Flight attendants union calls off strikes at Eurowings airline in Germany

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26 October 2016

The Ufo (Independent Flight Attendants Organisation) union called off Monday's strikes at the Lufthansa low-cost subsidiary Eurowings, as well as a demonstration in Dusseldorf on Sunday. It also ruled out a strike by cabin crew on Tuesday.

This shows once again that this small sectoral union does not represent any real alternative to the large service sector union Verdi, part of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB). Only last Thursday, Ufo had called on its members at the airline to down tools. All efforts to reach a compromise for workers of the European-wide Eurowings group had failed, Ufo negotiator and chairman of the new aviation union (IGL) Nicoley Baublies said.

On Sunday afternoon, Ufo then announced it had "received an offer from Eurowings almost simultaneously with us tabling our demands and announcing the strikes" two days prior. After an initial examination, the union had "rejected it as not suitable for negotiation."

Ufo said two letters that the Eurowings management had sent to the workforce had "misrepresented the approach of Ufo, and its demands, but also their own offer." "We will not descend to this level, which does not stop at personal attacks."

Nevertheless, in the same breath Ufo announced that "to demonstrate for our part that we are seriously interested in an agreement," it would consider the company's demands and the Eurowings offer again very closely for any overlaps, "which might make it still possible to restart negotiations."

Ufo invited the three Eurowings executives, Michael Knitter, Oliver Wagner and Dr. Jörg Beissel, to come to the negotiating table on Monday. Perhaps, they do not know, "or only know very superficially, what is being discussed by their representatives at the table." The executives accepted this offer.

On Tuesday, the union then consulted internally about the results of the conversation.

The contract negotiations covering the pay and working conditions for cabin crew at Eurowings have now taken almost three years. The international competition in aviation is being carried out on the backs of the workforce in every country. The entire aviation industry is in upheaval. Pilots, cabin crew, ground and administrative staff, pilots, cargo staff and other employee groups are being made to pay for increasing the competitiveness of their respective airline with their jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions.

The expansion of Eurowings into a European low-cost airline—to compete with Ryan Air, Easy Jet and other low-cost carriers—is central to the corporate strategy of Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr. Recently, Lufthansa leased 40 aircraft from its ailing competitor Air Berlin. Under a so-called "wet lease," Lufthansa is deploying 35 of these at Eurowings and five at its subsidiary Austrian Airlines.

Lufthansa has been in negotiations with the various unions for years and is simultaneously outsourcing jobs to its low-cost airline Eurowings. The result is the fragmentation of the workforce and a virtually opaque contract framework.

For example, Eurowings has a total of 90 jets based at Frankfurt, Munich, Zurich and Vienna, which belong to four different Lufthansa subsidiaries, in addition to the German and the Austrian Eurowings, the subsidiary German Wings and the Turkish airline Sun Express. For "legal contract reasons," Ufo could only take strike action affecting the 23 planes belonging to German Eurowings. The current labour dispute at Eurowings, however, affects 400 flight attendants—out of 120,000 Lufthansa employees.

In response to the actions of the large service sector union Verdi, which cooperates very closely with Lufthansa and other companies, and continually stabs the employees in the back, numerous smaller sectoral unions were established in the aviation industry. As well as Ufo and IGL there is the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC, pilots' union), the Trade Union of Workers in Air Transport (mobile and ground staff) and the Union of Air Traffic Control (GdF, including air traffic controllers).

Besides Ufo, Verdi also organises flight attendants at Eurowings. It claims to have the sole right to strike collective agreements covering these job roles and is currently also engaged in collective bargaining. Eurowings

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is pushing for a single collective agreement, as laid down by the federal government in its contract unity law.

The smaller sectoral unions have just as little with which to oppose the attacks of the corporations as Verdi does. In the meantime, just like Verdi, they are acting as a "partner" of the aviation companies, particularly Lufthansa.

In July this year, Ufo had given up longstanding achievements at Lufthansa without a fight and accepted an arbitration proposal covering 19,000 flight attendants. In November 2015, these had conducted the toughest labour dispute in the history of the company to defend their retirement benefits.

According to the arbitration ruling, the employees have to cover the risk for their old age and transitional care themselves in future. The arbitrator, former state premier of Brandenburg Matthias Platzeck (SPD, Social Democratic Party), had proposed the arrangement of a similar deterioration for the Eurowings workers as for their colleagues at Lufthansa.

But in the current negotiations, Lufthansa has demanded even greater concessions from the Eurowings flight attendants, as Baublies said in a video message on Thursday.

He complained bitterly that sweeping concessions from Ufo had not moved the company to reach an agreement—even though "we have conceded many things that are very uncommon… We have acted positively throughout the almost three years. We have held out the prospect of a contract at low-cost levels to compete with Ryan Air and Co... The closure of German Wings (...) had already been decided. Growth abroad, growth in non-union contract, non-owned enterprises has been accepted." But the destruction of the previous conditions is not a side effect but the object of the Eurowings expansion.

Baublies explicitly warned the corporation against developments as at Air Berlin and charter airline TUIfly. In early October, crews there had responded to the enormous deterioration of their working conditions and job cuts with a mass "sick-out."

The pilots and flight attendants had protested in the form of "sick-outs" because the unions are on the side of the corporations and explicitly rejected mounting any industrial action. Baublies declared that this was "definitely not a means for conducting a labour dispute for us." Verdi and the Vereinigung Cockpit had even helped work out plans to use scab labour.

The sectoral unions are now indistinguishable from Verdi. They collaborate closely with the same corporations, advocate the same nationalist perspective and accept the same profit logic of capitalism. They isolate protests and play off the workforce of one company against the others, and workers in Germany against those in other countries.

For example, on October 18, the IGL put out a press release calling on the corporations and "politicians" to jointly defend Germany as a business location.

"There is no airline that is not attempting to merge with another, form a joint venture or jointly seeks to abandon collective agreements [in Germany] by escaping abroad," the IGL chairman and Ufo executive member Baublies was cited saying. "This demonstrates the upheaval of an entire industry."

This form of consolidation leads mainly "to unrest, falling share prices and rising sickness rates," Baublies warned the corporate bosses. "What is needed now is an industry-wide dialogue and concerted action for the entire industry, which must be conducted by the employers, trade unions and politicians—the change initiated must strengthen Germany as a business location."

Put plainly, Baublies is openly advocating further attacks on workers. "Structures negatively impacting competitiveness" must be addressed; Germany must "make up for the missed growth in the global industry."

Like all workers, flight attendants and pilots need a new strategy to oppose the nationalist and pro-capitalist programme of the unions. To defend their rights and the gains of the past, they must break with trade union conceptions and turn to an international socialist perspective. This is even truer when corporations and governments are everywhere preparing trade war and military conflict, for which the working class is being made to pay.

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