

"Loud and proud": Strikes against Lufthansa continue

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For several days, pilots and flight attendants have been striking against Lufthansa German Airlines' brutal restructuring measures. On April 15, a strike by over 19,000 flight attendants from Lufthansa and LH-CityLine began again. Pilots from Lufthansa, Lufthansa Cargo, CityLine and Eurowings also joined in. The pilots are continuing their industrial action from Thursday through Saturday.

Corporate management wants to keep Lufthansa profitable under conditions of war and trade war. Its austerity programme, named "Turnaround," includes the winding up of unprofitable airlines and the founding of new low-cost carriers that pay crews less. Working conditions of pilots and flight attendants of the core brand are also under attack.

In opposition to management's actions, Lufthansa CityLine flight attendants voted 99 percent in favor of strike action in late March. The union asserted that not a single flight attendant voted "No."

The percentage voting to authorize industrial action at Lufthansa itself was also very high, over 94 percent. Since Friday morning, thousands of Lufthansa flights from Frankfurt and Munich have been cancelled, with up to 3,000 flights this week hit at Frankfurt alone. Hamburg, Bremen, Hanover, Stuttgart, Cologne, Düsseldorf and Berlin are also affected.

In a loud, angry protest march Wednesday, over a thousand strikers marched to the Lufthansa Aviation Center (LAC) in Frankfurt, where the company's 100th anniversary celebration was taking place in the new Hangar One. The airline's CEO Carsten Spohr appeared there with high-ranking guests: Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Federal Transport Minister Patrick Schnieder, Hesse State Premier Boris Rhein (all three Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and many other prominent figures from politics and business.

A large police contingent kept the strikers at a distance. They had prepared dozens of creatively worded placards to make clear what they thought of the centenary celebration: "There is nothing to celebrate here", or: "100 years of tradition, zero appreciation"; "Look what you made us do"; "Without us you stay on the ground!" or: "We are CityLine, loud and proud!"

Many directed their placards against the "Turnaround" austerity measures at Lufthansa, with slogans such as "Carsten: 'We are too expensive'—Where is your turnaround?";

"Restructuring, dismantling, overexploitation"; "25 years at CityLine and now dumped!"; "Profit over personnel—we are getting out!"; "Treated fairly takes off better!"; "Whoever saves on **us** endangers the safety of the passengers"; "Turnover soaring. Crews at the limit"; or simply: "Slavery was abolished!"

An airline captain told the WSWs team, "It simply cannot go on like this," and added,

We have just received the summer timetable, and it is so crammed full—it's simply not doable. Many can no longer withstand the stress. The anger is very great, and I am surprised that Friedrich Merz even dared to come here.

Markus, a Lufthansa flight attendant, reported confidently:

We are all striking together now, Lufthansa and CityLine, the pilots too. It is important that we strike for the preservation of our working conditions, not for more money. All of us standing here love our job, but everything is to be cut. We simply want to continue flying people safely around the world, but Lufthansa wants to slash our working conditions to such an extent that we can no longer transport passengers safely.

"We pilots and flight attendants have a great responsibility after all," he continued. "We have long working hours in the air, flying through many nights, especially for the older ones. The greater the age, the shorter the rest periods and recovery, the more difficult it becomes to maintain safety, the greater the pressure becomes."

Markus sees a connection between global political developments with the Iran war and capitalism driving it, on the one hand, and the harsh intransigence of the Lufthansa corporation on the other. "Worldwide, fewer and fewer compromises are being made, rule is only by power politics, and that has an effect right down into the company." For him it is clear: "We workers must all show solidarity, we are all in the same boat—also against the war."

Carla, a CityLine purser with 30 years of professional experience, carried a placard against capitalism. She explained

why the new contract being offered was completely unacceptable: “Costs are being squeezed; maybe they will still pay us the same salaries, but the workload is much greater. Less free time, more working hours, that means fundamentally the hourly wage has become significantly lower.”

Carla continued:

No one wants to be worse off. Many here have worked at CityLine for years. The airline has existed for over 35 years, after all. CityLine always had the smaller flights, often we flew with just two of us. In the past, there were even the small fifty-seaters, which you were allowed to do alone. That was very familiar and personal. But that aircraft is outdated, and we only get new planes via the new City Airline, but then with new pay scales. That means we start from scratch again.

She is also striking for the young people, Carla says, and for all those who could not go into the partial retirement scheme (ATZ) or still had to work for years. “We have a particularly large number here who still have to work for five or ten years. They ought to be able to continue working at Lufthansa or Eurowings now, basically it is all one corporation. But there is absolutely no job guarantee at CityLine. We are being squeezed more and more at our expense.”

Some 800 jobs are to be lost in the winding up of CityLine and the corporation also wants to cut up to 4,000 jobs in administration. The executive board is reacting to the crews' demands with uncompromising harshness. With in-house trade union Verdi behind it, it is holding firm to the austerity measures at the expense of the workforce.

Right in the middle of the first day's strike by flight attendants from Lufthansa and CityLine, Verdi agreed a new contract with the Lufthansa executive board for the new low-cost carrier City Airline, which includes a three year (!) no-strike obligation. Lufthansa is increasingly relying on Verdi, which operates as a company union at the airport.

Lufthansa management is attempting to oust the smaller unions UFO (Independent Flight Attendants' Organization) and Cockpit Association (VC, pilots and flight engineers). Personnel chief Michael Niggemann called UFO “irresponsible” on April 13 and claimed it was “completely indifferent to the fate of our passengers and the future of Lufthansa.” Niggemann demanded that the employees show consideration for the “geopolitical challenges such as extreme jet fuel prices and great uncertainty”—in other words: line up behind the war and trade war policy of the government and airline.

At the anniversary ceremony, Spohr only briefly addressed the strikers who were demonstrating close to the building, condescendingly claiming they were “apparently still

struggling with the newly chosen path.” Supervisory board head Karl-Ludwig Kley ranted about the “destructiveness of the trade unions” and demanded from Chancellor Merz a new regulation restricting the right to strike before this “grows into an even greater competitive disadvantage.” In an escalating war situation, the capitalists demand nothing less than a ban on strikes.

However, the union, UFO and Cockpit have little with which to counter this. Frightened by the unbroken determination to strike of the workers, they constantly signal their willingness to compromise. They regard continuing the strikes simply as a safety valve for their members' anger, and at the same time, they appeal ever more urgently to Lufthansa executives.

“The situation is unchanged,” Cockpit wrote on Wednesday. “Neither is there an offer for a company pension scheme at Lufthansa or Lufthansa Cargo, nor is there a viable offer for a new contract covering remuneration at Lufthansa CityLine or for a company pension scheme at Eurowings.” Cockpit had offered management to go to arbitration, which, was immediately rejected. Lufthansa went even further and raised the demand that not only unresolved collective bargaining disputes, but also already concluded, valid agreements some with times long running times must be renegotiated.

UFO chief negotiator Harry Jäger also appeared helpless: “[For management] To escalate so fiercely, to say ‘No! No!’ so often, (...) I lack the imagination for that. I really don't know how things will continue either.”

One thing is becoming increasingly clear: to defend their jobs, conditions and retirement provisions, and to maintain the safety of air traffic, crews must take up a political struggle. The assault on flight personnel is in line with attacks on the health and pensions of the working class, with the mass layoffs in industry and the reintroduction of conscription for the young.

Flight attendants and pilots must break not only with the union, Verdi, but also with UFO and Cockpit and organise themselves in independent rank-and-file committees. They must wage their struggle on a socialist and international basis and unite with workers at other airlines, in other sectors and countries. This is what the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting for.



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