

Pilots union pushes for sell-out of Air France pilots strike

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After Prime Minister Manuel Valls' extraordinary public denunciation of striking Air France pilots on Friday, Air France's largest pilots' union issued a statement Sunday capitulating and calling on pilots to end their 14-day strike, the longest in Air France's history.

The majority National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL) is ordering pilots back to work empty-handed. Pilots had demanded assurances that the growth of low-cost Air France subsidiaries like Transavia-France would not lead to cuts in wages or working conditions, and that pilots would have one contract covering all the corporation's subsidiaries. Not only has Air France given no such assurance, it is openly declaring its intention to force deep cuts on pilots by making them fly at Transavia-France or whatever other low-cost airline Air France sets up in the future.

The minority Union of Air France Pilots (SPAF), representing 20 percent of the work force, is calling for strike action to continue until October 2. Initial estimates yesterday showed that roughly half of Air France flights would still be grounded by the strike.

The protocol agreement issued by Air France scraps a 2007 agreement on relations between Air France and Transavia-France, limiting Transavia-France's fleet to 14 jetliners. It specifies that pilots on Transavia-France flights must work at prevailing wages and conditions at Transavia-France, "to ensure the latter's competitiveness."

The Socialist Party (PS) government and Air France both claimed victory and boasted that they had forced pilots back to work on management's terms. Attacking pilots for waging an "overly long" strike, Valls congratulated himself that "[t]he firm line of the government allowed us to reaffirm the company's development strategy," adding that Transavia France

"represents an undeniable asset in the rapidly-growing low cost market."

Air France-KLM CEO Alexandre de Juniac made clear that management is planning on moving ahead rapidly to trim pilot costs in line with Air France's low-cost rivals. "We will now be able to turn to the development of Transavia in France with the goals we had planned," he said. "We will finally be able to compete on equal terms with our low-cost competitors. This reform is vital."

The SNPL admitted that pilots could not accept the protocol "because of the uncertainty created by the double contract situation, given the existing accords in each company; because of the potential social instability inherent in the decision to force two groups of pilots to compete with one another; because there are too few guarantees given the concessions that have been demanded; because equity for future hires, whether on A320 or B737 [jetliners] is not guaranteed; finally, because protections are insufficiently precise to guarantee availability of work."

Nonetheless, the SNPL argued that it had no choice but to order pilots back to work, cynically trying to cover up its betrayal by declining to sign the protocol issued by the company. Its letter to the pilots admitted that there would be substantial opposition among the strikers to their decision.

The pilots' union wrote, "We had three options: first, to continue negotiating and striking beyond 14 days to improve the deal, but this was impossible given the stubborn positions we encountered; to sign the deal and end the strike, which was impossible given the implications of this protocol for the future of the profession; refuse to sign, quit the strike and calm the situation down. This was the responsible option we chose. We know very well that some of you will

reproach us for this decision. But union leaders must know how to stop a strike when it will produce no more advances.”

The SNPL’s cowardly claim that the strike is condemned to defeat due to the stubbornness of Air France and the PS is a fraud. Not only is the PS government weak, highly unpopular and afraid of a sudden shift in public opinion in support of the pilots, but the SNPL’s own communiqué makes clear that Air France is desperate to end the strike, which has cost it hundreds of millions of euros.

“It is our duty to preserve the future of our company and bandage its wounds before irreversible damage is done,” the SNPL states, adding that the unions have a critical role to play in pushing through restructuring plans on Air France workers: “Management cannot develop Transavia France alone. It cannot put through its ‘Perform 2020’ plan alone.”

If Air France faces “irreversible” financial damage from the strike, this means that strikers are in a strong position. Precisely at this moment, however, the union is declaring its willingness to end the strike and work with management to carry out attacks on the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The pilots are at a crossroads. If they end the strike now, management will wage brutal attacks to recoup the hundreds of millions of euros they have lost and make an example of the pilots to discourage strikes by other sections of workers.

The pilots face a political struggle against the PS government and Air France, to rally broader sections of the workforce against the PS’ hated austerity agenda and respond to the unions’ attempt to sell out their strike by taking the struggle out of the SNPL’s hands.

The first significant workers’ struggle against the PS has rapidly come up directly against the bankruptcy of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left groups who called for the election of PS President François Hollande in 2012. The bureaucrats in France’s national union federations have completely isolated the strike, while issuing reactionary denunciations of the pilots as privileged troublemakers. Pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party have made no move to support the pilots. These forces are all exposed as tools of the anti-worker PS government.

Valls brutally intervened in the strike last week: “This strike must end. This strike is intolerable for

customers. This strike is intolerable for the company, Air France. This strike is intolerable for the country’s economy.”

The prime minister’s hysteria reflects real fears in the ruling class that a broader movement in the working class in support of the pilots could erupt and bring down the Hollande administration, which is at a record-breaking low approval rating of 13 percent in the polls.

It is the fear of such a development, and not the supposedly hopeless situation facing the strike, that is driving France’s union officialdom to press for a sell-out of the strike.



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