

Strike by Taiwanese flight attendants points to growing workers' discontent in global airline industry

Ben McGrath
26 June 2019

Flight attendants from Taiwan's EVA Air are on strike demanding higher wages as well as a reduction in long working hours. The action is just one of numerous walkouts and protests being held by airline and airport workers around the world in response to attacks on wages and working conditions in one of the most globally interconnected industries in the world.

EVA Air cabin crews are demanding an increase in the hourly inflight wage on international routes from the current rate of \$NT90 (\$US2.90) to \$NT150 (\$US4.82). They are also demanding an end to shifts that require them to cover both legs of roundtrip flights on nine regional routes, which lead to work days in excess of 12 hours. EVA Air is Taiwan's second largest carrier after China Airlines.

The strike has forced the airline to cancel hundreds of flights, just as the peak summer vacation season gets under way. An airline spokesperson said the company would have to scrap 852 flights by Friday. Flights between Taipei and Hong Kong—one of the world's busiest international air routes—as well as from Taiwan to Japan, Singapore, London and New York will be affected, Bloomberg reported. EVA Air has a total cabin crew workforce of 4,305.

The strike began last Thursday when 3,000 workers in the Taoyuan Flight Attendants Union (TFAU) walked off the job. The flight attendants approved strike action in a vote that took place from May 13 to June 6 with more than 80 percent voting in favor. One thousand TFAU members from China Airlines also took part in the vote, supporting a strike at EVA.

"After repeatedly negotiating with the company over the disputes with no result, the union realizes that discussions will not lead to a resolution, and we hereby announce that all union members will go on strike," said

Chou Sheng-kai, the union's deputy secretary general. He made sure to add, "But we are still open to resuming talks if EVA has any proposals to change the situation."

The TFAU is already moving to shut down the strike without any demands being met. Talks are likely to resume Wednesday with the union already stating that it will not insist on a raise on the inflight allowance to \$NT150. It had already abandoned the flight attendants' original demand for shifts on 21 round-trip routes to be reduced to one leg. The TFAU has proposed moving up a vote to end the strike that had been scheduled for Saturday.

The dispute between the flight attendants and EVA Air has been ongoing since 2017. The union called the strike to allow workers to vent their frustration while leaving them isolated. In fact, when the strike began, Chou, the union's deputy secretary general, called on other flight attendants to scab on the strikers. "The airline still has 1,000 or so flight attendants for services and we have also asked the airline to use their reserve staff for domestic flights to reduce the impact on local passengers."

This attack on EVA Air cabin crews is part of an ongoing assault by airline companies around the world, which are slashing wages and increasing work hours and tasks to boost profits and returns to global investors. EVA Air recently reported that last year it had taken in a net profit of \$NT6.55 billion (\$US212.49 million), a 13.9 percent increase from the previous year, due to increased numbers of passengers on flights.

Flight attendants at EVA Air are not alone in their fight, but they will find no allies in the TFAU or other unions. Nor will appealing to the hearts of corporate executives yield results. Instead, flight attendants must turn to their class brothers and sisters internationally, all of whom are facing the same attacks from airlines in the name of

remaining “competitive.” This will only intensify as the world economy slides towards another recession, which is being accelerated by the trade war by the US against China and other competitors.

Airline workers and all workers confront a fight against the global capitalist system, which has enriched the corporate and financial oligarchy at the expense of the jobs and living conditions of workers in every country. In opposition to the nationalism of the unions, airline workers must fight for the unity of the international working class, particularly in an industry where companies employ workers from around the world.

Flight attendants from Hawaiian Airlines will picket today at Honolulu’s international airport. They have been working for two years without a contract while watching their wages fall within the industry as the cost of living and medical expenses rise. Some flight attendants at airlines like Frontier, based in Denver, Colorado, must go on food stamps just to get by. Both sections of workers are members of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which has sought to smother labor discontent.

Flight attendants at Germany’s Eurowings, a low-cost airline in the Lufthansa Group, are in the process of voting on whether or not to go on strike over low pay. If a strike is called it will likely occur in July.

The struggle is not limited to airline personnel. About 70 baggage handlers and wheelchair attendants at Denver International Airport went on strike in June 18 against unsafe working conditions, which includes handling dangerous materials or items without proper training. The workers are employed by Frontier and Southwestern Airlines through subcontractor Prospect Airport Services.

More than 11,000 Sky Chef workers who prepare food for American, United and Delta airlines in 28 cities across the US have also voted to strike. The catering workers, some of whom earn as little as \$US8.46 an hour, are asking for higher wages and less costly health insurance.

These include Sky Chef and Gate Gourmet workers at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in the state of Washington. Speaking of the conditions these workers face, a representative from Unite Here, said, “Neither the catering companies nor the airlines have shown a commitment to the significant economic increases that are necessary to end poverty and unattainable health care in the industry. Our members are facing poverty now, our members aren’t able to afford the rent now, and aren’t able to afford to send their kids to college now.”

The statements by Unite Here are entirely hypocritical. In 2013, the City of SeaTac passed a “living wage”

ordinance that was promoted by the Democrats, the unions and pseudo-left figures like Seattle city councilwoman Kshama Sawant as the first-in-the-nation \$15 minimum wage for all. But the ordinance included an exemption for employers with union contracts. This included Sky Chef, which pays workers less than the minimum wage with the sanction of Unite Here.

The current strikes and protests are part of a wave of airline workers’ struggles over the last 18 months. In February, pilots at China Airlines went on strike demanding that more pilots be added on long-haul flights to combat fatigue. In 2016, flight attendants at China Airlines, also covered by the TFAU, held the first strike in the history of a Taiwanese airline.

Last summer, pilots and cabin crew from Ireland-based Ryanair carried out coordinated strike action across Europe against low pay and poor working conditions. This included the largest strike in the airline’s history in September.

The attacks by companies on the right to decent pay and safe working conditions require an international response. The nationalist unions in all these countries have collaborated with the airlines to keep workers on the job without contracts, prevent strikes and impose concessions contracts on their membership.

Flight attendants, pilots, mechanics and hospitality workers must unite independently of the unions, form rank-and-file committees, and reach out to workers around the world faced with the same attacks on their livelihoods.

The strike in Taiwan takes place within the context of growing social anger in the Asia-Pacific towards inequality, which has fueled the massive protests in Hong Kong in recent weeks. The working class is the only force on the planet that can lead the struggle against inequality, economic catastrophe and war by fighting to replace capitalism with a scientifically planned world socialist economy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact