

# Protesting workers at bankrupt Air Berlin denounce Merkel government

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More than a thousand employees of the insolvent airline Air Berlin protested last Wednesday in front of Berlin Central Station to oppose mass layoffs. The workers were accompanied with family members and supporters from all over Germany

Insolvency proceedings were officially opened on 1 November, after Lufthansa agreed to take over 81 Air Berlin aircraft, plus Air Berlin's landing rights at various airports. The British airline EasyJet secured another 20 aircraft. Other bidders that offered to take over the Air Berlin workforce were not taken into account by the insolvency administrator and the German government.

Demonstrators were angry and fiercely criticised the way the deal had been reached behind their backs by the German government, Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr and Air Berlin CEO Thomas Winkelmann.

Both Lufthansa and EasyJet refused to take on the staff of Air Berlin. Instead employees are being told to reapply for jobs at Eurowings-Europe, a Lufthansa subsidiary based in Vienna, on terms well below their previous salaries.

The demonstration was organised by a group headed by a stewardess from Düsseldorf, Chantal Meyer, who has worked for the company since 2004. She spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at the rally held in front of the Chancellery in Berlin.

"We are currently in revocable release from work, which means we have nothing to do, a lot of time on our hands, and no income, unfortunately, because there are no funds left following bankruptcy proceedings." Affected are thousands of Air Berlin workers. Only around 1,700 employees of the Air Berlin subsidiary Niki, headquartered in Vienna, have retained their jobs.

Meyer organised the protest to demonstrate "that we will not be blackmailed into reapplying for our own

jobs." Air Berlin workers applying for position as the rival cheap fare Eurowings company will face estimated wage cuts of 40 percent, and up to 50 to 60 percent for pilots, depending on professional experience.

Meyer and her supporters organised a petition to pressure Lufthansa and the UAE Etihad air company to take the Air Berlin workers and the company's aircraft. The petition had been signed by 46,123 persons prior to the rally.

The hopes of the protesters are based on paragraph 613a of the German Civil Code (BGB), which protects workforces in company takeovers--at least for a limited time. So far, Lufthansa has justified its refusal to abide by the code by arguing that the law only concerned the takeover of entire concerns, but not the transfer of parts of a company, such as the 81 Air Berlin aircraft.

During the rally, the petition was handed to Gregor Gysi, a leader of the Left Party in the German parliament, who was to hand it to Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Responding to the WSW's question as to why she placed her hopes in Gysi, a politician who had supported the privatisation of airport ground operations in Berlin ten years ago, which resulted in drastic cuts to pay and working conditions, Chantal Meyer naively responded, "The Gysi of today is not the Gysi of that time."

Gysi read his letter to Chancellor Merkel during the rally. It consisted of a worthless plea that she "take seriously the indignation and despair" of Air Berlin workers. Any hope among workers that such appeals will change the mind of the German chancellor is completely unfounded. Just this summer Merkel flew to Abu Dhabi, along with Lufthansa chief Spohr and Air Berlin CEO Winkelmann, to discuss a takeover of

Lufthansa by the UAE airline Etihad, a move that would result in further attacks on airline workers.

In discussions with WSWS reporters, several protesters explained why many Air Berlin workers were not registering as unemployed with the Federal Labor Office, a fact that the news media has greeted with amazed disbelief.

Sabine who has worked as a flight attendant at Air Berlin for 17 years described the paradoxical situation. "We are revocable, which means theoretically we can be called back to work, although we have already been instructed to destroy our uniforms." In the event of an irrevocable release from work, she could apply for a job elsewhere or register as unemployed but she did not want to simply quit because "Then I would give up any rights I have to entitlements from Air Berlin", she explained. In addition, other airlines were not offering part-time employment. She has two small children and cannot accept full-time work.

"We have not seen much of the union since the bankruptcy", she replied when asked about the role of the Verdi public sector worker union in the labor dispute. "They should have been active much earlier, but Christine Behle [board member of Verdi] also sits on the supervisory board of Lufthansa," she said, before adding. "It all seems rather corrupt."

Sabine went on, "Mr. Winkelmann was also with Lufthansa for a long time, before he became our CEO and was able to guarantee his salary with a bank guarantee of 4.5 million euros. He is also a good buddy of Carsten Spohr, the head of Lufthansa."

Daniela, a flight attendant for 15 years, said, "We have done all we can to save the airline for the past three months, since August. We knew it was faring badly, but we always thought that somebody would take care of us and we would obtain secure employment from the new purchasers of the planes. Now we know better. After three months came the so-called 'revocable release from work' and now we are all out of a job", she concluded.

Along with Gregor Gysi, the deputy regional director of Verdi Berlin-Brandenburg, Roland Tremper, also addressed the rally. Tremper began by declaring, "Our social system is defined by providing people with a perspective and giving workers and their families an opportunity to live a socially secure and peaceful life", he said, in remarks that bore little relation to reality.

After a number of accusations against the policy of the Federal Government and the irresponsibility of the company chiefs, Spohr and Winkelmann, Tremper admitted he was also chair of a management committee at the employment agency in Berlin. A week ago, he said, he received an application for mass layoffs of ground staff.

Tremper reported that he rejected any request to approve layoffs that came in the form of a written letter or a teleconference. Instead he demanded a face-to-face meeting so he could look others in the eye and see who was really willing to agree to the dismissal of hundreds of workers. In a few weeks, he would do the same when the application for the mass sacking of cabin crew staff arrived.

"I do not know if it helps. But whether it helps or not, we will not just do via the phone or at the warm desk, definitely not", he impotently declared.

Whether on the telephone, at the desk or via direct eye contact the decision remains the same, with devastating results for Air Berlin employees.



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