

Lufthansa cabin crew launch strike

Our correspondent
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On Friday morning, 19,000 flight attendants began their strike action against Lufthansa. The union UFO (Independent Flight Attendant Organisation) had called on flight attendants to stop work from 5 in the morning till 1 p.m. at the Frankfurt hub, Germany's largest airport.

On Tuesday, the chair of the union, Nicoley Baublies, had announced that UFO was now in dispute with Lufthansa after the collapse of negotiations the night before. (See "Lufthansa cabin crew on strike") Until Friday, however, UFO had not organised any action.

Except for an hour-long protest strike in 2009, Lufthansa flight attendants have never before taken strike action. Nevertheless, support for the strike was overwhelming. In early August, the UFO membership voted by 97 percent for strike action; on Friday about a thousand flight attendants stopped work.

Two hours after the action started not a single Lufthansa plane had taken off. During the period of the industrial action most of the scheduled 330 Lufthansa flights were unable to take off. The timetable was disrupted until well into the afternoon.

Almost all internal and European flights were cancelled. Thousands of travelers were stranded at the airport and had to be looked after by Lufthansa.

About a hundred strikers, in evident high spirits, gathered at Gate 20. Pickets also stood at the other gates.

Officially, the UFO strike is for a wage increase of 5 percent and for profit sharing, although the union has indicated it is willing to climb down from this demand. UFO spokesperson Alexander Behrens noted that the union had made repeated concessions to Lufthansa over the years. After three pay rounds without any increase, Germany's largest air carrier was still not prepared to

offer any wage rise, but wanted to further reduce the pay bill.

Older employees with at least 20 years seniority at Lufthansa told the WSWs that they were not striking just for a 5 percent pay rise. "It's about a lot more," one said. "It is about stopping spin-offs, part-time working and temporary work. Above all, we want to demonstrate our solidarity with younger workers. They are very badly off."

The situation for cabin crew members has worsened over the years. It began with a savings program in the early 1990s, after the first Gulf War. At that time, the company saved DM 500 million in staff costs in cooperation with the ÖTV union (the forerunner of Verdi). Now young professionals take seven years to reach the same level that the older workers had started at, the strikers reported.

Workers said the strike also aimed to oppose the new pay scales, which would mean 30 to 40 percent less for new hires.

"We should not delude ourselves," one flight attendant said. "It won't take long; then it will hit the wages of the older employees."

Lufthansa is planning massive savings in labour costs for flight and ground personnel. In addition, 3,500 jobs in administration are to be cut.

The older employees, who are at the top of their pay scales, say that it is a myth that the final salary for a chief steward is €7,000 a month, as claimed by some sections of the media. That might have been the case 20 years ago, but it has nothing to do with today's reality, they said.

They want to oppose the smear campaign unleashed six months ago in the media against the allegedly exorbitant wage demands of apron controllers during a strike at Frankfurt airport.

UFO members turned to other employees at the

airport who could be affected by the impact of their strike. They pointed out that the aims of the strike involved issues that also affect many other sections of workers in the airline industry.

“We negotiated for 13 months to limit the further use of subsidiary budget airlines and temporary work at Lufthansa. We are well aware that this is also a big issue with you, and has sometimes been a reality for you for years. The issue in these negotiations was to stop this trend,” a leaflet says.

How things will develop remains unclear. Friday’s strike had a significant effect. However, so far UFO has rejected broadening the struggle and is pursuing a policy of “pinpricks”, i.e. of temporary actions limited to individual airports. UFO leader Baublies declared immediately after the strike ballot that a full-scale strike such as in the metal working industry was “unrealistic”.



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