

Lufthansa flight attendants vote to strike

By Ernst Wolff
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After a year of wrangling over a new pay agreement, 83.2 percent of members of the German UFO union (Independent Flight Attendant Organisation) have voted for action in a ballot held during the past three weeks. Although 97.5 percent voted in favour of a strike, the union leadership is seeking to avoid a direct confrontation with management.

On its website the UFO cites the following reasons for its decision: “Should the management of Lufthansa ... finally be interested in working together with staff—and not against us—we are immediately prepared to enter the home stretch and negotiate a deal...”

In fact there is not the slightest indication that Lufthansa management is prepared to comply. A week ago a letter to staff appeared on the group intranet from CEO Christoph Franz and executive member Carsten Spohr. They both insisted on a “comprehensive savings program”.

As in the past, the pair justified this by citing competition from low budget airlines, rising fuel prices and the financial impact of environmental taxes on airplane emissions.

Lufthansa Chief Financial Officer Simone Menne also confirmed last week that the executive is determined to stick to its target of increasing operating profits by at least 1.5 billion euros up to 2014 and saving 100 to 200 million euros in 2012. Analysts at the Nord / LB bank advised their customers to buy Lufthansa shares, as they expect further progress in the coming quarters “under the current restructuring program”.

The UFO leadership are patently encouraging illusions that the company is prepared to make an “acceptable” offer by August 16, though it is obvious that Lufthansa management remains firmly committed its austerity program. The union strategy awards the company an additional respite, instead of mobilising the cabin crews in a broad offensive against on-going

attacks on wages and living standards.

A key role in the attacks on staff is played by the temp agency, Aviation Power, which Lufthansa set up four years ago. Since June 3 this year, lower-paid temporary workers from the agency have been used to pressure Lufthansa flight attendants to accept reduced working conditions.

The intransigence of Lufthansa management was already evident in the case of the Lufthansa subsidiary Austrian Airlines, where operating profits in the first half of 2012 were increased by “outsourcing” pilots and flight attendants to the regional subsidiary company, Tyrolean. This brought the company an additional 26 million euro in profits.

The result for workers was a cut to wages and pensions, the slashing of premiums and severance pay, and the hiring of new employees at 25 percent lower wage rates. 110 pilots and 214 flight attendants who did not agree with the new arrangement were fired.

All of these attacks are part of a comprehensive “restructuring program” which is being carried out not only by Lufthansa but by all major airlines. The days when airlines were prepared to make concessions are gone for good. Now every legal means is being employed to reduce costs and increase profits to satisfy the demands of shareholders and investors. The results of this process are amply demonstrated by taking a look across the Atlantic.

In the US leading airlines have for years carried out extensive layoffs, wage cuts and the intensified exploitation of labour through the introduction of longer working times and shorter rest periods. As in the American auto industry, company bankruptcies have been used to wipe out pension claims, slash benefits and drastically reduce new hires’ salaries. Ten percent of US flight attendants currently earn less than 15,000 euros per year.

This systematic reduction in wages and working

conditions on both sides of the Atlantic was possible only because US and European companies could rely on their respective trade unions to undermine any resistance on the part of workers. The unions have headed off workers' militancy and anger with a few radical phrases, aiming to keep in check any resistance, avoid strikes whenever possible, and isolate workers' protests under all circumstances.

This is precisely the strategy pursued by the UFO union in the current dispute at Lufthansa. The rejection of strike action, despite the overwhelming majority in favour, is just the first step. UFO is determined to defuse the militancy of flight attendants in the coming weeks and lead them into a dead end.

This means that the issue for Lufthansa flight attendants is much more than merely securing a new contract. The aim of management is to slash all of the social compromises made in the past and ensure that workers bear the full brunt of the global economic crisis. In order to fight back flight attendants must unite with their fellow workers in Austria and Switzerland and reject any compromise in their current struggle.

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