

Ryanair on strike in Spain as airline strikes spread across Europe

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European airline workers are continuing strikes, defying state threats to ban strikes using reactionary “minimum service” laws against which unions are organizing no opposition.

Spain’s USO (Unión Sindical Obrera) and SITCPLA (Sindicato Independiente de Tripulantes de Cabina de Pasajeros de Líneas Aéreas) unions have called twelve 24-hour stoppages for 1,900 Ryanair cabin crew members at the company’s ten airports in Spain in July. Workers are striking over pay and working conditions. The six-day Ryanair crew strike will reportedly affect almost 2,650 operations and nearly 400,000 passengers.

Workers are striking in defiance of the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government’s demand that workers provide “minimum service” of between 57 and 82 percent of flights, depending on the airport and route. Confident of government complicity, Ryanair last month threatened to sack all strikers.

USO and SITCPLA are pathetically appealing to the PSOE-Podemos government, especially Podemos Deputy Prime Minister and Labour Minister Yolanda Díaz. In a joint statement, they implored Díaz: “Do not allow Ryanair to violate labor legislation and constitutional rights such as the right to strike and act against a company that does not abide by court rulings, does not comply with the law and uses fear, coercion and threats with its employees.”

Unsurprisingly, Díaz refused to reply. Her anti-worker record is notorious: she spearheaded the back-to-work campaign with the trade unions during the pandemic that led to millions of infections in workplaces and the deaths of thousands of workers and their family members. She also passed a reactionary labour reform extending the widely-hated one approved by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) in 2012.

Díaz belongs to a government that has repeatedly

attacked strikes. In November, it deployed armoured vehicles and riot police against striking metalworkers in Cadiz; in April, it mobilised 23,000 police to crush a truckers strike against rising fuel prices amid NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine. Two weeks ago, Díaz cynically gave her condolences after Spanish and Moroccan police ran riot, killing at least 37 refugees on the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla.

Initially, the unions at Ryanair only planned 24-hour stoppages in June. However, under rising pressure from workers, USO extended the strikes, which it blamed on the “indifference of the company.” Trying to split up the action and minimize its impact, the unions have called for 24-hour stoppages that will start today and continue intermittently on 13-15, 18-21, and 25-28 July.

Setting out to divide its members, USO called for separate strike days for its EasyJet members, who are fighting for similar demands. At EasyJet, Europe’s second budget airline after Ryanair, USO has called for six new strikes on July 15-17 and 29-31 to demand a 40 percent increase in their basic salary.

On only one day, July 15, will Ryanair and Easyjet strikes coincide, even though workers are defending the same demands: improved working conditions, higher salaries to offset inflation levels of 10 percent, remuneration for training hours and supplements for seniority.

The combined strength of airline workers at Ryanair and Easyjet was demonstrated last month. The strikes at both companies left at least 241 flights canceled and 1,440 delayed: 26 cancellations and 185 delays at Ryanair, and 215 and 1,255 at EasyJet. Most EasyJet cancellations were to or from Malaga-Costa del Sol airport, but operations at Barcelona-El Prat and Palma

de Mallorca-Son Sant Joan airports were also affected.

The critical question for workers is breaking the obstacles posed by the airline unions and building rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles across national borders. A powerful, Europe-wide mobilisation of airline workers is already underway. Over the past month, Ryanair workers in Belgium, Italy and Portugal have mounted strikes. Strikes have hit Air France, Transavia and Brussels Airlines, and there were demonstrations by US pilots at Southwest Airlines.

In addition, ground crew at airports across Europe—baggage handlers, security guards and check-in staff—also struck last month, leading to thousands of cancelled flights, hours-long waits at airports, and capacity curbs at Europe’s biggest hubs.

Terrified of the emerging international mobilisation of the workers, USO is whipping up nationalism to try to divide the workers and strangle the strike.

USO said that crew members in Spain earn a salary base of €950, or €850 less than their French or German co-workers. “The conclusion is clear: at EasyJet there is money for everything, except for Spain,” said USO general secretary Miguel Galán.

Galán has begged Ryanair to grant token concessions to avoid strikes. A new meeting has been scheduled tomorrow, after which USO hopes to call off the strike.

USO has also complained that Ryanair is bringing in crews to operate from Spain to break the strike, which once again demonstrates the impotence of the USO’s national one-day strikes. According to reports, some are Portuguese, but others are non-EU, from the United Kingdom. USO has said it will file corresponding complaints with the Labour Inspectorate in each city where Ryanair has Spanish bases.

The same nationalist perspective is shared by trade unions across Europe. Last week, French and Belgian pilots unions called strike actions on days not called by the Spanish unions, for 23-24 July.

In Northern Europe, the SAS Pilot Group (SPG) union at Scandinavian Airline Systems (SAS), the Scandinavian airline giant established in 1946 by the governments of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, has been delaying strike action for a month. On June 9, they submitted their notice to strike on June 29, which they ultimately postponed to July 4.

Since last week, nearly 1,000 SAS pilots have been on strike. SAS is operating at around 50 percent

capacity due to the pilot strike, affecting 30,000 passengers daily. Thousands of flights have been cancelled. According to Norwegian broadcaster NRK, the strike is costing SAS \$8 to \$10 million daily. In solidarity, 200 SAS aeroplane mechanics in Denmark are to join the strike on Thursday, refusing to service any planes.

With this immense power, the SPG agreed to break its own strike, flying some charter flights to help stranded passenger return home. It then had to call off its strike-breaking when pilots realised that they were being deployed to “popular and well-trafficked holiday destinations, such as Rhodes, Crete, Larnaca, and Split, from where there are already alternative travel options,” SPG admitted.

The anger of pilots is the culmination of a number of betrayals with SPG complicity. Pilots were forced to accept a two-tier system whereby new pilots came in on lower salaries and benefits in the SAS Link and SAS Connect subsidiaries. After the COVID-19 pandemic began, the union agreed to a “temporary” wage cut for its members. Last week, negotiations over a new collective bargaining agreement broke down, resulting in the strike.

Once again, these strikes are showing the immense power of airport and airline workers, a powerful section of the working class that can rapidly shut down much of the world economy. This could not only impose improved working conditions and wages, but set off a broader movement in the working class against the war, the criminal official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the surging cost of living.

The key question, however, is the need to unify workers struggles internationally and break free of the debilitating, nationalist hold of union bureaucracies that work closely with management and capitalist governments at their members’ expense. For this, workers need to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and fight for a socialist perspective to subordinate socially created wealth to social need.



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