

“The glamour of the job is just a mask”

British Airways crew members defy strikebreaking operation

By Ross Mitchell
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British Airways (BA) “mixed fleet” cabin crew at Heathrow airport are striking to oppose poverty pay and in opposition to punitive sanctions against around 1,400 workers involved in previous industrial action.

The strike by crew members—who work a combination of long- and short-haul flights--began on July 1 and will last until July 16. This is latest job action in one of the longest industrial disputes in the European airline industry this century.

The dispute has comprised a total of 26 days of strikes and bears witness to the resilience and determination of BA workers.

BA mixed fleet crews number 3,000 and have a nominal salary ranging from £12,000 (US \$15,561) to £16,000 (US \$20,748) with expenses. Some crew members even sleep in their cars between flights to save on accommodation expenses, while others come to work while sick to avoid losing pay.

The sanctions against cabin crew workers, which management describe as the “consequences of striking,” including docking two years of bonuses and removing all staff travel discounts for the next year for anyone joining the strike. The Unite union estimates this would cost strikers an average of £850 (US\$1,102).

A statement from the airline read, “We have set out the consequences for crew if they take strike action. The purposes of these consequences are to encourage crew to come to work.”

Management have devised a massive strikebreaking operation. They secured an agreement with the government-backed Civil Aviation Authority--responsible for the regulation of aviation safety in the UK--for the hiring of nine short-haul Airbus A320 jets, plus pilots and cabin crew as well as maintenance workers and an insurance deal from Qatar Airways for the duration of the

strike. These are termed “wet-leased” aircraft and are covering for around 30 domestic and European flights a day that have been grounded due to the strike.

Throughout the dispute, the Unite union has sought to keep the strike isolated to the workers at Heathrow. It opposes its extension among the 9,000 workers at other major BA bases at London Gatwick, London City Airport and Stansted airport, let alone workers employed at the international airlines group IAG that BA is part of. IAG employs 60,000 workers worldwide, comprising Iberia, Vueling, Aer Lingus, and EasyJet.

Unite has done everything to stifle the struggle, repeatedly cancelling scheduled strikes and limiting the walkouts they do call. Most recently, it cancelled a strike due to take place between June 16 to 19 to facilitate talks with management at the governments’ Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

Prior to the talks the union drafted up a “final compromise position” behind the backs of its members, which has not been made public.

Unite assistant general secretary Howard Beckett said, “The refusal by British Airways bosses to meaningfully consider our compromise offer is deeply disappointing. A resolution to this long running dispute was within the grasp of British Airways, but instead of grabbing that opportunity, bosses rebuffed it.” It regretted that “British Airways faces an entirely avoidable two-week strike and prolonged legal action on behalf of over 1,400 mixed cabin crew.”

The fact that workers are employed on such inferior contracts in the first place is the responsibility of Unite. The creation of a two-tiered workforce was imposed following the defeat of the national BA strike in 2010, with Unite and the BASSA union playing a critical role. The imposition and continuation of low pay rates for the

mixed fleet is part of the strategy by IAG to restructure its global pay levels downwards to be more competitive.

This allowed BA over the years to steadily replace more expensive, better terms and conditions contracts, with cheap labour with the collaboration of Unite.

Mixed fleet crews operate an increasing number of long-haul and short-haul flights inside and outside Europe. They operate on 32 long-haul flights to international destinations such as Abu Dhabi, Houston, Shanghai, Singapore and Sydney. Short-haul mixed fleet crews cover about 50 European destinations such as Helsinki, St Petersburg, Sofia, Vienna and Kiev.

That such draconian pay levels are now accepted by Unite were made clear in the comments of its spokesperson Alex Flynn, who said prior to the strike, “The issue is now largely around sanctions that have been meted out to the people that went on strike.”

The union’s isolation of workers and their resulting victimisation has resulted in votes in favour of strike action falling. In November 2016, 79 percent of mixed fleet workers voted to strike, with Unite cancelling a planned stoppage at the last minute. A second ballot in December saw 70 percent in favour of a strike. The last ballot in March 2017 saw support down to 56 percent on a turnout of 72 percent.

Back in December 2016 Unite general secretary Len McCluskey personally intervened to call off a planned strike scheduled over the busy Christmas holiday period to oversee negotiations. He declared, “I am delighted that British Airways has heeded our calls for talks. It is only by getting round the table that we can find a solution to my members’ concerns.”

Almost seven months have now elapsed, and BA workers are no further forward in their struggle for better pay and working conditions. 1,400 striking workers are suffering disciplinary sanctions, including removing staff travel, which allows crews to commute with an airline for free to reach the base where they pick up work.

The conditions being imposed on mixed fleet workers are intolerable. One worker speaking anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site* said, “We don’t have enough money to eat properly in Dubai each time we must stay over until the next flight. The travel enjoyment is not there as we were told as recruits. It has been tough and some of us who strike got punished by management.

“Essentially you are part of the plane. You just fly and stopover and cannot spend because the salaries are crap. Our conditions are not much different from airlines in the Arab countries. The glamour of the job is just a mask.”

Speaking to the *Independent*, another said she could not buy a house on the money she earned. “I’m required to live within a two-hour radius of Heathrow. I can’t buy anywhere with the money I’m on. When I go and ask for a mortgage, they laugh at me.” The worker earned less £20,000 last year and said, “I’ve been at British Airways for six years, and I’ve never entered the sickness process.”

The newspaper added, “A male colleague said that he earned more on a zero-hours contract with [budget airline] Ryanair. His P60 [total pay and deductions] showed income for the year at under £18,000.”

According to the *Independent*, the “Cabin crew say the pay deal comes with unacceptable strings attached: the loss of bonuses and travel concessions for a further year, as punishment for those who go on strike. They must also, say strikers, agree not to carry yellow pens or other yellow symbols. That might sound random, but yellow symbolises to other crew that they are strikers.”

To keep the dispute under its control, Unite has called a further strike to be held over 14 days from July 19, with another call to BA to negotiate “a settlement to this long running dispute.” This is being combined with an appeal to the courts to oppose BA’s leasing of Qatar Airways’ aircraft.

Mixed fleet workers at BA must break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy over the dispute. The prerequisite for a successful struggle is the creation of action committees, independent of Unite and based on the fight to unite airline workers throughout the world in common struggle against the global corporations. Only on this basis can they oppose the dead-end class collaborationist perspective of the trade unions, which has resulted in defeat after defeat.

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