

Large majority of Lufthansa pilots vote for strike action

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Lufthansa pilots have voted by a large majority in favour of strike action. But while nine out of 10 pilots support the strike, their union *Vereinigung Cockpit* (VC) is doing everything it can to prevent one.

Pilots at Germany's largest passenger airline voted 88 percent in favour, and their colleagues at the freight division Lufthansa Cargo voted 96 percent in favour of strike action. More than 90 percent of eligible pilots took part in the ballot.

The widespread discontent expressed in the vote is directed particularly against the company's handling of employees' occupational pensions. Since Lufthansa restructured the pension scheme in 2017, pilots have faced significant setbacks. The airline no longer guarantees the amount of pension benefits to be paid upon retirement but only guarantees to contribute to a company-managed fund at a fixed rate. Experience in recent years has shown that this change has substantially reduced pension levels. For this reason, the pilots' union *Vereinigung Cockpit* is demanding a tripling of the employer's pension contribution.

In addition, the market-based pension system is subject to all the fluctuations of the financial markets. Given the ongoing capitalist crisis, even a complete loss of pension funds is not an unrealistic scenario.

The cuts already implemented and those planned for the pilots flow directly into shareholders' profits. According to its most recent annual report, Lufthansa's net profit amounted to €1.4 billion. With a turnover of €37.6 billion, this represented a profit margin of around 4.4 percent.

But that is too little for the company. Starting in 2028, Lufthansa aims to raise its profit margin to between 8 and 10 percent—"surpassing the historical results of the Lufthansa Group," as it promised at an investors' conference in Munich. To this end, the

company announced plans to cut 4,000 administrative jobs, further fuelling anger among employees. Many of these jobs are expected to be lost at the company's Frankfurt headquarters.

The job cuts are to be achieved through digitalisation, automation and the consolidation of workflows, including the use of artificial intelligence. Thus AI—technology that could in principle ease human labour—is once again being used against workers in a profit-driven economy.

When Lufthansa Airlines CEO Jens Ritter claims that an increase in company pension contributions is "simply unaffordable," what he really means is that shareholders and executives intend to boost their own incomes at the expense of pilots' jobs, wages and pensions. At the same time, Ritter threatened all pilots considering resistance: if they insisted on defending their pensions, there would be "no alternative but to relocate further aircraft to more profitable operations."

This threat refers to a long-established practice by the company that has angered employees. By founding subsidiaries such as Discover Airlines and Lufthansa City Airlines (formerly CityLine), Lufthansa bypasses the collective agreements covering its core brand. Staff at CityLine, for example, are being told either to work under significantly worse conditions at Lufthansa City Airlines—or to leave.

The restructuring in the interests of shareholders affects more than 100,000 employees of the Lufthansa Group, which, in addition to the core Lufthansa brand (Germany), includes Austrian Airlines (Austria), Swiss (Switzerland), Brussels Airlines (Belgium), and ITA Airways (Italy).

Dividing the workforce between different airlines—and even within them, dividing administrative, ground and flight staff—serves only to harm workers'

interests. If pilots, ground staff and administrative workers are to defend their jobs, wages and pensions, they must break through the narrow framework imposed by the unions. Whether VC, UFO (Independent Flight Attendants' Organisation) or Verdi, all of these union organisations collaborate closely with corporate management and use their agreements to pave the way for further attacks.

VC itself agreed in 2017 to the conversion of the pension system from guaranteed benefits to fixed contributions. Eight years ago, after 14 pilot strikes, it also accepted that captains would retire at 60 instead of 55. In recent years, it has accepted 15 percent pay cuts—something that Arne Karstens, spokesperson for the bargaining committee, now laments while complaining about the company's "ingratitude." UFO had already agreed to this for cabin crew in 2016. Lufthansa has thus saved billions, which have flowed into management bonuses and shareholder dividends.

On the fundamental issue, VC is now fully aligned with the company. "We are sticking with the capital-market-oriented system," Karstens declared in an interview with *aero.de*. "The level of the pension will not be guaranteed; what remains are guaranteed contributions." He complained that it is Verdi, not VC, that enjoys management's "favour," even though pilots have caused "the least strike costs" since 2017.

The sectional union, founded by pilots over 50 years ago, supposedly as a less corrupt representative body, has shown itself today to be as bankrupt as Lufthansa's "house union" Verdi and the other main unions. While nine out of 10 pilots have voted to strike, VC is doing everything possible to prevent it.

It is treating the result as nothing more than bargaining leverage in talks with management. The company must now "finally present a negotiable offer on occupational pensions," says Karstens. "The result is a strong signal of our members' unity," declared VC President Andreas Pinheiro. "The pilots stand firmly behind their demands and their bargaining committee."

This is false. The result is a strong signal to organise strike action. But VC is not doing so. The union has already held seven rounds of talks with Lufthansa management and, despite the strike vote, is now calling for an eighth.

Worldwide, workers are having the same experience. Union leaderships act as management's company

police, isolating workers' struggles instead of coordinating them. They defend the capitalist system and thus prevent genuine mobilisation and solidarity among workers.

In August, Air Canada flight attendants demonstrated their determination to fight by defying a government strike ban—but their union, CUPE, sabotaged the action and shamefully capitulated to the government and company shortly afterwards. Only days ago, a Greek court banned air-traffic controllers and other aviation workers from participating in the general strike, and the unions accepted the decision.

The lessons for Lufthansa pilots and workers everywhere are clear. The fight for living wages and pensions and the defence of jobs cannot be left in the hands of VC, UFO, Verdi or any other nationalist and pro-capitalist union. Independent rank-and-file action committees must be formed, directly controlled by the workers themselves and coordinated across industries and national borders. These committees must base themselves on a political programme that rejects the subordination of human needs to corporate profit.

Most urgently, Lufthansa pilots must take the struggle out of the hands of the VC officials to prevent them from betraying it. VC does not want a strike. We call on all Lufthansa employees to contact us. Send us a WhatsApp message and fill in the form below to join an action committee.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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