

Trade unions betray airport workers in Britain

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The wages, conditions and livelihoods of airport workers in Britain are being systematically destroyed in a combined offensive by management and the trade unions. Airline workers are being picked off section by section, with ground crew staff, security, firefighters and cabin crew facing drastic attacks on their living standards.

Last week the Unite union agreed a below inflation pay deal with management of BAA, which owns six British Airports including Heathrow and London Stansted. Under the deal 8,400 employees, including security, firefighting and ground handling staff, will receive a 2 percent pay rise, a one-off bonus payment and other bonus payments linked to a productivity increase. The 2 percent deal is a de facto pay cut as inflation now stands at 5 percent.

Unite claimed the deal was a victory, which it now “expected to set the standard for future industry pay deals”.

Mocking Unite’s rhetoric, the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, “BAA settles airport pay dispute on worse terms than BA”. The *Telegraph* noted that the pay deal is lower than that which is mooted to have been offered by British Airways (BA) to its cabin crew staff in their ongoing dispute. That deal is now being put to a ballot.

The stitch-up of the BAA workers came only a week after Unite, the GMB union and BA management agreed that 3,000 BA ground crew workers will face pay cuts and up to 500 “voluntary” job losses. ‘Some 200 workers have already been forced to leave. A pay freeze until October 2010 has been implemented and flexibility arrangements will be introduced. This is also being put to a ballot, with the unions recommending acceptance.

The overall context of these agreements is provided by Derek Simpson, the co-leader of Unite, Britain’s biggest union, who made clear his opposition to strikes against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s spending cuts. Speaking to the BBC, he said there would be no “winter of discontent” and rejected the suggestion that there would be opposition on the scale of that in Greece.

Unite and Unison, the two largest unions in Britain, with a combined membership of more than 3.3 million, have been

instrumental in blocking calls for a token protest march to coincide with the announcement of Chancellor George Osborne’s spending review in October. This position was endorsed by the majority of the Trades Union Congress in July.

Over the past year the unions have worked to ensure that the disputes in the airline industry were kept entirely separate. A combined offensive by the BAA workers, British Airways ground crew and cabin staff would have shut down all commercial aircraft movement and had a widespread impact internationally.

Unite are now well on the way to selling out BA cabin crew. On July 24 the cabin staff rejected the latest derisory offer from BA. The dispute, in protest at restructuring that will lead to mass job losses and cuts in pay and conditions, goes back to October last year. Over a four-month period this year, workers have struck for 22 days. The union has sought to grind the workers down, holding several ballots and postponing industrial action at key points in order to enter talks with management.

As a result, in their rejection of BA’s latest offer only 45 percent of the workers voted, the lowest rate in the four votes held since November. The *Financial Times* noted that the fall in participation was “a turnout of less than half [Unite’s] 11,000 cabin crew members, well down on previous ballots for strikes that brought turnouts of more than 70 percent and majorities of at least four-fifths.”

In the trade unions, workers face an organised conspiracy to suppress the class struggle.

BA is seeking to impose the attacks on its workforce as part of a proposed merger with the Spanish national carrier Iberia. The deal is now almost certain to go ahead, after it was finally approved by the European Commission. The stance of Unite and its Spanish counterpart at Iberia, the CC OO, has been based on appealing to management to end the conflict as it would jeopardise the deal. Unite has complained bitterly that the dispute need never have happened if BA had accepted the tens of millions of pounds in concessions it offered it in the first place.

On July 13 Unite issued a letter to BA shareholders entitled, “It’s time for peace”. The letter stated, “It is time for a sea change in industrial relations—it’s time for cooperation, not conflict.”

It continued, “BA management has blown a vast sum of YOUR money confronting cabin crew. Remember, the company could have pocketed savings agreed by management and crew worth £55 million.”

The letter warned the shareholders, “And this never-ending conflict could harm the Iberia merger. BA’s management by conflict could jeopardise this important tie-up.”

Unite cited comments from the CC OO, which said it had “been monitoring the situation at BA very closely and is extremely concerned with the way senior BA management have instigated a conflict-based approach to industrial relations in the current dispute with Cabin Crew.

“Although CC OO believes that the merger with BA is to the benefit of our members, and places BA and Iberia in a much stronger position within the global airline industry, we have grave reservations over the style of management, particularly in respect of labour issues.”

Earlier this year, 23 workers who went on strike at Barcelona airport on July 28, 2006 and occupied the runways were given two-year probationary sentences. The workers had struck as part of a group of over 400 employees in Iberia’s handling services (luggage transfers, food deliveries and aircraft cleaning). They had staged the occupation for 11 hours and brought the airport to a halt, in opposition to plans to transfer them to other companies with the loss of 900 jobs and the imposition of new contracts on lower wages.

Originally, nearly 200 of the workers were charged with sedition under an anti-terror law passed during Franco’s fascist dictatorship. The 23 were eventually charged and convicted under public order offences. The CC OO is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain and, despite declaring the sentencing “unjust”, did nothing to defend the workers, as was the case with the General Workers Union (UGT) trade union. Following the case the CC OO said it would analyse “more deeply the facts”—as if they have not had four years to do so already.

At BA, Unite has ensured that any action it has been forced to call has been limited to a few days at a time. BA has been able to counter these strikes through the well-planned use of scab labour and management volunteers. The union wrote a letter to its members strenuously opposing an August 2 posting on the web site of the cabin crew section of Unite, British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA).

Entitled “Closing window blinds at the end of your flight”,

the posting requested cabin crew not to adhere to new instructions to close the blinds at the end of each flight. The letter from Unite, signed by Simpson and co-leader Tony Woodley, stated, “This posting could be taken as a call to take industrial action. Cabin crew should ignore this posting and should close the window blinds at the end of each flight as instructed and work normally.”

Reportedly BASSA has some disagreements with the proposed deal that Unite was originally prepared to accept from BA. However, BASSA has also worked to undermine the dispute. In May a member of BASSA’s nine-man executive told the *Times* that it was inevitable that BA would win the dispute.

Last week BASSA union officials said they would not endorse any action because, “If we strike and he [BA CEO Willie Walsh] operates 100 percent of services, he remains the *Daily Mail*’s union-busting poster boy. We, as crew and as a union, would be destroyed with no way back. We are not willing to put you into an obvious trap of his making.”

The trade union bureaucracy has been ably assisted by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP). An SWP article published August 17 acknowledged that Unite had negotiated a pay cut, but then meekly complained that Unite should have held a new strike ballot in July to “enable BA workers to strike officially.”

The SP went further, hailing the BAA-Unite deal as a victory. “Although this is still a below inflation pay offer, in real terms a paycut, this is still a significant improvement from BAA’s original position,” it wrote. “The very fact that BAA was forced to come up with an improved pay offer underlines the point that despite the economic crisis workers can still force concessions from the employers where they are organised in a position of industrial strength and are prepared to take decisive action.”

The fake-left tendencies function as a PR department for the trade union bureaucracy. Their defence of what can only be termed “yellow” company unions is a deliberate act of political betrayal. Unite et al differ from earlier yellow unions only in that they have far greater resources to employ in imposing the dictates of management. A pre-condition for any successful struggle is for workers to break with the trade unions and set up their own popular rank-and-file organisations, from which all representatives of the bureaucracy must be excluded as a fifth column of management.



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