

Unite and GMB sit on strike mandate by Heathrow workers to reverse 10 percent wage cut at British Airways

By Tony Robson
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Unite and the GMB union are sitting on a strike mandate by over 700 check-in staff and ground handling agents at Heathrow airport demanding the reversal of a 10 percent wage cut imposed by British Airways (BA) during the pandemic.

The airline workers are opposing the provocative decision of the UK's leading airline to reverse wage cuts for managers but not ground staff.

Both unions were handed overwhelming mandates for strike action nearly two weeks ago on June 23. The majority in favour of strike action among Unite and GMB members was 94.7 percent and 95 percent respectively.

Unite, which represents 500 of the check-in staff, issued a press release on July 1 stating, "Strike dates have yet to be announced as the union has offered BA a window of opportunity to resolve Unite's concerns or trigger strike action."

The GMB told *inews* it had originally intended to meet with its members on Monday of last week to discuss strike action in July and announce dates. Instead, it entered emergency talks with the company alongside Unite. The company reportedly offered only a one-off 10 percent payment rather than permanent restoration to the full wage rate. Both unions remain in talks, seeking to stave off the action during the summer holiday season.

According to the union, A-scale staff have suffered a loss in salaries of up to £3,500-£5,000 per worker. BA's parent company, International Airlines Group (IAG), which owns Aer Lingus and Iberia, announced last month it expects a return to full profitability by the end of the year.

IAG chief executive Luis Gallego stated, "We expect to be profitable from the second quarter onwards and for the full year. Premium leisure continues to be the strongest performing segment and business travel is at its highest

level since the start of the pandemic."

BA's decision to permanently slash wages has exacerbated the cost-of-living crisis facing workers, with inflation reaching a 40 year high of 11.7 percent.

Unite has emphasised it is merely seeking a restoration of wages to pre-pandemic rates, not a pay increase to match inflation. The GMB's position is the same, albeit with a 10 percent bonus for this year. Both unions have declared that a settlement on such minimal demands is in the company's interests, to forestall wider industrial action.

Unite national officer Oliver Richardson stated, "Unless it gets a grip and backs its staff, BA is fast heading towards a summer of strikes." GMB national officer Nadine Houghton warned that industrial action is starting to "spread like wildfire" as thousands more BA staff enter struggle, including engineers at Gatwick, Heathrow and Scotland and call-centre staff in Newcastle and Manchester. But the union is restricting workers' demands for action to a consultation ballot.

The mere prospect of strikes by airline workers met open hostility from Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy. Asked whether Labour would back such action he declared "No, no, no!" Lammy falsely claimed the dispute was over a pay increase, not restoration of a 10 percent pay-cut--such is Labour's determination to impose the class war onslaught against workers.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham was quick to posture against Lammy, "Supporting bad bosses is a new low for Labour and once again shows that politicians have failed. It is now down to the trade unions to defend working people. We are their only voice."

Her attempt to present the unions as a counterweight to Labour's alignment with big business is false to the core. Since the end of January, Unite has been in closed door

talks with Coventry Labour council during a pay dispute with 70 refuse drivers while the council has conducted a major strike breaking operation.

Unite is concerned that Labour's open support for BA management is undercutting its attempts to defuse industrial action and re-establish its corporatist relations with the company.

The company has relied on the services of Unite and the GMB to offload the financial burden of the pandemic onto the shoulders of BA workers.

BA cut around 10,000 jobs during the first year of the pandemic, even as it received millions in Covid hand-outs from the Johnson government to furlough around 22,000 of its 42,000 workforce. Unite and the GMB had claimed the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (in which the government paid 80 percent of workers' wages) would prevent redundancies. But in April 2020, BA unveiled its "fire and rehire" agenda for massive cuts to jobs, terms and conditions. Unite appealed to BA that its attempts to rewrite contracts were "un-British" and urged company executives to establish a "sector-wide, crisis support plan" for aviation "with representation from unions, businesses and government". Unite then brokered a deal with BA resulting in the destruction of 4,000 jobs, a 15 percent pay-cut and a new fleet structure that changed employment contracts overnight, dividing workers and degrading terms and conditions. "Fire and rehire" was achieved via the backdoor, delivered by the union.

Unite claims its latest June 28 pay deal with the Scandinavian airline SAS Connect is "game changing" and can be used to apply pressure on BA to reverse course. The agreement covers cabin crew based at Heathrow who are employed by the airline's contractor CAE Crewing Services Ltd. The headline pay increase of 18 percent includes immediate restoration of a 10 percent pay cut. However, this will be implemented in three phases. The immediate 11 percent hike includes only a 1 percent increase until November when an additional 4 percent will follow, with the remaining 3 percent paid in March 2023.

Unite regional officer Lindsey Olliver spelt out company's overriding concern, "Without this deal CAE would not have been able to retain staff in the UK's increasingly competitive aviation sector."

Unite and the GMB are dedicated to the continued suppression of the class struggle. They are working to block a summer of discontent and prevent a counteroffensive by workers against the employers and Johnson government.

The unions fear that renewed militancy and opposition to rampant profiteering by "flag ship" companies such as BA will undercut their pro-business agenda and link up with a powerful upsurge of airline workers internationally.

Airports worldwide have been engulfed by chaos as governments have lifted travel restrictions, abandoning measures to suppress the pandemic. Basic airline infrastructure has been gutted through the mass culling of jobs as airline companies propped up their stock market value. Their wrecking operation has created a disaster as airline traffic returns to 95 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

Over the past fortnight, Ryanair airline workers in Belgium, Italy and Portugal have mounted stoppages while the action in Spain faced the imposition of draconian anti-strike laws. There has been strike action at Air France, Transavia and Brussels Airlines and demonstrations by pilots in the US at Southwest Airlines over stress and fatigue with cabin crew at Southwest voting to strike after rejecting a below inflation pay offer.

In reviewing the developing movement across Europe and the US, a WSWS Perspective explained, "The nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the unions, which pit workers against each other in a fratricidal race to the bottom, have led airline workers to a dead end. New rank-and-file controlled organizations are needed to coordinate their struggles across national boundaries against these global corporations. That is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded last year.

"An industrial counter-offensive of the working class must be combined with a conscious political fight against capitalism.

"The crisis and failure of capitalism is now apparent for all to see: In the record surge of inflation, shortages of essential commodities, the ongoing pandemic, and the squandering of society's resources on the enrichment of the corporate and financial oligarchy and their mad plans for World War III. The global airline industry must be transformed into a public utility, democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class, as part of the socialist reorganization of the global economy."



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