

Striking British Airways cabin crew explain appalling work contract

Ross Mitchell
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British Airways (BA) was forced to cancel 24 flights and merge a number of other flights as a result of the 72-hour strike by cabin crew that began January 19.

The strike is over the poor conditions and inferior pay suffered by BA's "mixed fleet" cabin crew compared with those with seniority, under terms agreed previously by the Unite union. Average earnings for Mixed Fleet crew are £16,000 annually.

The strike proceeded after workers rejected a pay deal endorsed by Unite as the basis for calling off strikes planned for the Christmas period and following a 48-hour strike earlier this month.

The Labour Party has been forced to make a late show of support, with Shadow Business Secretary Clive Lewis, touted as a possible replacement as party leader for Jeremy Corbyn, visiting a picket line and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell addressing a Unite rally at Bedfont FC football ground near Heathrow. McDonnell accused BA's management of "bloody mindedness" and described the strikers as "the heroes and heroines of our movement."

A picket involving around 150, mostly young workers, was mounted at Hatton Cross Metro station, which acts as an entry point for cabin crew to travel to Heathrow airport terminals.

Mohammed told a WSWS reporter that he had joined BA after serving as cabin crew for British Midland International, BMI, which had positioned itself in the 1990s as a cheap quality competitor of BA and Virgin Airlines from the Heathrow hub.

"Since 2010 the new contracts have forced workers to earn as little as £11,000-£12,000 a year for 900 work hours per year. Nine hundred is the maximum safety limit BA cabin crew are allowed to fly.

"Once you complete your 900 hours—usually you do this in about nine months, for the work is

intense—management grounds you. That means you can either stay home and earn nothing extra, or you are assigned work duties in the airport terminals as a complement to ground staff. For this you get paid £3 an hour.

"While you are within your 900 flying hours, BA gives an extra allowance of £3 per hour flown to cater for your meals and expenses (cleaning uniforms, hotel expenses etc.), between flights away from your home airport.

"My home airport, my base, is Heathrow. If I am assigned one sector to Basel, Switzerland, then from the check-in to the check-out (that is, from taking work at the departure airport, Heathrow, to leaving work at the arrival airport, Basel), BA will pay me an extra allowance of £3 per hour. In this case five hours means an additional £15.

That means when I arrive at Basel I have £15 to cater for my meals and other expenses until I am assigned the next flight to another destination. It is only with this extra allowance to pay for expenses that our wages amount to £16,000 a year. This is really peanuts money. These are poverty wages."

John explained, "BMI ground staff were paid £14,000 back in 1999, while BA long haul cabin crew used to be paid £30,000 without the expenses allowance.

"We now work mixed fleets—that is no more separation between long haul fleets, which means sectors lasting 10 hours' flight and staying away for up to a month from the base airport.

"The union agreed these contracts in 2010. That is why we are here now.

"With mixed fleets working we are more flexible for management who can allocate us any flights at any time. We don't know whether we come back home this evening or tomorrow or the day after. It is very hard for

married cabin crew and those with children.

“Many of us are young, 20 to 35, and not many of us can start a family because of the working conditions and poverty wages.”

Joseph reported, “I was at BMI previously and we did the postal flight, carrying post to Edinburgh, Scotland and back to Heathrow, London. Cabin crew came back home—at the most, every other night—and we were paid £18,000 in the late 1990s, while ground staff were paid £14,000. That was also the wage of starting BA ground staff at the time. I lost my pension from BMI after they went bust and were taken over by Lufthansa.

“Load controllers were juiced-out by the company, working without breaks and management told us that because we were the cheapest airline, our jobs would be safe. Nevertheless BMI crashed into bankruptcy.”



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