

Ryanair pilots stage European-wide strike

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Pilots at the Dublin, Ireland-based low-cost airline Ryanair went on strike Friday in Ireland, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany to demand improvements in working conditions, forcing the company to scrap 400 of its scheduled 2,400 European flights.

The company, whose business model revolves around paying the lowest wages and offering the most exploitative working conditions in the European airline industry, has for years set the benchmark for slashing wages and benefits throughout the entire airline industry.

Some 250 flights in and out of Germany were cancelled, with pilots at nine of 10 airports where Ryanair operates involved. 104 flights to and from Belgium were cancelled along with another 42 in Sweden and the airline's home base, Ireland.

The strike met with wide support among airline workers. At Germany's Frankfurt Airport, where supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed the statement "The Ryanair strike and the resurgence of international class struggle," many airport workers expressed their solidarity with the strike.

"Of course I support this strike," said Jutta, who works for a supplier company at Fraport AG at the Rhein-Main airport. "It's been long overdue! The staff should be treated humanely," she said. "It can't always be just about profits. Who thinks about the people behind it all and who do all the work? The bosses just want to keep making more money, but that's at the expense of the pilots, the stewardesses and all the personnel."

Jutta said the pressure on the airline workforce is increasing and added, "It's not just Ryanair. They are pushing the standards down for everyone, you can see that. The 'greed is good' mentality can be seen everywhere."

Mustafa, a cargo handler at the airport, said he had

"great sympathy for this strike." It was "a clear sign that they won't just accept everything. It can't go on like this forever." He said that at Frankfurt Airport, "more and more work must be done by fewer and fewer people." Mustafa concluded that "the right to strike is there so that people who do all the work can also push for their demands."

In contrast to widespread support for their action among workers, the trade unions did everything to sabotage the strike and prevent it having any serious effect on the company. Ryanair reports that despite the industrial action, 85 percent of flights ran as scheduled.

Ryanair claimed that no flights were cancelled to and from the Netherlands, even though pilots were striking there. In the three countries where Ryanair employs the most pilots—the UK (880), Italy (829) and Spain (859)—the trade unions called no action in support of their striking co-workers. Likewise, unions representing Ryanair cabin crew did not lift a finger in solidarity with the pilots.

In the UK and Italy, Ryanair has concluded union recognition deals with the British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA) and ANPAC, the Italian pilots' union, respectively in the last eight months.

Last December, Ryanair agreed to recognise unions, as it outlined plans to expand its operations and increase profitability, with the company stating that it did not expect union agreements to add costs to its operations. Eddie Wilson, Ryanair's "chief people officer" said that Ryanair would continue its exploitative labour practices in "partnership" with the unions, insisting, "It's not the end of the model. The model here will stay the same."

Upon signing the first Ryanair deal in January, BALPA general secretary Brian Strutton said the union looked forward to a cosy relationship with a company. "Given Ryanair's previous hostility towards unions, today's agreement is historic. While we were initially

sceptical about Ryanair's sincerity in offering recognition to us and other unions, our conversations and meetings with them have shown that they are genuine in wanting a constructive trade union relationship," he said.

In the countries where strikes took place, the pilot unions sought up to the last moment to get strikes off the agenda.

On Thursday, the Association of Dutch Pilots (VNV), representing 50 Ryanair pilots, announced it would join Friday's strike after failing to reach an agreement with the airline. Ryanair attempted to prevent any strikes by taking last-minute legal action. The VNV said it was surprised by Ryanair's move because by that stage it had not actually called a strike.

In Germany, the greatest fear of the trade union leaders is that the strike will escalate out of their control and become a pole of attraction for Ryanair flight attendants and ground crew, as well as throughout the whole flight industry.

The Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) union refused to mount any pickets or to organise protests at any of Ryanair's 10 bases of operation in Germany. Instead, the union called on its members to attend a "meeting" in the basement of its Frankfurt headquarters, miles away from the airport and from the colleagues of the Ryanair pilots at other airlines.

The underground meeting was nothing more than a staged photo opportunity, where the union functionaries did their best to keep their own membership in check. Representatives from the *World Socialist Web Site* were forbidden from distributing leaflets to the union members present. The union representatives repeatedly told the workers they should not talk to the press under any circumstances. Only the union's press spokesman could do this, they said.

For the union, the meeting merely served as a means to reemphasize its "partnership" with Ryanair. Martin Locher, the president of the Vereinigung Cockpit union, quoted Ryanair marketing chief Kenny Jacobs, who has talked about "this unnecessary strike," and said he agreed "one hundred percent with this." It would "have made much more sense," Locher said, "to sit down and have constructive negotiations."

The efforts of the trade unions to prevent the development of a European-wide strike could also be seen in Ireland, where Ryanair has its home base.

Forsa, representing some of Ryanair's Ireland-based pilots, said it was Ryanair's "lack of experience" in industrial relations, i.e., that it did not yet sufficiently trust the union bureaucracy to police the workforce, that had led to its members' fifth one-day strike. The Irish Air Line Pilots' Association (IALPA), which is part of FORSA, only represents around a quarter of Ryanair's Irish-based pilots—with the company able to run the majority of its operations in Ireland by utilising pilots employed via third-party agencies.

Next week, IALPA is scheduled to meet with Ryanair under the auspices of mediator Kieran Mulvey. Ahead of the talks, IALPA announced it had no plans for further strikes.

Workers at Ryanair must not allow the trade unions to sabotage their struggle. They must form independent workplace committees that will continue to expand the strike. They must reach out to workers at all other locations and airlines to fight for the international unity of the working class against the nationalist parochialism of the trade unions.



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