

Air France announces pay cuts for pilots

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14 May 2016

After a ruling by the High Court in Bobigny and then a Paris appeals court permitting Air France to impose its Transform 2015 corporate strategy, the airline's board authorised the company to start applying it on June 1, 2016.

The accord will slash pilot pay. The 50 percent bonus for night flying will be cut to 40 percent, work on the ground will be paid at a lower rate and instructors' preparation time on the ground will be cut by half. Starting in 2017, the company will organise the pilots' 12 rest days on an annualised basis.

The pay cut is the outcome of the betrayal of the 2014 Air France pilots strike, which shook France's Socialist Party (PS) government and Air France management. The National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL), with the support of pseudo-left parties like Workers Struggle (*Lutte Ouvrière*, LO) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (*Nouveau parti anticapitaliste*, NPA), ended the strike to block a victory by the pilots and stabilise the PS government.

According to AFP, the current measures "are worth 20 to 30 million euros [\$US 22.6 to 33.9 million] yearly of improved competitiveness for the company, that is, 2 to 3 percent of the total pilot wage bill." Air France management and the unions are also negotiating other measures. The airline's CEO Gilles Gateau has announced he will "invite the recognised union organisations to determine how to proceed with these discussions."

The director of human resources at Air France downplayed the risk of a strike against the new measures, declaring, "I have never heard anyone say that there might be a strike call over this agreement, which involves putting into effect a deal signed by the SNPL." Air France management hopes the SNPL will be able to impose the pay cut on the pilots as it did at the ending of the strike two years ago.

In September 2014, the pilots struck against the

company's plan for Transavia, a low-cost Air France subsidiary that was seeking to employ pilots and other workers at lower wages. The 14-day pilots strike cost the airline tens of millions of euros, dented its bottom line and also threatened the government of President François Hollande, France's most unpopular president since World War II.

The PS feared this strike, which was widely popular, would draw in wider layers of workers in France and across Europe, where air transport workers were in struggle in a number of locations, particularly at Lufthansa in defence of pensions.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls intervened to demand the shutting down of the strike, which the SNPL ended, on the grounds that it "is our duty to preserve the future of our company and bandage its wounds before irreversible damage is caused."

The SNPL added at the time that the unions had a crucial role to play in persuading workers to accept the restructuring plan, arguing that "management cannot implement by itself the development of Transavia-France. Neither can it implement its project Perform 2020."

At the time, the WSWS warned: "If Air France is confronted with 'irreversible' financial damage due to the strike, this means that the strikers are in a position of strength. This is precisely the moment at which the union declares that it wants to halt the strike and collaborate with management to plan attacks against workers that it abusively claims to represent... If pilots end the strike now, management will launch brutal attacks in order to recoup the hundreds of millions of euros they lost, make an example of the pilots, and discourage other layers of workers from striking."

By bringing the strike to an ignominious end, the SNPL paved the way for the new attacks on basic social rights. Transavia workers' salaries are 25 to 30 percent less than those at Air France, but with 30 to 40 percent

more flying time. A year after the SNPL ended the strike, Air France announced thousands of job cuts.

The pseudo-left parties, for their part, hailed the ending of the strike. LO declared, “Despite the media outcry, despite the statements of Valls who tried to have the last word and use tough words to try to persuade people that he had not given in, the pilots made management back down on the Transavia Europe plan... Thank goodness sometimes there is a fightback.”

For its part, the NPA referred to Air France’s statement that it would eliminate plans for a Transavia Europe subsidiary as “a first victory to be saluted by all workers... This strike opens a new way forward to mobilise other sections of workers threatened by the Transavia plan: flight attendants, ground crew carrying out assistance duties in the airports and aircraft maintenance.”

A great deal of cynical praise was heaped on the SNPL to help cover up its abject betrayal of the pilots’ struggle and its rescue of Air France management and the PS government at the union members’ expense.

The attacks against Air France pilots are a warning for all workers and youth fighting the French labour law and austerity policies. All the leading organisations are closely tied to the PS, which they helped bring to power in the 2012 presidential elections by supporting Hollande, whose pro-war and austerity policies they subsequently aligned themselves with.

LO, the NPA and other organisations are now seeking to block the development of a broad political struggle of the working class and youth against the labour law, as they did during the 2014 strike, enabling management to carry out new attacks on the workers. Only a struggle against the PS and its pseudo-left supporters, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, will make it possible for workers to defend their social rights.



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