

Air France pilots' strike hardens despite government climbdown

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The Air France pilots' strike hardened yesterday, despite Air France's announcement that it would immediately scrap plans to build a new low-cost subsidiary, Transavia Europe, under pressure from the Socialist Party (PS) government. According to the company, 60 percent of flights were canceled yesterday.

Pilots resolutely opposed the creation of the Portuguese-based firm Transavia-Europe, which would have led to massive job outsourcing and bankrupted the Air France pilots' retirement fund.

After the government and Air France announced the climb-down, they called on pilots to "immediately return to work." Pilots stayed out on strike, however, understanding that the decision to cancel the Transavia-Europe project is only a tactic, to delay attacks on the Air France workforce until they have been better prepared politically.

According to a strike update published by the National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL) Wednesday night, "Currently, given the absence of guarantees against threats on French jobs and on the future of Transavia-France, SNPL-Air France confirms that the strike is continuing.... Mobilisation is still strong, with nearly 80 percent of workers on strike and a higher percentage planned for Thursday. Everything is in play now, and we must keep up the pressure."

The government's decision to force Air France to abandon its plans in the face of the pilots' strike signals a major political crisis in France. The PS government, deeply unpopular due to its savage austerity measures against the working class, decided to take one step back in the face of the first substantial strike movement against its policy of social retrogression.

According to the daily *Le Monde*, "Inside the government, there is fear that public opinion is shifting.

Initially, the pilots strike was considered as a strike by privileged elements, a corporatist movement."

In the union bureaucracies and inside the PS, there is deep fear of a movement of all airport workers that could halt air traffic in France and signal the beginning of an open struggle between the working class and the reactionary government of President François Hollande.

The main trade union federations continue to isolate the pilots' strike, which they have constantly sought to blacken in the eyes of the public. Workers Force (FO) attacked the strike because it "could threaten jobs" and was undermining the results of various concessions contracts imposed by the unions on the Air France workforce.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT)—which controls the ground crews, many of whom are poorly paid and have seen deep attacks on working conditions—declared that it "did not condemn this movement but did not support the ultra-corporatist content of its demands."

The CGT now felt forced to sign a communiqué with several flight attendants' unions, demanding "the unconditional withdrawal of the Transavia-Europe plan, synonymous with outsourcing of our jobs." The CGT is still not calling these workers out on strike, thus continuing to isolate the pilots' action.

The pilots' distrust for the promises of management and the various union bureaucracies is well founded. The state and Air France are clearly signaling that the company plans soon to carry out another attack on pensions and wages by creating another low-cost subsidiary legally domiciled in a lower-wage country.

Yesterday morning, government spokesman Stéphane Le Foll told Radio Classique: "This strike must stop now.... It is blocking a project that, strategically, is important for the company. We have to find the ways

and means for Air France to extend its activity in low-cost flights.”

According to *Le Monde*, Air France may also buy another low-cost airline, “as British Airways did for example by buying Vueling.... Thus Air France is contemplating the purchase of the Polish-Hungarian low-cost airline Wizzair. Sources in Air France management have let it be known that ‘Wizzair remains an option.’ ”

The pilots’ struggle against this perspective of outsourcing and exploitation of the workforce is the first large-scale workers’ struggle against the hated government of Hollande, who is currently at only a 13 percent approval rating in the polls. It is the political weakness of the government, and the fear of a broader movement against it in the working class, that forced the PS to insist on the temporary withdrawal of Air France’s low-cost plans.

Hollande has been able to continue his broader social attacks for so long only because of the reactionary role of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party. They have done everything they could to strangle working class opposition to Hollande, whom they supported in the final round of the 2012 presidential elections.

Objectively, the pilots are engaged in a political struggle against Hollande and the entire programme of austerity being implemented by the European Union. Their struggle is of central importance for the entire working class. It can only be waged on a perspective of mobilising the working class against European capitalism, taking the struggle out of the hands of the unions and their pseudo-left allies.

The SNPL itself openly complained at the beginning of the strike that it would have preferred to reach an agreement with Air France-KLM CEO Alexandre de Juniac, and that Juniac had been clumsy in rolling out his strategy to attack the pilots. “If he had played his cards on the table, everything would have happened better, but we learned of his plans bit by bit. Then he tried to push everything through,” said one SNPL official.

The government also criticised the way Juniac handled the pilots’ strike and antagonised the pilots. In a *Le Monde* interview Monday, he had offered to suspend the creation of Transavia-Europe for the rest of the year. On the other hand, he threatened to scrap Air

France’s agreement with the pilots on the creation of Transavia-France in 2007—which would have led to deep wage cuts for Air France pilots flying for the Transavia-France subsidiary. *Le Parisien* noted that pilots were “outraged” by this threat.

The government, like the union bureaucracy, considered this attempt to use the carrot and the stick very clumsy, as it forced the SNPL to demand the withdrawal of Juniac’s plans in order to keep control of the strike.



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