

Air France postpones job cuts as anger rises among workers

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On Monday, a week after workers invaded the works council meeting where Air France executives and union officials were planning the mass sacking of 2,900 workers, the airline announced that only 1,000 jobs would be cut next year. This partial retreat by the government and the airline points to their rising fear that the social anger that is spreading across the working class will explode.

On October 19, before the so-called Social Conference between President François Hollande and the trade unions, Hollande said he opposed the mass sackings, as long as the unions and Air France management could find other ways to cut wage costs: “We can avoid the sackings. I am asking both management and the social partners to be responsible. Sackings can be avoided if the pilots do what is necessary, if management makes definite proposals, if the ground crews can become conscious of certain realities.”

A new Air France works council meeting is scheduled for Thursday; management is slated to lay out its industrial strategy and its short-term consequences for staffing levels.

The partial retreat by Air France and France’s Socialist Party (PS) government does not mean that they have abandoned their plans to restructure the company at the workers’ expense. The company has gone through several restructuring plans in recent years. Last year, Air France imposed a plan setting up a low-cost subsidiary and forcing a significant wage cut to boost the company’s flagging competitiveness. This triggered a pilots’ strike that staggered both Air France and the PS, who feared that broader sections of workers would join protests against its austerity policies.

At the government’s request, the pilots’ union halted the strike, even though the pilots were on the verge of

suffocating the company financially and forcing it to retreat. This allowed Air France to expand its Transavia subsidiaries and prepare new cost-cutting plans with the complicity of the unions, who were well aware of management’s maneuvers.

After a hundred strikers burst into the works council meeting last week, politicians and the media launched a hysterical campaign to denounce the strikers as “thugs.” Five Air France workers were arrested at home at 6 a.m., and a sixth was also detained.

Along with this judicial inquiry, 18 disciplinary procedures have been launched, and roughly 20 workers face losing their jobs. Such unprecedented repression of social protest in France reflects the panic of Air France management and of the PS faced with a rising tide of demands from workers. As it carries out brutal austerity policies against the working class, the PS sees no other way forward besides imprisoning workers who act on their opposition to its reactionary policies.

In a video taken as the Air France workers burst into the works council meeting, one young flight attendant, Erika Nguyen Van Vai, 33, says: “We were asked to make sacrifices, we made them, it’s four years that we have not gotten a raise, that we work for nothing more, and we are the ones who pay. I get paid 1,800 euros a month, is that what is ruining France?”

Erika is a member of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, but said she was not “active” in the organisation. Asked later about her intervention at the works council, she said: “It was the first time I participated in a strike movement, my first act of militancy.”

The young woman’s anger reflects the intense opposition of workers not only at Air France, but across all industries in France and throughout Europe. Masses

of workers of Erika's age have seen nothing from the PS, its political allies, and the union bureaucracies besides austerity and social retrogression. Her intervention gives voice to far broader opposition among masses of workers to the reactionary austerity policies being implemented across Europe and the "social dialogue" that brings together the bosses and the union organisations.

Air France management was shocked by the video, where irate workers raised political issues for which company executives had no response. By pointing out that it is not a monthly wage of €1,800 that is ruining France, workers are pointing to the crying social inequality that has developed under capitalism, implicating the entire ruling class.

Such demands tear to shreds the framework of "social dialogue," in which workers will get only what business, the state, and the unions deign to give them, once they have themselves decided how to boost the firm's long-term profitability at the workers' expense.

The radicalisation of workers is international in scope. Auto workers in the United States have voted down a new contract that the UAW union and Chrysler wanted to impose on them, and Greek workers repeatedly voted decisively against the austerity measures that the Syriza government has imposed upon them.

The trade unions are also terrified by acute social tensions and are desperate to do whatever they can to control workers' militancy, as shown by the remarks of the CGT's secretary general, Philippe Martinez.

He said that he had "warned" the government that the "exasperation of workers" is rising. When he meets with ministers, he said, "we tell them, 'Be careful, things are going to explode.' They answer by saying we should calm the workers down, but we are not simply firemen, we are not there to fix up the mistakes of the bosses or the government."

The frustration of the unions, the state, and the bosses with the workers reflects their awareness that a broad radicalisation of the working class is taking place behind the surface of political life and beyond their control. Workers cannot rely on the unions, which are outright corporate police organisations inside the workplaces. Air France workers can only struggle for their demands by breaking with the unions and uniting in struggle with other sections of workers against

austerity and mass sackings, which entails a political struggle against the PS.



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