

BALPA trade union sells out British Airways pilots struggle

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The British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA) have betrayed the struggle of its British Airways (BA) members after recommending they accept an offer from the company.

Prior to the deal being signed, there were fears in ruling circles that 10 days of strikes over the Christmas period could take place alongside action by over 140,000 postal workers, higher education staff and rail workers. This powerful offensive was prevented by a combination of moves by the high court to declare the postal workers strike ballot illegal and the trade unions sabotaging any further action.

On December 16, pilots voted in favour of accepting the deal. BA's pilots took two days of strike action in September, after rejecting the same 11.5 percent pay offer over three years made by the company. They were also seeking a higher profit-sharing deal and rostering changes.

BA and BALPA agreed the deal in November following talks at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). Under the deal, BA withdrew its threat to remove subsidised travel for BA staff and their families made after pilots voted to strike.

The deal includes changes to rostering and working conditions that have not been made public. However, the *Financial Times* noted that BALPA "has not managed to secure a significant pay rise or a profit-share scheme that it had been pushing for." The only concession made to the 11.5 percent offer is a promise to inflation-proof it over the three-year span.

BA described the deal as "good for our customers, our people and our business." It is likely BA will offer the revised agreement to cabin crew and ground crew, whose unions had already accepted the original pay offer.

The pilots voted to strike after years in which BA air crews had been forced to accept lower pay as a result of deals between BA and BALPA to bolster the profits of the national flag carrier.

Pilots voted for industrial action by a 93 percent majority on a 90 percent turnout in July. BALPA, which represents 90 percent of BA pilots, refused to set a date for action. The strike ballot followed a consultative ballot in June in which BALPA members rejected the BA offer, while Unite and the GMB union, representing other BA staff, accepted it. Following the vote, IAG, BA's parent company, lost a court appeal to have the strike declared illegal.

BALPA continued to sit on the ballot vote to strike throughout the busy summer holiday period in August. It was eventually forced to sanction a two-day strike on September 9. This was the first-ever strike by BA pilots, and represented the biggest walkout of staff in the company's history, with 4,000 BA pilots taking part.

Over the two days, BA was forced to cancel 2,325 flights affecting 300,000 passengers. According to IAG, the cost of the two-day strike to BA was around £120 million. IAG reported an operating profit of £1.2 billion for the three months to the end of September, a seven percent drop.

It was clear from the start of the dispute that BALPA was working to isolate and end the pilots' strike. The union cancelled a second strike due for September 27. In a September 18 press release, BALPA General Secretary Brian Strutton said, "Someone has to take the initiative to sort out this dispute and with no sign of that from BA, the pilots have decided to take the responsible course. In a genuine attempt at establishing a time out for common sense to prevail, we have lifted the threat of the strike... BA passengers rightly expect

BA and its pilots to resolve their issues without disruption and now is the time for cool heads and pragmatism to be brought to bear. I hope BA and its owner IAG show as much responsibility as the pilots.”

The press release could have been written by BA’s PR department, as the union declared, “It was now time for a period of reflection before the dispute escalates further and irreparable damage is done to the brand.”

It wasn’t the pilots that decided to “take the responsible course” and call off the walkout—it was the BALPA leadership. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Strutton insisted that in any talks BALPA was willing to “move our position”, i.e., sell out the demands of pilots.

Rob Burgess, the editor of the frequent flyer blog Head for Points, made telling points in a November 24 article on the proposed new deal. He wrote, “As I have written before, I believe that BALPA has handled the strike badly. The ‘cold war’ period of threatening strikes went on far too long. When strikes finally came, the first was deliberately announced far enough in advance to allow BA to escape its liability for EC261 compensation (paid to passengers for delayed or cancelled flights).

“The second strike was cancelled *in the hope* that it could encourage the airline to re-enter talks. I can’t remember any other strike which was called off because the employer REFUSED to sit down and talk!

“In reality, **the offer now being proposed seems little different to what was originally on the table.** There is no sign, of course, of the profit-sharing deal that was a key part of the pay demand.

“BALPA’s lack of progress comes despite the fact that British Airways management has been on the back foot since IAG CEO Willie Walsh stated publicly that he felt the negotiations had been badly handled.” (emphasis in original)

Boris Johnson’s new Conservative government made clear in last week’s Queen’s Speech that it will push through major restrictions on the right to strike. It is to introduce “Minimum Service Agreements,” firstly in the transport sector, that will be implemented in alliance with the unions. These will see management and transport unions negotiate agreements that would see between a fifth and a third of all services running during strikes.

These authoritarian laws are to be passed in

anticipation of an escalation of the class struggle. But the main weapon of the ruling elite in its offensive against the working class is the trade union bureaucracy.

The proposed strike by 110,000 Royal Mail postal workers was banned by the High Court on November 13. In October, Communication Workers Union (CWU) members voted by a 97 percent majority on a 76 percent turnout to strike against attacks by the Royal Mail Group (RMG) on job security, terms and conditions. Refusing to defy the judgment, the CWU appealed it, only for the High Court to reject the appeal. No strike ballot has been called.

At the end of November, 40,000 university staff took part in an eight-day strike in opposition to attacks on pay conditions and pensions. Although having a mandate for further strikes, none was scheduled during the general election period.

Rail conductors and workers at South West Rail began an ongoing 27-day strike at the beginning of December against plans to introduce Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains—with the strike halted on election day, so as not to embarrass Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn in business circles. The Aslef drivers union ensured the strike was weakened and workers in the same company divided from each other, by refusing—as it has done regularly at train franchises over the last four years—to call out train drivers to back guards. This meant the company could run services throughout the stoppage.

A series of strikes over DOO by RMT members working for West Midland Trains was called off just prior to the December 12 general election. The workers voted for a series of seven strikes each Saturday beginning November 6. On Monday, after the RMT recommended acceptance of a new offer to resolve the dispute—that amounts to a form of DOO—the agreement was voted through with around a third of union members rejecting it.



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