

Lessons of the Lufthansa strike

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There are important political lessons to be drawn from the recent strike by Lufthansa cabin crew workers. The strike demonstrated that the fight against temporary work and the associated attacks on wages and benefits requires a socialist perspective and an international strategy.

Instead of broadening and deepening the struggle, the flight attendant union, Ufo (Independent Flight Attendant Organisation), responded to the strike's power and solidarity by closing ranks with Lufthansa management.

Flight attendants at Lufthansa took part in strike action on three days last week. On the first two days the strikes were limited to eight hours and selected airports but last Friday the Ufo called a 24-hour, nationwide strike.

This was the first such strike in the history of Lufthansa. For the first time since the founding of the company in 1954, cabin crew struck at all German airports. Despite the use of temporary personnel and the transfer of flights by Lufthansa to its subsidiaries, Swiss and German Wings, the company was forced to cancel almost two-thirds of its 1,800 flights scheduled for Friday.

The company's management was taken aback by the high level of militancy, and Lufthansa CEO Christoph Franz announced his willingness to negotiate. Ufo leader Nicoley Baublies immediately declared the end of the strike.

In a letter to its members the Ufo executive described the offer to negotiate by Lufthansa as a "resounding success". "In the moment of triumph," the letter declared, "we have offered out our hand to management which hoisted the white flag on Friday with the deletion of almost the entire flight program."

This peace offering from the unions will come at a high price for the flight attendants. The Lufthansa executive merely wants to end the strike as soon as possible to gain time to better prepare for future conflicts. Although the Ufo executive referred to a "triumph" for the strikers, management has not submitted a new offer. It has only made vague statements of intent and indicated its willingness to initiate a settlement.

The union tries to gloss this over. Under the heading:

"The waiving of temporary work" Ufo claims that Lufthansa has publicly agreed to renounce the use of temporary staff. That's not true. In its postscript Ufo is forced to concede: "Well ...— not really, only initially in Berlin, only for cabin crew, and only for a 'foreseeable' period."

This means that Ufo called off the strike without reaching any arrangement with Lufthansa— neither with respect to salary issues, nor over the questions of temporary work and cuts in benefits. One is forced to ask: what was the point of the strike in the first place? And on what basis can the union speak of a moment of "triumph"?

The hope that management will now enter arbitration and commit to a waiver of temporary work and social dumping is either hopelessly naive or deliberate deception of union members. In any event, Lufthansa is using the end of the strike in order to prepare for the next round of attacks. The company is determined to enforce its austerity program, "Score," and plans to increase its profits by 1.5 billion euros by 2014. With an annual turnover of nearly 29 billion euros and a staff cost share of 22 percent this means cutting around a quarter of the budget for personnel costs.

The vague announcement by the company to refrain from using temporary agency workers in Berlin must also be seen in relation to the announcement that the opening of the new expanded airport for the German capital will be delayed for a considerable period of time. This provides a respite for Lufthansa to proceed with a series of graduated attacks on the working conditions of cabin crew while reducing its reliance on external agency staff.

The company plans to carry out this restructuring in close cooperation with the Verdi trade union and also with Ufo. The fact that the leadership of Ufo reached out its hand to strike a deal is a considerable success for Lufthansa CEO Franz.

Ufo was founded twenty years ago in the course of a sharp confrontation with the predecessor of Verdi, the ÖTV public service union. In May of this year Ufo

replaced its former executive, which had indicated its readiness to make compromises, with a newer and ostensibly more militant leadership. Now, however, a few months later, the new union leadership is taking the same path as Verdi. How can this be explained?

Ufo made an organizational break with Verdi but did not break with the policy of social partnership. Ufo officials place company interests, i.e. the so-called “well-being” of the concern, at the heart of their policy. During the recent strike the union stressed in a number of leaflets and speeches that it was striking “not against Lufthansa but for Lufthansa”.

Ufo described company plans to use contract workers at the new Berlin airport as “irresponsible damage to its image”. The union argued that it was unworthy for one of the last of the traditional companies in the DAX 30 to replace employees who enjoyed close personal contact with airline customers by cheaper temporary workers.

This standpoint purposefully ignores the character of the attacks launched by Lufthansa. The company’s efforts to cut salaries by 20 percent and more, introduce temporary cabin crew and outsource its European flights to a budget subsidiary are bound up with the offensive by governments and businesses worldwide to wipe out the social gains obtained by workers in previous decades. This process finds its sharpest expression in Greece, but also here in Germany a huge low-wage sector has emerged in recent years.

Under circumstances in which wages are being depressed across the globe, the price for fuel is rising, and airlines face fierce competition from low-cost providers, it is not difficult for Lufthansa to make a case for reducing its costs. Under these conditions to pursue a policy based on recognising “fair and trustful contract bargaining and social partnership” means automatically capitulating to management. Whoever makes competitiveness within the capitalist system their guiding principle will inevitably be forced to accept the harshest forms of exploitation, up to and including child labour.

This is the path now being taken by Ufo. Instead of rejecting the company’s austerity program, the union has repeatedly signalled its readiness to compromise. “We recognize,” it said in a release on September 7, “that as one of the leading German DAX 30 companies Lufthansa must always consider reforms—but not at the expense of its social partner.”

The Lufthansa strike won broad support because workers in other areas of the airline industry and workers generally face similar problems. However, instead of

pursuing the strike to the end by expanding and organizing this broad support, the Ufo leadership was shocked at the success of the movement it had unleashed. Instead of expanding the struggle, it cut a deal with management, putting an end to the strike.

Lufthansa is now using this cooperation to introduce its planned cuts in close collaboration with the Ufo leadership. Ufo has thereby replicated a development which can be observed in all unions around the world, which now operate as co-managers and offer concessions in the name of “competitiveness”.

This transformation of the unions is not merely the result of the corruption of individual officials. The entire union perspective based on unconditionally accepting capitalist property relations is bankrupt. In the past unions put the company under pressure to achieve wage increases and social improvements. Today, under the conditions of globalization, they put their members under pressure to accept cuts to their wages and benefits in order to ensure that “their” company remains competitive.

Globalization and economic crisis does not mean that labour disputes are fruitless. On the contrary, workers worldwide face the same problems. The fight against social dumping and temporary work is universal and must be made the starting point for a broad mobilization against the profit system and the overturning of a society run by a criminal financial elite.

This is only possible on the basis of a socialist perspective which places the needs of the population above profit interests. The right to work and fair wages and benefits are basic democratic rights. The most important task facing the workers is the building of its own mass political party that fights for a socialist program. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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