Eurowings pilots vote to strike as determination of German airline workers to fight grows

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There is a large and growing willingness to strike among workers in the airline industry in Germany and internationally. At Eurowings, a ballot of Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) pilots' union members ended Wednesday with an overwhelming vote of 97.7 percent in favour of strike action.

Eurowings is the Lufthansa subsidiary operating vacation flights and short- and medium-haul routes at lower costs than the core Lufthansa brand. The price for this is paid by the staff in the cockpits, cabins and on the ground in the form of significantly worse pay and working conditions.

But the approximately 5,000 pilots of the core brand are also ready to strike, as was demonstrated in a strike ballot at the end of July. At Lufthansa Frankfurt and Munich, 97.6 percent agreed to strike action. At Lufthansa Cargo, the figure was as high as 99.3 percent. VC has announced a 24-hour strike by pilots at Lufthansa and Lufthansa Cargo for today (Friday).

The discontent has very real grounds. In addition to the accumulated loss of wages due to the coronavirus pandemic, inflation has skyrocketed since the start of NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. In Germany, inflation has already reached 8.5 percent, is much higher for gasoline and foodstuffs, and is increasingly threatening wages and salaries.

Lufthansa employees have already sacrificed large portions of their income and pension benefits since the beginning of the pandemic. In 2020, Vereinigung Cockpit expressly agreed to this and even proposed some of the sacrifices itself. Staff were placed on short-time work schedules for a long period and recorded salary reductions of up to 50 percent.

The other Lufthansa unions, Verdi, UFO, TGL-IGL and the Austrian ACA, also offered far-reaching concessions at the time—cancellation of vacation and Christmas bonuses, a wage freeze and the waiving of allowances. The givebacks added up to an income loss of no less than €1.3 billion for the Lufthansa workforce. At the same time, Lufthansa cut 32,000 jobs, many of them among pilots.

The same thing happened throughout the airports, at Frankfort Airport provider Fraport, ground services provider WISAG and other companies. Not infrequently, as at WISAG, it was precisely the longest-serving and experienced airport workers who were laid off. When flight operations restarted at the beginning of summer, unprecedented chaos ensued at the airports. Planes could not be checked in, lines formed for hours in front of security stations and hundreds of suitcases were left behind.

The chaos particularly affected Frankfurt Airport. In July, the number of passengers there rose above 5 million for the first time since the pandemic. But to prevent a collapse, Lufthansa was forced to cancel more than 3,000 flights.

To this day, crews and ground workers remain under great and growing work pressure and overtime is piling up. There is a shortage of staff everywhere; sickness levels are high and set to rise again as a result of COVID-19 infections.

The 24-hour warning strike on July 27, in which more than 20,000 Lufthansa ground workers took part, showed just how much things are boiling over. Just one week later, Verdi, the airport's in-house union, agreed to a filthy sellout. Verdi signed a new contract, which effectively means a loss of real wages, and agreed to a truce preventing further industrial action for the 18-month term of the agreement.

Economically, the corporation has largely recovered from the coronavirus crisis. But the board is determined to ensure the savings from the pandemic become the norm, in the interests of its shareholders and at the expense of the employees.

"The measures, some of them drastic, [have] worked," cheered the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on August 31. It added that the business community could "draw confidence" from the fact "that the company was able to return to profitability in the second quarter despite all the not insignificant adversities. The corporation is reducing debt, increasing its capital ratio, and the government's stake is reportedly below ten percent." Lufthansa was "moving in the right direction again," it said.

For the Vereinigung Cockpit union, its first commitment is to the welfare of the company and its shareholders. The VC executive employed the word "strike" only once in its Wednesday press release announcing the results of the strike ballot. And it did this only when assuring the management that VC did not want a strike either. The union writes, "To make it clear: The result is not a decision to strike! It is [sending] a stronger signal, the yellow card, so to speak, to Eurowings."

VC has been meeting with the company behind closed doors for four weeks, with the seventh round of negotiations being held this week. The union is doing all it can to either avoid industrial action by the pilots altogether, or to isolate it and keep it separate from other workers in the airline and other industries.

Despite inflation of more than 8 percent, from the outset VC has only called for a 5.5 percent wage increase for this year, which amounts to a de facto cut in real wages. It is not demanding "automatic inflation compensation" until next year.

VC has never seriously fought for its original demand for "uniform wage structures in all Lufthansa operations" in the sense that the top wages of long-serving Lufthansa employees should apply to all.

Instead, it has accepted that the number of aircraft guaranteed to be flown exclusively under the terms of the company collective bargaining agreement be limited to 325. At the same time, Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr is working to expand Lufthansa subsidiary CityLine2 as a so-called low-cost carrier in European traffic in order to drive budget carriers like Ryanair out of the market. The new Eurowings Discover subsidiary (formerly "Ocean") is still flying entirely without a labour contract and is another attempt to undermine crews' previous achievements.

Lufthansa is a complicated corporate entity with numerous subsidiaries that have increasingly poor pay structures and conditions for pilots and flight attendants. At Germanwings, for example, operations ceased two years ago, and employees were either laid off or taken over by Eurowings on worse terms. Other subsidiaries include Austrian Airlines, Air Dolomiti and SWISS.

Industrial action is also brewing at SWISS, which was taken over by Lufthansa after the Swissair bankruptcy in 2003. Pilots there have been working without a contract since April 2022. With a resounding no vote of 80.5 percent,at the end of July, SWISS pilots rejected a new draft contract which their union Aeropers had accepted and put to a vote. Some 1,150 SWISS pilots are Aeropers members and the turnout for the vote was 94.7 percent.

The great willingness to fight is evident everywhere, and, as at SWISS, is increasingly directed against the business-friendly unions. Not only at airports, but also in nursing, local and long-distance transport and at the ports, anger is growing about the untenable conditions. Recently, port workers in Germany went on strike, and like the Lufthansa ground workers, they demonstrated what power the working class could unleash if it united its struggles.

Particularly in airline operations, the struggles must be waged together not only across the separate subsidiaries and corporations, but also across national borders. This requires the formation of independent rank-and-file action committees, and at the airports, they must be directed against the treachery of Verdi, UFO and Vereinigung Cockpit.

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