

French air traffic controllers strike against work restructuring

By Anthony Torres
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Dozens of flights have been disrupted at airports across southern and western France this week, as air traffic controllers and Air France trade unions called strikes, amid rising opposition among workers to contracts signed by the trade unions.

Air traffic controllers are protesting new work time rules agreed in June 2016 by the National Union of Air Traffic Controllers (SNCTA) and the National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA). UNSA, which represents roughly 20 percent of France's 4,000 air traffic controllers, called a strike for March 6-10 for Brest and Bordeaux, and March 7-9 for Aix-en-Provence.

The unions criticized the "dogmatism" of the General Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGAC), who wants to go from a system of six days worked every 12 days to seven every 12 days. The DGAC is arguing that since the Reims and Paris-Charles de Gaulle airports have already adopted the more taxing work schedule, the workers in Brest, Bordeaux and Aix should do so as well.

The sharpest warnings must be made about the role of the union bureaucracies. The SNCTA and UNSA are calling out the air traffic controllers against contracts that they themselves have signed. As in many other strikes in the air industry in France and across Europe, they will seek to demoralize the workers and force them back to work so that the contracts can go into effect despite workers' opposition. The air traffic controllers' struggle must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions.

With many workers not honoring the unions' strike call, the DGAC recommended that airlines cancel only a quarter to a third of flights over southern and western France.

Air France announced that it would continue with

100 percent of long-haul flights, 99 percent of medium-length flights, and 80 percent of local flights. It did not rule out delays, however. EasyJet for its part canceled 38 flights starting Monday.

The French unions are isolating the air traffic controllers' struggle from other strikes in the European air industry: British Airways flight attendants were on strike on March 3-7 demanding pay increases and Lufthansa pilots have been striking at various points over two years to demand pay increases.

After having made limited concessions, Lufthansa is planning to compensate the resulting fall in profits by externalizing certain operations, such as by chartering 40 flights under conditions not covered by the current contract. Lufthansa management thus intends for the initial concessions to serve as an opening gambit in a plan to slash wages and conditions by hiring workers under conditions violating the contract.

Within France two trade unions at Air France scheduled strike actions separate from those of the air traffic controllers for March 18-20. Flight attendants are protesting demands for speed-up and the creation of a new, low-cost, long-haul airline, under conditions where the company has boosted pay for top management by 17.6 percent.

This is only the latest in a string of attacks on Air France workers since 2014 made possible by the capitulation of the National Pilots Union (SNPL). When pilots took strike action to oppose the creation of a low-cost subsidiary, Transavia, and wage cuts for workers who were being shifted to this company, the union imposed a return to work just two weeks into the strike.

They justified this total capitulation, when victory for the strike was at hand, by claiming that their role was to protect the company from harm. They said that they

wanted to prevent Air France from taking major financial losses due to the strike.

The union was also acting to save France's deeply unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government, as the strike, which caused hundreds of millions of euros in losses for Air France, was also widely seen as a struggle against President François Hollande's austerity agenda. The unions feared that a victory of the Air France pilots' strike could provoke a broader wave of strike struggles and undermine the PS government and the European Union (EU).

As the SNPL moved to force pilots back to work without any guarantees from management after weeks of strike action, the WSWs wrote: "If Air France faces 'irreversible' financial damage from the strike, this means that strikers are in a strong position. Precisely at this moment, however, the union is declaring its willingness to end the strike and work with management to carry out attacks on the workers it falsely claims to represent. The pilots are at a crossroads. If they end the strike now, management will wage brutal attacks to recoup the hundreds of millions of euros they have lost and make an example of the pilots to discourage strikes by other sections of workers."

As the WSWs had warned, the unions' reactionary sell-out soon produced a disaster for the pilots. A few weeks after the end of the strike, Air France and the trade unions signed an agreement to slash wages for the low-cost subsidiary. In 2015, Air France management and unions signed an agreement to cut 2,900 jobs. Overall, restructuring has eliminated 15,000 jobs, or one-quarter of the 63,000 workers employed at Air France in 2012.

Workers in the airports cannot expect anything from trade unions who capitulated to management in order to impose attacks on social gains and jobs or airport workers. The only way forward is a struggle for a broader mobilization of workers, creating independent organizations of rank-and-file workers to coordinate struggles internationally on a socialist and internationalist perspective opposed to the PS and the EU.

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