

Iberia airline strikers clash with Spanish police

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On Monday, striking workers at the Spanish airline Iberia paralysed Barajas international airport in the capital Madrid.

The strike is the first of a series of one-day stoppages called by the unions ASETMA, SITCPLA, UGT and CCOO as a response to Iberia's plan to lay off 3,800 workers (19 percent of the workforce), cut salaries by between 25 and 30 percent and reduce airline routes.

According to the unions, the strike was backed by 100 percent of the workers not detailed to provide minimum services agreed to by the unions.

Around 4,000 Iberia ground staff and cabin crew marched 10 kilometres from the industrial centre of La Muñozza in the outskirts of Madrid to the airport under a banner declaring: "We can all unite—Iberia will not be dismantled".

Other protesting workers drove their cars slowly past the accesses to the airport, forcing Iberia to recommend that passengers use the metro or the suburban trains.

Workers eventually overwhelmed the two police cordons set up to prevent them from entering the terminal. At around 2 p.m. the Antiriot Brigade Unit, the Guardia Civil and customs officials carrying anti-riot gear violently dispersed the protesters, arresting five and leaving one injured.

In Prat Airport in Barcelona some 50 strikers massed in front of dozens of police vans. There were also protesters at other airports across Spain.

According to Iberia the strike will lead to more than 1,200 flight cancellations over the next three weeks. On Monday a total of 236 flights were cancelled, of which 81 were Iberia flights, 20 Iberia Express, 78 Vueling (owned by Iberia) and 57 Air Nostrum, whose handling services are supplied by Iberia. The carrier has stated that 70,000 passengers would be affected by cancellations.

In April 2010 it was confirmed that British Airways and Iberia had signed an agreement to merge, making the combined operation the third largest commercial airline in the world by revenue. The newly merged company, known as International Airlines Group (IAG), claims the layoffs are needed to restore the Spanish carrier to profitability. The economic crisis that erupted in 2008 has led to deepening financial problems for some of the largest airlines, as passenger numbers have dropped sharply. Iberia lost €850 million (US\$1.1 billion) between 2008 and September of last year, including €262 million in the first nine months of 2012.

The Iberia workers' struggle is only the latest example of a process of restructuring, privatisation and deregulation that has swept the airline industry, as firms have sought to offload the cost of the economic crisis onto workers. In Europe this takes place under the Single European Sky regulations, begun in the 1990s and accelerated following the recent economic crisis. Iberia is being hit by the euro crisis and competition from discount airlines. Ryanair and Easy Jet have overtaken Iberia as the two largest operators of services between Spain and other parts of Europe.

Iberia's latest attack is part of a global assault by airline companies to drive down labour costs and impose intolerable working conditions. Last December, Scandinavian Airlines announced its "4Excellence Next Generation", which will see the elimination of 6,000 jobs, 40 percent of the total workforce of 15,000, and 17 percent pay cuts. Lufthansa has stated its intention to cut costs on its long-haul business by 10 percent by 2015 and by 20 percent by 2025, compared with 2011. Air France/KLM announced the elimination of 10 percent of the workforce or 5,000 jobs, whilst the firm's profits rose by 28 percent in the third quarter of

2012.

At every airline, the unions have collaborated in imposing the dictates of management on pilots, cabin crew, ground staff and other support workers. No attempt has been made to unite workers even within Iberia, let alone throughout the industry. Pilots employed by the airline, 320 of whom are going to be sacked, have been called out by the pilots' main trade union SEPLA on different days in order that no united opposition is organised.

The unions encouraged the nationalist chants, "We are Spanish, Spanish, Spanish", handing out Spanish flags and banners saying "British go home" in reference to the merger with British Airways. Nationalism has been fomented by the unions to divide Spanish workers from their counterparts in Europe and worldwide. Miguel Ángel González of the Spanish Trade Union Association of Aviation Maintenance Technicians (Asociación Sindical Española de Técnicos de Mantenimiento Aeronáutico, ASETMA), stated that dismantling Iberia "is not to invest the economic growth of a country which depends on tourist revenues" and that the strike is "necessary" to rebuild Iberia's profits and to defend Spanish interests.

The unions have also accepted the draconian government decree on minimum services that guarantees 90 percent of long-haul flights, 61 percent of medium-haul and 46 percent of domestic flights on stoppage days. Antonio Escobar, president of the Independent Union of Airline Cabin Crew (Sindicato Independiente de Tripulantes de Cabina de Pasajeros de Líneas Aéreas, SITCPLA) stated that the negotiations with the company are open and "the committee [of trade unions] is willing to compromise if they return to common sense".

The result of the continued negotiations and betrayals by the unions over the years was reflected in the desperation of a cabin crew member Sole who stated, "They are throwing out thousands of us... We have offered to reduce our wages by 30 percent and fly at full capacity, but they have not accepted. Iberia planes have been removed and they have put more British [Airways], Vueling and Iberia Express, but what do they want if we are giving everything?"

In December 2011 the air traffic controllers' unions refused to call on other unions to come out and support their members, who were facing swingeing cuts to pay

and longer hours. They were placed under military discipline and defeated.

Workers and youth must draw the lessons of painful experiences in Spain and internationally and strike out on the only viable political road—that of a rebellion against these moribund organisations and the building of a mass political movement to fight for workers' power and socialism. What is needed is to mobilise the insurrectionary mood sweeping across the working class in a general strike. New rank-and-file organisations must be built—independent of the trade union and labour bureaucracy—to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight to bring down Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party government.

This is a political struggle that must proceed from the recognition that capitalism has failed. It is not a question of exchanging one set of capitalist politicians with another, but of replacing the system in its entirety through the formation of a workers' government. The billions given over to the banks and the super-rich must be returned immediately and used to meet the basic needs of the population as part of the reorganisation of all aspects of social and economic life along socialist lines.



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