

Pilots strike at Lufthansa and LH Cargo

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Around 5,000 Lufthansa pilots took part in a 24-hour strike on Friday. Dozens of planes belonging to the core brand Lufthansa and Lufthansa Cargo remained on the ground. About 800 flights were cancelled at Frankfurt and Munich airports, and about 130,000 passengers were affected, according to the company.

All attempts to negotiate a new contract with Lufthansa had failed, according to the official statement of the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) pilots' union. The union is demanding salary increases of 5.5 percent in the current year (with inflation now at 8.5 percent!) as well as automated inflation compensation starting next year. In contrast, management claims to have made a "very good and socially balanced offer," most recently offering €900 more per head per month. "We lack any understanding for the strike call by VC," Lufthansa personnel director Michael Niggemann grumbled in the press.

The offer of €900 more per head and month, which is to run for 18 months, is a poisoned chalice. It serves two main purposes. Firstly, after the job cuts from the coronavirus lockdown, the company lacks many pilots, whom it wants to attract with the offer. Secondly, Lufthansa wants to use it to avoid the demand for automatic inflation compensation and a mandatory job guarantee.

There are very important issues at stake. The pilots' jobs at Lufthansa, which are covered by collective bargaining agreements, are coming under increasing pressure. CEO Carsten Spohr is in the process of operating more and more flights via the new Eurowings Discover and CityLine2 airlines, which are not bound by the collective bargaining agreements covering the core brand. Although these are subsidiaries of Lufthansa, their crews are paid much less. The Lufthansa corporate collective agreement (KTV), which has been in place for 30 years and has already been severely eroded, is being increasingly

undermined.

Against this, the pilots' union is demanding the Executive Board guarantee it will maintain a minimum number of aircraft of the core Lufthansa brand covered by the KTV. Even the pro-business *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* conceded that haggling over percentages was only a formal peg on which to hang the wage dispute: "In fact, the pilots' demand for a minimum fleet size for the core Lufthansa brand is about the long-term security of their jobs."

The pilot profession had already undergone major changes before the pandemic. Globalization created fierce competition in air travel, and Lufthansa's board of directors systematically attacked employees' salaries, pensions and transitional arrangements to meet the competition from those like Ryanair. With low-cost airlines employing pilots under increasingly precarious conditions, the profession has turned from a dream job into a nightmare.

When the pandemic broke out, the Lufthansa board—like the boards of Fraport, WISAG, etc.—used the forced lockdown as an opportunity. With the help of the unions, it pushed through unprecedented attacks on wage structures and jobs. At Lufthansa alone, 32,000 jobs were cut and a total of €1.4 billion was saved in wages, fringe benefits and pensions.

These attacks were carried out under pressure from shareholders. They were pushed through in cooperation with the works councils and airport unions. In fact, such savings would never have been possible without the active assistance of the unions Verdi, UFO, VC and IGL.

For example, every Lufthansa employee has accumulated a considerable salary deficit during the pandemic. Since then, this has been compounded by inflation, which has been increasingly fuelled since the start of the Ukraine war. Official inflation in Germany is 8.5 percent but is significantly higher in sectors such

as food and gasoline. On the very day before the strike, gasoline prices skyrocketed exorbitantly, so that a litre of diesel, for example, no longer costs €1.80, but €2.35. In Lufthansa's Frankfurt and Munich locations, rents are also rising steadily.

In its agitation against the strike, the bourgeois media repeatedly cite the comparatively high pay of pilots. But they fail to mention that pilots today usually have to pay themselves for their entire training, which costs around €100,000, and thus start out burdened with a mountain of debt.

In addition, the pilot's job involves constant stress, constant time shifts, climate changes and permanently changing working hours. As a result, only very few pilots continue to work until retirement age. Meanwhile, very few pilots can hope for early retirement, which was still common a few years ago.

The pilots' strike is part of a growing mobilization of the entire working class. However, their very justified strike for job and income security cannot be won as long as it is left to the Vereinigung Cockpit. VC officials fear a joint class offensive, which alone could lead to victory. They isolate the Lufthansa pilots from their colleagues in other areas.

Only Lufthansa's core airline and Lufthansa Cargo were on strike Friday, while subsidiaries Eurowings, Eurowings Discover, CityLine and Swiss, Austrian and Brussels airlines all operated as scheduled. Nor did Vereinigung Cockpit organize any rallies or demonstrations at the airports during the strike, or issue any flyers addressing other Lufthansa workers, those working in airports or aviation as a whole. This made it virtually impossible for outsiders to talk to striking pilots.

Yet Eurowings pilots are also ready to strike, as became known just hours before the Lufthansa strike began. In another strike ballot held by the VC, they had voted by 97 percent in favour of strike action over wages. In response to a question from the WSWS as to why VC was not taking joint industrial action against Lufthansa and Eurowings, VC press spokesman Matthias Baier said that these were completely different wage disputes that had nothing to do with each other and only coincided in time.

The opposite is true: The very factors that most concern Lufthansa pilots—inflation, job insecurity, the uncertainty of the pandemic and the Ukraine war—also

affect all other employees. Unrest is growing, and with it the willingness to fight. This affects not only workers at other airlines and airports, but also at the ports, in local and long-distance transportation, in nursing, logistics and schools. And this resistance is a thoroughly international phenomenon.

In order for it to be consciously organized, it is necessary to build rank-and-file action committees that function independently of unions like VC and take the fight out of the hands of the trade unions. Only in this way is it possible for workers to defend their past gains and wage the fight against inflation, the coronavirus and war on an international basis.



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