

Strike by thousands of pilots shuts down British Airways

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British Airways (BA) main base at London's Heathrow, Terminal 5, was described as a "ghost town," as some 4,000 BA pilots began a two-day strike on Monday. The strike is the first ever by BA pilots and is the biggest walkout in the company's history.

Management were forced to cancel nearly all 800 flights on Monday, affecting up to 145,000 passengers. Globally, an estimated 1,700 BA flights will be axed over the two-day strike and around 300,000 passengers affected. Only five BA planes took off, two of which were leased to another operator, and three flown by pilots not belonging to the British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA). BALPA represents more than 10,000 pilots, over 85 percent of all commercial pilots flying in the UK.

The main airports hit were Heathrow, where 93 percent of BA's pilots are based, and Gatwick. Sky News reported that, such was the disruption, "there may be knock-on disruption for people with journeys planned for Wednesday. This is because planes and pilots will likely need extra time to get back into the swing of normal operations."

On a 90 percent turnout, 93 percent of pilots at BA belonging to BALPA had voted to support the industrial action. Their action is aimed at securing pay and benefits improvements following years in which air crews were forced to accept lower pay—as part of company/trade union deals—to bolster the profits of the national flag-carrier.

The airline is estimated to face a loss of £80 million as a result of the stoppage, far exceeding the cost of settling the dispute, put at £5 million by BALPA. The settlement figure is a drop in the ocean compared to the massive profits BA has generated for its parent company, International Consolidated Airlines Group (IAG), over recent years.

Financial news organisation Bloomberg called BA a good example of how the industry had "broken with its dismal profit trend." BA's income had risen steadily over the last five years, from around €1 billion in 2014 to nearly €3 billion in 2018, generating massive profits for its parent company of some £2.6 billion in 2018. With a 16.6 percent return on invested capital, IAG had "felt able to return 1.3 billion euros to shareholders in dividends over the past year," according to Bloomberg.

BA CEO Alex Cruz, whose own yearly remuneration exceeds £1.3 million, called the pilots' action "cynical," claiming the 11.5 percent pay rise being offered, to be staged over three years, meant the "average captain" would be earning more than £200,000 a year.

The frothing right-wing media attacked the strike, with the *Daily Mail* denouncing the "Greed of holiday-wrecking BA pilots."

A striking pilot, speaking to the media on condition of anonymity, said "It's not really about money, it's about respect. We've effectively been lied to. We've given up a serious pension scheme, pay and pay rises when the company was weak—all on the promise that when the company was strong and giving up proper returns to its investors, we would benefit."

He contested the figure cited by Cruz, saying many pilots would struggle to ever reach that pay point. "Many pilots are working flat out, they are not likely to get a decent pension, it's a much longer pay scale to progress to higher pay." Pilots on short-haul flights earn considerably less. The starting salary for a cadet pilot is only about £27,000 a year, and that of a first officer £59,000, while pay for captains starts at £78,000, making £100,000 a more typical average wage, he said.

While the pilots are taking justified action in defence

of their pay and conditions, their union is doing everything it can to bring the dispute to an end. BALPA General Secretary Brian Strutton has offered talks at the government-sponsored Arbitration and Conciliation Service (ACAS), and has implored management to “get back to the negotiating table.”

Leading up to the strike, Boris Johnson’s crisis-ridden government made attempts to end the dispute. A spokeswoman for the government said, “The unions and BA need to get round the table and sort this out. The public would expect nothing less.”

In response, Strutton pleaded, “We have offered to get back round the table and have been refused. Rooms are available at [the conciliation service] Acas today and Balpa is willing to talk—where is BA?” Calling for close collaboration with the most right-wing government in decades, which is pledged to completing the “Thatcher Revolution,” he reiterated, “Since they’ve offered, perhaps Downing Street or the secretary of state for transport could assist in calling both sides for talks—Balpa would be there.”

Having previously secured the union’s agreement to carry out “cost-saving” measures—pilots have not just faced pay rises below the rate of inflation, the closure of the previous pension scheme saved BA an estimated £800 million—the company is in no mood to reverse the major concessions that have bolstered its bottom line. Taking a leaf out of budget airline Ryanair’s playbook, it has threatened to withdraw travel concessions from all those taking part in the strike. The travel concessions enable BA staff employed for more than three months to book tickets for themselves and up to three family members for just 10 percent of their face value.

In taking action, BA pilots, as with workers in growing numbers of struggles internationally—such as strikes by teachers in the US or the mass stoppages by Matamoros workers in Mexico—act in defiance of the trade unions. Everywhere, these organisations function as a form of company police in imposing the concessions demanded by the corporations to preserve and improve their profit gouging.

BA pilots must place no confidence in BALPA, but turn instead to their fellow airline workers in Europe and internationally who face similar attacks on their pay and conditions.

Immediately, this means linking up with Ryanair

pilots, who held a 72-hour strike last week seeking a pay rise, improved benefits and the restoration of lost licence insurance. Further strikes at Ryanair are scheduled to take place over seven days between September 18-29. At the same time, pilots working for Ryanair in Spain are planning five days of strikes on September 19, 20, 22, 27, and 29. The 900 pilots are opposing the shutting down of four hubs by Ryanair’s Spanish operation, with the loss of 500 jobs.

BA and Ryanair workers cannot take a single step forward without acting independently of the trade unions. Rank-and-file committees must be formed, wholly independent of the unions. They must link up the fight of all airline workers and grades across all national divisions, while making an appeal for support from airline, transport and delivery workers across the globe. Central to this struggle is the fight for a socialist, internationalist perspective that puts the interests of workers before the profit interests of the airline conglomerates.

The author recommends:

More strikes called off by UK airline unions
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[3 August 2019]



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