

Two-day strike by 4,000 British Airways pilots concludes

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The two-day strike by approximately 4,000 British Airways (BA) pilots, the first ever in the company's history, concluded Tuesday evening at midnight.

Flights were largely restored yesterday, but there were cancellations of up to 10 percent of flights due to the changes in airline scheduling arising from the strike. "The nature of our highly complex, global operation means that it will take some time to get back to a completely normal flight schedule," BA reported, as 150 aircraft began the day in the "wrong place."

The strike demonstrated the immense objective power possessed by the working class. The walkout cancelled 1,700 flights over the course of two days, affecting some 300,000 passengers. BA's main Heathrow airport in London was deserted, and the company, which has offered refunds or exchanges on all cancelled flights, is estimated to have lost somewhere between £80-100 million (US\$100-123 million) over Monday and Tuesday.

The British Airlines Pilots Association (BALPA), which covers more than 10,000 pilots in the UK, felt compelled to call the limited two-day action under conditions where pilots had voted in July by 93 percent to authorize strike action. They rejected a company offer that followed more than two years of give-backs and concessions enforced by the BALPA.

The union has confined the struggle to isolated one-off actions to prevent an open-ended strike that would have an immediate and massive financial impact on the airline and its shareholders. Despite the July vote by pilots to strike, the union waited until September, after the holiday season had concluded, to call even a limited strike, in the hope of reaching a deal and avoiding a walkout altogether. The next strike has been called for September 27, two-and-a-half weeks away, for just one day.

BALPA insisted that its concern is, in fact, to prevent disruptions to the company. It is now pleading with BA to provide it with an agreement so that it can shut down the struggle. Yesterday, union general secretary Brian Strutton called on the airline to "come back to the negotiating table with some meaningful proposals," and said that "any reasonable employer would listen to such a clear message, stop threatening and bullying, and start working towards finding a solution."

The pilots are seeking pay and benefit improvements after years of below-inflation pay rises and the closure of their previous pension system, saving BA an estimated £800 million. The company, backed by the Murdoch media, have denounced the 11.5 percent pay increase demand of pilots as "greedy."

BALPA has emphasized that the claims it is making would cost BA only an additional £5 million—i.e., one twentieth what the company has already lost in the course of the dispute. This only underscores the fact that the company's central concern is not only the immediate wage increase, but the fear that any concessions to the workers will only encourage opposition among other sections of airline workers in Britain and internationally, under conditions of growing militancy and strike activity around the world.

The pilots strike at BA took place as autoworkers in the United States voted near-unanimously to authorize strike action with the expiry of the four-year labor agreement this Saturday night, under conditions where the United Auto Workers union has been exposed for taking millions of dollars in bribes from the auto companies with whom they are supposedly "negotiating." This week 10,000 General Motors workers in Korea engaged in their first full-scale strike in 22 years.

There is growing industrial action by pilots across

Europe. In August, Ryanair workers voted by 80 percent to authorize strike action in the UK and Ireland, where the company has warned it is planning layoffs of up to 500 pilots and 400 cabin crew. Ryanair pilots have conducted strike action in Portugal and Spain over the past month, while Transavia pilots—a budget wing of Air France—are engaged in industrial action this month.

In every country, however, the unions' role has been to prevent any united counteroffensive against the airline companies. They have isolated workers within each country and each employer, separated pilots from cabin crew and other airline workers and opposed making any broader appeal to the working class.

Last night, the German pilots union Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) announced that it had reached an agreement with Irish-based Ryanair after 18 months of talks. While the terms have not been released, it is already clear that the company and union are anticipating major layoffs of workers, which the union will suppress any struggle against. VC lawyer Tanja Viehl said it included a “framework social plan” to “soften the impact of past and future base reductions.”

Viehl said the agreement also included the establishment of a Works Council, which will no doubt involve the creation of various highly paid positions for the union bureaucrats involved in the gutting of airline workers' wages and conditions. The union and company were particularly determined to sign the agreement before industrial action by Spanish Ryanair workers planned for later this month, on September 19, 20, 22, 27 and 29.

The unions' efforts to avoid any broader struggle have only emboldened the company to go on the offensive. Yesterday, the Murdoch-owned *Sun* claimed that it had received leaked documents sent by BA to the pilots, showing that the company would financially penalize pilots who participated in this week's strike action up to a staggering average amount of £21,000. As part of this BA reportedly told pilots it is cancelling their family ticket discount allowances for three years.

To take forward their struggle, BA pilots can place no faith in BALPA. They must turn to airline workers across Europe and internationally to mount a common international fight. This means electing their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands, and

make a direct appeal to airline, transport and delivery workers.

The ruthless cost-cutting operations of the major airlines, which are engaged in ever-more cut-throat competition, points to the impossibility of maintaining a safe, well-resourced global airline system under capitalism. The rights of airline workers and the safety of passengers are instead subordinated to the insatiable profit demands of a tiny layer of wealthy shareholders.

In the past year alone, BA's parent company International Consolidated Airlines has spent €500 million on share buybacks to inflate its stock price, and another €1.3 billion on dividend payouts. The alternative is the fight for socialism, and the transformation of the giant airlines into public utilities, under the democratic control of the working class, organized to meet social need, not private profit.



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