

Cabin crew trade union agrees to job cuts as Polish airline LOT to take over Germany's Condor

Marianne Arens
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The Polish airline LOT is to take over Germany's Condor, which was part of the Thomas Cook tourist company until that company's collapse in September 2019 and focused chiefly on flights to popular holiday destinations. Both companies confirmed the deal at a press conference in Frankfurt on January 24. Under LOT's ownership, Condor will receive up to 20 new long-distance flight routes and serve as a carrier to popular tourist destinations for holidaymakers from Eastern and central Europe.

Condor has been able to continue operations since the failure of Thomas Cook thanks to loans from the German federal government and the state of Hesse. No details on the purchase price paid by LOT were made public. However, according to the industry news site Airliner, the Polish Aviation Group, which owns LOT, agreed to pay €250 million to buy the airline, as well as to repay the €380 million in loans extended to Condor. The loans must be repaid by April 15.

To finance this initiative while at the same time boosting profit margins, the exploitation of the airline's workers is to be intensified. Prior to the announced takeover, Condor management and the trade unions agreed to impose job and pay cuts. A total of 170 administrative jobs will be cut, together with a similar number of cabin crew.

These attacks on jobs and working conditions are also being supported by the Independent Cabin Crew Organisation trade union (UFO). The union applauded LOT's takeover of Condor as "very good news." UFO also revealed on January 15 that it had accepted the cost-cutting programme, even though this will mean the elimination of 150 fulltime cabin crew jobs.

UFO's agreement to the cost reductions was a crucial

precondition for LOT's takeover and confirms everything that the WSWs has said about the union. Like other profession-specific unions, such as Cockpit (pilots), GDL (train drivers), and Marburger Association (doctors), UFO offers no alternative to the larger unions organised in the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB).

Founded as a result of widespread outrage among workers over the straitjacket imposed upon them by the Verdi trade union, which represents public sector workers as well as employees of private sector services, UFO has proven itself, no less than Verdi, to be committed to its role as a co-manager for the enforcement of attacks on workers' rights and jobs.

UFO's statement from January 15 underscores how consciously the union has chosen this path. In it, the union announced its support for the collective agreement to restructure the airline, just nine days prior to the takeover. UFO explicitly states, "We would like to state very clearly here that we feel this is the wrong path to take." Nonetheless, they agreed to the plan, to, in their own words, "secure Condor's continued existence." As UFO is forced to admit, the cutting of 150 fulltime cabin crew positions will affect a much larger number of employees, since many cabin crew work for Condor on part-time contracts. The planned expansion of the airline's fleet will also undoubtedly result in a substantial increase in workloads.

Trying to justify its sleight of hand, UFO noted that Condor management had already reached a deal with Verdi and published it. In reality, as a union representing only a minority of the workforce at Condor, Verdi does not have the authority to conclude such agreements. In December, UFO was still claiming,

“Even if a contract were agreed with Verdi, it could not simply be applied to all workers, because Verdi is not the majority trade union at Condor.”

Shortly after the Thomas Cook bankruptcy, UFO promised employees at Condor, “We reassure you that we see no reason to negotiate away rights achieved in previous contracts.” The fact that UFO was simply paying lip service to the concerns of its members was shown in November and December, when the union called on UFO members at Lufthansa to strike.

UFO refused to include the Condor employees, who faced the acute danger of losing their jobs, in the struggle, thereby ensuring that they remained divided from their colleagues at Lufthansa. During this period, UFO was undoubtedly actively involved in negotiations behind the scenes with Condor management, and possibly even Verdi, to draft the cost-cutting plan.

Then, in January, UFO presented cabin crew with a *fait accompli*. They appealed for voluntary layoffs so as to keep the official job cut numbers as low as possible. In its statement from January 15, UFO called for workers to express “the real Condor spirit.” In other words, flight attendants should agree to “voluntary” redundancies to boost company profits and prevent a larger number of job cuts.

UFO added that it did everything in its power to “improve the conditions for redundancy payments, extra time off, and many other things so that lay-offs will hopefully not be necessary.” They make an “urgent appeal” to cabin crew to “consider who can take additional part-time hours or unpaid holidays to ensure that everyone who wants to can stay on board.” This is a requirement of “solidarity.”

Among the 4,900 Condor employees, there are approximately 2,400 cabin crew, after around 50 jobs were cut over recent months. UFO boasted that it managed to get these 50 job cuts included in the total of 150 layoffs being demanded. The union writes, “If all cabin crew would reduce their working hours by a few percentage points, the reduction of 100 fulltime positions would be achieved and there would not need to be any additional departures.”

UFO is of course well aware that this is a recipe to further accelerate the downward spiral of wages and working conditions, while shareholder profits boom. This is a particularly disastrous message to send to the new owner, the Polish Aviation Group, which is sure to

use lower pay rates in Poland as the benchmark for all employees.

The air travel expert for German public broadcaster ARD, Michael Immen, made clear the direct connection between the attacks on the workers and increased profits on the stock markets when he commented on Condor on the day of LOT’s takeover, “This business is running profitably... They’ve managed to cut costs within four months. Cooperating with employee representatives, they’ve reduced personnel costs by a quarter. They’ve dressed up the bride and save around €23 million. That creates perspectives.”

The latest experiences with UFO show that Condor cabin crew, like all workers, require a new strategy. This must directly reject the subordination to capital and the nation state practiced by the trade unions.

To defend their rights and workplace benefits, cabin crew, pilots, and ground staff must build independent action committees opposed to the trade unions and turn to a socialist and internationalist perspective. This applies all the more forcefully as governments and companies around the world prepare for trade war and actual wars, and offload the costs for this ever more directly onto the backs of working people.



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