

Ryanair's mass sacking threat raises need for globally coordinated struggle of airline workers

Steve James
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Pilots at budget airline Ryanair, members of the Irish Airline Pilots Association (IALPA), are holding a fourth one-day strike Friday in pursuit of better pay and conditions. Earlier this week, Ryanair pilots in Germany, members of the Vereinigung Cockpit union, voted by 96 percent to strike in support of improved working conditions.

The Irish strikes and German vote came days after the largest action in the company's 34-year history, which saw one-day strikes by cabin crew in Spain, Belgium and Portugal.

The stoppages not only show that the objective conditions exist for a unified international struggle by airline workers, baggage handlers, air traffic controllers and broader sections of the working class in defence of living standards and working conditions, but also that there is widespread support for such an offensive.

Other recent Ryanair disputes include a four-hour pilot's strike in Germany late last year and three earlier cabin crew strike days in Portugal.

These actions are in addition to threatened strikes by Menzies Aviation baggage handlers at Luton, Manchester and Aberdeen airports in Britain and Amsterdam's Schipol airport—although all but the Manchester strikes were cancelled.

Between February and April, flight and ground crew at Air France voted and struck for 15 days against pay offers recommended by the trade unions.

Air traffic controllers in France also struck last month. According to Eurocontrol, the European Union's air traffic control agency, the total volume of flight time delayed during 2018 due to air traffic control strikes will be 53 percent higher than in 2017. Budget airline Easyjet complained that 2,600 flights were cancelled this quarter, compared with 314 last year.

Ryanair is intent on defending its business model, based on low pay and long working hours. Last week, it issued a 90-day "protective notice," threatening the sacking of more

than 100 pilots and 200 cabin crew based at Dublin Airport. Chief Operating Officer Peter Bellew complained of a downturn in bookings "partly as a result of recent rolling strikes by Irish pilots." He made clear that the company intended to victimise workers as a warning to others.

What is most striking is that this threat was made in the aftermath of last year's decision by the company to reverse its traditional stance of opposing union recognition.

With the shortage of pilots, the company has been unable to retain staff. Last year, Ryanair was forced to cancel up to 20,000 flights. Its workforce took the opportunity to seek improvements in their conditions, while pushing for union recognition agreements across the company's 87 bases.

At the time, Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary railed against "laughable demands for legacy-type inefficiencies. ... We are fully prepared to face down any such disruption if it means defending our cost base or our high-productivity model."

By "legacy" inefficiencies, O'Leary means the wages and working conditions of pilots in Ryanair's more longstanding competitors, which, while under assault, remain significantly better than those at Ryanair.

It was at the height of this crisis that Ryanair decided to sign a recognition agreement with BALPA, the British pilots' union, which includes 10,000 pilots and is recognised by 23 different companies. One quarter of Ryanair's pilots and aircraft are based in the UK.

Other union recognition agreements have also been signed.

That this shift has been followed by threats to sack striking workers confirms that the unions have been brought into the company by management to act as an industrial police force over their newly recruited members.

Ryanair did not retreat from its anti-worker offensive, only belatedly recognising the role played by the unions everywhere on behalf of corporations and management.

The immediate response from the Irish Forsa trade union, of which IALPA is part, to Ryanair's sacking threat showed that the company's confidence in the trade unions is well

placed. Its press statement politely complained that Ryanair was showing “unwillingness and/or inability to implement the airline’s declared intention to agree working conditions” through negotiation with the trade unions.

Forsa sought to present the sackings as seasonal. “It is normal practice,” the press statement continued, “for airlines to reduce activity in the winter months. In light of this—and of Ryanair’s recent difficulty in recruiting and retaining enough pilots to fulfill its schedules—it remains unclear if today’s provocative move heralds a significant change in normal practice.”

Finally, it called for “third-party facilitation” to resolve the dispute.

Any genuine workers’ organisation would immediately have demanded Ryanair retract its threats and seek the most combative and united struggle by all the company’s workers worldwide. But such a struggle is anathema for the trade unions.

This is illustrated by the experience of workers at the transnational retail and delivery company, Amazon. A July 23 article, “The global strike surfaces,” in the Catalan paper *La Vanguardia*, commented that the Ryanair action pointed to the emergence of internationally coordinated workers’ struggles.

Citing Ryanair’s earlier threat to sack striking cabin crew in Portugal and replace them with workers in other countries, it noted that employees at the budget airline, along with those at Amazon, Deliveroo and other companies, “have understood that global strategies can only be answered with global responses.”

The article noted a recent meeting in Rome held by members of the Uni Global Union regarding Amazon. Officials, ostensibly representing 20 million workers, “discussed the possibility of a global strike in Amazon’s centres in Europe,” the newspaper wrote, but “in the end they opted to leave it for later. ...”

The unions didn’t decide to leave a “global strike” by Amazon workers until a later date. They have been working to prevent such a development for months by isolating and sabotaging strikes in one country after another, under conditions in which they are fully aware of the potential to bring Amazon’s European and even its entire global chain to a grinding halt.

While workers were striking at Amazon’s Spanish plant in San Fernando de Henares, the unions ensured that operations continued as normal at its distribution centre in Alcobendas, just half an hour’s drive northwest, and at Getafe, half an hour to the southwest, where, in the four weeks before the strike, the company took on up to 350 new temporary hires.

Last year, Spanish unions colluded with Amazon in scabbing on a protest at one of the company’s facilities in

northern Italy during Black Friday sales by allowing an increase in the workload at the company’s plant in Barcelona.

The role of the unions at Amazon is not to expand strikes, but to isolate them and confine any action to a 24-hour stoppage, with non-unionised agency workers separated from those striking.

The necessity for globally coordinated industrial action against globally organised corporations is becoming clear to large numbers of workers. Production that is integrated across national borders brings the international working class together in a way never before possible. Not only do workers often share the same employers, appalling conditions and grievances, but they have the ability to communicate their opposition and organise collectively, thanks to modern technology and the use of social media.

These global processes have enormously strengthened the position of the working class against capital. A struggle by workers anywhere on the planet can very quickly become a rallying point for workers everywhere.

However, the central issue faced by workers at Ryanair, Amazon or any major corporation is that they must develop their fight back in a political and organisational rebellion against the trade unions, whose sole role is to smother the class struggle. To do so they must establish independent rank-and-file committees that can link workers with their brothers and sisters in a worldwide fight against exploitation based on an anti-capitalist and socialist programme.



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