

Flight attendants strike at Germany's major airports

Our correspondents
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Lufthansa flight attendants took their second day of strike action on Tuesday. On its first day of action last Friday the flight attendants' union, UFO, limited the strike to Frankfurt Airport. On Tuesday, Berlin Tegel and Munich were also included in the strikes.

In Frankfurt and Berlin Tegel cabin crew struck from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., in Munich from 1 p.m. onwards. According to the union around 1,800 flight attendants (i.e. 85 percent of all on-duty staff) took part in the strike. Lufthansa employs 19,400 cabin crew, of whom about two-thirds are organized in UFO.

According to a first assessment by Lufthansa on Tuesday afternoon, a total of 350 flights and 43,000 passengers were affected. By that time, the strike in Munich had just begun.

As was the case on Friday the flight attendants taking part in a labor dispute for the first time expressed their confidence. In Frankfurt, strikers distributed leaflets to waiting passengers in which they declared their goals. "Our working conditions are deteriorating, and are partly inhuman", one flight attendant told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, "so we have to set an example."

In Munich, some strikers had brought along their children. They carried placards expressing their outrage with CEO Christoph Franz. "Trust has taken wing and we have been lied to" and "Thank you to our loyal customers, shame on our executive". The picketers chanted "We are Lufthansa" and "Franz, we have had enough."

At Berlin Tegel about one hundred strikers gathered away from the public at the cargo terminal, about a kilometer away from the airport. Once again the outrage over the behavior of the Lufthansa management was palpable. "The use of temporary workers and the extortion we face is just disgusting", a young flight

attendant told the WSWS.

Another pointed out that, contrary to its own statements, Lufthansa had made profits in the past quarter, adding, "When things go well, we are not involved, but if things go badly, we are told to tighten our belts."

A third complained about the misinformation in the press and television: "They just present us as if we were big earners."

Tegel is a relatively small airport. Unlike Frankfurt and Munich, Lufthansa does not fly long-haul flights from the airport. The strike at Tegel affected just 40 flights, with half of this number not flying at all.

Berlin, however, is a key airport for Lufthansa in its strategy of employing contract workers to replace permanent cabin crew. Since June 3, some Lufthansa aircraft have flown from Berlin with temporary staff employed by the temp agency Aviation Power, which in turn is 49 percent owned by Lufthansa. In early June, a state court in Hesse turned down an injunction by union stewards to prevent the use of such temporary workers.

According to Lufthansa, the cabin crews employed by Aviation Power receive the same starting salary as Lufthansa staff. The former, however, must carry out an increased workload (by 9 percent) and their contracts are limited to two years. In line with their current contract, Lufthansa employees move to a higher pay grade after every two years. The agency workers, on the other hand, must apply for a new contract every two years and, if they are accepted, receive only their original starting salary. Lufthansa intends to employ 240 agency stewardesses from Aviation Power on this basis in Berlin alone.

Lufthansa began using scabs from Aviation Power in Berlin on Tuesday and was able to secure eleven flights

between 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. UFO apparently intends not to include temporary workers in its strike action. Union spokesman Behrens says that one should “show understanding” for these young colleagues.

It is the struggle against agency work which is at the heart of the now 13-month-long dispute between Lufthansa and UFO. The union calls this process a “Schleckerisierung” of the airline in reference to the recently bankrupt Schlecker drugstore chain—notorious for many years for its low wages and harsh working conditions.

As part of its “Score” austerity program, the airline wants to increase its profits by 2014 to €1.5 billion, mainly at the expense of the staff. This is only possible through slashing salaries and smashing up all contract agreements.

The wage contract offered to the flight attendants is a provocation. After three years without a pay increase UFO made major concessions to management and raised a demand for a five percent increase over 15 months. In response, Lufthansa offered a salary increase of just 3.5 percent over three years. This is less than the rate of inflation and represents a cut in real wages. And in return, flight attendants are expected to work longer hours.

A far more serious issue, however, is the attempt to completely overturn the company contract structure by the introduction of temporary staff. Lufthansa is also threatening to spin off all German domestic and European flights into a separate, newly formed low-budget airline, which would pay much lower salaries.

There are strong indications that Lufthansa is seeking to make an example of the flight attendants. On August 22, its supervisory board chairman and former Lufthansa CEO Jürgen Weber told the weekly *Die Zeit*: “It would be better to have a big bang before the company gets catapulted out of the competition.”

The fronts have hardened after yesterday’s strike. Lufthansa spokesman Klaus Walther tried to whip up animosity towards the flight attendants and described the strike action as “blows or punches in face of our customers.”

UFO Chairman Nicoley Baublies has threatened a nationwide expansion of the strike if Lufthansa will not make concessions. He told the television station N24: “If this arrogance is maintained, then we put an end to localized and limited strikes. Then we will say

sometime during the next few days, ‘Germany will now stand still around the clock’.”

On Tuesday evening, UFO announced a nationwide, twenty-four hour strike would take place on Friday. Airports affected include Frankfurt, Berlin, Hamburg, Dusseldorf, Stuttgart and Munich. According to UFO leader Baublies, the reason for the expansion of the strike was the stubborn attitude of Lufthansa. Lufthansa could avert the walkout if they agreed to arbitration. The company immediately rejected the offer. “We see no reason for a settlement”, a Lufthansa spokesman said.



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