

Flight attendants to take further strike action at Lufthansa

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Germany's main airline, Lufthansa, faces a 48-hour strike by cabin crew on Thursday and Friday. The Independent Flight Attendants Organisation (UFO) called the strike by flight attendants on Monday afternoon. Affected are Lufthansa departures from all German airports.

A ballot of flight attendants revealed on November 1 that 86.9 percent supported protest measures up to indefinite strikes. An overwhelming majority of workers at four Lufthansa group airlines also approved strike action: at Lufthansa CityLine, by 77.5 percent; Eurowings, by 82.3 percent; Germanwings, by 95.1 percent; and Sunexpress Germany, by 96.2 percent. According to UFO officials, workers employed at the various Lufthansa subsidiaries could also undertake action at any time.

The broad support for the strike is due to the working conditions for Lufthansa flight attendants, which have worsened dramatically in recent years. The job of a steward at Lufthansa, considered well-paid and secure 20 years ago, has degenerated over many years into a low-paid, insecure and highly demanding profession.

For this reason, some of UFO's demands are aimed at improving the chances of workers obtaining full-time positions. In addition, UFO is calling for an increase in expenses for workers of €10 per day (€5 now and another €5 in July 2020), as well as improved allowances.

UFO's main goal, however, is to continue to be recognised by Lufthansa as a trade union. Three weeks ago, on October 20, the union called out several thousand flight attendants from Lufthansa's four subsidiaries.

The union is internally divided and faces charges of corruption. The Lufthansa Group is using the situation to legally rid itself of the union, which has repeatedly

called for extended strikes, and rely instead on the Verdi public workers union. Lufthansa has been refusing to negotiate with UFO for months, and in January it sacked the former UFO chairman, Nicoley Baublies.

"At present, there can be no negotiations or talks with UFO," the *FAZ* newspaper quoted a Lufthansa spokeswoman last week. On Twitter, the company announced: "Lufthansa condemns the UFO strike call in the strongest terms and will consider legal action against it."

According to its own information, UFO represents more than half of Lufthansa's 20,000 cabin crew members. The Verdi trade union, on the other hand, has only a few hundred members among flight attendants. Verdi is despised and widely regarded as representing the interests of Lufthansa much more than the interests of flight crew. The union enjoys close relations with the company executive, and Verdi federal council member Christine Behle sits on the Lufthansa Supervisory Board as deputy chair.

In mid-October, Verdi had concluded with the airline "a final agreement" for cabin crew. Behle defended the deal on the grounds that collectively agreed solutions had to be found to "end unrest in the cabin." A company spokesman told the *Handelsblatt* newspaper, "We have always said that talking to Verdi is basically an option for us."

Despite its more militant posturing, UFO shares the same perspective of class collaboration as Verdi. On its home page, the union complained bitterly about the negative attitude of the executive: "Every hand we reached out was either ignored or bitten."

In its video message, the union said on Monday afternoon that it hoped Lufthansa would react to the vote in favour of action with an offer of talks. It was

only after the company failed to respond that the union called for a strike.

In a video message, UFO Deputy Chairman Daniel Flohr personally addressed Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr: “Mr. Spohr, the ball is back in your playing field.” It was up to him (Spohr) to find a way “out of this spiral of escalation and struggle carried out on the backs of employees, customers and shareholders.”

It was no coincidence that Flohr also mentioned shareholders. During the last round of contract talks, UFO accepted measures aimed at boosting company profits and the price of its stock. Following the shutdown of the last strike by flight attendants four years ago, UFO boasted that the new deal would save 10 percent of staff costs.

In fact, the deal agreed by UFO in July 2016 gave away long-standing gains of cabin crews. The personnel structure agreed at that time introduced the current two-class system, creating a permanent reservoir of precariously employed low-cost personnel. Since then, newly hired flight attendants receive a gross monthly salary of only about €2,250 (US\$2,490). Only after completing an additional 18-month qualification period, that they have to pay for themselves, can they gain additional rights, such as pensions and a higher salary.

At the Lufthansa subsidiaries, flight attendants have even lower incomes and earn a fraction of what Lufthansa flight attendants could count on a quarter of a century ago. In the same agreement of 2016, the pension scheme for those who still had one was changed to a “capital market model,” which means employees have to shoulder the risk of the scheme themselves and face losing everything in the event of a new financial crisis like that of 2008.

Three years ago, UFO agreed to all of these attacks on jobs and conditions. Since then, it has lost thousands of members, and there have been repeated internal conflicts. From the once seven-member board, only two individuals, Flohr and Sylvia de la Cruz, remain. They were confirmed at the union’s conference on November 1, and the election of a new union leadership has been announced for February 14.

Neither Verdi nor UFO represents the interests of Lufthansa employees. Formed 27 years ago out of anger and dissatisfaction with Verdi, UFO, like other “grass roots” or “independent” unions, provide no real

alternative. Whether it’s the German train driver union GdL, the Marburg doctors’ union, the Cockpit pilots’ union or UFO, each represents the same nationally limited, pro-capitalist perspective defended by Germany’s main trade union umbrella organisation, the DGB.

Cabin crew, like all other workers, must set up their own action committees, to operate independently of the trade unions. Based on an international socialist programme, they must join forces with pilots, ground personnel and other airline employees to defend their jobs and working conditions. This is the perspective fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and all of the sections of the Fourth International.



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