

Indian government attempts to smash pilots strike

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India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has responded to the four-week strike of Air India (AI) pilots by sacking over 100, after declaring their industrial campaign illegal, derecognising their union and threatening to hire scabs to replace them.

The Congress-led ruling coalition is also attempting to blame the pilots, who are fighting to defend their jobs and working conditions, for an estimated 3,100 million rupee (\$US55 million) loss in ticket revenue caused flight cancelations.

About 400 Indian Pilot Guild (IPG) members at the state-owned airline have been on mass sick leave to campaign for exclusive training on the airline's new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes. Management has offered 50 percent of training places on the new planes to lower-paid Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA) members.

IPG members also want payment of salary arrears outstanding from 2007, first-class air travel when not working and the right to be promoted to pilot commanders within six years.

On May 25, Indian civil aviation minister, Ajit Singh, met representatives of striking IPG members for the first time since their "call in sick" campaign began on May 8.

Singh declared the industrial action "illegal", demanded that the pilots return to work and threatened that the government would hire new hands. The IPG, which has promised to end the strike if the government reinstates all sacked employees, revokes union de-recognition and agrees to discuss pilots' demands, blandly told the media that the meeting "did not culminate in any mutually acceptable solution."

On Monday, the Air India board met to discuss the ongoing strike. It is believed to be considering renting

aircraft, which will come with pilots and cabin crew, to restore cancelled international flights. This strikebreaking move is in line with long-held management plans for downsizing the airline.

Management has also recalled retired pilots to break the strike and established a special medical board, drawn from the Indian Air force, to begin examining the striking pilots. Under Air India regulations, if sick leave extends beyond 14 days, the pilots have to undertake a medical examination by an "independent" body to retain their flying licenses.

The strike was declared illegal by Delhi High Court on May 9 and the pilots ordered to report for duty immediately. When they refused, management turned to the courts, which issued a contempt of court order on May 23.

Indian Airlines—the domestic public sector airline—merged with Air India in 2007 as part of a restructure of the state-owned aviation industry. The IPG represents pre-merger Air India pilots while the ICPA consists of about 800 pilots absorbed from Indian Airlines. ICPA pilots' salaries are 50 percent less than the IPG pilots and they only paid for hours worked. ICPA members are not paid for training.

In May 2011, 800 ICPA pilots struck, demanding pay parity. IPG did not support this strike. The carrier responded by sacking ICPA members and de-recognised their union. ICPA officials called off the strike after 10 days without resolving any of the issues.

Air India and the government are clearly aiming to reduce all pilots' salaries to ICPA rates. Instead of mobilising all pilots in a unified struggle to defeat this agenda, officials from both unions have aided and abetted the government attacks by deliberately keeping the airline's pilots divided.

Air India privatisation is on the UPA government's

agenda as part of its broader “free-market” restructuring of the Indian economy.

Last month the government approved a 300 billion rupee (\$US5.3 billion) bailout for Air India, which has a 6.3 billion rupee debt. Announcing the package, Civil Aviation Minister Singh declared that it was not “without strings.” Last week Singh threatened to stop the bailout package unless the pilots returned to work. He also declared that “India does not need a national carrier”, implying it could be sold off.

While the government, management and the media are scapegoating the pilots for the economic problems confronting the state-owned carrier, India’s entire aviation industry is in dire straits. The privately owned Kingfisher Airlines is another example. Most of its services have been cancelled and its workforce downsized. Kingfisher Airlines pilots have recently sought to secure long-outstanding arrears payment. The strike was called off midway by the union following management threats.

In the face of these escalating assaults, India’s two Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI)—and their trade unions have maintained a virtual silence over the government attacks on the pilots. On May 22, CPM parliamentarian Basudeb Acharya “criticised” Singh for declaring outside parliament that India did not need a national carrier. Acharya declared that this was an issue of procedure, and should have been discussed inside the Indian parliament.

M.P. Achuthan, a CPI parliamentarian, demanded that the government “take some bold initiatives to help the passengers in the Gulf countries.” He failed to elaborate on what these “bold initiatives” should be but the implication was clear—the government should organise strike breaking measures.

The escalating attacks on IPG pilots are part of the austerity measures now being implemented by the UPA government in response to the deepening global economic crisis. It follows threats by the central government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation to sack thousands of striking contract workers. The Indian government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh government, like its counterparts internationally, is determined to send a message to the whole working class that it will ruthlessly oppose all its struggles.



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