

# Workers revolt against mass layoffs at Air France

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Strikers revolted against mass layoffs at Air France yesterday, as hundreds of workers invaded a works council (CCE) meeting near Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris where management and the unions were discussing a restructuring plan for 2,900 job cuts at the company.

Anger erupted at the fourth straight mass restructuring plan in as many years, which have eliminated 15,000 jobs, or nearly a quarter of Air France's 63,000-strong workforce. The workers chanted, "This place is ours" and "De Juniac, resign" (referring to Air France-KLM CEO Alexandre de Juniac) as they stormed into the CCE meeting.

Air France CEO Frédéric Gagey immediately fled the scene, as the CCE meeting collapsed. Amid shouts of "Resign, resign," strikers surrounded Air France HR manager Xavier Broseta and Pierre Plissonnier, the head of the Air France's long-haul operations, and tore off their shirts. (video here)

The assistant general secretary of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, Mehdi Kemoune, was at the meeting and told the press that he tried to intervene to protect Broseta, but that the workers shoved him aside. Broseta "came to within inches of being lynched," another CGT official complained to TF1 television.

Newspapers published photos of police helping Broseta and Plissonnier, shirtless, to climb security fences around the compound and flee the scene.

France's Socialist Party (PS) government, Air France management and the trade unions unanimously denounced the strikers. All are desperate to return the company to profitability via billions of euros in cuts through Air France's so-called "Plan B," which calls for a 10 percent reduction in long-haul operations, €1.4 billion in savings by canceling orders of new Boeing

787s, and job cuts of 300 pilots, 900 flight staff, and 1,700 ground crew.

From Japan, where he is meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister Manuel Valls said he was "scandalized" and pledged his "full support" to Air France management, while Transport Minister Alain Vidalies declared that the strikers' actions "must be punished."

Air France issued statements declaring that it would continue advancing the restructuring plans and pursue legal action against the strikers for "aggravated assault."

The firmest denunciations of the strikers came from the trade unions, however. The French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) issued a statement declaring that it "condemned without reservation and with the greatest firmness the shameful violence" of the strikers, and called for an immediate resumption of talks with Air France management.

CFDT leader Laurent Berger called for "privileging dialog to get beyond difficulties and fight violence. That is trade unionism."

The Stalinist CGT, which cynically tries to cultivate a reputation as a more "oppositional" union than the pro-PS CFDT, also criticized and distanced itself from the protest. "We did not want the CCE to be invaded," Kemoune told AFP, stressing the close collaboration between the CGT and Air France management. He said that the CGT had "warned" management of the mood among workers and urgently called on them to reinforce security forces to protect the CCE against the strikers.

Kemoune blamed management for not having heeded to the CGT's pleas to beef up police and security forces against the strikers. "As usual, they did not listen, and now they have to bear the consequences," he said.

Such cowardly kowtowing to bourgeois public opinion and the unions' total integration into management points to the urgent necessity that workers take leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the CGT and its fellow unions.

They in fact called yesterday's strike at Air France, aiming to let off steam and prevent opposition among the workers from exploding outside their control. However, their hostile reaction to the eruption of strikers' anger at the CCE meeting is only the latest warning that they will prove hostile to any strike action that would threaten Air France's restructuring agenda.

The eruption of anger among Air France workers is the product of years of manipulation and filthy sellouts of workers' struggles. The unions, in line with management and their opposite numbers at airlines like Lufthansa and British Airways, are trying to save Air France and its bottom line by aligning the industry standard for wages and working conditions with those prevailing in low-cost, low-wage airlines internationally.

With Air France's weak financial position and continuing losses, the strikers are in a strong position. A two-week pilot strike last year brought Air France to the verge of bankruptcy and nearly forced management to abandon its restructuring plan and appeal to the PS government for emergency financial support, when suddenly the unions called off the strike. The unions admitted that continuing strike action risked causing "irreversible" financial harm to the firm.

Instead of using Air France's financial weakness as leverage to force it to surrender, however, they used it as a pretext to end the strike, prevent a resounding victory, and save Air France and the PS from a humiliating climb-down that would have encouraged strikes against the European Union's austerity agenda in airlines and industries across Europe. In December, once the danger from the strike was strangled, the unions agreed to deep wage cuts at Air France and planned the next stage in the attack on the workers they claim to represent.

Such cynical betrayals have stoked the anger of the workers, who sense that the talks between Air France, the unions, and the PS are a reactionary conspiracy directed against them.

The only way forward is a broad mobilization of the working class in struggle. Workers face the task of

setting up independent organizations to coordinate a struggle against Air France which can ultimately be waged only as a political struggle against the PS, the union bureaucracy, and the austerity agenda of the European capitalist class.

Attempts to promote illusions in the outcome of talks between the PS, Air France, and the union bureaucracy, epitomized by denunciations of yesterday's protest as a "shameful" deviation from trade union negotiations, are a reactionary fraud. It is the activities at CCEs across France, where the ruling class buys petty-bourgeois bureaucrats' support for attacks on the workers with tens of millions of euros in illegal subsidies to support the lifestyles of bloated unions staffs, that constitute a political crime against the working class.



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