

# Unions at Germany's TUIfly airlines act as strikebreakers

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The pilots, flight attendants and ground crew of Germany's TUIfly airline are putting up fierce resistance to a restructuring plan accompanied by extensive layoffs and a severe deterioration in working conditions.

While management proceeds ruthlessly against them, the workers, as in many other conflicts, are faced with the problem that the trade unions stand on the side of the company. They work closely with management and have conspired with them against the workers.

Immediately before TUI board chairman Henrick Homann announced the details last week of the company's far-reaching restructuring plans, with devastating consequences for the workers, trade union representatives signed their names to a new collective agreement. In doing so, they ended the no-contract conditions in which strikes are legally permitted and created a "contract peace" in which industrial action is forbidden.

The workers reacted furiously. As the trade union functionaries opposed their call for action, the workers resorted to self-defence. They organized a spontaneous "sick-out strike," in which they called in sick on short notice and in large numbers. The effects were considerable. The action showed the power the workers have when they break through the bureaucratic control of the trade unions. Management was completely surprised and could not organize replacement crews. Flights were cancelled by the dozens, and last Friday, TUIfly temporarily ceased all air traffic.

The trade union leadership was just as taken aback as management. The former head of the Independent Flight Attendant Organisation (Ufo), Nicoley Baublies, now the head of IG Luftverkehr (IGL), attacked the workers and their sick-out action. "That is definitely not a means of labour struggle for us," Baublies told *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*.

But that was not enough. The trade unions immediately took the initiative of organizing a strikebreaking operation. A joint "Ad-hoc Crisis Agreement" with the Air Berlin airline company reads: "Air Berlin has come to an agreement with the Cockpit Organization, the Ver.di bargaining commission Cabin and the general works council to implement emergency measures with the aim of stabilizing air traffic ..."

This was followed by a joint appeal from management, the

union and works council to oppose the sick-out strike. The statement reads: "A large number of Air Berlin flights operating under a wet-lease agreement with TUIfly have also been affected by the extensive TUIfly cancellations. In light of this, Air Berlin, together with the Cockpit Organization, the Ver.di bargaining commission and the general works council, calls on pilots, flight attendants and ground personnel to take part in special operations on a voluntary basis."

Unions have often sabotaged and stalled strikes and protest actions. But seldom before have they so openly and brutally stabbed their own membership in the back while operating as strikebreakers.

Despite this, the strike action had significant consequences. TUI personnel chief Elke Eller found herself compelled to quickly issue a statement saying TUIfly would remain "a German company based in Hannover" for the next three years. Labour and wage agreements would be valid until then, she promised. But such promises are worth nothing. This is not a legal binding agreement, nor is it clear whether, or in which form, TUIfly will even exist in three years.

Although the spontaneous strike action has been thwarted, the unrest among workers remains. "It is seething at TUIfly," writes the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ).

To prepare for the struggles ahead, it is necessary to draw a balance sheet of past experiences. An assessment of the trade unions is of central importance. Without breaking free from the straitjacket of the unions, it is impossible to lead a successful struggle to defend jobs and social standards.

The Ver.di and VC functionaries defend themselves, saying they were fooled by management and taken by surprise. But this is a lie. Nine leading functionaries at Ver.di, Cockpit and the works council sit on the company's supervisory board, and three of them belong to its executive committee. They are involved in all strategy debates and restructuring plans of management. The unions and the company works council are not only informed from the beginning about such decisions, but even submit their own restructuring plans for job cuts while agreeing to keep the peace.

Since 2014, there has also been a roundtable at company headquarters in Hannover which can be summoned on short notice. One could hardly imagine the collaboration of trade

unions, works councils and management to be closer or more intimate. It is just this close partnership that encourages management to carry out ever more intense attacks on workers. The board of directors considers the unions and works councils as an important instrument for the enforcement of its interests and plans. That is why the shock and concern in the boardroom was so great in recent weeks. The unions and works council temporarily lost control and the workers acted independently.

The close partnership between management, the works council and union means that the interests of workers can only be defended against, and not with, the unions and councils.

In this context, it is important to take a more precise look at the so-called employee representatives on the supervisory board. Ver.di functionary and chairman of the company's works council Frank Jakobi is deputy chairman of the supervisory board and a member of the presidium. According to the company's 2014-15 financial statements, he received €222,300 for his work on the supervisory board. Andreas Barczewski sits on the supervisory board and presidium representing the Cockpit organization. In the last year, he was paid €192,600.

Altogether, the work of the nine union representatives on the supervisory board has been compensated with €1.13 million. For Jakobi and Barczewski, that means more than €15,000 per month in addition to lavish works council salaries. Naturally, they all claim to pay the majority of their fees to the unions. But that does not improve matters. Rather, it confirms that the unions are funded in large part by the companies themselves through their supervisory boards.

Basing themselves on this collaboration, TUIfly plans a massive restructuring and the formation of a new "leisure airline" which is, above all, geared toward drastically reducing personnel costs through job and wage cuts. In the end, no one knows what will remain of TUIfly, writes the *FAZ*. Together with the beleaguered Air Berlin and its major shareholder Etihad from the United Arab Emirates, TUIfly is to be integrated into a holding in which current pay scales will no longer apply.

Two weeks ago, the Air Berlin board of directors announced they would lay off 1,200 workers as part of a "strategic reorientation" of the company.

The new holding is to include 60 aircraft, 20 from the Austrian Air Berlin sister company Niki and 40 from TUIfly. The travel company TUI as well as Air Berlin majority owner Etihad will each keep one quarter of the shares. According to press reports, the majority will rest with an Austrian foundation.

The *FAZ* cites an internal newsletter in which TUIfly employees expressed their concern and outrage. "TUIfly salaries will sink to the levels of Niki, which are approximately half as much. Or the entire workforce will simply be gotten rid of."

To fight against this, it is necessary to oppose the logic of the

capitalist profit system and take up an international socialist perspective. The restructuring of TUIfly and Air Berlin is part of a European-wide and international development which is not confined to the airline industry. Workers everywhere are confronted with the fact that the globalization of production is being used to enforce cost reduction measures in the form of layoffs, wage cuts and the degradation of working conditions.

Everywhere, so-called "atypical employment relationships" are being created. The dream job of being a pilot has turned into a nightmare. Temporary work and pseudo-self-employment are increasingly used by airline companies to reduce personnel costs. Most pilots must already pay for expensive training themselves and then, as part of the "pay to fly" system, pay tens of thousands of euros in order to accumulate the necessary flying hours.

In every other area of the airline industry, exploitation worsens and opposition grows. A few days ago, air traffic controllers in Greece announced a strike that was planned to last for several days. But the unions stifled it at the last moment. In September, air traffic controllers went on strike in France. But there too, the unions very quickly brought the strike to an end.

It is increasingly clear that without a rebellion against the trade unions and a conscious break with their nationalist, profit-oriented policy pitting workers in one location against those in another, no attacks from the company can be repulsed and no problems solved.

It is necessary to make last week's sick-out strike the starting point for organizing independently of the trade unions. A political program based on the rights and interests of workers in opposition to the profit interests of the companies must be adopted to unite workers internationally in a common struggle for a socialist perspective.

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