

French Prime Minister Valls denounces striking Air France pilots

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The strike of the Air France pilots against job outsourcing continued yesterday despite attempts by management and the French government to force an end to the strike.

Over 58 percent of pilots went on strike, with only 48 percent of flights taking off. Participation in the strike was reportedly particularly heavy at airports in southern France. The SNPL (National Airline Pilots Union) and SPAF (Air France Pilots Union) have committed themselves to continue the strike until September 30, whilst reserving the right to go beyond this date.

The strike prompted an extraordinary public attack by Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday evening. Valls attacked striking pilots as “selfish” and denounced their demands for a single contract at all the airline’s subsidiaries as “contrary” to the development of low-cost airlines—that is, contrary to the plans of Air France and the PS government to impose deep wage cuts on pilots.

“We have let dialogue install itself and continue under difficult conditions,” Valls added. “But we say very clearly, again, that this strike must end.”

Valls’s comments are a warning that France’s ruling Socialist Party (PS) is increasingly desperate in the face of growing public sympathy for the strike. Behind the scenes, the government is considering aggressive measures to force pilots back to work.

It is now two days since the Valls government pressured Air France-KLM to shelve plans to set up a low-cost subsidiary, Transavia Europe. The company’s intention was to establish the subsidiary in a country such as Portugal, where low wage levels and weak labor laws would allow it to hire low-paid pilots and other staff who would also have longer working hours and fewer labor protections. Air France pilots rightly feared that jobs would then be massively transferred to

the more heavily exploited workforce of Transavia Europe.

The pilots are continuing their strike because they now fear a similar danger from an existing low-cost subsidiary, Transavia France, after Air France-KLM CEO Alexandre de Juniac threatened to tear up contracts regulating how Air France pilots work at Transavia France. Workers there receive lower wages, and pilots have until now received a bonus from Air France for flying for Transavia France to make up the difference. However, the threats of Valls and Juniac made clear that their ultimate aim is to impose a significant pay cut on the pilots.

The attack on Air France pilots is part of an offensive throughout Europe to impose low-cost airlines and low-paid jobs as the dominant model of air transport. US airlines have imposed a similar model on their employees over the last 30 years, with deregulation, mergers and corporate bankruptcies designed to carve up wages and pensions.

This attack on the working class is being pursued ruthlessly across Europe and particularly in France, where low-cost operations still are less common than in other European countries. A smaller carrier, Monarch Airlines in Britain, just forced through a 30 percent pay cut for all staff, laying off 900 employees.

Lufthansa, the biggest European airline, is demanding that 5,400 pilots give back their rights to early retirement, pushing up the early retirement age from 55 to 60. Lufthansa enjoys the complicity of the Cockpit pilots union, which already agreed to a 20 percent cut in short-haul costs in 2010 and is currently limiting the struggle by pilots on the retirement issue to short strikes.

The inability of Air France and France’s Socialist Party government to immediately impose the Transavia-

Europe deal on the pilots has provoked a significant political crisis. Enormous anger is building up amongst workers and youth against the never-ending austerity policies of President François Hollande, who installed Valls as prime minister earlier this year. France's most unpopular president in history, with only a 13 percent positive opinion, Hollande is widely viewed with anger and contempt.

The ruling elite and the government fear that any movement such as the pilots' strike could ignite a mass movement against the austerity agenda of the PS. This is why Valls pressured Air France to give concessions to the pilots, hoping to stop the strike before it attracted others layers of workers into a struggle that could rapidly bring down the government.

As they push to end the strike, Air France and Valls are still seeking some way to impose cuts on Air France workers to align conditions with other European low-cost airlines—either by forcing them to work for low wages at Transavia France, or by acquiring another low-cost airline, like Wizzair. Juniac is hoping to break off negotiations and end the strike without agreeing to the pilots' demand for a common work contract for the whole of the Air France-KLM group.

In their struggle to defend working conditions, Air France pilots face a political struggle against the austerity agenda of the PS and the entire European Union (EU), and in particular their servants in the union bureaucracy, who have completely isolated the strike.

As in other European countries, Air France-KLM is using the unions to push through its attacks on the workers. Unions representing other sections of the workforce, such as the cabin crews and ground staff, are at the head of media efforts to denounce the strike.

Thus, Béatrice Lestic, General Secretary of the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) union at Air France, complained: "The longer the strike goes on the more the bill gets bigger and all the employees will have to pay it. We made efforts over the last two years and it's all been wiped out in the last 10 days."

This reactionary diatribe is characteristic of the outlook of the anti-worker corporate thugs who populate the French union bureaucracies. Lestic's main concern is that any attempt by workers to defend their working conditions will cut across the profits she obtained for Air France by pushing through attacks on

the workers the CFDT falsely claims to represent.

Lestic helped negotiate a 15 percent cut in the Air France work force, mainly flight attendants and ground staff; a wage freeze; an increase in days worked; and other productivity increases in Air France's previous round of cost cutting, dubbed "Transform 2015."



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