

More strikes called off by UK airline unions

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10 August 2019

UK-based Ryanair pilots have voted by an 80 percent majority on a 72 percent turnout to strike. They join pilots at British Airways (BA) and other airline workers in turning in overwhelming mandates for industrial action.

The Ryanair pilots are members of the British Airline Pilots Association (Balpa), which has called five days of strikes at the height of the holiday season—two days, on August 22 and 23, and three days, September 2–4. Ryanair pilots based in Ireland, where the airline is headquartered, are also being balloted over pay by the Irish Air Line Pilots Association (Ialpa) union.

Pilots in the UK and Ireland have many grievances, including over pensions, loss of licence insurance, maternity benefits, allowances and pay structure.

Ryanair is seeking to survive in an increasingly cutthroat industry by cutting its costs to the bone. Chief executive Michael O’Leary has said that 900 jobs were at risk (500 pilots and 400 cabin crew) and redundancies in the next weeks were “unavoidable.”

Airline staff in many countries fighting to defend their wages, jobs and conditions face sabotage from trade unions working with the companies to isolate and suppress strikes and prevent the emergence of a united offensive by workers.

The general secretary of Balpa, Brian Strutton, said as its Ryanair members voted to strike, “It is imperative that we resolve this dispute urgently to avoid strike action. No pilot wants to spoil the public’s travel plans but at the moment it seems we have no choice.”

Last month, British Airways (BA) pilots voted by a 93 percent majority to strike on a 90 percent turnout, rejecting a pay offer of just 11.5 percent over three years. Strutton said of the headline figure, “It’s not as good as 11.5 per cent—British Airways are actually taking other money away from us ... 93 percent of their pilots have said: ‘I want to go on strike.’ So it can’t be that good a deal, can it?”

Yet Balpa, which represents 90 percent of British Airways’ 4,300 pilots, has refused to announce a date when any stoppage will begin. Instead it moved to secure closer ties with the company in negotiations aimed at averting what would be the first strike by BA pilots in 40 years.

In June, a consultative ballot over BA’s pay offer saw it thrown out by Balpa members. The Unite and GMB unions representing BA staff other than pilots accepted the offer. Last month, British Airways’ parent company, International Airlines (IAG), lost a legal appeal to prevent the pilots from taking industrial action.

The union is obliged to give two weeks’ notice before any stoppage. With Balpa aware that strikes during the holiday season hit the airlines hardest economically, its refusal to call any action at BA effectively means that no strike can even take place until the end of August as the holiday season ends. Were it to announce a strike today, the first date industrial action could take place is August 25.

As Balpa resumed talks with BA at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service on Monday, Strutton insisted, “We currently do not have dates for any potential strike action [at BA] and will issue an update on this in due course.” Reassuring BA, a Balpa spokesman told the *Independent* Thursday, “Balpa has not decided to take strike action but will make an announcement if it does ... Until then there is no threat of disruption and idle speculation about possible dates only serves to worry the public unnecessarily.”

The struggle of pilots is being suppressed just as two days of planned strikes Monday and Tuesday by security guards, fire fighters, engineers and passenger service staff at London’s major Heathrow airport were called off at the last minute by Unite. The workforce was poised to walk out after 88 percent of members rejected a derisory pay offer of 7.3 percent over two-

and-a-half years.

Unite is re-balloting its 4,000 members on a new “improved” pay offer, which is not being publicly disclosed until the ballot ends.

Yet more scheduled airline strikes were called off late Friday by Unite. Security workers employed by ICTS, responsible for scanning passengers’ luggage at London’s Gatwick Airport, were planning to walk out over pay for two days from today. Most of the 130 Unite members are paid less than £9 an hour, less than the London living wage of £10.55 an hour.

A further strike from August 20 until August 24 was also pulled. Unite regional officer Jamie Major said negotiations with the company “were extremely productive and the new pay offer will be balloted on by members ... Following this pay offer it is hoped that there will be more harmonious industrial relations with ICTS moving forward.”

Pilots are under constant attack by the right-wing media for threatening travel “chaos.” The *Sun*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, castigated pilots for rejecting what they claimed was a £20,000 pay rise for workers on an average salary of £100,000. In fact, the starting salary for a newly qualified commercial pilot can be as low as £22,000. First officers on short-haul flights earn from £35,000 to £60,000, while only *some* captains and first officers on long-haul flights can earn over £100,000, though many earn far less.

What is never explained by the media hacks are the enormous responsibilities and pressures bound up with piloting aircraft, plus having to pay around £80,000 to attend flying school.

One of the BA pilots’ grievances, which has also incurred sneers from the gutter press, is that they now must stay in lower quality hotels on stopovers as part of the airline’s cost cutting. As one pilot told the *Times*, “The problem with lower-standard hotels is they tend to be noisier and that becomes an issue when getting enough sleep to do your job.”

It is profit accumulation, not primarily the safety of staff and passengers, that is the prime concern of the airlines operating in an increasingly competitive environment. This is underscored by the criminal negligence surrounding the introduction of Boeing’s 737 Max fleet of planes—now grounded worldwide because of major software problems that led to two

deadly crashes.

IAG has given Boeing’s 737 a vote of confidence, even before the technical problems have been solved. In June at the Paris air show, IAG declared it intended to purchase 200 of the troubled models for deployment at its subsidiaries, BA, Vueling and Level. The deal would be at a “substantial discount” and non-binding.

Further evidence of the consequences of this drive to cut overheads was seen Wednesday, when more than 500 BA flights out of the UK were either cancelled or delayed, affecting tens of thousands of passengers. This was due to a computer problem in BA systems relating to check-ins and may have been a result of outsourcing in order to cut costs.

Last year, Ryanair pilots took action to defend their pay and conditions in Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. In May this year, air traffic controllers closed airports in Belgium and France.

The offensive by airline workers at BA, Ryanair and other airlines poses the need for workers to organize themselves in their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. Such committees must organise action across national boundaries, based on a socialist, internationalist perspective that puts the interests of workers before the profits of the airline companies.



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