

Defying the trade unions, Air France workers vote to reject contract

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On Friday, it was announced that striking Air France workers had voted by 55 percent to reject the contract presented on April 16 by CEO Jean-Marc Janaillac and the trade unions. Over 80 percent of the workers participated in the vote.

The proposed contract was an insult to the work force. Issued by Janaillac with the tacit support of the unions, it proposed only a seven percent wage increase over four years. Air France management gave itself double-digit wage increases of up to 67 percent last year after posting record profits of over 1 billion euros. The profit surge was accomplished by moving staff into low-cost subsidiary airlines to drastically cut overall wage levels.

Workers voted the proposal down, defying threats not only from Air France management and the French government, but also from union bureaucrats, who denounced them for striking against the contract and demanded that they approve it.

While pilots reportedly voted largely to approve the contract, flight attendants and maintenance staff appear to have voted massively against it. The company has 3,500 pilots, 13,000 flight staff and 32,000 ground crew workers. While skilled pilots make good salaries, a large majority of workers at the company are not highly paid. Average monthly pre-tax income for employees is only €2,981 for men and €2,066 for women.

The week before the contract vote, French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) official Laurent Berger was interviewed by Europe 1 radio, where he denounced Air France pilots in inflammatory terms for “taking us all hostage” and causing “big, big problems” for the company. Air France has reportedly lost at least €300 million and is losing over €26 million each day the strike continues.

The Air France unions fully expected that after

organizing a few one-day strikes and giving workers no perspective to oppose the threats from Air France management and the government they would easily secure a “yes” vote. Management and union officials who had assembled to view the results of the vote could not believe their eyes when precisely the opposite occurred.

One anonymous union official recounted the scene to France Télévisions: “I saw 55 percent. At first I thought that was for ‘yes,’ but in fact it was for ‘no.’ A stunned silence came over everyone. There was silence for a full minute.” Then an Air France official shouted, “This company is unmanageable!”

A union bureaucrat at the meeting, who had organized strikes and publicly claimed to oppose the contract, while fully expecting it to pass, said, “I was sure that with all the efforts management had made, they would succeed.”

The unions were left without even a leaflet to distribute informing workers of the outcome of the vote. They were so sure that they would obtain a “yes” vote that they had printed out leaflets reporting passage of the deal and had made no preparations for a “no” vote. They were left empty-handed when their members defied them and voted down the contract.

Janaillac reacted by immediately announcing his resignation. “I take responsibility for the consequences of this vote, and in the coming days I will submit my resignation to the board of Air France and Air France-KLM,” he said. “This vote is the expression of unease. It calls for a profound transformation,” he continued, adding that he hoped his resignation would allow “a collective change of mentality and create the conditions for a rebound.”

French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire threatened the Air France workers, declaring that the state would

not “mop up Air France’s debts” and arrogantly lecturing the workers that their wage demands were “unjustified.”

Yesterday, after Janaillac’s resignation, Air France-KLM stock fell 13 percent, driven by investors’ fears that the strike could cut into the billions in profits the company is handing out to them. “This leaves the company without a chief executive in the midst of an ongoing conflict,” financial analysts told *Le Figaro*.

The Air France workers’ courageous opposition to the contract is part of an international upsurge of working-class struggle against the demands of the financial aristocracy. This wave of rank-and-file resistance is also bringing the working class into open conflict with the union bureaucracies.

In the US, a wave of teachers’ strikes and protests in defiance of the unions has erupted in numerous states. As Air France workers were voting down the contract, teachers in Colorado were going on strike, together with tens of thousands of California university workers and Los Angeles school bus drivers. At the same time, teachers have taken strike action in other countries, from Britain to Sri Lanka.

In Europe, strikes have erupted since New Year’s Day among German automotive, metal and government workers; British railroad workers; Eastern European auto workers and Turkish metal workers.

In France, the working class is coming into political struggle against President Emmanuel Macron’s agenda of austerity and militarism. A rail strike is proceeding against Macron’s planned privatization of the national railway (SNCF), while health care and state workers go on strike and students blockade their universities. Macron is overseeing deep cuts to wages and social services in an attempt to free up €300 billion for a vast increase in military spending. At the same time, France is joining in the US-led war drive in the Middle East, bombing Syria and threatening Iran with war.

The way forward is to take these strikes out of the hands of the corrupt union bureaucracies and establish independent rank-and-file organizations to unify strikers with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Air France strikes in recent years have provided a particularly blatant example of how the trade unions, which are all focused on boosting corporate competitiveness and profits, agree to measures that

directly undermine the interests of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

In 2014, a powerful pilots’ strike broke out at Air France against plans to move workers into low-cost subsidiaries that pay lower wages. Air France management lost hundreds of millions of euros and was brought to its knees financially. With victory in the strikers’ grasp, the unions suddenly called off the action. “It is our duty to preserve the future of our company and bandage its wounds before irreversible damage is done,” the unions declared in a statement.

The unions were not opposed to a collapse in wage levels for their members. They were fearful of and determined to prevent a victory of the strike that could harm corporate profits and encourage broader strike action in France and in the airline industry across Europe. Their role in strangling the strike was hailed by various pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class, including the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO).

The outcome of the 2014 strike is a serious warning to Air France workers today that the unions will stop at nothing to re-impose some version of the contract, doing everything in their power to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

While strike action is proceeding, the unions failed to reach an agreement on how to continue the strike at their meeting last night. An anonymous trade union official told *Le Figaro*, “We want to show we are responsible and not immediately call for more strikes.”



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