

Taiwanese airline cabin crews strike

Ben McGrath
27 June 2016

Flight attendants from Taiwan's flag carrier China Airlines (CAL) went on strike Friday over attacks on their working conditions. It was the first strike in the history of a Taiwanese airline. After just under five hours of talks between the company and the Taoyuan Flight Attendants Union (TFAU), the company supposedly agreed to the workers' demands and the walk-out was called off. Strikers were set to return to work today.

The strike was preceded on Thursday night by a protest of nearly 500 union members and supporters outside the CAL offices at Taoyuan International Airport in Taipei, Taiwan's capital. They were joined by another 1,000 flight attendants at midnight when the industrial action officially began. The crew members chanted, "Reverse labor-capital relations" and carried signs that read, "Strike not arbitration."

TFAU members had overwhelmingly voted to strike last Tuesday—2,535 flight attendants, or 96 percent of the union's total membership, took part in the poll to authorize the action. Only nine votes were cast against the walk-out. However, the union isolated the struggle, even from other CAL workers, whose own working conditions are no less under attack. The supposed adoption of the union's demands also will apply only to TFAU members.

Founded in 1959 as a state-owned enterprise, the government has since privatized CAL, while remaining a major shareholder.

Anger has been building among flight attendants, as well as other workers in the airline industry, for years. Recent changes by CAL, coming on top of already low pay and long working hours, led to the strike, as well as protests in May where the cabin crews denounced "enslavement contracts."

Before the strike even began, CAL's new chief agreed to scrap a new plan aimed at cutting official working hours. Ho Nuan-hsuan was appointed chairman of the company last Thursday by the government in a bid to quell discontent. Ho indicated he would drop a further move to enforce speedups and reduce rest time.

The airline's plan would have changed where flight

crews could report for work, from the downtown Taipei International Airport to Taoyuan International Airport, farther from the city. CAL hoped to eliminate the 80-minute commute time between locations, currently considered part of the total working hours. By doing so, the company planned to halve time for preparation and post-flight duties to 90 minutes and 30 minutes respectively. It would also have cut rest times.

In addition, the company pushed for an agreement that would have raised the number of working hours to 220 per month, more than the 174 hours allowed under the Labor Standards Law. Section 84-1 of this legislation allows certain companies, including those in aviation, to ignore this cap. CAL argued the change was necessary due to some long-haul flights, such as those to the US or Europe.

CAL has also reportedly made further concessions. The company has agreed to raise the subsidy for those working overseas from \$3 an hour to \$4 on July 1 and then \$5 next May. Flight attendants will receive 123 off days, up from 118.

CAL's supposed acquiescence to union demands is a maneuver to buy time while getting flights back into the air; an estimated 20,000 passengers were affected by the strike. The agreement is only preliminary and could change. "We can sign an agreement based on article 84-1, but its content has to be appropriate to our work conditions and environment," said TFAU vice-president Betty Hung, indicating that concessions to the airline were still on the table.

The TFAU is attempting to portray itself as a radical workers' organization, saying in a statement it would "become the vanguard of workers in this battle, and tell capitalists and the state that Taiwan must say goodbye to the era of overwork and long hours." Rather than appealing to workers throughout Taiwan, let alone internationally, the TFAU said it was trying to "wake up" the government stockholders.

Any agreement reached between the company and TFAU will only apply to its members. The majority of

CAL's workers, however, belong to the pro-company Employees Union (CAEU), whose head Ko Tso-liang, denounced the flight attendants for voting to strike. He compared them to "children," saying they had "battered the company's reputation and its sustainable development" as well as "affected the livelihoods of the firm's employees." TFAU was founded last September after flight attendants got into a dispute with the CAEU.

Other CAL unions include the China Airlines Maintenance and Engineering Labor Union, which had verbally expressed support for the TFAU, but did not join the strike, despite claiming at the end of May it would. The airline is planning to create a subsidiary called Taiwan Aircraft Maintenance and Engineering Company to service newer planes in their fleet while also hiring more dispatch workers at hourly rates. The existing CAL workers would continue to service older planes, raising fears of job cuts when those models are retired.

Regardless of how "militant" a union may present itself, these organizations are incapable of a genuine defense of workers' rights and interests. In conditions of increasingly cut-throat struggles in the global airline industry, the unions invariably side with "their" employers to slash pay and conditions and suppress opposition, so as to try to ensure the "international competitiveness" of the national companies.

Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan's new president, has postured as a friend of the flight attendants, to deflect widespread anger toward social conditions in general, which her administration is incapable of addressing. Tsai, who was sworn in on May 20, currently has an approval rating of 52.4 percent, considered low for a new president. She claimed to respect and defend the right to strike, but her government will defend the interests of the Taiwanese bourgeoisie no less ruthlessly than her predecessors.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact