualified to certify this particular model of aircraft. Once the aircraft landed in New Delhi, Air India engineers refused to reaffirm the certification, insisting that the aircraft could only be re-certified after a more thorough inspection.

Y. V. Raju, the AIAEA general secretary, told the *Hindustan Times*: "Airworthiness norms were not adhered to. AI [Air India], in complete disregard to all rules and regulations, played with the lives of those on board." He

also complained to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation.

AI management went apoplectic. It demanded Raju explain why he had approached the media, then issued or re-issued a gag-order forbidding any employee from speaking to the press about Air India's safety practices.

Workers responded to this anti-democratic measure, by walking off the job. The two-day job action reportedly forced the cancellations of almost 140 flights, most of them domestic.

The government, which remains AI's majority-owner, the airline and the corporate media responded with savage denunciations of the workers—denunciations in which they not only accused the workers of "selfishly" disrupting air traffic, thus ignoring the critical safety issues that were at the root of the walkout, but also sought to blame the workers for the company's financial woes.

AI reportedly has a debt of \$3.5 billion, all of which was incurred as a result of management-government decisions taken without any input from the workers.

The Air India strike is part of a growing wave of industrial unrest as Indian workers seek to resist the attempts of big business and the UPA government to make them pay for the world capitalist crisis. From the outset these struggles have demonstrated the impossibility of mounting a counteroffensive through the unions, all of which, including those affiliated with the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the CPI and CPM, uphold the capitalist profit system and the Indian bourgeoisie's program of attracting investment through privatization, deregulation and other pro-market "reforms."



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