# Irish unions work to sell out pilots at Aer Lingus

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Trade unions at Aer Lingus are seeking to block the emergence of a strike movement among the airline's pilots.

In spite of an overwhelming vote in favour of industrial action, the Impact union is in talks with management in a bid to prevent work stoppages due to commence next Tuesday.

In a ballot of members of the Irish Airline Pilots Association (IALPA), a branch of Impact, 87 percent voted in favour of industrial action against company proposals to increase flight time. New rosters being imposed by management would see pilots forced to work six days out of seven during the summer, a consequence of a reduced number of pilots at the airline.

Proposed action would see pilots arriving for work one hour later than scheduled, as well as refusing to work free days if required. Under the current system, pilots can be made to work free days for which they are not rostered.

The concerns over working hours for pilots had been voiced as early as last summer, but management had refused to alter its stance.

Similar issues were raised in January, when cabin crew at the airline refused to work new rosters that would have seen their flight time increase to 850 hours per year. Lunch breaks were to be eliminated, imposing longer shifts on cabin crew, and transfers at short notice were to become compulsory.

Over 200 cabin crew refused to observe the new regime and were struck from the payroll by the company. Impact made little attempt to defend its members, as each cabin crew member was summoned individually to a meeting with company executives where their removal was announced.

While denouncing the aggression of management, the union was at the same time holding talks with Aer Lingus to enforce company demands on all essential points. On the resolution of the dispute on February 10, Aer Lingus stated that it was "confident" the new deal would allow hours worked by cabin crew to rise to 850 as initially proposed.

Though pilots faced similar threats to their working conditions, Impact at no point even suggested that united action between cabin crew and pilots was possible. It saw its central task as the isolation of the cabin crew and the shutting down of strike action as quickly as possible.

It was to this end that Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) head David Begg launched an intervention with the main Irish employers group IBEC to broker a settlement. In a joint statement referring the dispute to the Labour Relations Commission (LRC), they declared that such action was necessary "in view of the serious nature of the dispute."

An identical path is being followed by Impact in June as in January. Before any industrial action had even begun, the union bowed to the authority of the LRC—a body composed of leading representatives of the state, employers' organisations and unions, and which has time and again handed down decisions reinforcing attacks on the working class.

The LRC is headed by Kieran Mulvey, who authored the final cabin crew decision in February. Earlier in May, Mulvey complained in a radio interview that the Croke Park Agreement—a four-year strike ban agreed between unions and management to facilitate the imposition of pay cuts—does not go far enough and would need to be reopened.

Mulvey said that it was not possible for Ireland to take the "scenic route" to labour market reform. He warned that if further attacks on workers were not agreed soon by the unions, then they would be imposed by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) through their bailout package to Dublin.

A sustained cost-cutting drive has been under way at Aer Lingus since 2009, involving job and pay cuts, and stepped-up exploitation of the workforce. Initially, the Greenfield Plan called for cost reductions of €97 million to make the airline profitable, including 600 "voluntary" redundancies. But each round of cutbacks is invariably followed by demands for more budget cuts at the airline.

At the beginning of May, Aer Lingus CEO Christoph Müller insisted that he would continue to press ahead with further cuts, despite profits of €57 million in 2010.

Müller blamed a €50 million operating loss in the first three months of the year on the workforce, declaring: "As anticipated we experienced a challenging start to 2011. Our performance was affected by the Impact cabin crew disruption in January and February, as well as difficult demand conditions, particularly on leisure routes from Ireland."

Impact responded immediately to Müller's threat with a pledge of loyalty to management. Any cost-cutting proposals would be "considered carefully," it advised, adding: "If there are genuine questions about the viability of the company, staff would need to be involved in discussions."

The initial redundancies in 2009 were followed in early 2010 by the laying off of all 1,200 of Aer Lingus's ground crew in Ireland, 970 of whom were subsequently rehired on cut-price contracts. Then came the cabin crew dispute of January-February 2011, and now pilots have shown their determination to oppose management attacks. At every point when a struggle has emerged, the unions have offered absolutely no perspective for workers. On the contrary, their only role is to compel the workforce to accept the company's demands.