

Ryanair faces largest pilots' strike in its history

Marianne Arens
9 August 2018

On Friday, simultaneous strikes against Ryanair will take place in several European countries. While workers' anger about the conditions of exploitation and the arrogance of the airline has grown, the unions are doing everything to isolate the strike.

So far, pilots' organisations in Belgium, Ireland, Sweden and Germany have announced strikes. In the Netherlands, Ryanair is trying today to have a strike by 50 pilots outlawed through a court decision. In Germany, pilots are taking part in a European-wide strike for the first time.

The strike is an expression of workers' tremendous anger about the extremely poor working conditions at the low-cost airline. Across the continent, Ryanair has created new benchmarks for exploitation in the airline industry. Precisely for this reason, workers are seeking ever stronger common international forms of resistance.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reports a German worker at Ryanair who was hired a few years ago as a "contract pilot," on the basis of a fake self-employment contract, who had to hand over an "appraisal fee" of 300 euros when he attended a job interview. "As an employee, you get the impression you are being ripped off by this company from start to finish," he said. "You have to look after everything and defend yourself. Otherwise you will be constantly bamboozled."

A German flight attendant told *Der Spiegel* that right after she was hired, she was asked to pay 3,000 euros for a six-week training course. Ryanair also hires flight attendants without preconditions and language skills, and only requires basic English skills. They then undergo an extremely tough and rapid internal training, which until recently they had had to pay for themselves. Only a few weeks ago, Ryanair changed this system.

Almost all flight attendants are hired via a temporary employment agency. Generally, flight attendants start with a work agency like Crewlink or Workforce, not with Ryanair itself. They receive a contract of employment under Irish law, even if they work and live in Germany.

This was also the case with the flight attendant who spoke to *Der Spiegel*, whose net income consequently lies between 700 to 1,300 euros a month. "It takes years to settle one's debts on this money, if you don't get any support from your family. And over the last five years, my pay has not risen." She could do nothing to alter the fact that for the last five years she has been employed on short-term contracts and receives no fixed income.

Flight attendants are only paid for the hours they are actually flying, but not for any other duties outside, such as cleaning the aircraft. "All preparations made on the ground, as well as the approach are not paid." She is not paid if flights are cancelled or delayed, nor is any overtime recompensed, and there is no sick pay. She also reported that Ryanair keeps statistics about absences and put workers under pressure if they are off sick too much.

Anger with these conditions of extreme exploitation continues to grow. The largest strike at Ryanair has already shown the potential for a common cross-border struggle by European workers. But the unions are doing everything to prevent a successful and effective strike against Ryanair. This is particularly evident in the case of the German pilots' union Vereinigung Cockpit (VC).

Until the last minute, VC has made every effort to prevent a strike. Only when Ryanair excluded even any symbolic concessions, and employees' anger continued to grow, did the union call for salaried pilots to strike

for 24 hours on Friday. Both cabin crew as well as those pilots who are hired through a staffing company are excluded from the strike.

At a press conference on Wednesday, VC expressly excluded any international expansion of the strike. Reporters from the WSWS asked if Cockpit supported Ryanair employees enjoying the same conditions in all countries. “Or is it ultimately playing the same game as Ryanair boss O’Leary, playing off one location against another? In other words, what is Cockpit doing to break through Ryanair’s divide and rule strategy?”

In his reply, the VC contract expert Ingolf Schumacher made clear that the union rejects an international perspective and accepts the blackmail of Ryanair management, “Unfortunately, we are, in Europe, in a situation where the employer here uses all the rights that the EU offers, for example, the freedom of establishment, etc.,” explained Schumacher. “But when it comes to the union in such transnational businesses acting defensively to effect something through strikes, then at least in German law covering industrial action we reach our limit. That’s why we cannot do this.”

In fact, Schumacher was putting forward not the legal restrictions in Germany, but the nationalist perspective of the trade unions and their bankruptcy. As a national organisation, they do not oppose the downward spiral of wages and working conditions but help to accelerate it.

Cockpit hopes to be recognized as a national negotiating partner, which organizes the competition between locations and controls the workers. The union wants to concretise the terrible conditions of exploitation at Ryanair into the form of a contract. To do this, the union functionaries are determined to suppress the enormous combativity and growing strength of the workers.

It is for this reason that the union has not posed any concrete demands concerning wages or anything else. It is merely calling for Ryanair to introduce a remuneration and framework agreement for its salaried pilots in Germany. This excludes up to a third of the pilots from the outset. Whether the rest would see any improvements over time remains a completely open question.

“We had introduced certain pay scales as a basis for discussion,” Schumacher said at the press conference.

But Ryanair had dismissed these as fantastical sums, and so the union moved away from naming any concrete figures, and instead said, “If it’s like this, then we come back to our original demand: Can we at least talk about structures?”

At the signal from Ryanair, the union has abandoned any concrete salary demands and only insisted that a collective agreement be concluded with it as a union. But the union does not want to orient such a contract towards the standards prevailing at the large airline operators, but those at other low-cost airlines, which follow similarly exploitative conditions as Ryanair. At the press conference, Schumacher mentioned Tuifly as providing a guiding framework. Two years ago, the Tuifly workforce organised a mass sick-out against the terrible working conditions.

And although they have set no demands, and Ryanair has already agreed the conditions of exploitation of Tuifly, Cockpit representatives say they are “ready to compromise.”

“In the interests of Ryanair passengers, we really don’t want to strike,” VC president Martin Locher said. “But with the work stoppages, we want to consciously send the company a sign that it is our concern, now finally, finally to enter into constructive collective bargaining.”

The VC press conference has clearly underscored that workers at Ryanair cannot take a single step forward without breaking with the nationalist trade unions. As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated:

“Ryanair pilots, cabin crew and ground staff must break free of the grip of the trade unions and take the struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be formed, wholly independent of the trade unions. They must link up the fight of all Ryanair workers across all national divisions, while making an appeal for support from airline, transport and delivery workers across the globe.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact