

Vote “NO” to British Airways pilots’ contract! Form rank and file committees to oppose BALPA sell-out!

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The British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) is seeking to ram through a sell-out contract against the interests of 4,300 British Airways pilots that will lay the basis for further attacks across the entire BA workforce.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for pilots to vote against the contract and to form rank-and-file committees to organise opposition to BA management.

BALPA has been engaged in talks for three months with BA, which is preparing to lay off 12,000 of its 42,000 workforce, seizing on the coronavirus pandemic to force through a long-planned assault on pay and conditions. It threatened to fire and rehire the remaining 30,000 workers on new inferior contracts.

BA entered talks with BALPA threatening to make 1,255 pilots redundant. The deal was agreed in principle on July 6, but it was only on July 22 that its main elements were made public. Announcing that it was recommending pilots accept the deal, the union gave its members just one week to vote on it with the ballot closing July 30.

The deal includes:

- 270 compulsory redundancies.
- Voluntary working, and the creation of a standby pool of 300 pilots on reduced wages, who will only return to their jobs as demand picks up in the aviation industry.
- The wages of the voluntary pilot workforce will be paid by reducing the pay of other pilots by an initial 20 percent. BALPA states that this will be reduced “to 8% over the next two years then further reducing toward zero over the longer term.”

BA owner International Airlines Group (IAG) said it welcomed BALPA’s holding “a consultative ballot of

its members in relation to the proposed restructuring and redundancy agreement reached between the union and the airline.”

Pushing acceptance of its sell-out, the union stated, “BALPA is recommending its members accept these proposals as the best that can be achieved in these incredibly difficult circumstances.” It claimed, “There will be no ‘fire and rehire’ of pilots.”

BA has got what it wanted, at this stage, through deepening its collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy without having to carry through a “fire and rehire” policy among pilots. BA knows that if the deal is passed hundreds of jobs will be lost, with pilots reduced to being part of a temporary workforce at the beck and call of the company. Pay cuts are being enforced for years until the end of an undefined “longer term.” BA stated of its union partner, “We would like to thank BALPA’s representatives for their hard work and tireless effort to engage and find solutions to save as many pilot jobs as possible.”

BALPA was prepared to go even further, if only BA would have agreed to no job losses at this stage. BALPA General Secretary, Brian Strutton, noted, “It is hugely disappointing that during our extensive negotiations British Airways would not accept the full package of mitigations we put forward which would have avoided any job losses at all, *and at no cost to BA* .”

The week prior to the BALPA agreement, in the face of mounting opposition from workers, BA began issuing long-standing cabin crew with “fire or rehire” notices, under which they had to re-apply for their jobs at much reduced rates of pay, or accept voluntary redundancy.

The *Times*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, recognised the importance of the union's sell-out of "part of the [British Airways] workforce... that last year had their first strike: one that axed 2,325 flights, disrupted thousands of passengers and cost IAG €155 million."

That strike was sold out by BALPA last November.

The *Times* article, published July 24, demanded other unions at BA follow suit: "Shouldn't Unite be trying to get a similar deal for the 26,000 British Airways cabin crew, engineers and ground staff it represents?"

A BA spokesperson said after the BALPA agreement was made public, "We call on Unite to work with us, as the pilots' union BALPA is doing."

Unite will soon drop whatever rhetoric it still employs to carry out a betrayal along the lines of BALPA. As the WSWs noted this month, a report published by the New Economics Foundation, in consultation with the Trades Union Congress, revealed that Unite has already agreed to a "redundancy cap" of 10 percent of all positions in the aviation industry, equivalent to tens of thousands of jobs.

Airlines through the world have seized on the pandemic conditions to ram through long-planned restructuring. They all work in alliance with the unions, who are pointing a gun at their members' heads demanding acceptance of job cuts and concessions.

Even as it was negotiating with BA, BALPA agreed a deal with Ryanair cutting the pay of pilots by 20 percent as apart of "a package of cost savings." The Ryanair pay cuts set a new benchmark and will be in place for at least four years. BALPA said that this had saved 260 jobs but had to admit that another 70 jobs were at risk "from four potential base closures (Leeds Bradford, Prestwick, Bournemouth and Southend)."

Faced with the prospect of losing their jobs, BALPA's Ryanair members voted to accept the deal.

These deals will only whet the appetite of the airlines. Shortly before BALPA announced that its deal with Ryanair has been enforced, chief executive Michael O'Leary warned, "We've already announced about 3,500 job losses but we're engaged in extensive negotiations with our pilots, our cabin crew and we're asking them to all take pay cuts as an alternative to job losses."

The trade unions are organisations hostile to the interests of workers. To oppose BA's onslaught, pilots

must act independently of BALPA and vote down their rotten agreement with BA. They must take the initiative into their own hands and form a network of rank-and-file committees, free of the control of the unions.

Pilots should follow the lead of US autoworkers who, faced with an alliance of management and the Trump administration forcing them back to work in unsafe conditions, have established rank-and-file safety committees at several plants.

Rank-and-file committees must carry out the mobilisation of all airline workers—pilots, cabin crew and ground staff of all grades—advancing their own global strategy against the relentless and destructive race to the bottom demanded by the airlines. Airline workers in Britain must appeal to their class allies in Europe and internationally facing the same offensive against jobs, terms and conditions. The airlines must be brought under public control as part of the fight for the programme of socialist internationalism.

The Socialist Equality Party pledges to assist BA pilots, cabin crew and other staff in this fight and urges workers to contact us, with confidentiality assured, to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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