

Russian flight attendants carry out sickout against dangerous working conditions at Rossiya Airlines

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8 August 2021

Flight attendants in Russia took part in a series of sickouts in late July and early August at the Rossiya Airlines, forcing the cancellations of dozens of flights. In Russia, airline workers are by law prohibited from officially going on strike.

Workers are infuriated over miserable pay, woeful understaffing and the massive spread of the coronavirus exacerbated by company policies. Flight attendants are forced to fly for weeks on end without a break, with one flight attendant passing out on the job because of extreme exhaustion. Because of the insufferable conditions, an average of 20 flight attendants are quitting their jobs every day.

Rossiya, a subsidiary of Russia's state-owned Aeroflot company, refuses to acknowledge that a strike took place. However, in a sign of extreme nervousness, on Thursday it announced "loyalty premiums" of 25,000 rubles (about \$340) for its employees, provided they are fully "available for scheduling" between August 5 and September 10.

Aeroflot kukhnia (Aeroflot kitchen), a popular channel for airline workers on the Russian social media site Telegram, which has covered the strike and published information on working conditions, has called upon workers to reject the offer and on passengers to boycott the airline. It also called for the removal of responsible managers whom it described as "potential murderers."

Aeroflot kukhnia, apparently run by flight attendants, obtained the internal document outlining the new policy, which is circulating with no signature, no stamp, and "not even the name and position of those who worked it out and confirmed it," according to the channel. "Overall, it does not have any legal legitimacy

and not a single flight attendant will be able to contest or demand anything on this basis."

Based on the document, workers would only receive the sum if they are fully "available for scheduling" regardless of their state of health, in other words, even if they are infected with COVID-19. Thousands of Russian airline workers have fallen ill during the pandemic, especially over the summer, when the country experienced a massive surge caused by the highly infectious Delta variant.

According to the aviation workers union, a staggering one third of the total workforce of flight attendants have either been infected or are recovering from COVID-19. Russia is still recording an average of well over 20,000 new cases per day, the fourth highest number in the world. In spite of this, virtually all public health measures have been lifted as vaccination rates stall, as is the case in western Europe and the United States.

"How dangerous will it be for the average passenger to fly with Rossiya, especially for those who are immuno-compromised?" Aeroflot kukhnia asked. "This is not even manslaughter, but an entirely different article of the criminal code."

In an earlier post explaining the reasons for the strike, the channel noted, "Not a single flight attendant has seen the salary that management has now been promising for five years. 80,000 rubles [\$1,089] is a fairy tale even for those flying more than 100 hours. For 70 hours of flight time, you'll get 50,000 rubles [\$680] and even that is not guaranteed." Instructors who have to teach new flight attendants are paid only for 40 hours of work but often work up to 80 hours or more. The channel added that workers were subject to

“constant slander by management. You are no one, you are meat.”

A central grievance of flight attendants is also that the company routinely forces them to work in violation of safety rules, endangering their own lives and those of passengers. But in the case of accidents, it is the workers who face legal repercussions.

On social media, the sickouts won significant support. One airline worker wrote, “Great job. That’s what needs to be done, it cannot be everyone by themselves, but we must act together as united brothers in aviation. To hell with all those who scare and insult you. The fight is now in the open, fear nothing, you are correct. Period.”

Russia’s airline industry is notoriously unsafe, and plane crashes that kill hundreds of people are a regular occurrence. The unsafe conditions in the airline industry are stark example of the consequences of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

Nationwide, Even before the pandemic, more than four workers died on average in work-related accidents each day, for a total of 1613 deaths in 2019, one of the highest industrial mortality rates in the world. The official figure for work-related, non-fatal accidents is 23,000. However, a recent investigation by investigative journalism outlet Istories found that the real number of safety-related accidents in Russian industries are between 22 and 44 times higher than officially reported.

The flight attendants’ strike no doubt has provoked enormous concerns in the ruling oligarchy. It is a clear indication of growing social and political opposition in the Russian working class amidst an upsurge of working class struggles internationally. In late June, autoworkers at the PSMA Rus’ plant in Kaluga engaged in a work stoppage to protest the unbearable heat at the factory.

The flight attendants’ strike comes just a few weeks before Russia’s parliamentary elections in September. Well aware of the explosive conditions created by the pandemic, the Kremlin has worked out an agreement “For safe elections,” according to which candidates are not allowed to address the pandemic. The agreement was signed by the ruling United Russia party, the Greens, the far-right Rodina and Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and a few other parties.

As it has around the world, the pandemic, which has cost hundreds of thousands of lives in Russia, has played a catalyzing role in fueling the class struggle. And, as everywhere, the unions are playing a critical role in suppressing any struggles by the working class in defense of their interests and their lives.

The Russian unions across aviation and other industries have maintained conspicuous silence about the sickouts, seeking to isolate the strikers. The union of flight attendants has not even condemned the “offer” by the company for workers to endanger their own lives and those of passengers for a miserable 25,000 rubles.

The trade unions in Russia have all emerged either directly out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s official unions or out of attempts by layers of the bureaucracy and middle class to set up so-called “independent” unions to gain a larger share of the spoils in the process of privatization. They are complicit in the social catastrophe that capitalist restoration has wrought and are integrated into the state and various oligarchy-controlled political parties.

Workers in Russia can only develop a fight for their own interests and in defense of their lives and health by establishing rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers’ Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees, that are independent from these corporatist organizations. We urge workers in the Russian aviation industry who are interested in discussing this perspective to contact the WSWs today.



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