Spanish pilots unions call strikes against new low-cost airline

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The two main trade unions representing pilots and cabin crew at Spanish airline Iberia have renewed their call for strike action against the creation of a new low-cost subsidiary, Iberia Express. The strikes will take place every Monday and Friday from April 9 to July 20.

The new airline, which has 500 staff and a fleet of four aircraft, was launched on Friday last week and the first flights took place on Sunday to selected cities in Spain and the Canary Islands. They will later expand to the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Greece, Latvia and the Netherlands.

Chief Executive Luis Gallego said, “The containment of costs will allow Iberia Express to grow and compete with the low-cost operators.”

The launching of Iberia Express will mean a frontal attack on the wages and conditions of pilots and cabin crews at Iberia. According to the unions’ own calculations, 8,000 jobs are threatened.

“The company intends to divert 40 planes from the main group to the new subsidiary, which would mean the elimination of 8,000 jobs,” stated SEPLA (Sindicato Español de Pilotos de Líneas Aéreas, Spanish Airline Pilots Union).

About a dozen one-day strikes have already taken place between December 18 and February 29 involving pilots called out by SEPLA. From February 13 they were joined by cabin crew represented by STAVLA (Sindicato de Tripulantes Auxiliares de Vuelo de Líneas Aéreas, Airline Flight Attendants Union).

On March 2, the unions announced that an additional 24 one-day strikes were planned during March, April and May, which would have affected the Easter holidays as well as local bank holidays in Madrid and other autonomous regions. Iberia had already announced the cancellation of up to 260 flights in response.

The reasons given for calling the action were that “the company refused to negotiate” and its “radical refusal of all their proposals”.

However, the unions then agreed to call off the first set of strikes after both parties agreed to mediation. Industry, Energy and Tourism Minister José Manuel Soria praised the cancellation of the strikes as “very positive.”

The unions were forced to renew strike action following the breakdown of these negotiations and the rejection by the pilots of the mediator’s report and proposals during two extraordinary assemblies on March 27 and 29.

The latest dispute follows a standard pattern. The company declares its intention of cutting wages and conditions and refuses to answer the demands of the unions involved. The unions call a series of strikes. Then there is a well-publicised government intervention to get the two sides talking. The two sides then agree to negotiate and the government appoints one of their ex-ministers or ex-politicians to give the appearance of neutrality and fairness. The government mediator then recommends the changes the company announced in the first place and the unions implement them.

The attacks waged at Iberia are part of a worldwide assault involving privatisation and deregulation. In Europe this takes place under the Single European Sky regulations, begun in the 1990s and accelerated following the recent economic crisis. Iberia is being hit by the euro crisis and competition from discount airlines and high-speed trains. Ryanair and Easy Jet have overtaken Iberia as the two largest operators of services between Europe and Spain.

As a consequence of these processes, Iberia merged

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with British Airways (BA) to create the International Consolidated Airline Group (IAG) in January 2011, making it the seventh-largest airline company in the world and third-largest in Europe in terms of revenue. Taken together, BA and Iberia carry over 60 million passengers a year and have a workforce of over 60,000. IAG is seeking to take over other low-cost carriers, including Lufthansa's BMI, worth €207 million ($275 million), which is about to be completed.

After only a year of the merger, IAG's operating profits nearly doubled to €485 million ($653 million) in 2011. However, Iberia weighed heavily on earnings, posting an operating loss of €61 million compared to a €592 million profit at BA.

A major factor in BA's profitability is its employee costs—the lowest of all the major European network airlines. These costs are set to plunge further as a result of the cost-cutting measures accepted by the Unite union when it reneged on strike mandates and ended the long-running strike action by cabin crew in May 2011. Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey declared, "Change is with us. There is no point rejecting change, we have to embrace it."

All the main grievances that led to the dispute, when the airline announced the elimination of 1,700 jobs and the introduction of inferior pay and conditions for new hires, remained in place. Unite accepted BA's right to organise scabbing on any future dispute, agreed to strikers being penalised and promised not to defend union members from victimisation. Almost immediately following the ending of the strike the company hired 700 new cabin crew members on £17,000 a year average compared with £29,000 for existing Heathrow crew.

Pilots and cabin crew are not the only workers whose wages and conditions have been attacked at Iberia. The company has a track record of imposing poorer working conditions on its employees and taking them to court for resisting them.

As far back as 2006 workers employed in Iberia's handling services (luggage transfers, food deliveries and aircraft cleaning) staged an occupation for 11 hours that paralysed Barcelona airport. They were protesting the decision 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. Although a High Court judge dismissed the anti-terror charges, the strikers were still convicted on public order offences.

The treacherous path being followed by the pilots and cabin crew unions was paved by the cowardice of the air traffic controllers' unions, who last year refused to call on other unions to come out and support their members placed under military discipline for refusing to work when their annual quota of hours ended. The other airline unions were happy to stand aside and do nothing.

The Popular Party government has even appointed the same "mediator", Manuel Pimentel, which the previous Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government used against the controllers. Last year Pimentel's recommendations were implemented, resulting in the slashing of wages and increasing work hours. The company has started disciplinary proceedings against several pilots and fired others and is pursuing the union for a reported loss of €36 million.

The controllers were left to fight alone, isolated not only by the other trade unions but all political parties and so called "left" organisations.

No forces came forward to resolutely support the controllers, or explain the true significance of the PSOE's attack, other through the perspective presented by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The defeat of the air traffic controllers' strike, the halving of their wages, and devastation of their working conditions set the benchmark for all other airline workers in Spain and around the world who are being submitted to the same treatment by the airline companies.

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