

Airport strikes hit Paris and spread across Europe

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A one-day strike yesterday by ground crew and firemen at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris forced the cancellation of one-quarter of flights through the airport, one of Europe's largest. Workers were demanding a €300 monthly raise amid spiraling increases in the cost of living in France and internationally.

They also demanded more staff, as layoffs during the pandemic have left airports unable to deal with the current surge in air travel. The Workers Force (FO) union estimated that 15,000 airport workers lost their jobs in the last two years, leaving the remaining "workers under pressure." The Airports of Paris (ADP) authority is currently looking to fill 4,000 positions.

Sylvia, a security screener at Charles de Gaulle Airport, told reporters: "All of us struggle to make it to the end of the month; all of us have debts we need to make payments on." She noted that security staff make "only a few euros above the minimum wage."

Strikes also took place at smaller regional airports in France. Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union officials at Carcassonne Airport explained its one-day strike on June 8, telling *L'Indépendant*: "We want our tasks to correspond really to what we were hired to do. Each time staff levels fall, management gives workers tasks not in their contracts. ... Management is making no concessions. The director said he will announce something on June 17."

Airport strikes in France are part of an escalating wave of struggles across Europe and internationally by airport and airline workers, a powerful section of the working class that can rapidly shut down broad sections of the world economy.

The day before the strike in France, airline and air traffic controllers in Italy walked out at airports across the country. Some 68 flights in Milan Malpensa, 40 in

Milan Bergamo, and 15 each in Linate and Turin were canceled as air traffic controllers and workers at Alitalia, RyanAir, EasyJet, Volotea and other airlines went on strike over pay and working conditions. Controllers strikes downed operations at Milan, Turin, Verona, Genoa, Cuneo, Bologna and Parma airports.

Italian union officials told the *Corriere della Sera* that the airline workers strike was against "violation of minimum wage rules set by the national contract, continuing depressed wage levels, arbitrary reductions in pay, non-payment of sick days, the corporation's refusal to give mandatory vacation days during the summer season, and the lack of water and meals for staff."

RyanAir broke off contract negotiations on June 8 in Spain, where dozens of airports could go on strike; it also faces threats of strikes in Italy, Portugal, France and Belgium.

Beyond Italy and France, airport strikes have spread across much of Europe in recent weeks, as airlines have massively overbooked passengers to try to recoup profits lost in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when few passengers were traveling. This intensifies infection risks, as a new wave of COVID-19 starts across Europe, and governments abandon all public health measures against contagion. All this creates impossible working conditions for airport and airline workers.

Last month, International Air Transport Association (IATA) Director Willie Walsh insisted that air traffic would return to pre-pandemic figures by 2023, despite staff shortages and renewed waves of infection.

"We're seeing very strong bookings. Certainly all the airline CEOs that I'm talking to are seeing not just good demand for year-end travel, but they continue to see demand as they looked through the year," Walsh

said. He shrugged off warnings about high oil prices and strikes, insisting that the focus should be on profits. “I don’t think we should be distracted from the fact that we are seeing a strong recovery,” he told the Irish *Independent*.

This ruthless search for profits at workers’ expense has provoked a wave of strikes across Europe that could intensify over the summer.

In April, Polish air traffic controllers defeated a threat of mass sackings, walking off the job to overwhelmingly reject government demands for a wage cut of up to 70 percent. The Polish government was stunned by the threat of a total shutdown of air traffic in a country centrally located for the NATO war against Russia. It decided to bide its time, temporarily withdrew its wage cut demand and used the services of the ZZKRL controllers union to end the strike.

At Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, baggage handlers and security personnel could go back on strike during the summer after Dutch unions shut down their strikes in April and May. Dutch union official Joost van Doesburg admitted that workers are still overwhelmed with work and angry: “Something big has to happen. I am shocked, and the members are frustrated. It is completely out of control. Staff members are literally falling over.”

This week, balloting began among workers at London’s Heathrow Airport on whether to strike this summer. Unions for ground staff at the airport agreed to a 10 percent pay cut during the pandemic, which they justified citing the fall in the number of passengers. But management has since reinstated its normal bloated salaries while continuing to freeze workers’ wages despite the global surge in inflation. The vote result is expected on June 23.

On June 8, Lufthansa announced the cancellation of 900 flights in July, issuing a statement that declared: “The entire air industry, especially in Europe, is currently suffering from bottlenecks and staff shortages. This affects airport, passenger assistance, air traffic control, and airline staff.” Frankfurt Airport, Lufthansa’s central hub, has warned that staff shortages could lead to major delays in what is Germany’s largest airport.

This followed a one-day strike in March by German airport security screeners that shut down all departures from Frankfurt, Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, Hanover,

Stuttgart, Cologne/Bonn and Düsseldorf airports. While unions ended the action, none of the workers’ underlying grievances have been addressed.

The key question facing airport workers is the need to unify their struggles internationally and break free of the debilitating, national framework imposed by union bureaucracies that work closely with management and capitalist governments and seek to defeat their own members. For this, workers need to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to coordinate and lead their actions.

The various national unions are utterly bankrupt. They divide the working class along national lines and sell out each strike piecemeal. In this way, explosive social opposition is bottled up, suppressed and subordinated to the unions’ maneuvers with capitalist governments.

A unified European strike of airline workers and air traffic controllers could shut down much of the continent’s economy and demonstrate the vast social power of the working class. It could not only impose improved working conditions and wages, but set off a movement in the broader working class against the problems of imperialist war, the criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and social inequality and the surging cost of living.

The basis of such a movement would be the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the fight for a socialist perspective to subordinate socially created wealth to social need.



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