

Air travel chaos deepens as airlines pursue profits at expense of jobs and living standards

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Workers across Europe have responded with industrial action and strike ballots to an onslaught on their jobs, wages and conditions by the airline industry.

Profit gouging by the aviation industry has led to a catastrophic situation of queues, delays and flight cancellations at airports across the continent, with hundreds of thousands of passengers stranded and with many losing thousands of euros and pounds.

This week, ground crew and firefighters struck at Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport and at several smaller airports in France. Italian air traffic controllers and workers at budget airlines have held four-hour stoppages. In the spring, airline workers struck in Poland and at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, third-busiest in Europe.

More strikes are being prepared, including at London's main Heathrow Airport and at Scandinavian carrier SAS AB across Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

The European airline crisis afflicting millions is entirely due to the rush by the ruling elite to recklessly end public health measures under conditions in which, to shore up their profits and stock market valuations, they had already decimated the infrastructure of the industry during the pandemic.

Under conditions in which airline traffic is back to 95 percent of what it was pre-COVID, many airlines and airports cannot function since the vast majority of almost 200,000 European aviation staff made redundant over the past two years have not been replaced. This is just the tip of a global iceberg. The *Financial Times* reported this week, "According to research by consultancy Oxford Economics, compared with pre-Covid levels, there were 2.3mn fewer jobs in the aviation industry by September 2021. These figures include a 29 percent fall in contracted staff at airports, such as ground-handlers, where 1.7mn jobs were lost."

Euronews website cited Aéroport de Paris executive Augustin de Romanet who "estimated that Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport and nearby Orly airport had a combined workforce shortage of 4,000 employees."

It is now common at the UK's main airports to see queues of people overflowing outside terminals. For many this is just the start of what they describe as an "inhumane" experience, producing distressing scenes. Many waiting to board what are in effect flying COVID-incubation tubes have been forced to sleep in terminals across the continent, with no support from the airlines. The BBC reported that one man, a diabetic who takes lifesaving medication related to a triple heart-bypass, was left abandoned in Amsterdam for three days. He said he had been "thrown under a bus" by EasyJet, with the airline cancelling two flights at short notice.

Nothing works at the airports, where staff shortages are acute including at security checks. Training and vetting new staff to replace those let go during the pandemic takes around three months.

Arriving at destinations, passengers have been forced to wait for hours to collect their luggage. Footage posted last week showed passengers at Manchester Airport climbing through a baggage carousel curtain in an attempt to retrieve stranded luggage.

The person filming the scenes told the *Manchester Evening News*, "I do not think that anyone got their bags, but I don't know, and the police came armed. They were closing shutters and walking around making the point. People were just trying to get their own bags back."

A passenger told the newspaper, "At first, when we landed, we had to wait for the steps to get off the flight because there was no people around to do that

apparently.” After getting through passport control, “we went to the baggage reclaim hall. There were hundreds of people there and luggage everywhere on the floor. Some of it was dated from May 27—it had been there for three days.”

One of Manchester Airport’s main baggage handlers is Swissport, which operates at 285 airports globally. In a cost-cutting operation, it shed 20,000 of its 65,000 strong workforce during the pandemic. In June 2020, Swissport announced it would lay off 4,500 staff in Britain, 53 percent of its entire national workforce. Six months later, with the collaboration of the trade unions, it had pushed through almost 3,200 job cuts. Only now, well into the holiday season, the same firm declares its plan to recruit another 30,000 workers to deal with its self-created mess.

Airlines are responding to the crisis by demanding even more from their workforce. József Váradi, chief executive of Wizz Air, the Hungarian-based budget airline, responded to reports of his staff’s crippling fatigue by insisting they get over it. This includes pilots who are responsible for the safety of thousands of people. The *Financial Times* reported that Váradi issued an internal video briefing on staff shortages forcing cancellations of Wizz flights in which he warned, “We cannot run this business when every fifth person on a base reports sickness because the person is fatigued. We are all fatigued, but sometimes it is required to take the extra mile.”

Airlines have massively overbooked flights to try to recoup profits lost during the first two years of the COVID pandemic. One can only imagine the horrors that could result from such a policy, as drained staff, who cannot cope as it is, fight a losing battle to deal with overwhelming numbers of passengers.

The situation will only worsen, with the *inews* site citing comments from the easyJet branch of the French SNPL pilots’ union warning the airline that without extra staff being recruited their “mental health is at stake.” SNPL declared, “Literally hundreds of employees in distress have fed back how chaotic our operations have become recently, to unprecedented levels... We are actually convinced that our disruption hasn’t even peaked yet and frankly this is a frightening prospect.”

According to the FT, “during the peak months between July and September it [Wizz Air] would fly 40

percent more than in 2019.” All that counts is the bottom line with Váradi salivating, “Summer is going to be profitable, but we will [have to wait and] see how profitable it will be.”

The chaotic and criminal herding together of millions of people at dysfunctional airports who have ditched every safety measure—under conditions in which not only is the pandemic not over, but even more virulent COVID strains are in circulation—will lead to yet more death and long-term illness. In Britain COVID rates have shot up as the summer holiday season has got underway. In the week ending June 2, according to the Office for National Statistics, around 990,000 people had COVID (1.5 percent of the population). This represents around one in 65 people, up from about one in 70 the week before. The surge is being driven by Omicron variants BA.4 and BA.5.

Enough of this criminality and chaos! The crisis in the global airline industry cannot be solved based on what is in the interests of the capitalist class and on a national basis. It must be resolved by a common struggle of aviation workers globally against the capitalist corporations whose only concern is raking in profits.

This requires aviation workers taking up a new perspective in rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy which in all countries works to secure the revenues of airline operators at the expense of workers’ jobs and working conditions. Socialist measures, above all rational planning, must be implemented through the expropriation of airlines companies and their transformation into democratically controlled public institutions that serve the needs of society not shareholder profit.



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