

Strike by 1,400 pilots grounds hundreds of flights at Scandinavian Airlines

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Thousands of flights from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway to destinations across Europe and the world have been grounded since Thursday as over 1,400 pilots at Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) have taken strike action. The pilots are demanding wage increases after a decade of pay cuts and freezes, and greater protections against variable scheduling.

The strike was called by trade unions in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark early on Friday morning. The unions, organized in the cross-border SAS Pilot Group, have done everything in their power to avoid taking strike action, and are continuing to fruitlessly beg management for a return to negotiations. With three representatives on SAS' board of directors, the unions are thoroughly complicit in the attacks that have been enforced against pilots, cabin crew, and other SAS employees over the past decade, including the imposition of savage wage and benefit cuts in 2012 when the airline stood on the verge of bankruptcy.

The job action includes 545 pilots from Norway, 492 in Sweden, and 372 in Denmark. They are demanding a 13 percent pay rise over three years after four successive years in which the company has raked in hundreds of millions of euros in profits, achieved through hundreds of job cuts, pay cuts, and the outsourcing of work, including among pilots, to sub-contractors. While pilots, cabin crew, and ground staff have suffered wage cuts since 2012, SAS chief executive Rickard Gustafson's total compensation has shot up by 38 percent over the past three years.

The pilots are also calling for a more predictable schedule. Currently, they can be forced to work up to seven weekends in a row, and they never know in advance if this will be the case. Outsourcing is a further concern, with the pilots represented by the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish unions only accounting for 70

percent of SAS flights. Over the past six years, the company has outsourced growing portions of its operations to other European countries, such as Ireland and Spain, where labour protections are much laxer. Pilots based in these locations are not involved in the strike.

SAS management has already cancelled over 1,200 flights today and tomorrow. This follows the grounding of 640 flights on Friday and 900 over the weekend. Since the breakdown of talks early on Friday morning, no further round of formal bargaining has been announced.

The attacks on SAS pilots and the airline's workforce as a whole are intimately bound up with the global restructuring of the airline industry, which has seen tens of thousands of layoffs, outsourcing, and wage cuts at all major carriers. SAS, established in 1946 as a joint venture between the three Scandinavian neighbours, is now engaged in a race to the bottom with budget airlines like Ryanair and Norwegian Airlines in Europe's highly competitive airline industry. The goal is to drive down labour costs so as to boost profits and shareholder payouts.

The strike by SAS pilots is the latest indication that airline workers are opposed to this ruthless cost-cutting strategy and want to fight back. Strikes by pilots and cabin crew at Ryanair, Europe's largest budget airline, occurred in several countries last year, including Germany, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Ground crew at German airports and in other countries, subjected to similar vicious cost-cutting demands, have also waged courageous strikes over recent years in the face of management threats and the sabotage of their strikes by the union bureaucracies in every country.

Moreover, the SAS pilots' strike is part of a global upsurge of the working class, which is being driven by

the deepening capitalist crisis and the imposition of austerity by ruling elites in every country. Since the beginning of 2019, mass strikes were launched by tens of thousands of manufacturing workers in Matamoros, Mexico, teachers in Poland, and public sector workers in Germany. Mass movements, such as the Yellow Vests in France and the widespread protests against Algeria's authoritarian regime, have also erupted.

It is to these struggles that SAS pilots and the airline's entire workforce must turn if they are to secure decent-paying, secure jobs, not the nationalist, pro-corporate unions. Even now the determined struggle by the pilots demonstrates the tremendous power a common working class struggle could have, grounding hundreds of flights every day, costing the company around €10 million on a daily basis.

Despite this the unions are offering no strategy for pilots to achieve their entirely justified demands. Instead, they are holding out a begging bowl to management to get back to the negotiating table, where a rotten concessions contract will inevitably be concluded, unless, that is, pilots take control of the strike into their own hands.

SAS provides a textbook example of how the unions, in connivance with national governments and corporate management, have gutted workers' rights to serve the interests of the financial elite.

At the turn of the century, SAS was still majority-owned by Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. But over the past two decades, during a period in which right-wing and even far-right parties have come to dominate politics in all three countries, and in which the social democrats and unions have abandoned any tenuous association with left-wing politics, this has fundamentally changed. Norway, governed by a coalition of the right-wing Conservative Party and far-right Progress Party, sold its 9.8 percent stake in the company in 2017. The Swedish Social Democratic government of Stefan Löfven, which remains in office solely thanks to a deal with two right-wing parties, has also vowed to sell its stake in the company.

The unions have only been too happy to oblige in the attacks on SAS workers. Through their three representatives on the company's board, the unions received information months in advance of the public announcement of the company's near bankruptcy in November 2012 that management was planning to

exploit the crisis to slash jobs and attack labour protections. Hostile to organising any genuine opposition among the workforce to this onslaught, the unions accepted a large "bailout" from the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish governments, which included over 800 job cuts, pay freezes for pilots and other staff, and the development of plans to outsource the company's operations to undermine labour protections.

SAS pilots and other workers at the airline can only launch a fight to overturn these concessions if they take control of the strike into their own hands. Pilots should form independent strike committees to break free from the stranglehold of the nationalist, pro-capitalist unions. They should appeal to other sections of workers at SAS, and pilots, cabin crew, and ground staff throughout the airline industry internationally, to join their struggle. Above all, they must recognise that their demands for decent-paying, secure jobs can only be achieved as part of a political struggle on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to oppose the austerity dictated by the capitalist corporate elite.



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