

# Spain's Ryanair cabin walkout enters second month, defying PSOE-Podemos government anti-strike laws

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Ryanair cabin crew in Spain have entered the second month of a five-month walkout over pay and conditions, the biggest strike in the company's history. Workers in the USO (Unión Sindical Obrera) and SITCPLA (Sindicato Independiente de Tripulantes de Cabina de Pasajeros de Líneas Aéreas) unions have been taking part in 24-hour stoppages every Monday to Thursday since August 8 and will continue their action until January next year.

Workers are demanding that the budget airline end its outsourcing of staff and guarantee basic working rights, including providing Spain's minimum number of paid holiday days and minimum wage. They are calling for the reinstatement of 11 workers fired by Ryanair during strike action in June and July and the dropping of disciplinary action against around 100 other cabin crew who participated in those stoppages.

Knowing it could rely on the support of the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, Ryanair took aggressive measures against strikers earlier this summer, threatening to fire all those who took part in walkouts. The company claims that its disciplinary action and sackings are a result of workers breaching the draconian minimum service requirements of between 57 and 82 percent of flights imposed by the PSOE-Podemos government to hamstring strike action.

At the start of August, the Ministry of Transport announced a further strike ban targeting this fresh wave of walkouts. Workers will be forced to staff between 68 and 85 percent of all domestic Ryanair flights, depending on the airport and the month, and between 36 and 60 percent for journeys beyond mainland Spain. These measures make it illegal for the majority of workers to strike.

"These essential service [requirements] aim to juggle the general interest of citizens and in particular their

mobility needs, with the right to strike of this group of workers," the Ministry of Transport declared on August 5. Far from "juggling" the interest of Spain's citizens with the rights of workers, these anti-strike laws are an assault on the entire working class, aimed at stemming the growing upsurge of the class struggle in Spain and internationally.

The PSOE-Podemos government's minimum service laws are reminiscent of the imposition of a "state of alarm" on 2,200 striking Spanish air-traffic controllers in 2010–11 by the then PSOE government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero. In a measure not used since the end of the fascist Franco regime in 1975, workers were subjected to military discipline, marched back onto the job by armed officers and closely monitored by soldiers while they worked.

Despite the long duration of this year's Ryanair strike, the company has boasted it does not anticipate the action will have any effect on its operations over the next months. "Ryanair expects that these latest threatened strikes, which involve only a handful of our Spanish cabin crew, will have zero impact on our Spanish flights or schedules in August or September," a spokesperson said on August 9.

In addition to the official strikebreaking of the government, Ryanair is relying on the complicity of the trade unions to divide Ryanair employees and isolate airline workers organised in different unions from each other. At the end of May, the Podemos-linked Workers' Commissions (CCOO) came to an agreement with Ryanair on pay and conditions after backroom negotiations, promising minor salary increases and more days off.

The deal, which comes after years in which the USO and SITCPLA had been in discussion with the company,

will only apply to those workers who are members of the CCOO. CCOO-affiliated cabin crew will not join striking members of the USO and SITCPLA in the five-month stoppage, significantly reducing the impact of the strike.

In a further attempt to intimidate staff, Ryanair has begun sending out aggressive letters to workers who have taken more than four periods of sick leave in a year, threatening them with disciplinary action and dismissal if there is not “an immediate and significant improvement in attendance at work.” Coming amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to spread in Spain, these letters are an attack on workers’ right to sick leave and will lead to further infections and deaths among Ryanair staff, their families and airline passengers.

In mid-August, the USO union also reported that Ryanair had been using scab workers from France to run their domestic flights in Spain. On August 16, two of the four flights scheduled to be cancelled because of industrial action were able to go ahead with French crews. None of the unions have issued an appeal for coordinated action by airline workers across Europe.

Despite the union-imposed divisions, the intimidatory actions of the company and the PSOE-Podemos government strikebreaking, the initial round of strikes from Monday August 8 to Thursday August 11 resulted in 18 cancelled flights and 784 delays in all ten bases Ryanair operates in Spain. Over the course of the first month of industrial action, dozens of flights were cancelled and around 4,000 delayed.

Ryanair cabin crew have appalling working conditions and pay. According to Lidia Arasanz, general secretary of USO’s Ryanair section, around 400 members of Spain’s Ryanair cabin crew are outsourced to the recruitment agencies Workforce International and Crewlink. Britain’s *i* newspaper, which saw a copy of a Workforce International contract, reported that agency employees receive a base salary of only €8,715 a year, then earn an additional fee per flight hour worked.

Outsourced cabin crew are not guaranteed a minimum number of flight hours, meaning monthly take-home pay could be as low as €726.25. This is far below Spain’s minimum wage, which equates to €1,050 per month—itsself a poverty-level salary that leaves many workers struggling to make ends meet.

Workers at other airlines in Spain are also taking strike action. EasyJet pilots took nine days of strike action last month, walking out over three 72-hour periods on August 12–14, 19–21 and 27–29 to demand the return of pre-pandemic working conditions and pay.

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SEPLA union (Sindicato Español de Pilotos de Líneas Aéreas) had pushed through a significant pay cut for pilots, to protect “not only our jobs but the survival of the company itself in Spain,” according to the union. This supposedly temporary reduction in wages has not been reversed, despite air traffic returning to pre-pandemic levels.

The nine days of Easyjet strikes led to the cancellation of around 90 flights. Like Ryanair cabin crew, EasyJet workers faced minimum service laws, which demanded that 57 percent of flights from Palma de Mallorca, 60 percent of flights from Malaga and 61 percent of flights from Barcelona and Menorca run as usual.

Between August 28 and September 6, over 500 cabin crew at Spanish low-cost airline Iberia Express took strike action to demand a cost-of-living salary increase after seven years of pay freezes. Despite the minimum service requirements, 60 flights were cancelled over the ten-day period and another 100 delayed. According to the USO union, another 94 flights were staffed by scab crews from other airlines run by the Anglo-Spanish International Airlines Group (IAG), which includes Iberia Express, Vueling and British Airways.

The critical question for airline workers in Spain is to break through the obstacles put in place by the airline unions by building rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles across unions, companies and national borders. In this, Spanish workers can call on the support of airline workers across Europe, including Ryanair workers in Belgium, Italy and Portugal, as well as strikers at Air France, Transavia and Brussels Airlines, all of whom have taken part in industrial action over the last few months. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees offer cabin crew, pilots and other airline staff every support in this struggle.



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