

Germany: Lufthansa pilots take renewed strike action

By Stefan Steinberg
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Lufthansa pilots began their eighth strike action since April on Monday. The latest strike is due to last from Monday midday until Tuesday at midnight. The strike is expected to affect around 1,450 flights, including short, medium and, from Tuesday, long haul flights.

The strikes have been called by the Cockpit union, which represents 5,400 pilots and copilots working for Lufthansa, Lufthansa Cargo, and its budget carrier German Wings. Lufthansa plans to make major cuts to the pilots' existing retirement plan.

While the immediate issue in the dispute is cuts in early retirement provision, the background to the disputes is the major changes in the air industry that affect not only pilots, but all airline workers in Europe and across the globe.

In a scramble for profits and dividends, airline companies across Europe are engaged in a ruthless campaign to slash wages and undermine the working conditions of all airport staff. Lufthansa intends to expand its cheap fare air enterprises and is intent on driving down the salaries while lengthening the working life of pilots.

To this end the Lufthansa management cancelled the company's previous contract with the pilots at the end of 2013 and provoked the current dispute. Lufthansa chief Carsten Spohr has repeatedly stated that the company is not prepared to back down on its demands.

The latest strike has been met with a renewed barrage of propaganda in the press, denouncing pilots as a privileged and selfish elite. The pilots' strike comes on the heels of a train drivers' strike, which closed down most of the German rail network, last weekend.

The latest strikes have been seized on by the government to enforce legislation aimed at stripping the power to take industrial action by unions representing specific groups of workers such as the

pilots and train drivers. The legislation is aimed at ensuring that the policing of the labour movement is concentrated in the hands of the Trade Union Confederation (DGB). The DGB has collaborated closely for many years with the employers and government in imposing wage cuts, layoffs, and worsening working conditions.

The new law, which would enforce so-called "unified bargaining," is being drawn up by Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD) for presentation to parliament this autumn. The law would allow the largest union in an enterprise to conduct contract bargaining and call a strike. Smaller unions such as the GDL train drivers union, Cockpit, UFO (flight controllers) and the Marburger Bund (doctors) would lose the very basis for their existence.

For the first time the German chancellor has intervened in the current strike wave to throw her weight behind the new legislation. On Monday deputy government spokesman Georg Streiter declared that, according to the chancellor, "there are many good reasons to adopt a law on unified bargaining."

Despite the fact that both unions are affected by the same legislation aimed at neutralizing their activities, both the GDL and Cockpit have refused to conduct combined industrial action. The beginning of the pilots' strike came promptly at the end of the train drivers' strike. GDL leader Claus Weselsky declared that the train drivers would refrain from any further action for at least a week.

For its part, the Cockpit leadership made clear it that it also rejected any extension of its strike. Cockpit leader Markus Wahl announced his regret at the latest strike: "It is sad that we now have to go on strike for the eighth time." He also declared that the union would guarantee at least a third of all Lufthansa flights.

Cockpit is also opposed to any extension of its action to other countries, although airline staff confront identical attacks on their wages and conditions. Following the pilots' strike at the start of this month, a WSWS reporter asked Wahl why he refused to undertake any joint action with pilots who had been taking strike action at Air France. Reflecting the utterly nationalist and sectional standpoint of the union, Wahl replied that such collaboration was not desired: "At the moment there is no need for that."

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