

# German flight attendants' union calls for arbitration at Lufthansa

Our correspondents  
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Lufthansa flight attendants took strike action on Friday for the third time in a week. The two previous actions were limited to eight hours and selected airports; this time the flight attendants union, Ufo, called a 24-hour nationwide strike.

Following the announcement of the strike, Lufthansa canceled around 1,000 of its 1,800 flights. The remaining flights were partially manned by agency personnel or taken over by the Lufthansa subsidiaries, Swiss and German Wings. Some 100,000 passengers were affected. This is more than the number affected by the pilots' strikes in 2001 and 2010.

The flight attendants are fighting against the transformation of their profession into a low-wage sector. Lufthansa plans to massively reduce staff costs and save €1.5 billion by 2014. It is demanding that cabin crew work longer hours, a clear reduction in upper salary levels and overtime payments, and lower starting wages. In return, Lufthansa has offered a pay increase well below the rate of inflation. It is seeking to employ lower-paid contract workers and is threatening to outsource domestic German and European routes to a new low-cost airline.

At Berlin-Tegel, Ufo pickets assembled in the morning outside the entrance of the cargo area where the cabin crews pass through on their way to work. At noon, over 100 flight attendants marched to one of the airport terminals. Alluding to the Lufthansa CEO, Christoph Franz, they chanted: "Franz, we've had enough."

At Terminal D, Ufo spokesman Alexander Behrens gave a short speech, declaring: "We are the face of Lufthansa and have certainly earned 5 percent more after years of uncertainty."

The flight attendants brought banners, however, which made clear that they regarded the dispute to be

about much more than wages. They have long since realized that Lufthansa is intent on a massive reduction in income. This was reflected by one placard that read: "3.5 percent—No way! Minus 10 to 30 percent!"

Other demands raised by flight attendants were expressed on placards reading: "Poverty in old age—courtesy of Lufthansa", "Jobs for life vs. agency workers" and "We are against outsourcing". The clearest statement was a sign declaring: "Mini-jobs, temporary work, agency work? Karstadt, Schlecker, Lufthansa? It is not about 5 percent!"

As these slogans demonstrate, many flight attendants are convinced that what is at stake in the labor dispute goes far beyond an ordinary contract conflict.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed the statement "Lufthansa strike needs the support and solidarity of all workers" and discussed the broader political issues with strikers.

"I fully agree with your analysis of the situation", a member of Ufo said, but added the caveat that legal issues meant it was necessary at the moment to limit the conflict to financial claims.

A discussion with members of the airport security service in Berlin showed that discontent was simmering among other sections of airport workers. One employee of Airport Security said: "We're facing the same situation here at the airport". She continued by saying she thought it "regrettable" that Ufo was not seeking the support of workers not directly employed by Lufthansa. "In the end, temporary employment and wage dumping affect us all", declared one of her colleagues.

Around 500 flight attendants are employed in Dusseldorf. About a hundred of them were currently stranded abroad, Anja Kutscher told the WSW. They are stranded in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Kuwait

and throughout Europe because many flights failed to return to Dusseldorf yesterday.

“The strike participation is very good”, she said. “There is a great deal of solidarity among the cabin crews”. This is due to the close working conditions where between three and ten colleagues were at work at any one time on an aircraft.

Anja Kutscher reported that discontent has increased in recent years. Like many others she had worked for Lufthansa for many years. She was participating mainly to protest against the massive salary cuts for new-hires.

“Since 2005, we have had a system where after their first six years of employment workers receive only the former level of new-hires”, a Ufo representative told the WSWS.

“Young colleagues are often forced to take side jobs to make ends meet”, Anja Kutscher declared. “Especially if they live in expensive cities such as Frankfurt.”

All of the attendants were aware that the contract dispute involved much more than pay. “It is a general phenomenon, and not just in Germany,” Anja Kutscher continued. “Above all, younger employees have to work longer and receive even lower wages. So we are here not only for ourselves, and not just for Lufthansa.”

The strike has met with considerable support. A survey by Infratest dimap indicates that 75 percent of Germans have a general sympathy with the strikers.

Although the strike was a great success, Ufo chairman Nicoley Baublies had previously agreed with the company management to new talks with the assistance of a mediator. Such an arrangement was made during a telephone conversation between Baublies and a Lufthansa negotiator on Wednesday evening, Baublies said at Frankfurt Airport on Friday morning. “Whatever happens in the next day or two, we will neither plan nor announce any further strikes.”

One Ufo spokesman said they wanted to give the airline “pause to consider”: “Lufthansa should first of all come to its senses.”

Unconfirmed reports indicate that Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician Franz Müntefering will be appointed to mediate in the dispute. As labour minister in the former grand coalition led by Angela Merkel, Müntefering was responsible for pushing through an increase in the retirement age from 65 to 67 years.

On Friday evening, *Spiegel Online* reported that

Lufthansa was prepared to make concessions with regard to the use of agency workers. Two hundred agency stewardesses hired by the company AviationPower, who are currently used by the airline, are to be awarded permanent contracts in the coming year. Lufthansa has agreed to defer the use of external cabin crews in Berlin for “the foreseeable future”. The company, however, is not prepared to make any concessions regarding its general savings targets.



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