

# Mixed fleet cabin crew continue strike against British Airways

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British Airways (BA) “mixed fleet” cabin crew began the latest phase of strike action against the company Wednesday. The workers, employed at several London airports, are fighting poverty pay and the imposition of punitive sanctions against around 1,400 colleagues involved in previous industrial action.

The strike is scheduled to last 15 days. It is the latest in one of the longest running industrial disputes in the European airline industry. The crew members—who work a combination of long and short-haul flights—carried out an extended stoppage from July 1 to July 16. The dispute began last year, with the crew having already struck for a total of 46 days in a series of strikes.

Another two weeks of strike action is planned beginning August 2.

Despite the determination of the cabin crew to oppose BA’s attacks, the disruption to flights remains minimal. The airline has been able to transport every booked passenger to their destination during the strikes.

In July, management stepped up their strike breaking operation and intimidation of workers by organising the “wet-leasing” of 20 planes and their crews from IAG majority shareholder, Qatar Airways financial group. Qatar Airways holds a stake of over 20 percent in BA. IAG subsidiaries include Aer Lingus, VueLing, EasyJet and Iberia. Crews that once flew with British Midland also work under IAG.

BA’s mixed fleet crews are composed mainly of young workers, numbering around 3,000. They are on a basic salary beginning at just £12,100 and generally earn no more than £16,000, with expenses. Some crew members sleep in their cars between flights to save on accommodation expenses, while others come to work while sick to avoid losing pay.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to pickets at

Hatton Cross London Underground station, the commuting point for cabin crew to pick up work at Heathrow airport.

Paul from Luton is 25 years old and three years into the job. He said, “We are striking to the end. Management removed our benefits and staff travel for more than 1,500 of us over this year. It was to intimidate us from striking. Poverty pay is tyranny already. We are on poverty wages; we cannot afford buying or renting houses around the airport, as we are supposed to be within a two hour radius commuting distance. We live in rooms and share flats.”

BA ramped up the exploitation of its workforce with the introduction of mixed fleet contracts following the defeat of the national cabin crew strike in 2010. Fully one third of its cabin crew are now under inferior contracts. Prior to that defeat—imposed as a result of the betrayal of the Unite union—contracts at BA were worth a minimum of £30,000.

A cabin crew member for five years, Natalie, left Hull to become a flight attendant in London. She said, “With our BA poverty wages, there is no way we can build families, let alone find suitable housing.”

While management is stopping at nothing to defeat the workers, they are only able to proceed due to the role of Unite, which has exerted all its efforts toward limiting the strike. While BA employs about 5,500 mixed fleet cabin crew, only 1,500 are on strike.

Just 8.75 percent of all BA cabin crew struck in June around its three London bases—London Gatwick, London City and London Heathrow airports. The remaining 14,500 cabin crew, employed on both pre-2010 contracts and mixed fleet contracts, are being kept separate from their striking colleagues, with BA forcing them to cover extra flights.

Unite is seeking to divert the struggle of cabin crew

into the dead end of legal appeals of BA's actions and futile appeals to Members of Parliament.

Unite's national officer, Oliver Richardson, boasted this week of the support the strikers are receiving from the public and politicians. The latest strikes began with Unite hailing what it openly described as a "photo opportunity" in parliament to coincide "with the tabling of early day motion (EDM) by MPs expressing concern over low pay and British Airways penalising striking members of cabin crew." Richardson said of the motion, "There's already been *fantastic* support from politicians who have grown increasingly concerned about the bullying and belligerent behaviour of our national carrier, British Airways."

In reality, the motion is a token gesture, committing the signatories to nothing. It calls only for "British Airways to engage in constructive relations with Unite to resolve the dispute." And far from winning widespread support of MPs, just 33 MPs of 650 signed the motion, with only 28 Labour MPs of 262 endorsing it. Nominally "left" Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn did not sign and neither did his closest ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. McDonnell, who is the local constituency MP for the borough of Hayes and Harlington, told striking cabin crew in January, "We will be winning this."

What BA has achieved in creating a super-exploited, two-tiered workforce is being used as a template for airlines throughout Europe. This month, Dutch-French airline Air France-KLM, along with the trade unions for cabin crews and pilots—SNPL (Societe Nationale des Pilotes de Ligne)—collaborated in announcing a new productivity and cost cutting plan. The plan, to be rolled out under a new low-cost subsidiary airline, project-named "Boost," aims at boosting profits by driving up productivity. Launching this September, Boost will employ cabin and flight deck crews on lower wages, pensions and terms and conditions. They will be as flexible as BA mixed fleet crews.

Seeking to emulate the substandard conditions imposed on workers at BA/IAG and at Lufthansa in Germany, Jean-Marc Janailac, the CEO of Air France-KLM, has laid out a strategy to generate higher and consistent earnings. Air France-KLM is imposing the contracts in order to reverse a situation in which it is not profitable on 35 percent of its routes.

Janailac announced on taking over at Air France-

KLM in May 2016 his intention to lower costs by 20 percent at a new subsidiary, compared to the parent group. Boost cabin attendants will earn 40 percent less wages. But over time, all new recruits at AF-KLM will face the same fate as at BA since 2010—where all new recruits end up with the poverty wages and mixed fleet working contracts.

The experience of BA workers demonstrates again the urgent necessity for airline workers to break out of the straitjacket of the trade unions by building new organisations of struggle.

Cabin crew workers at BA have shown for the past eight months their resolve and determination. But if they are to avoid defeat, it is imperative that they turn to a new strategy based on the fight to unite airline workers throughout the world—who face the very same attacks on the jobs wages and conditions—against the global airline corporations. Only on this basis can they oppose the dead-end class collaborationist perspective of the trade unions.



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