

Lufthansa pilots vote overwhelmingly in favour of strike action

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4 August 2022

In a recent strike ballot, 97.6 percent of Lufthansa passenger airline pilots and 99.3 percent of Lufthansa Cargo pilots voted in favour of taking action, the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) pilots' union announced last Sunday.

Six rounds of negotiations with the Lufthansa board had failed to produce results. Management did not even present a serious offer. Under pressure from its members, the pilots' union felt compelled to declare the negotiations a failure and hold a strike ballot.

At the same time, it signalled to the board that it did not want a strike and offered to continue the formally failed negotiations, now being called “exploratory talks.”

Even before the ballot was counted, VC negotiator Marcel Gröls declared that it was “initially” a “warning signal to the Lufthansa Executive Board.” Management was now expected to “finally make good offers.” What was needed now was “a serious will to find a solution on the part of Lufthansa, in order to jointly create creative solution spaces in the interest of the company and its employees,” the VC collective bargaining boss said.

Lufthansa's 5,000 or so pilots confront the fact that the union is restraining and sabotaging their large, almost 100 percent willingness to strike. This, in turn, strengthens and encourages Lufthansa management to stick to its provocative wage policy aimed at reducing pay. To push through their demands, pilots must therefore wage a battle on two fronts.

They must join together in a rank-and-file action committee, independent of the pilots' union, to put their decision to strike into practice. At the same time, such an action committee creates the prerequisite for linking the pilots' struggle with that of other Lufthansa employees, such as the ground staff, who are also currently engaged in collective bargaining disputes.

In addition, it creates the possibility of establishing contact with striking aviation workers in other companies and countries, coordinating their struggles and mobilizing the full fighting power of the pilots and all other aviation workers.

Without breaking VC's control, the struggle cannot be won—despite a great willingness to strike. Conflicts already arose when the pay demands were being drawn up. Pilots working for the subsidiaries Eurowings, Austrian Airlines, Swiss, Air Dolomiti, etc., which belong to the Lufthansa group,

but who earn much less than employees of the core brand, demanded a significant wage increase to compensate for the losses of the past years and inflation.

VC limited its demand for this year to 5.5 percent, which, even if fully implemented, would mean a massive real wage loss, and postponed a demand for automated inflation compensation until next year.

Add to that the union's demand for a single collective bargaining agreement covering all cockpit personnel, and it is a double-edged sword. While it is desirable to overcome the different agreements in the various flight operations, the Executive Board is trying to break the previous leading role of the core brand and make low wages the standard.

The pilots' great willingness to strike is also a response to the massive concessions made by VC in recent years because of the coronavirus pandemic. These have led to a significant deterioration in working conditions and enormous income losses.

In spring 2020, shortly after the start of the pandemic, VC had already agreed to reduce pilot salaries by up to 50 percent, initially until the end of the year. Shortly before then, the VC leadership extended this pay cut until the end of June 2022. In addition to short-time working, the package included concessions on pay and pensions.

“The concessions agreed this spring and now additionally offered amount to a total value of over €600 million. This corresponds to salary reductions of up to 50 percent compared to the pre-crisis period,” Markus Wahl, then VC president, declared just under two years ago.

The two other unions at Lufthansa, Verdi and UFO (Independent Flight Attendants Organization), also offered to cut vacation and Christmas bonuses and accept a pay freeze and the waiving of allowances, bringing the total income give-backs by the workforce to around €1.3 billion. At the same time, Lufthansa cut 32,000 jobs, including many pilots.

The unions' claim that the company would honour these concessions as soon as flight operations picked up and passenger numbers rose again was quickly refuted.

At the end of last year, management terminated the so-called “perspective agreement.” In it, the pilots of the core brand—Lufthansa and Cargo—were guaranteed a minimum fleet

size and thus job security and predictable opportunities for promotion.

Instead, Lufthansa management now wants to further shrink the core brand and hand over the feeder traffic coming into the two hubs in Frankfurt and Munich to the planned Cityline 2.0 airline, which will again mean lower wages and worsened working conditions. In addition, staff cuts are continuing. In May alone, 281 Germanwings pilots received notice of termination.

This threat overrides the ongoing collective bargaining talks. As business daily *Handelsblatt* reported: “In view of this, there are also numerous voices in the pilot community who believe there can be no solution without industrial action.”

Lufthansa is particularly unscrupulous in its treatment of young pilots and junior staff. Six months after the start of the pandemic, which for the pilots-to-be meant a complete interruption of their expensive training, Lufthansa management invited its 500 or so student pilots to a video call. Stephan Klar, then managing director of LAT, the Lufthansa subsidiary responsible for pilot training, opened up by saying to the shocked students that there was “no economic or [career] perspective sense” for you to “continue your training.” The students were called upon to “reorient themselves professionally,” he said.

Around 200 Lufthansa students filed a legal complaint against this. But the Frankfurt Labour Court dismissed the suit last December, as well as injunctions against the closure of pilot schools in Bremen and Phoenix, Arizona. LAT chief Matthias Spohr (brother of Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr) welcomed the court ruling, citing the alleged “reduced need for pilots” due to the pandemic. In the meantime, Lufthansa is resuming pilot training, on much worse terms.

After Lufthansa and other airlines were rescued with billions of euros of government money in the wake of the pandemic, these amounts are now to be squeezed out of the staff via cuts in real wages and job reductions. Resistance to this is growing. The Lufthansa pilots’ willingness to strike is part of a wide-ranging wave of strikes in the international aviation industry that has been continuing for months.

Pilots in Spain, at Europe’s second-largest low-cost airline Easyjet, have announced a strike for August that is to last nine days. Some 900 SAS pilots from Denmark, Norway and Sweden went on strike in early July; hundreds of flights operated by the Scandinavian airline were cancelled. The company used the industrial action as a pretext to file for bankruptcy and reorganize flight operations under new conditions.

A vote on a strike by cockpit staff at British Airways is underway after a walkout by ground staff was called off at the last minute. And earlier this week, Portuguese unions announced strikes at all major airports to begin in the second half of August.

But the trade unions everywhere are trying to isolate these

international strike movements from each other and prevent a joint struggle. In Germany, service sector union Verdi is desperately trying to stall the collective bargaining dispute of the 20,000 or so Lufthansa ground workers with a rotten compromise to prevent a joint struggle with the pilots.

Pilots must take control of their wage dispute and the strike already decided into their own hands. They must no longer allow union officials, who also sit on the company supervisory board, collect fat rewards, and represent the interests of the corporation, to dictate what they are allowed to demand and whether or not their decision to strike will be carried through.

Pilots, in particular, who are constantly in contact with colleagues in different countries and continents, know that they face the same or similar problems all over the world. They must now unite internationally and use their strike power to organize a common struggle of all aviation workers.

That is why the break with Vereinigung Cockpit and the building of independent action committees is so important. Only through a conscious intervention of the workforces is it possible to reject the intensification of exploitation and overcome the chaos at the airports. Aviation and public transportation—like health care, nursing and education—are important components of socially indispensable public services that must no longer be subordinated to the capitalist profit economy.

Building action committees is an important step in developing international cooperation and discussing an anti-capitalist, socialist orientation that places the interests of pilots and all other aviation workers and the needs of passengers above the profit interests of the corporations and shareholders.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its international sister parties have created the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for this purpose. Contact the IWA-RFC and register to build action committees!



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