

# Spain's Iberia airline strike betrayed by unions

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Last Monday, the five unions representing the majority of workers at Spanish airline Iberia accepted the proposal to end the dispute by Labour Law Professor Gregorio Tudela.

The official mediator's proposal had been unofficially accepted the day before in agreement with International Airlines Group (IAG), the holding company for Iberia and British Airways.

The unions immediately called off the five-day strikes planned for next week, ending the three-month struggle that opened up after workers rejected the airline's restructuring plans at the start of the year.

Tudela's proposal includes a minuscule reduction of Iberia's planned redundancies, from 3,807 (19 percent of the workforce) to 3,141 (16 percent) and wage cuts of seven percent for ground staff and 14 percent for cabin crew and pilots. A pay freeze will be imposed in 2013-2015. The preferred route for the redundancies will be early retirement at 55.

The unions have attempted to portray the acceptance of the proposal as a victory for the Iberia workers. The Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), with nearly 7,000 members in Iberia and representing 39 percent of the workforce, issued a statement declaring it was pleased that "no worker will lose their jobs in Iberia traumatically."

The Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) statement repeats that the proposal avoids the "traumatic" effects of the new labour reform and provides for "a dignified exit for more than three thousand workers."

The cabin crew union, SITCPLA, argues that to have said no would have meant "an intensification of the struggle" and small scale stoppages because the rest of the unions would have moved away from strikes. This would have meant having "public opinion against" as no one would understand "why we reject early

retirement" and "why we are striking."

The other two unions, ASETMA and CTA Vuelo, have not published any statement.

SEPLA, the pilots' union, did not sign the document but called off the stoppages planned for Easter. The Comisión de Trabajadores Asamblearios (CTA Tierra), the cabin crew union STAVLA, and the small anarcho-syndicalist union CGT voted against.

The deal will not mean an end to redundancies even after the company sacks over 3,000 workers. IAG has reported a near €1 billion pre-tax loss for 2012, with the Spanish carrier's operating loss widening from €61 million in 2011 to €896 million in 2012. A Deutsche Bank analyst told the *Financial Times*, "At face value then, the proposed restructuring is not as aggressive as IAG wanted... but nevertheless we think the market will focus on the speed at which this restructuring is moving and this is positive."

Iberia will continue to drive down labour costs and impose intolerable working conditions, as other airlines companies have done. This is part of a process of restructuring, privatisation and deregulation that has swept the airline industry.

According to a survey of over 800 workers in the STAVLA union, more than 80 percent are against the proposal. On Monday, around 100 Iberia workers demonstrated outside the main doors of the Rectoría of the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) where the meeting between the unions and the company was taking place.

They whistled, banged frying pans and shouted at the trade union leaders as they left the meeting. "If they don't take us into account, they don't represent us," they shouted. According to *Público*, "some workers lamented the 'concessions' by some unions which they considered as 'another arm of corruption' as 'they

earn for each ERE.’ ”

This refers to how the unions receive approximately 5 to 10 percent of each redundancy package, supposedly to cover for legal representation costs.

Workers applauded when the CGT brought a banner stating they will not accept the proposal. The CGT plays a specific political role of sucking in workers disenchanted with the bigger union federations by means of radical and militant phraseology. But it always ends up playing the exact same role as the larger unions, such as when the CGT called off the four-day strike by metro and bus workers in Barcelona in February 2012.

On Wednesday Ana Pastor, Minister of Public Works and Transport, had to cancel signing the agreement at UAM and instead used the Ministry’s building fearing a response from angry workers. Even then, 100 workers gathered in front of the Ministry to show their opposition.

The latest betrayal follows the standard pattern established by the unions, successive governments and Iberia since the introduction of the ERE. The company declares its intention to cut wages and conditions and refuses to answer the demands of the unions involved. The unions call a series of strikes and then the government names a mediator to give the appearance of neutrality and fairness. The two sides then agree to negotiate and the government mediator recommends the changes the company announced in the first place. The unions implement them, playing the role of labour police.

At Iberia, the unions also accepted the draconian government decree on minimum services that guaranteed 90 percent of long-haul flights, 61 percent of medium-haul and 46 percent of domestic flights on stoppage days.

First they stopped any attempt to unite workers even within Iberia, let alone throughout the industry. Pilots employed were called out by SEPLA on different days in order that no united opposition was organised.

Then they divided Spanish workers from their counterparts in Europe and worldwide. Unusual in workers’ demonstrations in Spain, chants of, “We are Spanish, Spanish, Spanish” were heard. Spanish flags were waved and banners saying, “British go home” in reference to the merger with British Airways. Even in the meeting held with Iberia and the mediator last

Monday, the unions declared that that the workers’ mobilization against the restructuring plan was not due to lower wages or layoffs, but a “response to the looting [of Iberia] by British Airways.”

The pseudo-left parties such as the Anti-Capitalist Left (IA) of the Pabloite United Secretariat, El Militante, (the former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency) and Class Against Class, the former Morenoite section in Spain, have acted as unabashed promoters of the union bureaucracy.

En Lucha (In Struggle), the Spanish affiliate of the British Socialist Workers Party, has remained silent except for publishing a brief rant by an Iberia worker against the merger with British Airways.

The IA’s statement on March 5 stated that the strike was the result of Iberia’s treachery in betraying the previous agreement with the unions, who were “prepared to make the sacrifices to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of the company.”

El Militante stated on February 14 that Iberia was “an excellent opportunity for union leaders to correct its policy of pacts and consensus. ...Workers have the strength, we have the will. Union strategy is needed to live up to our goals!”

Class against Class wrote on February 16 that under “the savage attacks by the employers, the union bureaucracy is forced to break the social peace.”



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