

Lufthansa cabin crew on strike

Our correspondent
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Lufthansa's 19,000 flight attendants have been carrying out industrial action since yesterday. This was announced by Nicoley Baublies, chair of the Independent Flight Attendants Organisation (UFO), on Tuesday afternoon in Frankfurt after negotiations collapsed the night before due to management intransigence.

Work stoppages would be “limited in time and location,” and would be announced with only a few hours’ notice, he said. No walkouts were planned for Tuesday itself.

This is the first official strike by cabin crew at Lufthansa, one of the world’s largest airlines, with an annual turnover of almost €30 billion. In 2009, for two days, flight attendants held warning strikes lasting several hours, causing flight cancellations and delays.

In early August, members of the UFO, which is estimated to represent around two thirds of flight attendants, voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of industrial action. Of the 83 percent of members who took part in the ballot, 97.5 percent voted to strike.

Much is at stake. In April, Lufthansa announced a cost-cutting program—“Score”—aimed at increasing the company's operating profits by €1.5 billion by 2014. This will be achieved primarily through a reduction in staff costs, which, at 22 percent of total costs, are higher at Lufthansa than at competing airlines.

In addition to 3,500 redundancies in administration, “Score” foresees massive wage cuts for flight and ground crews. This will be achieved through the use of lower-paid temporary workers, the outsourcing of staff to the company's own budget airline, and the dissolution of the current structure covering wages and conditions. This currently guarantees flight attendants, who start at a relatively low monthly salary of €1,780, an incremental rise every two years. At the highest pay level, a flight attendant can thus earn €4,000 a month, and a service leader €7,000.

In implementing “Score” the company can rely on the support of the union Verdi, whose leader Frank Bsirske, is deputy chair of the Lufthansa Supervisory Board. Verdi

has repeatedly signed on to low-wage settlements and has repeatedly stabbed the smaller unions such as the pilots' union Cockpit, the air traffic controllers' union GdF, and the flight attendants' union UFO in the back.

These “sector” unions have developed largely because different sections of professional workers no longer feel represented by Verdi. This applies to UFO, which split from Verdi’s predecessor in 1992.

In December 2011, surprisingly, UFO declared it wanted to engage in the upcoming collective bargaining round jointly with Verdi. In January, after Verdi had accepted a wage rise of 3.5 percent tied to unfavourable special arrangements, rather than the initial 6.1 percent rise tabled, the UFO membership began to complain. The UFO leadership felt compelled to withdraw from the negotiations.

UFO then called for a wage increase of five percent, no temporary working aboard Lufthansa aircraft, no outsourcing of jobs to affiliated budget airlines, and the preservation of the existing wages and conditions structure.

Lufthansa appeared adamant. On August 16, the company presented a new contract which, according to UFO, “after more than three years of a pay freeze did not contain any concrete offer to raise wages” and “exceeded the worst expectations by far.” It represented a “deterioration for all—less pay, more work, no security.”

Supervisory Board Chair Jürgen Weber, who had been at the head of Lufthansa from 1991 to 2003, advised the company to confront the workers. “Better to let it come to a big bust-up before the company is catapulted out of competition,” he said on August 22 to the weekly *Die Zeit*. Management said it expected “a turbulent struggle.”

The leadership of UFO is completely unprepared for this confrontation. It does not support the course taken by Verdi, which is no more than an appendage of management, but rejects launching an uncompromising industrial struggle, including the mobilization of other professional groups at Lufthansa and its subsidiaries, as well as solidarity action at other aviation companies. It

advances, moreover, no new political perspective for the working class. But these are indispensable to defeat Lufthansa.

UFO does not even seem to concur with the Swiss flight attendants' union Kapers, which represents staff at the Lufthansa subsidiary Swiss, even though Kapers members recently carried out a vote of no confidence in the union leadership. (See: Flight attendants at Swiss airline oust union leadership).

Instead, UFO is treating the strike as purely a Lufthansa matter and promoting the illusion that it can force the company to compromise with a few isolated actions. On August 16, in an official statement following Lufthansa's provocative offer, UFO asserted its willingness to compromise.

The Lufthansa management had “missed a great opportunity,” the union stated, “to continue to utilise the qualified and motivated cabin crew to achieve a competitive advantage and take the [union's] readiness to compromise seriously.”

Immediately after the membership ballot, UFO leader Baublies, who took office just six months ago, declared that he thought an all-out strike was unrealistic. But UFO was able to carry out some damaging pinprick actions, he said.

Despite the overwhelming result of the ballot, UFO engaged in new negotiations with the company, giving credence to its promises. A week ago, Baublies praised the commitment of personnel director Peter Gerber, who had persuaded the union to resume negotiations. Now Baublies is again talking about a tactic of “pinprick actions”—brief isolated strikes at individual locations aimed at supposedly disrupting the flight timetable.



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