

Union abandons Philippine Airlines ground employees

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Early in the morning of September 27, an estimated 300 Philippine Airlines (PAL) ground staff went on a sit-down strike in defence of their jobs and working conditions. They are part of a group of 2,600 being replaced by workers from subcontracting companies, which pay half the wages that PAL employees receive and provide no benefits. September 30 marked the PAL workers' last official day on the job.

The sit-down strike was in direct opposition to the leadership of the Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA). PALEA leaders pointedly refused to label the event a strike, referring to it instead as a protest. They did not call out the rest of the union membership. And they voiced no opposition when police, airport security and airline management threatened the strikers with criminal charges unless they left their stations. Those workers who left were replaced by scab labor brought in from the contract service providers who were slated to take over from the retrenched workers.

Other strikers were forcibly removed by police and security personnel. Four strikers were injured as they were dragged from the airport. By six in the evening, the strike had been effectively broken.

In the aftermath of the strike, President Benigno Aquino III announced that his government would bring criminal charges against the striking workers—including of economic sabotage and the disruption of airport services. According to the Civil Action Authority Act of 2008, the charge of disruption of airport services carries a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment.

More than 102 international flights and 70 local

flights were cancelled as a result of the strike, with about 14,000 passengers affected.

In a pathetic legal manoeuvre, PALEA president Gerry Rivera insisted that only a protest had been staged on September 27, and not a strike. Since the job cuts were first announced, the union leaders have worked to block any industrial campaign and to limit any response to token protests.

Four days after the strike, the union led a demonstration a few kilometres from the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Metropolitan Manila as hundreds of police and riot police backed by firemen in fire trucks blocked the demonstrators from marching toward Terminal 2, from which Philippine Airlines operates.

More than 2,000 retrenched workers and supporters were on hand for the mobilization. Initially hyped as a strike, the union leadership also declared it a mere protest. It is not coincidental that on the last day of work, the most militant workers were led out of the airport, preventing a repeat of the strike of September 27.

A mass was held, candles were lit, a short street drama presented and union leaders railed against contractualization. Mainstream news media highlighted the traffic snarls which resulted from the demonstration. An ABS CBN TV report claimed passengers had to walk kilometres to avoid missing their flights. Then, as previously agreed with city government and police authorities, the union sent the workers home at eight in the evening.

According to an ABS CBN News report, PALEA president Rivera declared to the assembled workers: “This is not the end of the fight but the beginning.”

This is a blatant lie. Far from fighting in defence of the jobs and working conditions of the ground staff, the union had betrayed and continues to betray its members. For more than a decade, the ground staff workers had no pay agreement. The workers’ right to collective bargaining was given up by the union leadership in exchange for corporate board seats and continued recognition of the union by the airline.

Since 2009, when the airline’s program of retrenchment was announced, the union has repeatedly refused to conduct a principled struggle. It has instead appealed to one section of the ruling class after another, peddling the illusion that under the pressure of the workers some “reformist” section of the Philippine government would intervene on behalf of employees.

These appeals, made twice to the Department of Labor, twice to President Aquino, and once to the stockholders of the airline, were each time unequivocally dismissed.

On October 1, PALEA secretary general Bong Palad announced that the union was offering to send the workers back to work. October 1 was the first day on which the workers had been officially replaced by contractual labor.

The union leaders depicted their decision as having been made out of concern for Philippine Airlines passengers. The contractual laborers, they declared, were poorly trained and the boarding of flights and loading of baggage were being bungled, with flights delayed and cancelled as a result.

In other words, the union leadership sought to compel workers to return to work so that the employer, which is firing them, could operate more efficiently. It is difficult to conceive a clearer demonstration of the treacherous policies that flow from the union bureaucracy’s ties to the corporations in which its membership is employed.

PALEA secretary general Palad declared: “We will go back to work while waiting for the Supreme Court to rule that outsourcing is illegal. If the court declares otherwise, then we will abide by the law and comply with the third employee agreement.”

PALEA has already stated explicitly and without reservation that it will instruct its members to abandon the defense of their jobs and accept half the wages they once received and the loss of all of their job benefits, when the Supreme Court rules that the contractualization of their jobs is legal. Every decision which the Philippine court system has handed down over the past decade has favored the owners of the airline.

The airline management rejected the union’s offer for the workers to return to the job. They have been replaced with contractual laborers and will be allowed back on the job only when they are themselves contractual.

The Philippine Airlines ground crew have lost their jobs and are being forced into contract positions through the increasingly transparent betrayals carried out against them by the leadership of their union. Any struggle by workers to defend basic rights, including to a job, necessarily involves a break from the union, a political fight against the Aquino administration and the turn to other sections of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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