

Unions call four-day strike at Air France

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On Friday, Air France-KLM unions announced a four-day strike to last from June 23-26. The strike call comes after workers participated in 15 strike days between February 22 and May 8 to demand wage increases.

The call is the unions' attempt to control rising anger at Air France. After the airline's workers voted to reject a concessions contract negotiated by unions and management calling for a 7 percent wage increase over four years, while management had granted itself double-digit wage increases of up to 67 percent, union officials are afraid they might lose control of the situation. For this reason, they are calling a symbolic action.

In May, Air France unions and management organised a referendum on the proposed contract, hoping to secure a "Yes" vote and thus create conditions to end strike action. The French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) had called for a "Yes." Air France was proposing an immediate 2 percent raise plus a 5 percent raise in 2019-21, depending on the company's profits.

However, some 55 percent of the workers voted the contract down, stunning the unions and forcing Air France-KLM CEO Jean-Marc Janaillac to resign on May 4. The unions then sabotaged the strike, calling for its immediate end, on the ludicrous pretext that Air France management had to be allowed a respite so it could concentrate on recruiting a new boss!

After Janaillac's resignation, in a joint letter sent to Air France management, the unions wrote, "We will show we are responsible and not immediately call a strike." They said they would continue asking for talks without mounting strike action, however, even after a new CEO was named: "That is why, for the time being, there is no scheduled date for strike action."

But now, the unions have changed course and told management they cannot wait, fearing wildcat actions could erupt across the company. Karine Monségu, co-

general secretary at CGT-Air France, said: "On the ground, people are angry. The workers want to go back to war. Management has to understand it can't ignore the workers."

At the same time, the airline's unions are demanding to meet with management as soon as possible, to restart talks before walkouts begin.

Air France-KLM management plans to present "actions and measures" today at the central works committee meeting. According to *Libération*, "They indicate that management's new wage proposal only includes a 3.65 percent wage extension payable in three instalments and spread out until February." Like the last contract voted down by the workers, this is far below what workers are demanding.

Air France management is counting on the unions to bludgeon workers into accepting the contract. In a letter to the Air France unions, interim CEO Anne-Marie Couderc wrote: "Concrete responses must be provided ... we must make sure the coming weeks will be useful in addressing the concerns that have been expressed."

The unions, terrified by the growing opposition, demanded to meet earlier with management to find a new deal to peddle to the workers. "Why wait for June 14?" asked Philippe Evain, head of the National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL). He claimed that the delay in scheduling talks "is profoundly damaging to the company... This wait-and-see approach is scandalous."

Similarly, at the Stalinist CGT, Monségu asserted, "Management must urgently organise a meeting with us."

Militancy and social anger are rising among workers in France and internationally. However, the only way to struggle against social and wage austerity is to break the stranglehold over workers' struggles maintained by the trade unions, backed by petty-bourgeois politicians like Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the New Anti-capitalist Party. The construction of a network of rank-and-file

committees in the workplaces must serve to take control of the strikes out of the hands of the unions and unify the different strikes against the policies and regime of French president Emmanuel Macron.

Air France workers have already passed through important experiences. The union bureaucracies have done everything to strangle strikes after having negotiated contracts that accepted wage cuts, job cuts and attacks on working conditions.

In 2014, Air France pilots launched a strike against cuts to wages and benefits as Air France tried to found a low-cost subsidiary, Transavia, to transfer staff toward lower-wage positions. After two weeks of a powerful strike, Air France was financially on its knees, and the pilots were on the verge of victory.

Precisely at this time, terrified by the prospect of a victory that would encourage militancy far more broadly, the unions called off strike action. “It is our duty to preserve the future of our company and to tend to its wounds, before irreversible damage is caused,” the unions declared in a joint statement.

The unions did not object to a collapse in wages. What they feared was a victory of the workers, which they were determined to avoid in order to boost profits and discourage broader strike action in France and in airlines across Europe.

The only viable perspective is to fight to unify the struggles of the working class and develop them independently of the trade unions. Not only at Air France, but among rail workers, public sector workers and retail workers, strikes have been called against job and wage cuts. It is only by turning these actions into a political struggle against Macron that workers can take forward their struggles and prepare a real victory.



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