

Lufthansa flight attendants threaten strike

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The union Independent Flight Attendants Organisation (UFO) has announced renewed strikes by its members at Lufthansa, the largest German airline. If the company does not accept UFO's demands, the union says it will call a one-week strike of its 19,000 Lufthansa flight attendants starting Friday.

UFO head Nicoley Baublies announced the strike at a press conference on Monday after contract negotiations over the pension scheme failed once again on the weekend.

The strike will affect Lufthansa flights only, not the Lufthansa subsidiaries Germanwings and Eurowings.

Baublies believes the strike will take place. "Lufthansa knows what we want and can still avert the strike," he said. However, after two years of negotiations over the pension scheme, he no longer believes the company will budge. The airline confirmed this. Lufthansa personnel head Bettina Volkens said on Monday in *Handelsblatt* that there would be no new offer for the pension scheme. In addition, Lufthansa is considering legal steps to prevent the strike.

The dispute between the flight attendants' union and Lufthansa has now been going on for two years. Corporate head Carsten Spohr wants to cut Lufthansa ground and air personnel. The company is also increasingly coming into conflict with the pilots and their union, the German Cockpit Association (VC).

Spohr would like to expand to Lufthansa employees the attacks on working conditions that have already been imposed on workers at the subsidiary companies, Germanwings and Eurowings. Attacks are planned on both the compensation and transitional pension payments of both pilots and flight attendants. According to UFO, the current compensation recommendations of the corporate board are "at best an inflationary adjustment."

The transitional pension payments of flight attendants and pilots are a thorn in the side of Lufthansa. Flight attendants are currently able to leave work at the age of 55, and the company is responsible for former employees until they reach the legal retirement age.

The airline does not want to pledge a definite retirement benefit rate in the future. Instead, it wants the employees to jointly finance their retirement by making a set contribution

that will then be invested in the capitalist market. According to UFO, the recommendation by Lufthansa is above all aimed at pitting older and younger workers against one another. The company does not want to allow any protection of already acquired benefits. Instead, anyone who wants to retire at 55 will only be able to do so on reduced payments.

Lufthansa claims that, because of increased competition and low interest rates on the markets, the transitional payments can no longer be financed. However, the company raised its profit forecast only a short while ago and expects €2 billion in operating profits this year.

Baublies emphasised that the financial protection of the pension transition is indispensable for flight attendants. "As a 55-year-old flight attendant," he said, "I cannot retrain for a desk job." He also said that cabin employees are already in danger of not receiving a net retirement payment of even €1,000 per month: "This is poverty in old age." However, Lufthansa head Spohr is demanding cuts of up to 40 percent from the employees. "It is time for the cabin to put up a fight against this Manchester capitalism," said Baublies.

Lufthansa executive board member Karl Ulrich Garnadt claimed that the last recommendation from the corporation contained "pension benefits that are unique in the entire industry." He said that the call for a strike in such a situation made him speechless and demonstrated "a certain amount of unworldliness."

This shows that the interests of the corporation and its employees are irreconcilable. For decades, the corporations have tried to crush all the social achievements the workers have fought for over the past 150 years. In particular, the financial crisis since 2008 is being used to turn back the wheels of time. Baublies is right when he compares the current attacks with the methods of exploitation of early capitalism in Great Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Like many other companies, Lufthansa has created working conditions at its cheap subsidiaries—Germanwings and Eurowings—that were unimaginable even 30 or 40 years ago. The current issue of *Der Spiegel* reports on the working and wage conditions of flight attendants at Lufthansa. The starting wages of Lufthansa employees and

Eurowings employees are at about the same low level. The lowest pay comes to between €22,800 and €21,000 per year.

However, the wages of workers at Lufthansa can increase to €52,200 after many years. Workers at Eurowings, on the other hand, can receive up to €24,400 after six years, but then no more increases. The pay differences of head flight attendants at the two companies are even more extreme. At Lufthansa, employees can earn up to €70,000 and, at the Eurowings subsidiary, they can earn up to a maximum of €30,000. In addition, the employees of the subsidiary receive lower benefits, expenses and retirement benefits.

These attacks, which are not limited to the airline industry, have only been possible in the last 20 to 30 years because the unions in every country and in every corporation have been transformed into extensions of company management. Like a workplace police force, the unions and their representatives help to carry out attacks on the employees and strive to suppress all opposition in the ranks of the workers. These bureaucratic apparatuses are no longer workers' organisations.

The service union Ver.di and its predecessor organisations have taken over the role of carrying out attacks against the employees at the DAX corporations. For this reason alone, trade unions such as Cockpit and UFO have been able to achieve a dominant position. When UFO was founded in 1992, many flight attendants saw the new union as an alternative to the old corrupt organisations.

On the contrary, just like Cockpit and all other unions that accept and support the capitalist market economy and social partnership, they have no way of countering the attacks on workers by the corporations.

This is demonstrated by the wage struggle by Lufthansa flight attendants. The last time UFO put up a struggle against Lufthansa was three years ago. Then, at the end of 2012, UFO agreed to an arbitrator's decision that involved major concessions by the workers.

The current struggle has already lasted almost two years. The first talks took place in December 2013, when Lufthansa cancelled the pension scheme contracts. Since then, UFO has repeatedly threatened strikes but allowed itself to be delayed, held back and blackmailed by Lufthansa.

Most recently, UFO announced strikes in May and June of this year after failed arbitration on the pension scheme and transitional payments. The strikes were cancelled, however, after Lufthansa promised to raise its offer to reorganise pensions. Then the company claimed afterwards to know nothing about this.

In a statement on Monday, the bankrupt perspective of UFO was made quite clear. The corporate board has repeatedly submitted offers. "Our recommendation of new

provisions has already produced more than €70 million in savings each year, not to speak of positive balance effects in the range of several hundred million due to dissolved assets into the bargain," writes UFO. They also write that their recommendation would lead to savings of "about 130 million per year."

UFO also thinks that changes are necessary and stands "ready to promote comprehensive reforms." Lufthansa seems, "however, not to be interested in any long-term wage and social partnership," complains UFO. "The consequence in the last two years and especially last weekend is the failure of our attempt to accompany Lufthansa on the way to corporate restructuring and the production of a win-win situation."

In conclusion, UFO says that it is "sad, furious and disappointed," and after long, tough negotiations is at the exact same point as the Lufthansa pilots organised under the German Cockpit Association.

The pilots had already gone on strike 13 times since April 2014, and—just like UFO—made repeated concessions. Most recently, they presented a €500 million austerity package. But this readiness to compromise has only emboldened the Lufthansa executive board to carry out even sharper attacks. In September, the state labour court in Hesse forbade the German Cockpit Association from striking. It is clear that Lufthansa wants to carry out similar attacks against flight attendants.

Not only Lufthansa employees, but all workers, must draw important conclusions from this. There is no "wage and social partnership," no "win-win situations," or whatever one wants to call class collaboration in a given case. The corporations have called off all such measures and are carrying out ever more unscrupulous and brutal attacks against their employees. The nationally restricted policies of social partnership promoted by UFO and the German Cockpit Association have no way of opposing these attacks—besides generalised moaning, which, in the final analysis, is only the prelude to capitulation.



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