

Indian government prepares mass sacking of Air India pilots

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India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government has moved to hire new pilots in order to crush a five-week strike of about 400 Air India (AI) pilots.

The pilots, who are members of Indian Pilot Guild (IPG), have been maintaining a "call in sick" industrial campaign to demand exclusive training on the airline's new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes. They also want payment of salary arrears outstanding from 2007, first-class travel when not working, and the right to be promoted to pilot commanders within six years.

On Wednesday, Civil Aviation Minister Ajit Singh told the media that the Air India pilots' strike "is over as far as we are concerned." The airline, he said, had "decided to recruit pilots from domestic and international markets. We expect to advertise for the posts soon."

If the striking pilots wanted to return to work, Singh added, they would have to reapply for their jobs and follow the government-owned carrier's recruitment processes.

Singh's threats mark a turning point in the government attack on AI pilots. In the face of growing demands by big business and the corporate media for a more rapid imposition of its pro-market economic measures, the government is demonstrating that it will crush all resistance from the working class.

The government's latest move against the AI pilots follows the illegalisation of the industrial campaign, de-recognition of their union, and the dismissal of over 100 pilots. On Wednesday a Mumbai high court bench rejected an appeal by the pilots against de-recognition of their union.

Singh also announced that Air India is planning to replace the striking pilots—70 percent of them are co-pilots—with trainees and hire new foreign pilots on one-

year contracts and Indian pilots for five years. "With this," he declared, "the entire AI network of 27 stations shall not only be restored but expanded."

While Singh claimed that the government had no plans to privatise the national carrier, he said that all pilots had to support the restructuring measures recently outlined in a Dharmadhikari Committee report. Contrary to its denial, the government is sending a clear message to big business that it preparing the state-owned carrier for privatisation.

Headed by retired Judge D. M. Dharmadhikari, the committee has called for the downsizing of the airline's 27,000-strong workforce and the slashing of wages and working conditions. It calls for pilots' salaries to be determined by the type of aircraft they fly—narrow or wide bodied—and their payments linked to flying hours and a fixed allowance.

The report also proposed 10-15 percent salary cuts for pilots, engineers and cabin crews, the "rationalisation" of their allowances and reduction of the airline's total workforce by 10 percent, under a so-called "voluntary retirement scheme."

Singh revealed that AI plans to slash its 32 billion-rupee (\$US581 million) annual wage bill by 2.5 billion rupees in the first year and wants the Dharmadhikari report implemented in three months. The government has appointed a four-member committee to discuss the imposition of the restructuring with the airline's unions. All existing wage agreements with unions will be terminated when the plan begins.

In the face of the escalating government attack, the IPG organised a "silent protest" procession of its members in New Delhi and Mumbai on June 6, with pilots carrying placards appealing to airline management and the government to "enter dialogue." IPG leader Flight Captain Anil Kumar Rao called for

discussions with management to “find ways” to end the industrial action.

Like their union counterparts—the Air Corporation Employees’ Union (ACEU) and the Indian Commercial Pilots’ Association (ICPA)—the IPG has kept air transport workers isolated and divided. Its demands are for a relatively privileged position for its members rather than improved pay and conditions for all pilots.

The ICPA represents pilots who worked for Indian Airlines—the domestic state-owned airline—before its merger with Air India in 2007. ICPA pilots’ salaries are 50 percent less than the IPG pilots and have inferior conditions. The ACEU, which has 11,000 members, has praised the government’s restructuring plan.

India’s two Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their trade unions—have refused to oppose the anti-democratic measures against Air India pilots.

The escalating government assault on AI pilots is driven by an ongoing decline in local and international air industry profits amid the worsening global economic crisis. Air India and Kingfisher, a privately-owned Indian airline, are expected to lose \$1.3 billion and \$1.4 billion respectively in the year ending April 2013.

The turmoil in US and Europe has impacted heavily on the Indian economy. India’s economic growth is falling, with its gross domestic product growth rate declining to 6.5 percent last year, the lowest in nine years.

Last week, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries president R.V. Kanoria declared that the country was “in the midst of a grave economic crisis” and demanded that the government allow greater foreign direct investments, cut social welfare and step up other “free market” measures.

The Congress-led government’s attack on the pilots sets a dangerous precedent for a similar assault on other sections of workers who oppose the onslaught on their jobs, pay and living standards.



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