

Norwegian Air worldwide layoffs hit Spanish workforce

Santiago Guillen
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Norwegian Air Shuttle has announced plans to lay off 1,191 workers in Spain, affecting 85 percent of its workforce in the country. In parallel, it will close its bases in Barcelona, Gran Canaria and Tenerife, following the closure of its bases in Madrid and Mallorca prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is just the latest redundancy scheme announced by large corporations in Spain. Over 30,000 workers are expected to be laid off in the coming months, including in factories, offices, shops and shopping centres. The trade unions are collaborating with management, as in Corte Inglés where over 8,000 workers will be made redundant.

Norwegian ceased its operations in Spain in March 2020 when lockdowns, confinements and travel restrictions began. Since then, it has kept its entire staff furloughed, which will now give way to the redundancy scheme. The only exception is for 215 pilots and cabin crew members at its two operational bases in Malaga and Alicante for the summer season.

The two main unions at the company, the United Workers Union (Unión Sindical Obrera—USO) and Spanish Union of Airline Pilots (Sindicato Español de Pilotos de Líneas Aéreas—SEPLA) feigned surprise at the announcement. In what is now a refrain of Spain's trade unions each time a mass redundancy scheme is announced, a union source at Norwegian told *La Vanguardia*, “we knew an ERE [redundancy scheme] was coming, but we did not imagine this size.”

These statements reveal the reactionary role of the trade unions as appendages of management. The redundancy scheme was anticipated and SEPLA and USO did nothing to defend jobs. Instead, they met with the company last November to try to “calm” the furloughed workers. Norwegian official sources told the press, “there are regular meetings [with the trade unions] with a certain periodicity since the pandemic began.”

In January, Norwegian proposed to lay off 485 workers

by cancelling their long-haul flights. USO made clear they were prepared to accept this. Its representative Ernesto Iglesias told the press he “hope[d] that in the next few days the airline will present its redundancy scheme proposal and detail its plans for the short-haul fleet where they also announce layoffs.” The unions did not even call token protests or short duration stoppages, waiting for the company to formalise the layoffs on April 26.

The magnitude of the redundancy scheme was predictable. Norwegian is in a global restructuring process and in recent months has been carrying out similar actions in all the countries it operates in. The trade unions in those countries have, like USO and SEPLA, done nothing to defend jobs.

In the UK, after eliminating long-haul flights, Norwegian laid off 1,100 pilots and cabin crew members at London Gatwick (LGW) airport. The Unite union, which represented 700 of those workers, said only that they were not consulted about the job losses and that workers were owed outstanding wages and redundancy pay.

Beyond offering to provide legal support to workers, Unite did nothing more than appeal to the Tory government while launching a nationalist campaign to prevent workers from waging a necessary united struggle across borders. “Unite has warned ministers that the kind of support for the industry seen in competitor nations is desperately needed here. It is now absolutely imperative that government steps in,” said its regional officer Jamie Major.

Facing no opposition, Norwegian management went on the offensive. In February, the company's bailed-out UK branch told over 1,000 laid-off employees that it could not afford to pay them their final wages or other redundancy payments. In a final insult, Norwegian told the workers they could hold on to their uniforms and branded cabin bags as a “keepsake” of their time with the airline.

In Italy, Norwegian's 322 employees were fired in mid-February, again without notice, after its Italian subsidiary went into liquidation. The company did not even bother to activate the public aid that workers can benefit from in the event of dismissal.

The Italian Federation of Transport Workers (Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Trasporti—FILT), the Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori —CISL) and Italian Union of Transport Workers (Unione Italiana dei Lavoratori dei Trasporti—UILT), issued a statement of surprise: “Norwegian, unexpectedly and without even consulting with the unions, has decided to leave hundreds of its Italian-based employees on the street, along with their families, in the midst of a global pandemic”. Their only response was to hold a rally in front of the Norwegian embassy.

The following day, Norwegian laid off 286 employees in France, when its French subsidiary declared bankruptcy. The unions again claimed to be caught unawares. Workers were informed in a simple text message. As in the Italian case, the company virtually disappeared, still owing salaries and compensation to its workers. To this day they remain unpaid, despite the firm receiving €8 million in aid from the French state.

The trade unions limited themselves to taking the company to court. According to Alexandra Lafargue, union representative of the UNAC cabin crew union in France, they were unable to even apply for unemployment insurance because the liquidators in Ireland—where Norwegian based its French and Italian subsidiaries—“did not give us any documents”.

In the United States, Norwegian laid off 514 employees. The airline’s subsidiary in the US had been widely criticized for using an agency based in Singapore, OSM Aviation, to hire employees with low-salaries and on short-term contracts.

In Finland, the company has fired 283 workers in similar fashion. In Sweden, it has reduced the workforce from 733 to 59 employees, and in Denmark, from 734 to 55. In Norway, where the airline has received financial aid from the government worth hundreds of millions of euros, it is for now maintaining its structure and some 2,000 jobs.

Norwegian co-founder Bjorn Kjos and OSM Aviation owner Bjorn Tore Larsen plan to operate with a new low-cost airline in the US by December, Norse Atlantic. Reflecting the mass desperation in the industry due to the huge number of layoffs worldwide, the *Wall Street*

Journal reported that on its first day Norse received 20 job applications a minute. In one week, it received 8,000 applications.

Norse has already received the approval of Sara Nelson, the international president of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA)-CWA, AFL-CIO. Despite the mass redundancies imposed by Norwegian in many of its global bases. Nelson said of Norse Atlantic, “We believe that Norse can provide good jobs as flight attendants to respect labour rights in the US and Europe”. Nelson added that the airline was happy to work with the AFA.

No wonder. The AFA has presided over tens of thousands of job cuts in America, including American Airlines (25,000), United Airlines (36,000), and Delta Air Lines (17,000). Their only response has been to plead for another government-backed corporate bailout for the airlines, like its European counterparts.

The mass and global jobs cull at Norwegian Air Shuttle reveals the complete inability of the trade unions to defend jobs, salaries and conditions. To fight back, workers must turn to the only allies they have—their colleagues in other airlines and airports, including the tens of thousands of other workers under redundancy schemes, and the wider international working class.

Workers need new combat organisations independent of the trade unions. The International Committee of the Fourth International is calling for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The IWA-RFC will bring together workers from all over the world to confront the attacks of the corporations and carry out an offensive based on the needs of workers not the accumulation of profits for the super-rich.



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