

Air France delays outsourcing of jobs amid pilots strike

Our reporters

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After Air France CEO Alexandre de Juniac's proposal on Monday evening to postpone until December the development of its low-cost subsidiary Transavia-Europe, other sections of Air France workers are supporting the pilots' strike. Striking pilots also marched yesterday in front of the National Assembly in Paris in protest, while 60 percent of the firm's planes were grounded and nearly 40 percent of flights cancelled.

"The CEO wants to relocate jobs. He is playing a double game. We are in a conflict with management. We also want to maintain the quality of the system, of the services we offer," one pilot explained to WSWs reporters in front of the National Assembly. "I'm against a boss who is a dictator."

Especially in the low-cost sector, he added, "one has greater workload ... you build up fatigue. There must be a balance between profitability and the buildup of fatigue."

Several pilots stressed that they wanted to work in all of Air France-KLM's different subsidiaries, including the low-cost ones, so as not to be limited to only serving the social elites. "Businessmen travel on Air France, for family visits there is the [airline] HOP, then the third company is the charter company Transavia. We are pleased to work, we want to work in all three," another pilot said.

The pilots fear that the creation of the subsidiary Transavia-Europe, legally headquartered in Portugal, could lead to extensive job losses in France. Pilots employed in Portugal would have lower salaries and not pay into the retirement fund of the pilots in France, enabling Air France-KLM to increase its profits by massively transferring jobs to the lower-wage workforce of Transavia-Europe.

Pilots overwhelmingly rejected the threats Juniac

made in a *Le Monde* interview this weekend, saying that if pilots' unions refused his terms, he would void all existing agreements in force between Air France-KLM and Transavia-France. This was manifestly a threat to slash bonuses paid to Air France pilots when they work for Transavia-France, to compensate them for the low base salaries of the low-cost subsidiary.

On France 2 TV's 8 o'clock news Monday evening, Juniac announced a climbdown: "If we can't achieve a satisfactory dialogue and agreement, we will have to stop. I will do so with deep regret."

Nevertheless, he held out hope of reaching an agreement with the union bureaucracies, stressing that "it would be too early" to speak of definitively withdrawing the project. "We hope to convince, we hope to come to a conclusion in negotiations on the expansion of Transavia. If we don't achieve this, we will drop the project, with real regret because it's a project which consolidates Transavia France, which consolidates Transavia Holland," he said.

At his press conference late Monday afternoon, Jean-Louis Barber, the leader of SNPL-Air France (National Union of Airline Pilots), feeling that he was losing control of the strike, called on the prime minister to mediate, in an attempt to find an end to the conflict—even through Manuel Valls had praised management's proposals as "reasonable" and demanded pilots "end the strike."

The pilots rejected these proposals demanding the outright withdrawal of the Transavia-Europe project. Wider sectors of Air France personnel are expressing support for the strike, with three pilots trade unions—SNPL-AF ALPA, SPAF and Alter—and five other unions representing different categories of staff including the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) are calling for "the unconditional withdrawal of the

Transavia-Europe project, which means the relocation of our jobs.”

Visibly taken aback, the government and the trade union bureaucracy are putting pressure on Air France to back down, fearing the eruption of an uncontrollable mass movement against the government.

The Junior Minister for Transport Alain Vidalies took note of Air France’s proposal, stressing in a communiqué that he had “suggested that the Transavia-Europe project be eliminated from the company’s plan.” The state is pressing Air France management to end the strike and prevent a broader movement of the working class against the ruling Socialist Party’s (PS) offensive to cut labour costs—that is, salaries and social benefits—for workers across France.

Members of Vidalies’ entourage told the press, “Our line is to propose the dropping of the Transavia-Europe project. If management makes a real proposal saying that Transavia-Europe is being dropped, all parties will be able to go along with that.”

At the National Assembly protest, SNPL trade union official Antoine Amar told the WSWS: “We started off just on the basis of the interests of the pilots, but if we give way, after us there are the cabin staff, the technical staff, everyone fears outsourcing and job losses ... The strike is just. If we go down, all the workers will pay the price. There are not only pilots in a plane.”

Asked if he saw a broader link between the struggle of Air France workers and a struggle against the PS’ general policy of slashing labour costs, Amar replied in the negative: “we are not in the sphere of politics,” adding: “the strike is just, we are together in the defence of workers.”

In fact, the trade union bureaucracy is working closely with Manuel Valls’ austerity programme. “The SNPL has asked in a communiqué for a meeting with Valls, but he hasn’t replied,” Amar complained.



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