

Germany: Striking pilots need a socialist perspective

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All workers should support the current strike by Lufthansa pilots. The labor dispute has been going on since February 2014, with pilots undertaking no less than a dozen walkouts in the face of fierce management opposition.

Lufthansa management is not willing to surrender and has attacked the 5,400 striking pilots from all sides. It has appealed to the courts to ban the strike. It has appealed to its political supporters and the media to break the strike. And, in close cooperation with the trade unions and works councils in other parts of the company, management is trying to organise sections of Lufthansa workers against the pilots' strike.

The most recent result of this campaign is an appeal by the so-called "Ground Works Council" in Frankfurt, which calls for a rapid end to the "destructive dispute". The striking pilots are called upon to accept management's ultimatum. The interests of one group (i.e. the pilots), cannot be at the expense of their colleagues, the appeal with no names attached to it insists.

In the same tone as management, it declares: "The main issue is to facilitate the necessary company restructuring in a constructive and future-looking manner for the good of all Lufthansa employees. Tariff requirements (i.e., minimum wages equally agreed to by employers and employees in a certain industry) must accept real market conditions".

If the appeal, which has been widely propagated by the media, proves to be genuine, and if it is confirmed that the public service union Verdi is behind it, this is further proof of the political bankruptcy and anti-working class nature of this organization.

At the same time it should be recalled that a few weeks ago, the pilots' own union, Cockpit (VC), called for a pause in the strike when employees at TUIfly

organised a spontaneous sickout protest. At the time, Cockpit, together with the management of Air Berlin, Verdi's tariff committee, and the pilot's joint works council, called on flight attendants and ground staff to work extra shifts in order to undermine the impact of the job action by TUIfly employees.

This reveals a fundamental problem, which affects not only the current pilots strike but all labor struggles. The corporatist methods of "social partnership", including the German system of co-determination with management, are completely bankrupt and have only led to one disaster after another.

The rapid intensification of the capitalist crisis has resulted in fierce worldwide competition. Under these conditions social partnership translates into collusion with the corporations to impose ever more concessions in the name of boosting the global competitiveness of your "own" bosses.

Managements blackmail the workforce with the argument that if you are not willing to forego wages and social benefits, the company will not survive on the world market and all jobs will be lost. The nationally based unions have no response to this and invariably agree to reduced wages and worsened working conditions.

On the basis of the union alliance with management, individual workplaces and factories are pitted against one another and, one after the other, brought to their knees. The givebacks never end and the consequences are catastrophic.

The systematic development of low-cost airlines is part of this extortion. The Eurowings Lufthansa-based charter company operates under Austrian collective bargaining rules, which means that wages and salaries are 40 percent lower than in the parent company.

For years Cockpit has been trying to reach an

agreement with company executives based on peaceful cooperation. The result is clear: management exploits the willingness of the union to collaborate in attack after attack.

On Monday, Cockpit Chairman Jörg Handwerk complained in an interview in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “What sort of partnership do we have if one side goes to court against employees?” Handwerk warned management if Cockpit loses control over its members, then the dispute could take an entirely different form. “Then staff will express their protest differently, ignoring the trade unions”. Then there would be “no longer any control of the protest. In whose interest would that be?” he asked.

One year ago Cockpit, together with the unions Verdi and Ufo, took part in a round table meeting called the “job summit” convened by the Lufthansa executive and aimed at restructuring the company. Since then, Lufthansa has massively increased pressure on its employees. Cargo, technology, ground services, catering, etc., have been broken up, outsourced or delegated to new subsidiaries on the basis of cheap labour and layoffs.

Neither Verdi, Ufo nor Cockpit has made any attempt to coordinate their labor disputes directed against the same employer--Lufthansa. On the contrary, they are deliberately isolating embattled workers in order to keep them under control.

Behind the transformation of the unions into tools of management is their political orientation to the capitalist system, which allows a finance elite to enrich itself at the expense of the working class and the general public. In order to carry out a successful strike it is necessary to break with this capitalist perspective and adopt a socialist and internationalist orientation.

Globalization and the economic crisis do not mean that workers’ struggles are fruitless. On the contrary, pilots, who travel daily to other countries and continents, know very well that workers around the world face the same problems. The fight against low-paid agency work and social dumping is universal, and must be the starting point of a united mobilization of the working class in every country against the profiteering and destructive might of the criminal financial aristocracy.

This is only possible on the basis of a socialist perspective, which places the needs of the population

above the profit margins of the banks and big business. The right to work, a reasonable wage and social benefits are basic rights that must be defended.

This current struggle must be understood in the context of the rapid changes in the political situation. The election of Donald Trump, a right-wing demagogue and billionaire, as American president and the formation of an extreme right-wing government in the US has strengthened and encouraged reactionary forces around the world. German politics is reacting to this development with a massive military armament and a lurch to the right by all parties.

Major social struggles and class battles are inevitable. The pilots must recognise their strike as a component of such a struggle and prepare a broad political mobilization of the working class, combining the defense of wages and social gains with the struggle against the return of militarism, dictatorship and war.

The most important task facing the workers is the construction of their own political party fighting for a socialist program. This is at the centre of all the work of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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