

British Airways cabin crew strike at Heathrow Airport

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British Airways (BA) cabin crew struck today at Heathrow airport in their ongoing struggle in defence of pay and working conditions, which have become unbearable for “mixed fleet” workers.

Cabin crew struck for three days from Sunday, with today’s strike the first day of another three-day stoppage. The last strike by BA cabin crew was on January 19 and 20. This came after a previous three-day action starting January 10.

This week’s strikes went ahead despite the best efforts of the Unite trade union bureaucracy to sabotage the struggle. On December 20, Unite announced that a strike over pay by 1,500 of its members—employed by the baggage-handling firm Swissport at 18 airports—had been called off, with the union recommending the workers accept a new pay offer.

Prior to Christmas, the Heathrow cabin crew were also set to strike, but soon after its Swissport intervention, Unite connived with the company to call off the strike. General Secretary Len McCluskey personally intervened in the negotiations, and the union recommended a pay offer that was subsequently rejected by the cabin crew membership by a margin of seven to one.

Mixed fleet crew currently earn £11,000-£12,000 a year, plus a £3-per-working-hour allowance for expenses and maintenance between two flights—usually abroad. This amounts in practice to earnings of £16,000-£17,000 a year.

By way of comparison, for 2017, BA’s projected profits amount to £2.3 billion, with its chief executive, Willie Walsh, pulling in a nominal yearly salary of £8.8 million.

BA management have punished the striking workers by withdrawing a company benefit called “Staff Travel.” The same punishment was meted out back in 2010, when BA crews based in Manchester went on strike. Staff Travel provides workers who live either abroad or in the UK with the right to commute to their base airport to pick

up work, without having to purchase a flight ticket. Staff Travel was not taken away from pilots and co-pilots at BA, as this would scuttle the airline’s operations.

Heathrow is located between the boroughs of Harlington to its north perimeter and Bedfont and Feltham to its southern perimeter. These boroughs rely on the airport for jobs and livelihoods.

Unite built a headquarters in Bedfont, which hosts the local Heathrow membership. This was built in order to contain the anger of BA workers. As of last month, the branch had 3,000 members, mostly from mixed fleet cabin crew workers. Cabin crew fall under three groups: London Heathrow mixed fleet, London Gatwick fleet and London City fleet.

As with any dispute in which Unite is unable to prevent strikes breaking out, the union ensures that no other workers in the same sector are mobilised in support, let alone among its wider 1.4 million membership.

Instead, Unite is dragooning cabin crew behind a dead-end campaign centred on sowing illusions in the Labour Party and MPs from other parties. On Tuesday, Unite stated it would be “holding a photo opportunity outside the Houses of Parliament on College Green, Westminster with a giant ‘BA low pay no way’ banner,” with 100 striking cabin crew lobbying parliament to “seek MPs’ support in their on-going battle against poverty pay at the airline.” This is the same parliament that recently debated strengthening anti-strike laws, which, if passed, would render industrial action in the transport sector all but illegal.

In January, Labour’s shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, came to speak to strikers. McDonnell—the closest ally of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn—was introduced by Unite Regional Secretary for London and Eastern Pete Kavanagh.

“Congratulations for building this branch, which is nudging 3,000 strong now,” Kavanagh said.

“Congratulations for building the confidence of the workforce to a point where you have been able to deliver a fantastically successful strike.”

McDonnell, who is the local constituency MP for the borough of Hayes and Harlington, said, “Those who are taking strike action today, you are the heroes and heroines of our movement.” He added, “What you are doing today is heroic, is the right thing to do and it will force them [management] back to the negotiating table. We have to be confident about that. ... What you are showing today is three factors, courage, determination—we are going absolutely to win this; and above all solidarity: solidarity with one another.”

Despite such brave talk, Unite has not mobilised the other 9,000 BA cabin crew organised in another Unite branch, resulting in the strike only disrupting a mere 1 percent of BA flights. Nor has Unite sought to mobilise the 60,000 employees of the International Airlines Group (IAG), which incorporates BA.

Matt Smith, Unite regional organiser for BA Mixed Fleet, took the stage and said, “Willie Walsh [IAG CEO] is using you as some sort of sick contestant in his version of The Hunger Games. ... You have a year of being able to manage and after that you are exhausted and on low pay.”

Andrew Stanley-Ward, Unite union representative for BA Mixed Fleet, explained, “It all feeds back into the business plan. They want these people to join what seems a prestigious airline, a big British brand, do the job and after a year or two they realise physically they cannot do it, financially they cannot do it and they are out of the door and they have a new wave coming in.” He added, “Now I am earning less money than I was in 1997. My first wage slip of November 1997 when I started flying was higher than my wage slip of January 2017.”

Unite is admitting that over the years it has allowed BA to employ working-poor as cabin crew that can easily be fired and replaced due to high youth unemployment in the UK since the 2008 financial crisis and imposed austerity.

The current IAG business plan could have not been rolled out without the collaboration of the trade unions. As a result of the BA unions’ sabotaging the struggles of workers in 2010 and 2011, BA management were able to introduce the mixed fleet system while at the same time shrinking all its UK airport bases to just two—London Heathrow and London Gatwick—and three fleets.

In 2010, the Unite union agreed with BA to allow the company to use scab personnel to break up future strikes by workers.

BA became a subsidiary of a new financial holding, IAG, from January 2011—an expression of the financialisation of the transport industry across Europe and the world. Financial holdings directly control airlines and aircraft leasing, as opposed to airlines being formally separate from banks and hedge funds, as was the norm up to the 1990s.

Today, IAG encompasses BA; Iberia, the Spanish airline flag carrier; Aer Lingus, the Irish flag carrier; Eurofleet; EasyJet; baggage handling; ground check-in services; engineering; CityFleet (from London City Airport); and others such as the Barcelona-based, low-cost local Spanish carrier, Vueling.

From the start, IAG was represented on both the Madrid Stock Exchange IBEX35 and of the London FTSE-100 Stock Exchange. It is the sixth largest airline group in the world, with revenue of £18.27 billion in 2015.

On November 4, IAG agreed to acquire British Midland International (BMI) from Lufthansa, thus making IAG the majority holder of slots at Heathrow—up from 45 percent to 54 percent. BMI workers were then employed by BA on the lower BMI wages. In 2012, IAG merged all the cargo operations of BMI, BA and Iberia into one business unit—IAG Cargo, with 2,400 workers. In 2015, IAG acquired Aer Lingus. In May 2016, financial group Qatar Airways increased its holding in IAG shares to 15.01 percent.

Today, BA airline workers are the working poor of the global transport industry in Europe. The latest mixed fleet contract is the worst, with complete flexibility, poverty wages and the longest flying hours a month, 900, as compared to the standard BA flying hours of 610 a year for older fleets. Back in 2012, BA Eurofleet cabin crew workers were away from their base airport at the most four days a month, with a total three days of flying time through a maximum of six sectors.



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