

One-day strike by Lufthansa pilots in Germany

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The Lufthansa pilots' strike on Tuesday was the fourth strike action by the pilots since April. It was directed against the effort by the corporation to carry through a massive attack on the retirement benefits of 5,400 pilots.

This time, the pilot union, German Cockpit Association (VC), called for a strike by the long-distance pilots who fly out of Frankfurt Airport. The strike took place from 8:00 am until the 11:00 pm, the hour when planes are no longer permitted to fly.

Fifty-seven flights were affected. Twenty-three flights took place in spite of the strike, after members of Lufthansa management, as well as a few strikebreakers, were deployed as replacement pilots. In addition, two flights were early and four were postponed until Wednesday.

The pilot union had cancelled a long-distance pilot strike scheduled for September 16 at the last minute, because supposedly Lufthansa had presented changes. However, as the negotiations quickly demonstrated, Lufthansa was absolutely unprepared to back off from a worsening of the pilots' transitional retirement plan.

For some time, Lufthansa pilots have been able to claim retirement benefits from a transitional retirement plan, even though it has been under attack for many years. They had the possibility of going into early retirement at 55. This rule was also to the benefit of passenger safety. It was financed out of a common fund into which workers made regular contributions, corresponding to their wage level and to the time they have been working for the firm.

Although the pilots view this money as a fixed percentage of their income, Lufthansa insists on reducing its costs for it and eventually abolishing it completely. Management insists that the minimum age at which a pilot can claim the transitional benefits be

changed from 55 to 60 years and that the average age must rise from 58 to 61 years. Lufthansa also wants to completely abolish the existing early retirement plan for newly hired pilots.

Markus Wahl, a member of the management board of the Cockpit Association, told WSWs reporters in the Frankfurt Airport that such a split in the members is "totally unacceptable to us." In order to partially obscure its intentions, Lufthansa offered a deceptive package, which it described as "employee financed" temporary care, that is, a self-financed program.

On Monday, Lufthansa announced plans to hire third-party pilots in order to save money. After that, CEO Carsten Spohr plans to lease planes to the Swiss airline company PrivateAir starting at the end of next year, and lease them back along with Swiss cockpit personnel—a break with the tradition of Lufthansa planes being flown exclusively by the company's own pilots. There are plans to fly the cheaper planes mainly to tourist destinations such as Las Vegas or Mauritius.

The Cockpit Association does not intend to undertake any action against this particular variation of outsourcing. Wahl justified this by claiming that such a procedure cannot be challenged due to contractual obligations.

Lufthansa's attack on the pilots' retirement plan is being carried out within the framework of an international offensive of the airline companies, which has been going on for three decades. In bitter global competition, the wages, working conditions and safety standards are continually pushed down. The employees affected by these measures are recklessly pitted against one another.

The struggle against these attacks transcends borders and individual corporations, and it must include the remaining flight personnel—flight attendants, ground

personnel, pilots, airport ramp personnel, etc.

A French pilot strike ended on the weekend. The pilots had fought for over two weeks against the attempt to by Air France to use low-cost companies to drive their wages down. The strike was stifled by the Union SNPL, which claimed it did not want to inflict any “irreparable” damage to Air France.

This example must serve as a warning to the Lufthansa pilots: the Cockpit Association will capitulate in the same way. The union shares Lufthansa’s view that securing the company’s “competitiveness” on the world market is the most important question. This is how the Cockpit Association emphasized its readiness to make concessions and cap the cost of the retirement plan.

The Cockpit Association has no intention of conducting an international struggle. When asked about collaborating and coordinating the struggle of the pilots at Lufthansa and Air France, Wahl revealed the nationalist standpoint of the union. He declared that such collaboration is simply unnecessary: “At the moment there is no need for that.”

Among the pilots, there is a very different point of view. A flight captain was quoted in a midday program broadcast by the television station ZDF on Tuesday: “We see clearly the meaning of the strike at Air France against the consequences of the low-budget airlines for our own struggle.”

An end to the conflict at Lufthansa is not yet in sight. The Cockpit Association announced the intensification of strike measures. A multiple-day strike could follow as the next step, or a strike at several airports.



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