

Joint strike by Ryanair pilots and cabin crew hits six European countries

Our correspondents
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Cabin crews and pilots from six European countries took part in the largest strike so far against Ryanair's low-wage regime. Work was suspended yesterday for 24 hours in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Germany.

More than 240 flights were cancelled across Europe, far more than Ryanair management had expected. One hundred and forty Ryanair flights, or 40 percent of flights, to and from Germany were cancelled. At Berlin's Schönefeld Airport, 52 out of 90 take-offs and landings were cancelled. Fifteen were cancelled in Hamburg, 19 in Cologne/Bonn and 21 in Frankfurt. Ryanair flights that were able to get off the ground were usually delayed for hours.

"Low Fares, No Cares," "No Rights—No Flights!" and similar slogans were chanted by several hundred mostly young flight attendants who demonstrated in Berlin and Frankfurt.

While striking Ryanair workers were determined to fight, the Verdi union limited the walkout by crews stationed in Germany to Thursday evening only, fearing that a longer strike might break free from the union's control.

In Frankfurt, Verdi officials tried to prevent Ryanair strikers from speaking to journalists from the *World Socialist Web Site*, insisting that no interviews from rank-and-file workers would be permitted, even without attribution. However, the young flight attendants were eager to describe the inhumane conditions they face and to appeal to airline passengers and other workers to support their fight.

At the Frankfurt Airport flight attendants and pilots from Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, France and Germany gathered at Terminal 2. "We simply have to work too much for too little money," a flight attendant from Italy told the WWS. "We are often on standby at the airport for hours without being paid for it. Payment begins only

when the plane takes off. That's totally unfair."

A flight attendant from Greece confirmed the poor working conditions, excessive pressure and lack of health insurance. Then she said that she found the uncertainty facing temporary employees especially bad. A large part of the staff is employed via sub-contractors, not Ryanair. "Most of them do not dare strike with us. They are afraid of losing their jobs."

In Berlin, a flight attendant named Laura, who said she had participated in the negotiations, took to the microphone and described the plight of cabin crew members. "We are people with rights who work for this company and for all passengers every day across Europe. We come from different countries, speak different languages, have different cultural backgrounds and work together as a team every day."

To great applause, she described how it was impossible for the crews to focus on sales targets for the goods they are supposed to sell passengers inflight. The cabin crew are trained to look after the passengers and keep them secure in an emergency, "But our company does not accept that," Laura said.

Ryanair chief executive Michael O'Leary has repeatedly threatened to divert aircraft away from locations where workers are on strike. The management of the low-cost airline, which flies to more than 215 airports in 37 countries and operates from 86 bases in Europe and North Africa, threatened the strikers with wage cuts, reprimands, transfers to other locations or even termination.

Despite the threats the simultaneous walkout in six countries, which paralyzed Ryanair on Friday, demonstrated the enormous potential of overcoming the national divisions imposed on the working class and waging the class struggle as an internationally coordinated battle.

However, the nationally based unions are unwilling and

incapable of leading such a struggle. On the contrary, they insist that each national union conduct their own negotiations with management, separate from all others. Even inside the same country the unions divide workers along craft lines and between different union affiliates. In Germany, for example, the Independent Flight Attendants Organisation (UFO) refused to participate in the strike on Friday because they were still conducting negotiations with Ryanair management on Thursday afternoon.

At the same time, the unions politically subordinate the working class to the same capitalist political parties that have long attacked the working class. On Friday, the Cockpit and Verdi unions offered the stage to several prominent politicians from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party to posture as friends of the striking workers. In addition to Verdi leader Frank Bsirske, Hubertus Heil (SPD), federal minister of labor and social affairs, Michael Kellner, CEO of the Greens, as well as the state chair of the Left Party, Katina Schubert, spoke in Berlin. In Frankfurt, candidates Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel (SPD) and Janine Wissler (Left Party) used the opportunity to hustle votes for the Hesse state election in four weeks.

These politicians are all responsible for the right-wing course of the German government, either as a minister or as the “loyal” opposition in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and in the state parliaments. Their parties have implemented massive anti-labour measures, ranging from the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV welfare and labour “reforms,” through the Collective Bargaining Act, to the extension of agency work, to name just a few examples. When Air Berlin went bankrupt, they pushed through a sell-off of the airline with the connivance of the trade unions, which included a savage attack on the jobs, wages and conditions of airline workers.

These politicians have a special interest in the strike against Ryanair. They implicitly take the side of Lufthansa, the largest German airline, which regards Ryanair as a dangerous competitor. Representatives of Verdi, UFO and Cockpit sit on the Supervisory Board of Lufthansa, Verdi boss Frank Bsirske was deputy chairman of the Supervisory Board for many years, and Verdi board member Christine Behle holds his seat today.

The German political establishment also fears the Ryanair’s increasing encroachment in the German aviation market. O’Leary, who once reportedly said that Germans were “ready to crawl naked over broken glass” to snatch up Ryanair’s low-cost fares, is seen as an inherent threat to the corporatist relations between the

unions and the German-based corporations. This includes *Mitbestimmung* or “co-determination,” which has long been used by the corporations, the government and the unions to suppress the class struggle and implement the strategic interests of the German multinationals.

Literally until the last minute, Verdi and Cockpit officials tried to get approval from O’Leary for a separate deal or to submit to a third-party conciliation (mediation) in order to prevent a strike. On its web page, Cockpit complained that O’Leary had regrettably “not made a better offer since the last stoppage on September 12. In addition, no agreement for conciliation had been reached between Ryanair and Cockpit so far.”

The nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the trade unions, along with the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, have led workers to a dead-end. After many bitter experiences it has become increasingly impossible for these nationalist and pro-capitalist parties to sell themselves as “left-wing.”

A conversation in Frankfurt with Greek flight attendants was characteristic. When the conversation on Friday turned to Syriza, the Left Party’s allies in Greece, a flight attendant said firmly, “I don’t think much of Syriza. Ever since they joined the government, they haven’t lifted a finger for the workers. In Greece today, many more people are unemployed than before.”

The immense potential expressed in Friday’s strike can only be realised if Ryanair workers begin to organise themselves independently of the nationalist unions. Pilots, cabin crew and ground crew should elect rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. These committees should link up across national borders and reach out to all airline workers at Lufthansa and other global airline corporations to prepare a common fight against the attack on the jobs, living standards and working conditions of all workers.



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