

Air France pilots strike against low wages

Antoine Lerougetel
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Seventy-five percent of Air France's 3,760 pilots have been on strike since Monday to defend their jobs and working conditions, threatened by the growth of the company's low cost subsidiary Transavia projected in management's new strategic plan "Perform 2020."

On Thursday, over 60 percent of the firm's planes were still grounded. Management assesses its losses at €10-€15 million per day, excluding compensation payments. A week-long strike would be the longest carried out by Air France pilots since 1998.

Jean-Louis Barbier, the leader of SNPL-Air France (the National Union of Airline Pilots), the majority union in the company, asserted that the strike would continue until Thursday and that it could go beyond that date. The SNPL is organizing a referendum in its membership on whether to continue the strike and will announce the results on Saturday. Barbier says that "if the pilots vote to continue the strike, this time it will be an unlimited one."

The development of a low-cost subsidiary is the weapon Air France is intending to use to diminish the working conditions of all its employees. The cabin staff of Transavia is paid about 20 percent less than their Air France counterparts, but their flying hours are 30 to 40 percent longer.

In 2013, the low-cost sector had 45 percent of the air traffic market in Europe. In France, it had only 25 percent, but competition is increasing. "Low-cost companies have become the new benchmark," Gille Gompertz, the CEO of freight company Avico, said.

Low-cost firms keep their planes in the air as long as possible every day, working from five in the morning to midnight. They reduce to the minimum the turnaround times of their aircraft, making their flight personnel clean up the plane. Above all, they are cutting salaries and increasing flying hours (700 hours at EasyJet and Transavia on average, and 800 hours at Ryanair, as opposed to 450 to 500 hours at Air France).

With ferocious competition between airline companies in Europe and internationally, carried out with drastic reductions of labor costs and the intensified exploitation of the workers, the trade unions are leading Air France employees into a dead end.

The SNPL is continuing to negotiate with Air France on the number of planes that will be assigned to Transavia. Management has proposed to limit the expansion of the Transavia France fleet to "30 planes until 2019", as opposed to the approximately 50 initially planned.

The pilots' trade unions, far from acting in solidarity to oppose the intensified exploitation of low-cost airline workers, are crying out against "social dumping." The SNPL speaks of the "pillaging of French jobs," when the offensive against the pilots is, in fact, part of a social counterrevolution being carried out in countries across Europe in order to slash labor costs.

Médiapart quotes the strike leaders as saying: "We've got nothing against some planes flying low-cost.... Our problem is when low-cost starts to encroach on activity which has classically been part of Air France's." In other words, other workers can have a low-cost life as long as this does not affect Air France pilots.

The union claims it is possible to defend the jobs and wages of pilots by creating a single contract with the present conditions at Air France for all pilots of planes with over 100 seats, whether they are employed by Air France or Transavia.

Such an attempt to cut a deal with management to exempt pilots from the effects of the spread of low-cost companies without mobilizing the entire working class in struggle is doomed to failure.

The union itself admits that around the world, when a low-cost company is established in a given location, it employs its staff, including pilots, according to the working conditions prevalent in that country. An SNPL official admitted that "we are promised that pilots

employed according to Portuguese and Czech labor conditions will never be used in flights leaving France, but we just don't believe that promise..."

In any case, Air France CEO Alexandre de Juniac scornfully dismissed the SNLP's demands, stating: "Everybody knows that you can't run low-cost with the norms of a traditional company."

The differences in wages at Air France are enormous: a captain of an A380, for example, earns about €200,000 gross per year at the end of his career, but his colleague at an Air France regional flight company is paid €18,000 per year.

Juniac's position is supported by other trade unions, which are openly hostile to the strike. Force Ouvrière (Workers Power) attacked the strike, warning it "could endanger the jobs in the company," and complaining that the strike was undermining the sacrifices workers already have made.

Laurent Berger, leader of the Socialist Party-aligned CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), denounced the strike as "indecent."

The struggle against the impoverishment of all sections of the working class must become a political struggle against the government and the European Union. Ministers in France's Socialist Party (PS) government have not hidden their hostility to the strike, demanding that the strikers go back to work and that the trade unions and Air France management get together in a "social dialogue" in order to push through the attacks on the workers.

On Thursday, Prime minister Manuel Valls claimed that the strike was "not understood" by the French people. He added: "The strike must stop. I insist that the Air France pilots should stop this dispute, get around the table, progress. Their status is not being questioned. It's France's future which is at stake, and social dialogue must bring an end to the dispute."

The new economics minister, the banker Emmanuelle Macron, declared on *Europe 1* radio: "We can no longer accept that a country is blocked by a handful of people... I think the strike should stop."

This makes it clear that the ruling PS intends to act aggressively against the strike in order to prevent the development of a broader movement in the working class in opposition to its unpopular, socially regressive policies.



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