

Italian air traffic controllers go on strike

Marianne Arens
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On Tuesday, January 14, a strike by air traffic controllers at Italian airports brought air traffic to a halt, with travellers facing long delays. The air traffic controllers and staff of several airlines stopped working between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. local time.

Air traffic controllers from the ENAV control authority went on strike at Rome Fiumicino airport and Ciampino, Venice, Verona, Bergamo, Bologna, Bari, Brindisi and Catania (Sicily). At Ancona, Perugia and Pescara airports the strike lasted all day. At the same time, staff from EasyJet, Air Italy, Spain's Volotea and other smaller airlines also went on strike.

A government decree had prevented a national air traffic controllers' strike originally planned to last 24 hours. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (MIT) had, as in an earlier strike last week, legally limited it to four hours. The new minister of transport, Paola Di Micheli (Democratic Party, PD), justified this decision, which amounts to a strike ban, as necessary "to avoid a serious and irreparable interference with the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of movement." Using exactly this wording, a 24-hour strike in December had also been banned by the ministry.

Nevertheless, hundreds of flights were affected yesterday and EasyJet, Ryanair, Air One and Alitalia had to cancel several hundred domestic and international flights. Alitalia alone cancelled 139 flights in advance.

The air traffic controllers are fighting against job cuts and for compliance with flight safety. Two years ago, ENAV adopted a "Piano Industriale (Economic Plan) 2018-2022" with the agreement of the trade unions, which included the introduction of a new, remote-controlled high-tech air traffic control system. This is accompanied by a concentration and expansion of what will ultimately be two large control centres in Rome and Milan, while staff will be gradually reduced or

replaced by auxiliary staff at the 45 smaller control towers spread throughout the country.

In 2016, ENAV was partially privatised, with around 4,000 air traffic controllers. Since then the number of specialist staff has been systematically reduced. The controllers point out that the business plan was written primarily from the point of view of the stock market, but not from that of the employees and air traffic safety. While 200 jobs will again be cut in Puglia as part of the plan, services throughout the country are seriously understaffed. Excessive overtime hours are being worked but have not been paid for months.

It is not only air traffic controllers who are dissatisfied and prepared to strike. Pilots, flight attendants and ground workers are also confronted with the effects of merciless global competition in air transport. This is encouraging wage dumping, and jobs and vital social achievements are being destroyed.

The best example of this is Alitalia, once the Italian flagship, which was forced into bankruptcy by Etihad in spring 2017 after employees rejected an extortionate "restructuring" plan. Since then, Alitalia has been kept in the air by government bridging loans and managed by commissioners of the Ministry of Transport.

In November, the government postponed the sale deadline for the eighth time, now May 31, and plans to continue operating Alitalia via a consortium in which the Italian State Railways (FS) and the infrastructure group Atlantia are to participate. A financially strong private airline group is being sought as a partner. At present, Delta Airlines or Germany's Lufthansa are still expressing an interest in this.

Alitalia pilots, flight attendants and ground staff are fighting a desperate battle against the systematic dismantling of their jobs, rights and achievements. Of the approximately 22,000 employees three years ago, not even 11,000 remain today. A further jobs reduction is imminent, as Lufthansa is making any form of

takeover dependent on the “successful restructuring” of the airline, according to Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr.

Alitalia employees did not take part in the airport strike this Tuesday but had organized several strikes in November and just before Christmas. Most recently, the airline had to cancel over 300 flights on December 13, due to strike action.

Five unions (Filt-Cgil, Fit-Cisl, Uiltrasporti, Ugl-Ta/Assivolo Quadri and Unica) called for Tuesday’s strike. In a joint statement, they justify it by citing the serious crisis in Italy’s aviation sector, which the government has blamed on inefficiency and lack of initiative. At airports, wage dumping and “wild competition between ground services and air carriers” are the order of the day.

However, the unions themselves are part of the problem, not the solution. They are national federations, committed to the welfare of the companies and the state, whose repeated short strikes are merely safety valves to prevent the workers’ pent-up anger leading to a social explosion. At the same time, they play an essential role in the implementation of the cuts. The unions had already agreed to Etihad’s “restructuring” plan for Alitalia, which workers rejected three years ago. Their appeals are made to the government in Rome, with which they have been working for years.

Although the unions describe the limiting of the air traffic controllers’ strike from 24 to 4 hours as “a serious and unjustified restriction on the right to strike,” as union secretary Salvatore Pellicchia (Fit-Cisl) put it, they are keen to continue working with the government and demand “first of all, a round table with the ministry,” as their statement says. The government in Rome does not represent the interests of the workers, but those of the employers and finance capital.

The Five Star Movement (M5S) of Beppe Grillo, which had originally declared itself an anti-corruption party and claimed to be “neither right nor left,” has turned out to be a right-wing, corrupt government party. It has been running the government since June 2018, first in coalition with the far-right Lega and now with the PD. Since parliamentary elections in March 2018, its poll ratings have halved from 33 percent to less than 17 percent.

As can be easily seen from the decree to restrict the air traffic controllers strike, the government of M5S

and the PD is continuing the right-wing policies of the Lega even though the Lega is no longer in government. It has not repealed the infamous “Decreto Sicurezza ” security law, which not only prohibits refugees from being landed in Italy, but also threatens strikes, demonstrations and workers’ protests with police measures.

In the case of Alitalia, M5S had promised to save the airline two years ago through nationalisation. Today, it is involved in the search for a new private company to take it over, which will mean sacrificing workers’ jobs and conditions.

The attacks on air traffic controllers and airline workers are an example of a development that is shaping the whole of society. The social gulf is widening and the living conditions of the working class are deteriorating massively. In Italy, 15 percent of the population live in relative poverty, according to statistics agency Istat, and unemployment is officially at almost 10 percent. Unofficially, and taking into account those who are economically “inactive,” it is much higher.



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