

British Airways workers in limbo as deadline for mass redundancies passes

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Tens of thousands of British Airways (BA) workers have been left in limbo after the airline announced plans to lay off its entire workforce of 42,000 people by June 15 and rehire around three-quarters on significantly worse pay and conditions.

In a letter to the British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA), and the GMB and Unite trade unions in late April, BA threatened to "give all employees notice of dismissal by reason of redundancy and/or some other substantial reason," unless they were able to "reach agreement on proposals" from the company. BA would then "offer a proportion of them employment under new terms and conditions."

Under section 188 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act, employers must write to trade unions representing their staff to give 45 days' notice of proposed redundancies. With BA's 45-day consultation window having ended on June 15 without an agreement, 42,000 BA workers are now at risk of being fired.

As of yesterday, BA had still not told the vast majority of their staff whether they will keep their jobs, with many cabin crew members telling the WSWS and posting on social media that they had heard nothing from the airline.

One BA worker wrote on Twitter, "we're none the wiser, the agony continues in limboland. No redundancy notices as yet, no idea if we're being furloughed again, if we're working next month or even if we'll have a job. The uncertainty is causing untold anxiety for us all."

Of the 12,000 redundancies under BA's proposals, 4,700 are cabin crew. Some long-serving cabin crew will have their pay slashed by as much as 75 percent.

BA plans to restructure its three cabin crew "fleets" into a single pay structure. Currently, BA cabin crew are organised into the better-paid "Worldwide" and "Euro" fleets, and the low-wage "Mixed" fleet, who work under inferior contracts.

The "Mixed fleet" pay grade was introduced by BA in 2010 following the defeat of the national cabin crew strike, which was sold out by the Unite union that same year. All new hires since 2010 have been on "Mixed fleet" contracts,

with predominantly young workers earning between £23,000 and £28,000 a year.

Under BA's new plans, all cabin crew will be put onto contracts worth £24,000, a 50-75 percent pay cut for long-serving crew members and a significant loss even for more poorly paid "Mixed fleet" staff. Rehired crew would be expected to operate "to higher levels of flexibility," according to BA.

Carol (not her real name), a long-standing BA cabin crew member, spoke to the WSWS on June 15. A member of the legacy Worldwide fleet for over 20 years, she joined strike action in 2010 against the airline's now-enacted two-tier cabin crew contracts.

Carol said, "We all thought that we would be fired today, but so far I've heard nothing. Willy Walsh [CEO of International Airlines Group (IAG), the parent company of BA], has wanted rid of the legacy contracts for ages. They couldn't do it as a result of [the volcanic] ash cloud [which grounded planes and lost the airline millions in 2010] but now they are using the coronavirus pandemic—with staff being furloughed, in lockdown, isolated, and under all sorts of mental pressures—to try to force it through.

"BA wants to negotiate this, but workers wouldn't accept it. It would mean a 60 percent wage cut and attacks on terms and conditions such as longer shifts, and fewer breaks between work. I've been with BA for 25 years and was earning more than this new contract in 1996! How can this be fair? I joined BA because it was 'the best airline in the world,' but now it'll be totally different. They are ruining BA. What's the point of having a contract if they can just rip it up whenever they want?

"The new contract will mean that greater strain will be put on workers as BA wants the all-new fleet to be a mixture of long-haul and short-haul flights. As London Heathrow is the main European hub for BA, staff have to commute from all over the UK and Europe to go to work via plane and car or public transport.

"Some staff in the UK drive for hours to get to work for a shift, or they can fly. This is facilitated by shifts being

organised in such ways as having a month working and a month off, so that staff can live near to Heathrow in lodgings, or with friends and family, when working. With the new contracts, no one knows how staff will get enough rest and organise their lives if they are forced to work these ‘flexible’ hours. Management doesn’t care about the impact on workers.

“They also want to change terms and conditions such as the disciplinary procedure. Now why would they want to do that? After the 2010 strike staff were sacked for speaking out.

“I have childcare responsibilities, bills and a mortgage to pay. The conditions BA wants to impose mean that I will probably have to find other work as I will not be able to live under the new contract. I know that a lot of staff are looking elsewhere for work, but there’s not that much out there that pays well enough. So, staff are being forced out. The voluntary redundancy arrangement is how they are doing this.”

The threat of mass redundancies has had a harmful impact on Carol’s mental health: “I am on anti-depressants as a result of all of this pressure, as are a lot of other staff. One woman recently posted a desperate video on [a staff Facebook group]. I later heard that she was sectioned [under the Mental Health Act]. I also heard that a male staff member died of a heart attack in Serbia. BA had a notice on their site that they were a ‘mental health champion,’ but I understand that they’ve taken this down now. Willy Walsh hasn’t made a statement about this, nothing expressing sympathy or regret over these incidents.”

One BA worker reportedly committed suicide at the end of May, only weeks after BA announced plans to lay off 12,000 staff. According to Unite Assistant General Secretary for Politics and Legal, Howard Beckett, the male worker was a long-serving member of BA’s cabin crew who had been placed on a disciplinary procedure.

While BA claimed the worker was no longer employed by the airline after being fired last year, his tragic case is by no means an anomaly. A survey conducted by the British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA), a branch of the Unite union, found a staggering 96 percent of BA staff had reported mental health issues since the airline announced its mass redundancy plans.

More than half (52 percent) of the 8,000 employees surveyed said that they or a colleague had thought of self-harming or suicide. Eighty-two percent reported suffering from anxiety, 91 percent were experiencing depression, and 61 percent were struggling with a lack of sleep.

This full-frontal assault on BA workers comes from an airline sitting on billions in cash reserves. The airline has also received millions of pounds in government bailouts

since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

According to a cross-party Transport Select Committee report published Saturday, BA has been handed close to £35 million from the government’s furlough scheme as of May 14. A further £300 million was handed to BA under the Covid Corporate Financing Facility, a scheme allowing companies to sell commercial paper—unsecured, short-term debt that can be held for up to 12 months—to the Bank of England.

The Select Committee branded BA’s redundancy plans a “national disgrace” and urged the airline “not to proceed hastily with largescale redundancies or restructuring to terms or conditions of employees until the [government’s] Job Retention Scheme ends in October 2020.” Many MPs and celebrities have also denounced BA’s actions in nationalist terms as representing a “betrayal of Britain.”

In reality, the same job destruction is being meted out across the airline industry. UK carrier EasyJet announced 4,500 redundancies—30 percent of its entire workforce—at the end of May, while Emirates has announced one-third of its 70,000 strong global workforce will be made redundant.

The noisy condemnation of BA by the UK ruling class is not motivated by altruism. It is a word of advice to the airline, urging that it proceed with its plans more carefully, under conditions of massive popular disgust at BA’s actions and a rising international wave of militancy in the airlines sector.

Unite and the GMB have refused to organise any fight against BA’s plans. Yesterday, Beckett told the *Sun* that Unite is updating its records to “ensure that we are prepared for an industrial action ballot.” But Unite, GMB and BALPA have issued no call for industrial action for more than six weeks. Unite confirmed yesterday that no statement had been made about any forthcoming strike ballot.

No faith can be placed in the unions which have acted as loyal partners to the airline companies, but BA pilots and cabin crew have immediate and powerful allies among hundreds of thousands of airline workers internationally. We urge BA and other airline workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to share their experiences and organise a fightback.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact