

“Truce” imposed on Polish air traffic controllers’ struggle

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Polish air traffic controllers have had a “truce” imposed on their struggle. At the last minute, to prevent a widespread shutdown of Polish airspace from May 1, the air traffic controllers’ union ZZKRL and air traffic control authority PANSa agreed on a temporary contract.

On Thursday evening they signed an agreement that will only last until July 10. According to the union, it is “a truce, not the end of the war.” The time will be used to better prepare the attack on the air traffic controllers and undermine their willingness to fight.

Polish air traffic controllers are fighting back against the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic being dumped on them—their salaries cut by up to 70 percent, workloads increased, and safety rules undermined.

The air traffic control authority, which is backed by the Polish government, is financed by the fees levied from airlines flying to and over Poland. Due to the slump in air traffic because of the pandemic, its revenues had dropped significantly. In 2021, they were 43 percent lower than in 2019, and well below its operating costs.

PANSa president Janusz Janiszewski, who took office in 2018, sought from the start to pass the losses on to the nearly 600 air traffic controllers the agency employs. These workers were responsible for managing nearly a million flights a year in 2019 before the pandemic.

In 2020, air traffic controllers’ pay had fallen by an average of 15 percent. Janiszewski boasted to *Polska Times* that PANSa had cut its budget by over a billion z?oty (€214 million) compared to original plans. “In 2020-21, we optimised costs, including staff costs, by 25 percent.”

While the air traffic controllers and millions of other Polish workers have been forced to bleed because of the pandemic, the financial oligarchy has enriched itself, as in other countries. Micha? So?owow, Poland’s richest man for years, increased his fortune by 2 billion z?oty (about €400 million) from 2019 to 2021. According to *Forbes*, he now controls \$4 billion, twice as much as in 2016.

To enforce further wage cuts of up to 70 percent, PANSa then sent out notices of dismissal pending a change of contract to the air traffic controllers earlier this year. They were effectively sacked when the notice period expired at the end of April, with the offer to be rehired on much worse terms from May 1.

But PANSa, the government and the union working closely with them, had not counted on the willingness of the air traffic controllers to fight, demonstrating their ability to paralyse air traffic and thus counter the social attacks on behalf of the entire working class.

The vast majority simply refused to sign the new contracts and work on the worse conditions. At Warsaw’s two airports, Chopin and Modlin, 170 out of 208 air traffic controllers refused to sign. This

threatened a widespread breakdown of air traffic control from May 1, when most of the dismissals came into effect.

Eurocontrol, the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation, warned of around a thousand flight cancellations a day due to the dispute in Poland. The situation was serious, as not only would connections to Poland be affected but also flights through Polish airspace, a spokesperson for the EU Commission said.

For the two Warsaw airports alone, a reduction in daily flights from 510 to 170 was predicted. The Polish government published an emergency flight plan, according to which only 32 routes would be served by eleven selected airlines from Sunday. The main airport, Chopin, would only be open from 9.30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and the smaller Modlin would only offer two connections a day.

Behind the scenes, efforts to break off the conflict were in full swing. PANSa representatives and union officials met almost daily, but nothing was made public about the content of the talks. Mostly, only short joint press releases were published, emphasising that the talks were being “conducted objectively in an atmosphere of mutual respect.”

The government also intervened in the dispute in the person of Infrastructure Minister Andrzej Adamczyk. PANSa head Janiszewski had to resign in March and was replaced by Anita Oleksiak. At the same time, the government threatened to deploy the military, citing the war in neighbouring Ukraine.

Early last week, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stressed, “The responsibility of air traffic controllers must be emphasised in the context of the very, very difficult time we are operating in,” referring to the central role Poland plays in NATO’s proxy war against Russia.

The eastern Polish airports of Rzeszów and Lublin are important hubs for the supply of weapons to Ukraine. Rzeszów, which is only a two-hour drive from Lviv in Ukraine, has at times been so crowded with military cargo planes that some had to be diverted, the *Wall Street Journal* reported. Since early March, the US has also stationed a Patriot air defence system there.

In an interview with Radio ZET, Deputy Infrastructure Minister Marcin Hora?a threatened that “all means will be used to ensure ...control of the airspace.”

Ex-PANSa head Janiszewski had already declared on March 19, “Currently, half of Poland’s sky is reserved for the work of the army, air defence and allied forces.” In the event of the “worst scenario, i.e., the introduction of martial law or war in Poland,” PANSa would become part of the Polish air defence system.

The agreement reached between the air traffic control authority and the union has averted the flight cancellations for now. “We are no longer threatened with paralysis of air traffic,” assured Infrastructure

Minister Adamczyk. The air traffic controllers wanted to “work and fulfill their current tasks. In the event of a war beyond the eastern border, Polish airspace will also serve to support Ukraine. There will be no restrictions on the number of flights.”

Adamczyk said they would pay the same salaries as before the pandemic until July 10. Meanwhile, negotiations on new pay scales, work rules and other regulations are to continue.

There has been no press release from the union so far, and it is still unclear how it will sell the deal to its members. It has clearly sided with the government, agreeing to an industrial truce in the face of the Ukraine war, and stalling the controllers' struggle. Because of the drastic level of inflation, now over 12 percent, paying the old salaries is equivalent to a massive wage cut.

PANSA has also gained three months to better prepare the attack on the controllers and to provide replacements for the recalcitrant and supposedly too expensive controllers.

The Polish media have accompanied the dispute with the usual inflammatory commentary, portraying the air traffic controllers as a well-off elite who are never satisfied. This is not only factually wrong, but also politically reactionary. Precisely because the air traffic controllers have a strong position, the attack on them serves as a prelude to an offensive against the entire working class.

A cautionary example is the busting of the American air traffic controllers' union, PATCO, in 1981 by then US President Ronald Reagan. At that time, Reagan fired all 13,000 air traffic controllers who were fighting for better wages and working conditions, and who were then isolated and sold out by the other unions.

The busting of PATCO was the prelude to endless attacks on the American working class that continue to this day. These have massively lowered the living standards of working people and led to unprecedented levels of social inequality. While millions of American workers can no longer make ends meet, the wealth of the richest US citizen, Elon Musk, equates to six months of Poland's GDP.

Moreover, incomes are only one point of contention in the current dispute in Poland. The air traffic controllers are also primarily concerned about the safety of passengers, for whom they are responsible. As in the pandemic, where it refused to implement a life-saving lockdown to ensure the profits kept flowing, the ruling class is subordinating people's lives to its capitalist interests.

To achieve his cost-cutting goals, PANSA boss Janiszewski had already attacked not only the salaries but also the air traffic controllers' working conditions. He expanded shift work and cut sick, weekend, and holiday pay. Most drastically, shift work was extended from eight to twelve hours and “Single Person Operations” (SPO) introduced, whereby one controller alone monitors air traffic.

In early February 2021, when two air traffic controllers spoke out about the safety risks involved, in a report by broadcaster TVN24, PANSA sacked them without notice. Since one of them, Franciszek Teodorczyk, is a board member of the ZZKRL union, and union leaders are subject to special protection against dismissal, PANSA summarily revoked the union's recognition and reported it to the public prosecutor's office. Legal proceedings are still ongoing.

The systematic increase of air traffic controllers' workloads has already led to several near-disasters:

- In December 2020, President Duda's plane took off without the assistance of an air traffic controller, as he was only on duty until 10 p.m. at Zielona Góra's smaller airport.
- In February 2021, the air traffic controller in Katowice, working in SPO mode, gave permission to land even though a repair team was

working on the runway.

- In March 2021, an air traffic controller did not answer a pilot's call for nine minutes because he had fallen asleep; an hour later, he fell asleep again.
- In May 2021, a Warsaw air traffic controller cleared a taxiway for take-off that was already occupied by another aircraft. He was later found to have alcohol in his blood.
- In December 2021, an air traffic controller at the airport in Krakow became unconscious. A colleague was able to rush to his aid, but traffic at the airport was not stopped.

Air traffic controllers report that PANSA management is trying to create a climate of fear and intimidation to sweep mistakes and shortcomings under the carpet. It has replaced critical and experienced controllers with younger and lower paid ones. The new contract presented to the controllers is designed to enshrine the intolerable and life-threatening working conditions.

The union and the air traffic control authority must not be allowed to use the “truce” to enforce this contract in a slightly moderated form. The ZZKRL—like all other Polish and international unions—works closely with the government and accepts the profit-logic of capitalism. Air traffic controllers must therefore build independent action committees and link up their struggle with other workers in Poland and internationally.

There is hardly any other industry that is as internationally interwoven as air transport. It is expected that the volume of traffic in European airspace will significantly exceed pre-pandemic levels in the coming months. In addition, there is a significant increase in military air traffic because of the Ukraine war.

However, personnel levels have been cut back everywhere—in air traffic control, among aircrew and on the ground—and now profits are to be raised by a corresponding increase in workloads. Resistance to this is growing everywhere.

In the last month alone, air traffic controllers and ground staff went on strike in France (27 March to 4 April), in Germany (several warning strikes were held in March), in Italy (11 and 22 April), in Greece (6 April) and in Peru (16 April).

The social situation is tense to bursting point in other areas of Poland, as well. In recent years, there have been repeated large protests and strikes in the health and education sectors. The mass demonstrations against the reactionary restricting of the abortion law brought the fermenting anger against the PiS government to the surface.

These struggles must be united. This requires a socialist perspective that places the interests of society above the profit interests of capital.



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