

Ryanair workers set to strike across Europe

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Pilots and cabin crew at European budget airline Ryanair are taking part in strike action today. The strikes, which will impact hundreds of flights, involve workers in Ireland, Portugal, Belgium and Spain, and reflect sharply deepening class tensions in the airline industry and across the continent. Ryanair pilots in Germany are also being balloted for industrial action.

As with last week's strikes by Amazon warehouse workers in Germany, Spain and Poland, the actions by Ryanair employees show the potential and necessity for a coordinated continent-wide movement of the working class in defence of jobs and living standards.

Pilots based in Ireland are holding a third 24-hour strike today, following similar actions on July 12 and 20. The one-day actions follow ballots in which 99 percent of pilots based in Ireland and directly employed by the airline voted to strike. More than 250 Ireland-based pilots are self-employed agency staff and not involved in the dispute. Sixteen flights on July 24 to and from the Republic of Ireland have been cancelled with around 2,500 passengers affected. The July 12 strike resulted in 30 flights being cancelled, while last week, pilots picketed Ryanair's headquarters in North Dublin.

The pilots, members of the Irish Airline Pilots' Association (IALPA), are seeking "a fair and transparent mechanism" based on seniority to allocate pilots to a particular Ryanair base, to arrange transfers between bases and for annual leave. The one-day strikes are the first ever of Irish-based Ryanair pilots, and only the second ever of Ryanair pilots anywhere.

The actions have taken place despite the best efforts of the IALPA to stop them. The IALPA is part of the Forsa trade union, which emerged last year out of a merger of a number of smaller public service unions. Forsa officials made their priorities clear to the *Irish Mirror*, before the July 12 strike. "We regret the fact that it's come to this. Pilots don't want to be on strike.

They know it's bad for passengers, for the airline, for Ireland's economy and tourism sector and for pilots themselves."

The strike follows a sustained push last year by Ryanair pilots across the European continent for better conditions and a means of overcoming the fragmentation imposed upon them by the company. A series of open letters sent from 60 local Employee Representative Councils, bodies with which Ryanair hitherto preferred to negotiate, culminated in a short-lived European Employee Representative Council that claimed to speak for over 4,000 Ryanair pilots across 80 bases and 30 countries.

Led by a group of senior pilots, they used a major rostering calamity at Ryanair, which resulted in the loss of as many as 700,000 passenger flights, to force the company into recognising trade unions—something opposed by Ryanair over its previous 32-year history.

Ryanair, in the end, only agreed to the recognition as it sought the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy in maintaining control of the workforce.

On Wednesday and Thursday, Ryanair cabin crew in Belgium, Portugal and Spain are also due to strike in a coordinated action—impacting some 600 flights and up to 75,000 passengers—against the brutal levels of exploitation in the industry.

Up to 400 cabin crew in Portugal held three one-day strikes this year, prompting a number of flight cancellations. Strikes took place at Lisbon, Porto and Faro airports.

Workers are striking in pursuit of demands for leave, sick pay, an end to cabin sales targets, minimum legally defined rest periods, an end to agency working, predictable working hours and a seniority system. They also want an end to the current system in which they are all forced to open an Irish bank account.

A recent Ryanair Crew Summit, organised by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) of

trade unions and its European wing, the European Transport Workers Federation, listed 34 demands, one of which is for workers' employment contracts to explicitly recognise the national law and jurisdiction of the country in which the particular worker is based.

Currently all Ryanair cabin crew are employed under Irish law.

As result, Spanish cabin crews, for example, are forced to rely on the European Union's health insurance, rather than the Spanish system, to receive medical treatment in Spain, despite living there. Staff also report being unable to get a mortgage in Spain because their pay was delivered in Ireland.

Workers also have complained about disciplinary measures being imposed for calling in sick more than twice a year, and of being threatened with transfers to the Lithuanian branch of Ryanair if they fail to meet the company's notorious requirements for onboard sales of snacks, perfume and scratch cards.

Representatives of cabin crew from 80 percent of Ryanair bases attended the summit, and ground crew from 100 percent.

Under pressure of the growing militant mood, the ITF was forced to warn in early July, "If the company does not begin to negotiate with unions in good faith and deliver real improvements for workers across its network, it risks a summer of industrial action."

However, as with the pilots' action, the long warning period ahead of this week's industrial action offered by the trade unions has given the company ample time to co-ordinate its response. Ryanair claimed that as many as 85 percent of the passenger journeys affected by the cabin crew action had already been rescheduled or the passengers offered refunds.

In effect, the trade unions are seeking to prove their credentials in controlling a highly concentrated, highly mobile, and internationalised workforce in a crucial sector of the transport industry.

Underscoring the point, immediately after announcing the impact of the July 25 and 26 strikes, Ryanair recognised the FIT CISL union in Italy. It has also recently recognised Verdi in Germany and Unite in the UK.

Ryanair hailed its new allies and sought to use these to pressure striking workers. "Ryanair hopes that the cabin crew unions in Spain, Portugal and Belgium [where agreements have not yet been concluded] will

soon follow this example by engaging in negotiations with Ryanair rather than disrupting Ryanair customers by going on unnecessary strikes."

The company's leading personnel officer, Eddie Wilson, also hailed the union recognition agreements as "a further sign of the progress Ryanair is making with trade unions since our December 2017 decision to recognise unions, with over 66% of our cabin crew now covered by recognition agreements."

Since its foundation, Ryanair has championed a particularly brash and sneering tone towards its millions of passengers and its workforce staff. The company's business model relies on low pay and using large numbers of a single aircraft, the Boeing 737, to keep maintenance costs lower than its rivals. As a result, the company is now the largest airline in Europe and one of the largest in the world. It flies to 33 countries and has over 80 bases.

On a daily basis, the efforts of its European-wide workforce provide an example of coordination and advanced organisation that could be of an enormous benefit to society.

Instead, under capitalism and the division of workers along national lines, the benefits accrue only to the CEOs and their financiers. Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary recently purchased a €10 million Baroque palace in Majorca in Palma's Old Town. O'Leary's net worth is estimated at around €850 million. Last year, the company reported that its 37.6 million passengers pushed revenue up to €2.1 billion, although fuel and labour costs forced a 20 percent slump in pre-tax profits over the first three months of this year to €319 million.



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