

German pilots struggle: The right to strike requires a socialist perspective

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The decision of the labor court in the German state of Hessian to forbid Lufthansa pilots from striking is a fundamental attack on the right to strike directed against all workers. Both the board of the airline and the German government are behind the court decision.

The strike ban on the pilot union was discussed in the highest political circles. The decision took place only two months after the law on so-called contract unity was passed. Both are part of a campaign to attack the wages and living standards of the working class.

A successful struggle against these attacks cannot be waged within the framework of the unions and their bankrupt perspective and tactics. They are attacks on a basic democratic right that can only be defended by means of an international strategy and a socialist political program.

The court, under presiding Judge Michael Horcher justified the strike ban by saying that the walkout called by the pilot union Cockpit interfered with the “low cost concept” of the company and was therefore against the law.

In other words, if corporations want to establish low cost subsidiaries as Lufthansa has done with its “Wings Concept” and Deutsche Post AG has done with its Delivery GmbH, then workers are not allowed to go on strike to defend themselves against worsening working conditions or wage and salary cuts of 40 percent or more.

What remains of the right to strike if workers cannot use it to defend themselves against the practices of a company that explicitly pits workers against one another, creates a new subclass of low-paid workers and thereby undermines and nullifies wage contracts?

The fight for the demand “equal pay for equal work” has a history spanning almost one hundred and fifty years. This demand was behind bloody class battles in which many workers lost their lives. Now a state court wants to reverse the wheel of history. An extremely aggressive managing elite, which is exclusively oriented to the profit interests of the owners, is being given a free hand.

Corporate boards routinely raise their own salaries by several million without a second thought. However, in the

view of the court, they are supposed to have the right, in the name of competitiveness, to cut the wages and income of their employees in half, while the employees are left completely defenseless.

Up until now, the courts had acknowledged that the fight against the foundation of low cost firms with drastically lowered wages and working conditions was a basic component of the defense of wage contracts. In the case of postal workers and federal railway workers and even Lufthansa workers, several courts acknowledged that strikes were proportionate responses. A year ago, the same Judge Horcher made a contrary ruling with regard to the strike by the train drivers union GDL. Although it was the biggest strike by train drivers since the end of the Second World War, Judge Horcher ruled it was legal.

The pilot union Cockpit carried out twelve strikes in the course of the contract struggle that has been going on since April of last year. The thirteenth strike has now been forbidden. This reveals the political motivation behind the decision.

Ever since the federal government passed the contract unity law in order to prevent any action on the part of the workers outside of the big DGB unions (Confederation of German Trade Unions), attacks on workers and their standard of living have undergone a rapid increase. Train drivers, package delivery workers and workers in the social and education sectors have been the target of massive attacks. Meanwhile, their unions have systematically undermined and sold out their struggles.

The union Verdi broke off the package delivery worker strike, which was aimed at defending the workers against outsourcing to the newly founded company Delivery GmbH. The train drivers union GDL accepted a five-year enforced settlement, which set a precedent for the treatment of pilots. Either they give up their opposition to the “Wings Concept” and accept that the newly hired pilots will earn 40 percent less and also that older employees will be forced step by step to switch to the low-cost company or else their union will be ruined financially and destroyed.

The leadership of the Cockpit union reacted with shock and dismay to the court decision. It had hoped for collaboration in a partnership with the corporate leadership of Lufthansa. In July, it had even suggested a compromise offer with planned cuts on the order of 500 million euros. It is now clear that this readiness to compromise with the Lufthansa corporate board only emboldened the corporation to escalate its attacks.

On the day before the decision, the corporation announced it would sue the Cockpit union for 60 million euros compensation because—as the press release of the corporate executives said—the pilot strikes in April of last year were already “illegal”. At that time, the Cockpit union had gone on strike at Lufthansa Cargo although—in the view of the corporate leadership—the previous wage agreement was still in force. “The damage to the Lufthansa corporation from the strike in April, 2014 amounted all together to about 60 million euros”.

The attack on the pilot union has been accompanied by an aggressive campaign in the media. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* defended the verdict, saying, “The judges have decided correctly”. The “privileges of the ladies and gentlemen in Cockpit” could no longer be maintained in light of growing worldwide competition. Even before the decision, the same author, Karl-Heinz Büschmann, claimed the strike was driving the corporation into insolvency and that the pilots must finally be brought to reason. He claimed that even after the 40 percent salary cut, the Lufthansa pilots were among the higher earning pilots.

Under the title “Courageous judges”, Holger Stelzner of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* blustered that one would have to be “stricken with more than mere blindness if as a highly paid pilot with a secure job one put one's own career group above all others in this situation”. The strike is “disproportionate, since a small minority is taking the majority hostage”, he claimed.

The pilots and their fully justified struggle against massive wage cuts and a worsening of their working conditions and benefits can only be defended on the basis of understanding the full political dimensions of the struggle. Similar attacks are being prepared in workplaces everywhere.

The same kind of social devastation that was carried out in Greece is also being prepared in Germany. At the same time, the attack on the right to strike is aimed at suppressing all opposition. This is the way in which the German government reacts to the sharpening of the international crisis of capitalism and the European Union. The return of German militarism and the preparations for war are closely bound up with this. The government is preparing massive cuts in order to rake in billions for military spending. Major social and political class struggles are the unavoidable

consequence.

The unions support the policies of the government and the demands for more competitiveness. Consequently, they react to this development by subordinating themselves to the capitalist state and working ever more closely with the corporations. The Cockpit union emphasizes over and over again that they are ready for far reaching concessions and that they support the measures taken by corporate leadership in order to increase competitiveness.

This subordination of the unions to capitalism and the system of private profit has led to the rapid degeneration of the unions all over the world and has deep objective roots in the changes in world economy. The globalization of production has destroyed the basis of the nationalist perspective in defense of workers.

The pilots as well as all other workers must reject the restricted concept of union militancy and turn to a new political perspective.

The banning of the pilots strikes underscores the real character of the state under capitalism. Whatever democratic illusions the Social Democrats, the CDU-CSU, Greens, Left Party and other capitalist parties peddle about the German state, in the end it is an instrument for the suppression of the working class and the defense of the private property and profits of the giant banks and corporations.

The struggle to defend the right to strike requires the development of a powerful political movement of the working class to replace the capitalist government with a workers' government committed to genuine democracy and social equality. This requires a political party that fights for the international unity of the working class and a socialist program. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) fights for this perspective.



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