

Over 1,000 Ryanair cabin crew and pilots strike in Germany

Our reporters**13 September 2018**

Over 1,000 Ryanair cabin crew and pilots went on strike in Germany yesterday, demanding better pay and working conditions. The strike follows similar walkouts against Ryanair throughout Europe, as part of a global upsurge in the class struggle.

The strikes forced Ryanair, Europe's largest airline, to cancel half of its flights into and out of Germany. The hardest-hit airports were Berlin Schönefeld, Frankfurt, Hahn, and Düsseldorf. More than 50 percent of flights at Schönefeld alone were cancelled. The airline operates out of 19 airports in Germany.

The strike began at 3 a.m. and lasted for 24 hours. It was the first strike by cabin crew at the airline in Germany. Despite the threat of reprisals from company management, the mood among strikers was militant.

According to the Verdi trade union, the wages for cabin crew in Germany range between €800 and €1,200 per month before tax. When compensation for flying hours and other benefits are included, total pay rises to €1,800. Since the company operates under Irish labour law, workers receive no sick pay and lack other basic job protections.

At Frankfurt airport, around 70 cabin crew demonstrated for these demands. To prevent reprisals from Ryanair, the strikers all wore masks bearing the face of Ryanair owner Michael O'Leary. Placards demanded, "Ryanair stop squeezing out your crew." Lemons were distributed to underscore the point.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to a group of strikers at Berlin Schönefeld, who hailed from Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovakia, Croatia and the Netherlands. The workers said that what they called intolerable working conditions drove them to strike.

"We work in two shifts, early and late shift. The early shift begins at 5:20 a.m. The late shift begins at 11 a.m. and can last until midnight," the workers explained.

The workers said, however, they are only paid for part of this 12-hour period, i.e. for flying time. "Flying time begins when the plane leaves the gate. That means all of the preparation for the flight and clearing up afterwards is unpaid." Under this scenario, they say that of the 12 hours, only six or eight are compensated.

The majority of them are employed by Ryanair's labour contractors Crewlink and Workforce, which employ most of the 1,000 Ryanair cabin crew in Germany.

Asked what changes they would like to see in working conditions apart from pay, the workers answered spontaneously, "Ryanair doesn't understand sick pay. If we're sick, we receive no pay. The number of annual paid holidays is also very low, between 15 and 20 days, and one of these can be withdrawn over Christmas."

The strikers said Ryanair is putting them under tremendous pressure. If further strikes take place, the company said, all of its German locations could be closed. The winter could see "cuts to aircraft and jobs in the German market," declared the company on Tuesday. There would be no chance of concessions on wages, O'Leary emphasised.

However, the workers not only face a struggle against the company for their demands, but also against the trade unions. These organisations do not represent the workers' interests, but are all trying to cut a deal on a national basis with Ryanair, which recognises them as bargaining partners. They have no desire to eliminate what they call terrible working conditions, but want them set in stone under a contract negotiated through collective bargaining.

The Cockpit union, which called the strike on Wednesday together with Verdi, made this clear by offering to enter arbitration with Ryanair, which

rejected the proposal. As a potential arbitrator, the union named former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who as the author of the Agenda 2010 austerity measures bears responsibility for devastating social spending cuts and the explosion of the low-wage sector.

In Italy, the Anpac union signed a contract with Ryanair on 28 August covering the 300 pilots represented by the union. More than 500 pilots are employed by Ryanair in Italy. This “first collective agreement in Europe signed by Ryanair airline workers,” according to Anpac, also apparently applies to cabin crew.

The contract in no way corresponds to the demands and needs of airline workers. In many ways, it is worse than the status quo, since it bans strikes and does not permit free trade union elections. The parties must commit not to participate in any job action.

The contract includes Ryanair’s participation in a healthcare insurance scheme and sick pay of €76 per day. It also allows maternity or paternity leave of a maximum of 10 months per couple. However, this applies only to permanent employees. At the same time, nothing in the contract prohibits employment through contractors, meaning that Ryanair can overcome the financial costs simply by employing more pilots and flight attendants through its labour contractors.

In addition, pilots and flight attendants say they will still have to pay for their own uniforms and receive no free food and drink on board. Concrete figures with regard to the concessions made by Ryanair on wages and social benefits have not been made public, but many workers report they will be inadequate. Two other Italian unions (Filt Cgil and Uiltrasporti), which are in competition with each other, described the contract as totally unacceptable and plan to continue the strikes.

The unions in Germany are planning a similar deal at the expense of the workers. This is why they are cracking down ruthlessly on anyone asking questions. During the last strike, Cockpit barred WSWS reporters from giving leaflets to workers and pressured the workers not to give any interviews. On Wednesday, Verdi lead negotiator Mira Neumaier sought to prevent a WSWS reporter from speaking to workers at Schönefeld airport.

The unions’ actions confirm the assessment made by the WSWS, which called on Ryanair employees in August to organise independently of the unions in rank-and-file committees across national borders. We wrote,

“The only way to combat this global offensive by the employers is through a global counter-offensive by the workers! Ryanair pilots, cabin crew, and ground staff must free themselves from the grip of the unions and take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. They must organise rank-and-file committees independently of the unions to unite the struggle of all Ryanair workers across national borders and at the same time call for support from airline, transportation, and delivery workers around the world.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact