

Lufthansa strike needs the support and solidarity of all workers

Socialist Equality Party (PSG)
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Striking Lufthansa flight attendants need the support and solidarity of all workers. At the centre of the labour dispute is not just a reasonable wage for a specific group of workers, but the basic rights and social gains of the entire working population.

Lufthansa is seeking to downgrade flight attendants, who carry out a highly responsible and demanding job, to the wages and working conditions that currently prevail in many service industries where wages are below subsistence level.

A huge low-wage sector, involving a quarter of the entire workforce, has emerged in Germany since the adoption of the Hartz laws 10 years ago. In spheres such as the media, publishing and broad segments of the service sector, bogus forms of self-employment—involving contract, temporary, agency and other precarious forms of work—have become the norm. All of these forms of labour lack any social and legal protection. Now this huge low-income sector is being used to explode the traditional contract structure in other spheres of work.

The pay increase offered by Lufthansa to flight attendants (3.5 percent over three years) is well below the rate of inflation and is linked to a sharp deterioration in working conditions. According to the flight attendant's union, Ufo, the offer constitutes a real wage cut of 20 to 30 percent.

This offer is only the tip of the iceberg. Lufthansa is planning to slash the salaries of flight attendants through the use of contract workers employed by the Lufthansa subsidiary, Aviation Power, and by hiving off German and European routes to a newly established low-budget airline. As part of its "Score" austerity

program, the company plans to increase its profits by €1.5 billion by 2014. With an annual turnover of nearly €29 billion and personnel costs amounting to 22 percent, this would save the airline around a quarter of its entire personnel costs.

Should Lufthansa succeed in its offensive against the flight attendants it would create a precedent with huge implications not only for the entire aviation industry, but also for other sectors such as engineering and the civil service where employees still have some degree of rights and entitlements.

Lufthansa is not an isolated case. All over the world the ruling class is using the economic crisis to introduce the types of exploitation that prevailed in the 19th century while accumulating huge fortunes in the process. Whether it is Chrysler workers in the US, Hyundai workers in Asia, public sector workers in Brazil or miners in South Africa—the corporations and governments are intervening with extreme brutality against striking workers.

In Europe the European Union is launching ruthless austerity programs to destroy social gains made over the past seven decades. It will not cease until the standard of living of the working population has fallen to the level of China and Europe's other major competitors. The social attacks already mounted in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy are merely the prelude and will soon be felt with full force in Germany.

Lufthansa is not prepared to make any concessions with regard to its austerity plans. The company's executive cites rising costs and growing competition

and is threatening the strikers with massive job losses if they do not back down.

While the executive demands one sacrifice after the other from its workforce, the four members of the board have increased their pension funds dramatically and collectively pocket an annual salary of €6.8 million. CEO Christoph Franz, who has described the demands raised by flight attendants as excessive and unacceptable, has an annual salary of €2.3 million—i.e., more than a hundred times the starting salary of a flight attendant.

Resistance to this social counterrevolution is growing around the world. The strike by cabin crew is part of this movement. To succeed it must be the starting point for a broad political mobilization that opposes the systematic destruction of social gains and democratic rights. It is vital to prevent a selfish and irresponsible elite from ruining society and plunging the world into the type of economic and political catastrophe that characterized the 1930s.

Such a mobilization is opposed not only by the big corporations and governments, but also by the trade unions, the SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Greens, the Left Party and all those organizations pledged to defend the capitalist profit system. In an earlier period the unions preached social partnership and a harmony of interests. Today, under conditions of increased global competition, they have become the most important ally of the corporations against workers.

At Lufthansa, the Verdi public services union is an integral part of management. Its leader Frank Bsirske sits as vice chair on the company supervisory board and collects an annual compensation of €87,500. Verdi has repeatedly agreed to low wage settlements and has stabbed in the back smaller sectoral unions, such as the Cockpit pilots union, the air traffic controllers union GdF, and cabin crew union Ufo.

The current strike would not be taking place if Ufo had not broken away from Verdi. But Ufo merely made an organizational break with Verdi without drawing the necessary political lessons. It shares the standpoint of Verdi that trade unions must take account of the

difficult competitive situation for airlines. On the basis of this argument Ufo is quite prepared to arrive at an amicable solution. Ufo leader Nicoley Baublies has repeatedly offered Lufthansa concessions, compromises and conciliation, spreading the illusion that the management could be “brought to its senses” by “pinpoint” industrial action.

Such a standpoint undermines the strike and plays into the hands of management, which is determined to crush the flight attendants through a combination of strike-breakers, judicial strike bans, media propaganda and, not least, the strike-breaking services of Verdi.

In order for the strike to succeed it is necessary to set up action committees that operate independently of the union. These action or strike committees must establish contact with workers in other departments and companies and become the starting point for a broad political mobilization of the working class based on a socialist program.

Week by week it becomes clearer that jobs, wages and social rights cannot be defended within the framework of the capitalist system. Continuing social decline is inevitable as long as the banks, speculators and the profit sheets of the big concerns dictate the economic agenda.

The transformation of the unions from workers' organizations into integral parts of management is inseparable from their defence of the profit system. Opposition to the planned austerity measures and the defence of adequate wages and social rights require a perspective directed against the capitalist system.

The basic task confronting workers is the development of its own mass political party that fights for a socialist program.



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