Air France to lay off 2,800 workers

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On September 18, Air France-KLM announced the elimination of 2,800 jobs as part of its "Transform 2015" restructuring plan. This follows the slashing of 5,600 jobs in 2012 from a total of 69,553 at Air France.

The layoffs were imposed on Air France-KLM workers through "voluntary redundancies" agreed to by the unions. Since then, wages have been frozen and speed-up imposed. The current layoffs will hit 1,800 ground staff, 350 pilots, and 700 air hostesses and stewards. As a mark of the Paris Stock Exchange's approval, the company's share value has nearly doubled since the start of the Transform 2015 program.

Béatrice Lestic, the leading CFDT (French Democratic Labour Confederation) union bureaucrat at Air France, hailed the Transform 2015 cuts as a smart business plan: "We agree on a dose of austerity, as long as there are accompanying measures for growth … Today we are ready to make sacrifices, as long as there is a long-term plan for the future of the company."

With the current job losses, the company aims to reduce its debt by €2 billion over three years, hysterically insisting that without Transform 2015, the company "could die." The company acknowledges its flights to be full and making profits during the summer months, but adds that it suffers "losses in winter."

According to Air France executive Frédéric Gagey, "While our activity is very seasonal, we lack flexibility to adapt to slack periods."

The ominous message to the workforce is that they should expect total flexibility in a reduced labour force; this is the norm in low-cost airline companies. Unprofitable European destinations will be shut down, along with provincial airports in winter.

Air France and the Dutch airline KLM merged in 2004, after Air France was privatized in 2003. The company also has a 25 percent stake in ailing Italian airline Alitalia, which has over a billion euros of debt and registered a net loss of €280 million last year. The French state is still Air France-KLM's largest shareholder, owning 15.8 percent of the firm's shares.

In line with other major national airlines in Europe, Air France-KLM is engaged in a savage competition for markets. Since the 2008 financial crisis, tens of thousands of jobs have been lost, with over 20,000 layoffs in the European airline industry in the first six months of 2012 alone.

The airlines are pushing to drive down wages and conditions of their workers in line with short-haul, low-cost companies like Ryanair or EasyJet, and long-haul competition from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Increases of productivity of pilots, stewards and shorter rotation periods of planes are the benchmark for Air France-KLM. Germany's Lufthansa is transferring most of its European flights to its low-cost subsidiary, GermanWings.

Workers at Air France-KLM will be faced with similar attacks on conditions and the work place labour code as workers at Ryanair. On October 2, the latter was fined €200,000 by the tribunal in Aix-en-Provence and ordered to pay €9 million in damages to the Social Security system and flight crews, for having breached the French labour laws at Marseille-Marignane airport.

Ryanair employed 127 workers at Marseille-Marignane under Irish contracts. Between 2007 and 2010, it never registered with the local chamber of commerce in Aix, where it had an operational base and its personnel lived. Ryanair defended its treatment of the workers by stating: "They fly in Irish planes and straddle several countries; they no more work in France than anywhere else."

Ryanair's appeal will be based on claims that free-market European Union regulations "clearly authorize the mobile crews working for an Irish company and on planes registered in Ireland to pay their taxes and social security in Ireland".

In 2010, EasyJet was convicted of similar offences, fined €140,000, and ordered to pay €1.4 million to the Unemployment Benefits Department. Cityjet, a subsidiary of Air France, was also fined for similar offences and paid damages of €2,000 to each worker.

The answer of the unions to the latest attacks on workers' conditions at Air France-KLM is to sit down with the company and government, trying to negotiate a rotten deal. Its purpose is to block an independent struggle by the workers against the cuts—the only way forward for the defence of jobs.

The Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour) at Air France appealed for round table talks with Industrial Renewal Minister Arnaud Montebourg. Both the CGT and Montebourg have long experiences with tying workers to the perspective of waiting for state rescues of distressed firms, then rapidly moving to close the firms down.

Thus Montebourg, after having boasted of his "interventionism" in an apparent attempt to save PSA's Aulnay auto plant from being closed, eventually shifted his position and declared that the plant's closure was "inevitable."