

UK: Unite union imposes isolation of Heathrow cabin crew strike

Ross Mitchell, Robert Stevens
11 March 2017

British Airways (BA) cabin crew at Heathrow airport completed a seven-day strike Thursday. The workers are employed in the airline's "mixed fleet" crew and are in dispute against poverty pay levels and inferior working conditions. With the latest strikes, the 2,900 members of the Unite trade union have taken 26 days of strike action.

Mixed fleet crew currently earn £11,000-£12,000 a year, plus a paltry £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.

A member of BA's flight deck crew, in reply to a recent article in the *Independent*, said cabin crew had "effectively gone from £36,000 pay, to £18,000 in the last 5 years." He added, "I'm flight deck so only know and see a small part of their day, but you're right it's not just about safety. Do you go to work at 3 am, and then finally get to a foreign bed at 1 am the next day, when it's actually 11 am in the morning local?"

He continued, "The massively long days, filthy working environment and reduced life expectancy demands a reasonable wage. ... For years both flight deck and cabin crew have been told the reductions in t&cs [terms and conditions] were there to keep the business profitable, whilst at the same time the companies have made huge profits, that have seen CEOs and billionaire shareholders bank accounts bloat."

These conditions were imposed following the defeat of the national BA strike in 2010, with Unite playing a critical role. The imposition and continuation of low pay rates for the mixed fleet is part of the strategy by the International Airlines Group (IAG), which incorporates BA, Ireland's Air Lingus, and Spanish airline Iberia to restructure its global pay levels

downwards to be more competitive.

The strikes by the Heathrow cabin crew demonstrate workers' determination to resist BA's attacks. However, this struggle is being systematically isolated by the Unite union.

Prior to the latest strikes, BA management boasted that only 0.4 percent of flights would be affected over the seven days. This was even less disruption than the last strikes, during which 1 percent of flights were disrupted.

Unite has done nothing to mobilise the support of other cabin crew in defence of the Heathrow crew, either at that airport or at any other in the UK. Unite has more than 9,000 BA cabin crew members organised in another branch, but these workers have been kept rigidly isolated from the struggle at Heathrow. Nor has Unite made any attempt to enlist the solidarity of the 60,000 employees in three countries where the IAG operates.

On this basis, the BA has been able to push through a separate deal with other cabin crew staff. A BA representative said last month, "Our pay offer for mixed fleet cabin crew is consistent with deals agreed with more than 90 percent of British Airways colleagues, including many Unite members."

The creation of a tiered pay system and a divided workforce was the outcome of the defeat of a bitter struggle fought in 2010-11. Following strikes held over a 20-month period, Unite accepted all of BA's demands, including the slashing of jobs and introduction of inferior pay for new entrants. On top of this it signed up to a scabs' charter, agreeing to BA's right to train and use a special pool of replacement cabin crew in the event of any future strike.

This was the culmination of years of class collaboration by the union with BA management. In the

aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, Unite proposed a package of “negotiated efficiencies” to BA, with National Secretary for Aviation Steve Turner pledging that until an “upturn in the global economy” the union “will work with the company on the introduction of temporary measures aimed at ensuring stability and security of employment for our members and their families.”

The proposals included a company-wide deferral of the pay award due for 2009/2010 and “headcount efficiencies.”

Opposed to mobilising its membership and workers throughout the airline industry against these attacks, Unite has instead called on workers to put their faith in an appeal to Members of Parliament. Last month, Unite held what it described as a “photo opportunity outside the Houses of Parliament” to “seek MPs’ support in their on-going battle against poverty pay at the airline.”

A few days later, on February 9, Labour MPs Lisa Nandy, Dennis Skinner, Christopher Stephens, Rachael Maskell and Dawn Butler tabled an Early Day Motion to Parliament. The motion—as with the vast majority of EDMs—was not the subject of a subsequent debate, and read, “This House supports BA workers in mixed fleet cabin crew in their current industrial dispute over pay.”

The “support” offered was token—committing no one to anything—as it then called for Unite and BA to reach a negotiated settlement.

Unite were calling on MPs to support striking workers under conditions in which all the main parties agree with austerity and oppose industrial action by workers. On March 1, the government’s anti-strike Trades Union Act became law—enacted by a Parliament that recently initiated debates aimed at making strikes illegal in key sectors, including transport.

Just 35 out of more than 300 opposition party MPs supported the EDM, with a tiny handful of these (19 out of 229) Labour MPs. John McDonnell, the “left” shadow chancellor who is the main ally of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, refused to put his name to this timid motion. This was despite McDonnell, who is the local constituency MP for the borough of Hayes and Harlington, telling striking cabin crew in January, “We will be winning this.”

Corbyn did not sign either.

The attacks facing BA Heathrow cabin crew are part of an offensive being carried out against airline workers

internationally by companies seeking competitive advantage over their rivals at all costs. Cabin and flight crews have seen their workload increase while their real term pay remains either stagnant or declines drastically.

Last month, the German pilots union Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) accepted an arbitration ruling on compensation for 5,400 Lufthansa pilots. This struggle, involving many strikes, dated back to 2012 as pilots fought proposed cuts in salaries and pensions and attacks on working conditions. The arbitration works out at an average salary increase of just 1.2 percent per year. Lufthansa’s shares climbed by almost 3 percent on the news, reaching the top position on the DAX stock index and its highest position since last May.

As with Unite, the unions involved in the strike—Verdi, UFO and Vereinigung Cockpit—never attempted to coordinate industrial action among their membership throughout the Lufthansa Group. This week, air traffic controllers and other workers at Air France held strikes to protest conditions imposed as a result of contracts signed by the unions.

Airline workers in Britain, Germany, France and internationally must oppose the dead-end nationalist and class collaborationist perspective of the trade unions, which has resulted in defeat after defeat. The prerequisite for a successful struggle is the creation of class struggle organization, independent of the unions and based on an internationalist, socialist programme.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact