

German union calls off strike by European air traffic controllers

By Dietmar Henning
27 January 2014

Air traffic controllers had planned to strike in several European countries this week. In Germany, the Air Traffic Control Union (GdF) had called out its members for a one-hour solidarity strike on Wednesday.

The employers responded immediately, turning to the courts to have the strike prohibited. The *Bild* newspaper reported that Lufthansa had applied for an injunction against the planned strike by air traffic controllers before the Labour Court in Munich. Earlier, the state-owned German Air Navigation Services (DFS) had already requested a preliminary injunction from the Frankfurt Labour Court.

DFS claims the work stoppage is “politically motivated” and therefore illegal. Originally, GdF announced it would immediately appeal should the action face a court ban, but then it withdrew the strike call.

With a coordinated strike throughout Europe, air traffic controllers wanted to protest against EU plans for restructuring European airspace, plans intended to cut jobs and worsen working conditions.

The first stage of the European-wide strike was to have been launched on Monday by French air traffic controllers. But the SNCTA union there has “provisionally” withdrawn its call for a five-day walkout. However, two other French unions are sticking to the planned actions. It is unclear whether the announced strike action in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria, scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday, will now go forward.

The protests of the air traffic controllers are directed against EU plans to liberalise and deregulate European airspace. Twenty-eight national air traffic control services monitor the 650 sectors of European airspace. The EU Commission had therefore already planned to

“harmonise” airspace around the turn of the millennium.

So far, there has only been an aggregation of the airspace into nine blocks, of which, according to EU Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas, not one is “done right”. The European Commission and Kallas are therefore urging the air traffic control companies to “harmonise” this patchwork. For years, Kallas has pursued the implementation of a “Single European Sky” (SES).

He wants to strengthen Eurocontrol, the European air traffic control establishment in Brussels, by centralising work there. He also wants to give his commission more powers for the further implementation of the reforms. The delay in SES is because “under the current system, member states have the last word when it comes to setting objectives and making adjustments when there is a failure to achieve the goals set.”

Kallas also wants services such as weather experts and communications providers that support the air traffic control services to compete through normal public tenders in future, instead of “benefiting from monopolies” as previously. As in other labour markets, “normal public tenders” will lead to a deterioration of quality, wage cuts and job losses.

It is obvious that the EU’s arguments that the reforms will increase safety and protect the environment are false. It is all about cost savings. The EU Commission has provided figures showing that aircraft often cannot take the direct route because of the fragmentation of the airspace being monitored. This means each flight is on average 42 kilometres longer than necessary, meaning more time, more fuel consumption and greater environmental impact. The EU calculates this incurs approximately €5 billion in additional costs, which must be paid by airlines and

passengers. The reforms are therefore meant to push down prices; providers should reduce charges and develop even more traffic.

In June last year, the commission condensed the four regulations required to establish SES into a single regulation, and proposed changes to the rules for the European Aviation Safety Agency, known as SES 2+. The unification of European airspace this proposes has the following objectives: airspace capacity is expected to triple and the costs of air traffic management to halve.

The European Commission is looking to the example of air traffic control in the United States, whose airspace corresponds approximately to the size of that in Europe. However, despite a higher volume of air traffic, the cost of air traffic control in the US, according to the European Commission, is about half that in Europe. It is clear that European air carriers and their associations support the EU Commission. They claim that the poor organisation of air space in Europe costs them about €14 million per day.

The air traffic controllers, who already face extremely difficult working conditions and constant pressure, are the ones who will have to pay for this course of action. The result would not be an increase in safety, but an increased risk to air transport.

The trade unions have warned of the looming security and capacity problems. They believe the basis of the EU's calculations is wrong, and fear that almost 10,000 jobs could be lost in Europe.

The European Air Traffic Controllers Union (ATCEUC), in which 14,000 members are organised, and the European Transport Workers' Union (ETF), have been trying for a long time to negotiate a deal with the European Commission. They are not against rationalisation and savings, but are opposed to the uniform savings targets of the EU Commission.

They want to ensure that the job losses and any changes in working conditions are planned and worked out in close cooperation with the unions. Their main objective is to strengthen the role of the unions as an intermediary and consultant, and thereby secure their own positions. When they were planning a European-wide day of action by air traffic controllers in October last year, they called this off immediately after receiving a fresh offer of talks from the commission.

In Germany, GdF is also under pressure from the Grand Coalition government of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD). The government wants to take away the livelihoods of the so-called sector unions. The coalition agreement reached between the CDU/CSU and SPD sees a commitment to legally establish "contract bargaining unity", which means that in an industry and in an enterprise, only the trade union with the largest membership may conduct negotiations with the companies and the employers' associations.

This is aimed directly against the GdF and other smaller sector unions such as the Union of Train Drivers (GDL), the Flight Attendants Union (UFO) and the Marburg Federation of Doctors. With its law on contract bargaining unity, the government wants to preserve the monopoly of the large unions belonging to the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), with which it works closely.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>