

One-day Lufthansa strike grounds flights in Germany

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A strike by technicians and service staff at Lufthansa on Monday led to the cancellation of flights at airports in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart, Hannover, Dusseldorf and Cologne.

In limited strike action four weeks ago, 700 of 1,800 Lufthansa flights were affected and remained on the ground for a day. As a result of Monday's strike, 1,688 scheduled airline flights of a total of 1,720 could not take off.

The strike was directed against the offer made by Lufthansa management in the third round of ongoing contract bargaining. The workers' union, Verdi, is calling for a 5.2 percent wage increase for the company's 33,000 employees and employment guarantees and improvements for trainees. In response, Lufthansa offered salary increases between 0.4 percent and 0.6 percent for the next 12 months.

The main reason for the expansion of the labour dispute is not just the miserable offer from the employer's side, but also fears on the part of the Verdi union and the company executive of the radicalisation of the workforce and the increasing influence of smaller craft unions, such as the pilots' union Cockpit and Ufo. The latter unions emerged as a direct result of the failure of Verdi to represent airline ground staff. Only 15 percent of Lufthansa employees are organised in Verdi.

To prevent workers from turning to its rivals, Verdi decided to expand its strike action somewhat while simultaneously intensifying its cooperation with management.

Militant phrases by Verdi bureaucrats are aimed at disguising the union's close collaboration with company management. Verdi negotiator Christine Behle, who has sat on the Lufthansa Supervisory Board since March, railed against the "unacceptable" offer

and accused the employer's side of "playing on the fears of the workforce". Lufthansa chairman Stefan Lauer countered by describing the strike as "completely over the top" and threatened legal action.

At the same time, both parties ensured that the strike was limited to one day (and in Berlin to just a few hours), while employees of the wholly owned Lufthansa subsidiary German Wings were not called out in an effort to minimise the effect of the action. All of the flight cancellations were made known on Friday, down to the last detail, "to avoid inconvenience to passengers". It was also agreed that no further strike action be taken until the next round of union-management negotiations on April 29-30.

The limited walkout takes place in a situation in which the livelihoods of Lufthansa workers are increasingly under threat. The international aviation industry has for years been dominated by ruthless competition, which has already led to thousands of layoffs and a downward spiral in terms of income. In the US, airline employees are paid around 40 percent less than 10 years ago. Europe is seeking to catch up in this respect by leaps and bounds. German airlines face additional competition from Etihad Airways (Abu Dhabi) and Emirates (UAE), which not only have lower labour costs, but also significantly lower fuel prices.

To compete and maintain profits for its investors, Lufthansa introduced its SCORE austerity programme in 2012. The aim of the programme is to increase the operating profits of the airline to €2.3 billion (US\$3 billion) by 2015. Last year alone, the company saved €740 million. SCORE foresees the elimination of 3,500 jobs and drastic cost reductions in personnel.

The co-managers in the union bureaucracy support important elements of the SCORE programme. This is why Verdi is attempting to increase its influence among

workers, while keeping a cap on their growing resistance.

In the course of the strike on Monday, the rumour circulated among the 2,000 workers taking strike action at Frankfurt airport that Verdi boss Frank Bsirske was jetting first class to the South Pacific for the next round of contract talks. One of the strikers, who has worked at the airport for 30 years and 10 years for Lufthansa, declared: “Just the fact that such a rumour has some credence is revealing.”



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