

Flight attendants at Swiss airline oust union leadership

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Flight attendants of Swiss, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the German airline Lufthansa, are protesting against low pay, extremely short stopovers on long-haul flights and the withholding of an annual bonus equivalent to a month's wage. Instead of paying this usual bonus, the company sent its staff a wooden cheese board, which was regarded by most employees as a provocation.

However, their anger is directed not only against the company's executive board, but at their union Kapers as well. Its failure to represent the interest of its members has led to a group of disgruntled flight attendants forming an oppositional group within the union and calling itself "Quo Vadis Kapers" ("Where are you going Kapers?").

Last week, a protest by the group led to an extraordinary general meeting of Kapers, at which a vote of no confidence in the leadership was passed and the next executive elections were brought forward by one year to November 2012.

This conflict not only affects Swiss, but also its parent company Lufthansa and its Austrian subsidiary Austrian Airlines. It unfolds against a background of intensified exploitation of international air travel workers through cutbacks, longer working hours, the removal of additional services, the "central pooling of functions"—meaning more work—and especially through so-called "fleet adjustments," i.e., layoffs.

Swiss's management justifies wage cuts and the worsening working conditions by pointing to the euro crisis, the CO2 tax, increasing competition from low-cost airlines and the increased exchange rate of the Swiss franc. It fails to mention that Lufthansa rakes in yearly profits in the hundreds of millions and that Swiss also generated a profit of 65 million francs in the last quarter.

As an additional means of pressuring the cabin staff management exploits the increased demand for flight attendant training in Europe and growing willingness to work for low wages—both consequences of rampant unemployment—as well as the use of cabin crews abroad, mainly in Asia, who are paid below European rates.

In its attack on workers, the executive board of Swiss can fully rely on the union, Kapers. In an interview with the newspaper *Tagesanzeiger*, Kapers leader Georg Zimmermann said, "We must be realistic. Air travel is no land of milk and honey... Low fares indicate a high degree of economic pressure..."

Zimmermann not only sounds like a member of management, he even makes the corresponding proposals. "With all due respect for the demands of cabin crews," he said, "an annual bonus or a wage increase of 8.33 percent seems unrealistic at present..."

"Quo Vadis Kapers" have withdrawn their support for Zimmermann and his cronies. However, the group itself is at a crossroads now, because its announced strategy of bringing "more rebellious heads" onto the executive and joining forces with a larger union to increase pressure on the management will not solve the problems of cabin crews either.

All the airlines are exploiting the present crisis of capitalism in order to raise their profits by systematically destroying the previous gains made by airline workers. The "social partnership with Swiss" of which Zimmermann talks in his interview with the *Tagesanzeiger* belongs irrevocably to the past. The crisis means that governments and corporations throughout Europe and internationally have abandoned any concept of social partnership, going over to a frontal assault on the living standards of working people.

The transformation of unions into corporate agents is a universal and internationally observable phenomenon. It can be traced back to the nationalist perspective of the unions and to the privileged position of their officials.

As a matter of principle, unions defend the system of market economy and capitalist property, which form the basis of their own activities as mediators between capital and labour. They never oppose international corporations that pit workers in different countries against each other by taking advantage of the lowest wages.

They refuse to unite the workers in their struggles against capitalist exploitation internationally and respond to globalization by defending the competitiveness of “their” company and “their” national economy. In order for them to be able to compete on the world market, they promote the reduction of costs and willingly assist the management. They demand national protection measures to divide the international working class and weaken it in the struggle against the big corporations.

In the US, the attack on wages and working conditions of air crews began some 20 years ago. Once relatively well-paid and prestigious jobs in the aviation industry are now among the hardest and most poorly paid. Each downward step has been accompanied and supported by the trade unions.

This downward spiral has also gripped the European airline industry.

The staff of Swiss already suffered painful losses after the collapse of its predecessor Swissair eleven years ago, which was tolerated and supported by the unions.

The larger unions play a particularly nasty role. The German union Verdi, which has over two million members, broke several strikes by small sector unions. Industrial action by the air traffic controllers union GdF, the Flight Attendant Organisation (UFO) and the pilots’ union Cockpit have been publicly attacked and sabotaged by Verdi.

The claim by “Quo Vadis Kapers” that a larger union would help increase pressure on the management is based on a lie. The large unions work closely with business organizations, governments and political parties. During the course of their careers, many of their officials switch sides several times between the

various camps.

This is the real meaning of “social partnership” that Kapers chief Georg Zimmermann conjures up in his interview with the *Tagesanzeiger*. It is an alliance between big business, government and the unions against the workers. In times of international economic crisis, it is used to mount a comprehensive attack on their living standards.

Just like other unions before it, Kapers does not hesitate to purposely divide workers internationally. Zimmermann and his gang have already given a telling example of this by supporting the agreement on what they call “infiltration protection”.

According to this rule, Swiss may only employ a maximum of 25 percent foreign personnel as of 2013. Only 40 percent of these are allowed to have their home base in foreign countries and work outside the regulations of the collective agreement covering Swiss personnel. Altogether only 10 percent of foreign flight attendants are allowed to work from Thailand, India, China and other overseas destinations.

Instead of demanding equal pay for all employees, the union has helped to establish a two-tier system which pits Swiss flight attendants against their counterparts in Asia and overseas, and which, as the example of temporary workers with Lufthansa shows, helps depress wages more broadly in the long term.

The way forward for Swiss cabin crews is not to elect more “rebellious” heads into the union leadership of Kapers, nor to seek the support of an even larger union. Swiss flight attendants have to renounce their union as an extended arm of the management, unite with their international colleagues and refuse to let the costs of the capitalist crisis be placed on their backs.



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