

# Lufthansa pilots' union cancels strike despite broad support for pilots

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The union for Lufthansa Airlines pilots, Vereinigung Cockpit (VC), on Tuesday, announced an agreement with management in the ongoing wage dispute. “There is a deal,” a Cockpit spokesman told the media.

Around 5,000 Lufthansa pilots took part in a 24-hour strike last Friday, September 2. On Monday, VC announced two more days of strikes, planned for Wednesday and Thursday. At Lufthansa Cargo, the strike was to last as long as three days, until Friday night. Now the “announced industrial action for this week has been canceled,” according to the VC press release.

The press release discloses no details of the agreement, saying only: “A comprehensive package of monetary and structural issues was agreed upon in essence and awaits fleshing out in the coming days.” However, the VC’s demand for a 5 percent pay increase already lags far behind current inflation, which reached 7.9 percent in August.

Pilots gave up a significant portion of their income during the coronavirus pandemic, and along with the unions Verdi and Ufo, it was the VC that demanded these massive concessions from them. At Lufthansa, 32,000 jobs were cut and the company saved a total of €1.4 billion in wages, fringe benefits and pensions.

Meanwhile, the company has long been back in the black. In the second quarter of 2022, operating profit was €393 million. But Lufthansa is not prepared to grant its employees a pay increase that will match, let alone exceed, the explosive rise in prices. The inflationary spiral has been fueled by NATO’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which is mercilessly diminishing real wages.

While negotiations were still underway, a WSWS team at the airport spoke with Lufthansa pilots, flight attendants and other airport employees, not only from the Lufthansa Group but also from Fraport airport operators, WISAG service providers and numerous subsidiaries. Most of them considered the pilots’ industrial action necessary and worthy of support. Out of consideration for their job security, we have changed some names at their request.

At Gate 20, the access point for many Lufthansa

employees, we spoke with Hannah, who has worked for years as a purser at Lufthansa. Pursers are the highest-ranking flight attendants and are in charge of the cabin.

“You’re the first ones to come here and ask us yourselves how we’re doing,” Hannah said. “In the media, it always sounds like we’re just on strike because we can’t get enough.”

Hannah described how she had recently calculated what the coronavirus pandemic had cost her in lost wages. “I lost €30,000 because of it,” she said, “all money I actually need for my retirement.”

“We had to give up a lot for the sake of the company,” she continued. “To this day, we have not been paid back. Many colleagues of mine were offered the chance to leave voluntarily with severance pay, and I almost did that. But because I’m already over 60, they only offered me €9,000 and I couldn’t afford that.”

As she reported, there is little left of the once generous benefits at Lufthansa. This is especially true for those seeking early retirement, which is often very necessary because hardly anyone can manage the energy-sapping work under constant stress, with constant time zone changes, climate adjustments and ever-changing working hours until the statutory retirement age. “The retirement transition rules have been weakened over the years,” Hannah said. “That can only be afforded by someone who has really been able to save a lot. But we couldn’t do that because I had to fund the kids’ education.”

Another purser, when asked what the pilots’ conflict with Lufthansa was about, spontaneously exclaimed, “I can tell you exactly: I’ll call my husband, he’s a pilot.” Over the phone, her husband explained, “We gave up almost 30 percent of our salary during the coronavirus period. Not only in money, but also in more hours worked and fewer days off. If you add inflation, we should be getting 40 percent.”

“A lot had to be forfeited during the pandemic,” said Heiko, an older pilot on his way to his plane. “Because of the concessions the union made, the bottom line is that income has been cut almost in half.” Many couldn’t even

afford the transitional retirement arrangement, especially if they hadn't worked at Lufthansa all their lives, he explained.

Heiko confirmed that even Lufthansa cockpit jobs covered by collective bargaining agreements had come under pressure, and that was the case even before the pandemic. With Eurowings Discover and CityLine2, the Lufthansa Group has created two new, non-tariff airlines, which are to compete with the low-cost airline Ryanair, with significantly worse staff conditions. Heiko reported: "Lufthansa has also introduced a second, worse pay and tariff structure in its own group for the younger pilots. This has to be reversed."

His opinion on the pilots' strike was: "The strike is necessary because we simply cannot allow the proud crane [reference to the company logo] that Lufthansa once was to go to the dogs like this. Everyone who was laid off in the pandemic and wants his job back must get it back. But that's not what the unions are fighting for."

Bernd, an 11-year Lufthansa employee in aviation security, first fended off questions by saying that once he got going, it would be "a whole novel." Then he stopped and said, "I would definitely support the pilots' strike."

He reported, "I love working at the airport, but all the peripheral stuff is a disaster. The pandemic was used to make conditions worse. Many of my colleagues were 'dumped,' as I call it, with or without severance pay. And now there are staff shortages everywhere. I can see that with us, even in aviation security, people are now being hired in a hurry who are not really trained at all."

Bernd also felt that CEO Carsten Spohr "should apologize to every single person who has been 'dumped.'" He said, "We would all have to go on strike together. Shut down the airport completely for once."

In response to the interjection that VC, Verdi, Ufo and all the unions were dividing the workers, and that it was necessary to set up independent rank-and-file committees to mobilise all airport workers in a common labour action, Bernd said, "I think that's good. We could certainly achieve more that way: a functioning airport and secure jobs."

At the ground crew entrance of Terminal I, we talked to Ludmilla, an airport security worker, who volunteered her opinion: "I think it's okay that they're on strike. So many were laid off at Lufthansa. It's a huge stress for the pilots now."

Manuel, who works for a subcontractor of the airport operator Fraport, also thought the strike was good. He explained that he was more familiar with the conditions at Condor than at Lufthansa, but added, "Basically it's the same everywhere: they've cut so many staff that now nothing works at all."

Just the night before, he said, a Condor plane again failed to fly. "It could not take off because it had not been checked

through due to a lack of staff," he said.

Speaking about rampant inflation, Manuel pointed to the connection to the war in Ukraine and said that was what worried him the most right now. "In Europe, all the governments are in the process of supplying more and more weapons until it really hits the fan," he said.

In a discussion with two Fraport employees about the austerity measures and layoffs at the airport, one said, "What are you going to do? You find out that the financial situation is bad. Then they don't have money to keep paying people."

To which his colleague said, "When those up there say they have 'no money,' that's different than when we say it. With them, it's a minus on the balance sheet. But if we don't have money, then we can't pay the rent, pay the gas bill, pay for gasoline."

WSWS reporters also spoke with a former WISAG employee. A year and a half ago, WISAG laid off more than 300 workers. Those laid off fought for four months against their termination and even went on a hunger strike.

The worker, who now works for another service provider at the airport, said of the conflict at Lufthansa: "In the past, everyone who worked at Lufthansa was proud, there was quality. But that is no longer the case. Lufthansa now employs many subcontractors where people work like slaves. I know of one case where people slave away for €11 an hour. How are you going to feed a family on that?"

He continued, "No matter who it is, pilots, flight attendants, regular employees, everyone has to stick together. Divided we can't accomplish anything. And with the war happening, it's now getting worse: rents are expensive, electricity and everything is getting more expensive all the time. Everything that the government is now giving out with a spoon, it will take back with a ladle later. Only together can we do something about it. That's what's important now: only together can you bring the big companies to their knees."



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