

Ryanair faces industrial unrest across Europe

Our reporter
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On Wednesday, Ryanair cabin crew in Portugal began a five-day strike. Meanwhile, the High Court in the UK refused to grant the airline an injunction to stop a two-day stoppage by pilots beginning today.

Ryanair secured an injunction against its pilots based in Ireland, or they too would have been on strike.

Ryanair, Europe's second largest airline, was granted an injunction by the Irish High Court Wednesday to prevent a planned 48-hour strike by 180 Dublin-based pilots. The court ruling favoured the argument of the Irish-based airline that the union had announced strike action before the mediation process had been exhausted.

Justice Denis McDonald said he would restrain the union "from directly or indirectly, organising, directing or endorsing" a strike by its members on Thursday and Friday. The pilots are members of the Irish Airline Pilots' Association (IALPA), a branch of the Fórsa [Force] public service staff union.

The Irish pilots had voted by a more than 90 percent majority to strike in pursuit of an improved pay offer in line with commercial airline norms.

Responding to the ruling, Fórsa stated, "Once the union has the ruling in writing, we will consider it in detail and consult with our legal team. Only then will Fórsa be in a position to consider its next steps."

British and Irish Ryanair pilots are fighting for higher pay and have grievances over pensions, license insurance, maternity benefits and allowances. Ryanair recently declared it had a surplus of 500 pilots and 400 cabin crew across its operations, warning that redundancies would be announced in the coming weeks.

Ryanair sought a separate legal injunction to prevent the strikes of its UK pilots. However, Mrs Justice Lambert DBE threw out Ryanair's technical and legal arguments and said the industrial action ballot and procedures undertaken by the British Airline Pilots

Association (BALPA) were lawful.

Ryanair responded by saying it planned to operate at full service during the strike and did "not expect significant disruptions." Seeking to sow divisions among its workforce, it declared, "thanks to the great work and volunteerism of the vast majority of our UK based pilots Ryanair now expects to operate its full schedule of flights to/from its UK airports." It called on passengers with flights booked to turn up as normal.

BALPA issued a statement focusing on its desire to prevent a strike taking place. Brian Strutton, BALPA general secretary, said "We offered to meet Ryanair management at ACAS [UK government mediation service] to negotiate a resolution but instead they attempted a legal bludgeon. That's backfired. However, we are clear that we want to settle the dispute and bring about a change in Ryanair for the better."

Strutton added, "We hope that Ryanair will take up our offer of a way forward this evening so we can call off this action. We urge Ryanair to change their attitude to dealing with us and adopt a constructive approach. In the event that Ryanair rejects our overture and therefore the action over the next two days does go ahead, we apologise to the passengers who will be affected."

In Portugal, the Ryanair cabin crew are members of the SNPVAC (National Union of Civil Aviation Flight Personnel). They accuse Ryanair of refusing to comply with a protocol signed between the airline and the union. The protocol was said to have covered holiday pay, 22 days leave per year, and mandated Portuguese staff employed by Ryanair to be in compliance with Portuguese employment law.

The union submitted to a reactionary Portuguese law maintaining a minimum level of service and thus undermining the strike. The Portuguese government ruled that the strike happening at the height of the busy summer season could have caused major disruption and enforced a minimum level of service.

The *Independent* newspaper reported Wednesday the walkout “is causing little impact, with only some minor delays reported ... The airline switched many passengers to other flights before the strike, and the Portuguese government enacted a law forcing the cabin crew to work on a stipulated number of flights because the walkout came during the busy summer holiday period and could have caused chaos.” It meant a daily round-trip flight between Lisbon and London took place as normal.

The Belgian CNE (National Federation of White-Collar Workers) and ACV PULS (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions), to which unions Belgian Ryanair cabin crew belong, told its members they should refuse requests from Ryanair in Portugal to cover hostess and steward positions so as not to help break the strike of the Portuguese cabin crew.

Spanish Ryanair cabin crew are also set to take industrial action in response to Ryanair’s plans to close bases in Spain. Ryanair has announced it will close its bases in Gran Canaria and Tenerife and may close its base in Girona on the Spanish mainland. The closures would lead to the loss of 350 cabin crew jobs and 150 pilots. Ten separate days of strike action are set to go ahead throughout September. The cabin crew are represented by the USO (Workers Syndical Union) and another union, Sitcpla (Independent Airline Cabin Crew Union).

Talks under the auspices of the state mediator, SIMA, involving the two unions and Spanish Ryanair representatives took place on August 20. The seven-hour talks ended with no resolution. The unions accused Ryanair representatives of turning up late and not being prepared to talk to the union representatives directly, only meeting with mediators.

Ryanair pilots working for the Spanish division of the airline have been balloted over the loss of pilot jobs, but no result has been made public.

Ryanair, as with all airlines, is seeking to lower costs in the face of increased competition in a cutthroat industry. Recently it announced a 19 percent drop in its first-quarter profits compared to a year ago. The grounding of the fatally flawed Boeing 737 Max jets has hit Ryanair, as the airline has 210 of a special high-capacity variant of the aircraft on order. Deliveries were due to begin in April 2019, with flights starting in May. The 737’s grounding has led Ryanair to cut

around a million seats this year from its flights.

Boeing claims the 737 Max has lower operating costs than its rival, the Airbus A320neo. According to The National news site, “Ryanair, which operates the older 737 model, expects costs to increase because of the delivery delays. The new jets would have added 4 per cent more seats, 16 per cent fuel efficiency and delivered ‘significant’ cost savings for the airline in the next five years.” Ryanair said, “The delayed deliveries in 2019 means that we will not see any meaningful cost benefit until FY21 [2021].”

Ryanair organises its operations on a pan-European basis and faces a situation in which workers in four of its subsidiaries are in dispute. Last year too saw pilots and cabin crew taking part in strike action across its European sector. Despite this, these struggles remained under the control of the various national union bureaucracies, which refused to coordinate an offensive in pursuit of workers’ demands.

The suppression of airline workers’ struggles in recent weeks only further testifies to the fact that workers cannot rely on the trade unions to defend their interests.

Even though British Airways (BA) pilots voted for strike action in June, BALPA has yet to announce when such action will take place. BA lost a legal appeal at the end of July to prevent the strike. Strutton declared, “BALPA wants to resolve this through negotiation and so we are not announcing strike dates.”

For Ryanair and airline employees everywhere, defending jobs and conditions means adopting a socialist, internationalist perspective and waging their struggle independently of the union bureaucracy.



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