

What way forward for the Air France pilots' strike?

Alex Lantier**30 September 2014**

Striking Air France pilots now being ordered back to work by the unions are at a political crossroads, raising basic questions of class perspective for workers internationally.

After over two weeks of strikes against cuts to wages and pensions threatened by the expansion of Air France's low-cost subsidiaries, pilots were in a very strong position. Having lost €290 million, Air France is under intense financial pressure to end the strike. Sources in the deeply unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande, which has demanded that pilots cave in to Air France's demands, told the press that they fear a sudden shift in public opinion in favor of the pilots.

Suddenly on Sunday, however, the National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL) declared the strike to be a lost cause. Proclaiming that no further advances could be obtained from management, it lifted its strike call, saying it wanted to avoid "irreparable" damage to the company.

The analyses of the press outside France, watching the strike and nervously calculating its broader impact, were far more accurate than the absurd fictions the SNPL told its members to force them back to work. The German financial daily *Handelsblatt*, which is covering Lufthansa pilots' strikes against pension cuts, wrote: "This episode symbolizes the power that the pilots have over their employers—and should be a warning for Lufthansa."

Pilots must reject the abject surrender demanded by the SNPL, which would only lead to disaster. Air France and PS officials have indicated that they will now move to slash labor costs, forcing pilots onto contracts on low-cost airlines like Transavia-France. One indication of what is being prepared is that unions at Monarch Airlines in Britain agreed last week to 900

job losses and pay cuts of up to 30 percent to transform the firm into a low-cost airline.

The central issue emerging in the working class' first major struggle against the Hollande-led PS government is the impossibility of defending working conditions within the framework of the nationalist, anti-worker unions. Amid cutthroat competition between the airlines for market share on a continent bled white by EU austerity measures, subordination to the unions means defeat. Unions seek to strengthen their respective national airlines by competing among each other to impose the biggest cuts on the workers, to place their bosses in the most competitive position on international markets.

Since the 2008 Wall Street crash and the EU austerity drive, unions at British Airways, Air France, Lufthansa, Alitalia, Iberia and beyond all imposed concessions contracts. Perhaps the most grotesque betrayal came in 2010 at Ireland's Aer Lingus. After workers voted to reject a union proposal for mass layoffs and a 10 percent pay cut, the unions agreed to the state's proposal to sack the entire cabin staff, hiring three-quarters of them back at drastically reduced wages.

Air France pilots can defend themselves only by taking the struggle out of the hands of the unions and turning to mobilize broader layers of workers internationally in struggle against EU austerity and to defend jobs and wages. This can only be done, however, through a political struggle against the EU, based on the socialist and revolutionary program.

In the current explosive political situation in France and throughout Europe, any broader struggle of the working class immediately raises a confrontation with the state. Air France is well aware of the explosive discontent in other layers of its staff. Hollande, with an approval rating at the unheard-of low of 13 percent,

fears strikes that could paralyze France's airports or other industries, and then, as in 1936 or 1968, all of France and beyond.

The unstable, despised cabinet of Prime Minister Manuel Valls would not survive a broader strike. This was a major consideration in the pro-PS national trade union federations' decision to totally isolate the pilots' strike, Valls' repeated denunciations of the pilots, and the conspicuous silence on the strike by the various pseudo-left allies of the PS, like the New Anti-capitalist Party. These forces all stand on the other side of the barricades from the working class.

The treachery of the unions and the pseudo-left parties reflects in the sphere of politics the same underlying reality expressed in the sphere of economics by the EU's relentless drive to austerity: the failure of capitalism.

The working class can respond to the class war waged by the bourgeoisie and its petty-bourgeois allies across Europe only with its own revolutionary struggles and demands. The commanding heights of the European economy, including the airlines, must be taken from the control of the financial aristocracy, placed under international public ownership, and run as social utilities in the interests of working people.

Striking Air France pilots speaking to the WSWS stressed that they wanted to fly on low-cost airlines, so they would not only be serving businessmen but also flying for working people traveling to see family, or for youth on tourist visits. Pilots simply refused to take pay cuts in the process.

Decent-paying jobs cannot be the preserve of pilots flying for business oligarchs. As the Air France strike has shown, however, there is an inexorable logic to accepting the division of the airline between flights for an elite that can afford expensive tickets, and those for masses of people who can only afford low-cost travel. Pilots flying for low-cost airlines, as Air France management is making clear, are to be paid less.

Air travel must be available at prices affordable for all, and pilots and other airline workers must receive decent wages, thanks to the massive injection of public funds and investment.

Workers must reject with contempt the inevitable, absurd claims of the defenders of capitalism that no money can be found for this. When Wall Street criminality brought the world economy to the verge of

collapse in 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy found hundreds of billions of euros overnight to pay off the major banks, as did other heads of state. The European Central Bank periodically injects trillions of euros into the banking system amid one or another crisis—while imposing 30 percent pay cuts on workers of entire companies or even, as in Greece, entire countries.

These funds must be expropriated and turned to productive use, creating the economic and industrial basis for the United Socialist States of Europe. To achieve this program, the working class must be organized as an independent political force, with the aim of taking political power and restructuring the economy on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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