

Air France workers strike to demand pay increase

By Anthony Torres
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Air France workers went out on a one-day strike yesterday against a miserable sweetheart contract negotiated by a group of trade unions closely linked to management. Faced with rising anger among workers, the unions felt compelled to organize a strike of all layers of the Air France workforce, for the first time since 1993.

Workers are demanding a 6 percent pay increase, given bumper profits recorded by Air France in 2017 of €590 million. After the usual mandated yearly negotiations, management obtained the support for a 1 percent raise of two legally recognized, but unpopular unions, the General Managers Union (CFE-CGC) and the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT). Especially given that executives were granting themselves double-digit pay increases, workers' anger exploded, as they have suffered a six-year wage freeze and 10,000 job losses.

All layers of workers, from pilots to stewardesses and ground crew, went out on strike. In France, 50 percent of long-distance flights were canceled, as well as 25 percent of medium-distance flights and 15 percent of national flights. However, management refused to grant the workers' demands, which would cost €240 million according to Patrick Turner, the CEO of Air France, who called their demands 'unreasonable' and 'not realistic,' adding that they would eat up too much of the profits of the company.

Workers are preparing to take further strike action to obtain their demands. At the same time, the organizations making up the trade union alliance that called yesterday's strike is meeting today to "decide on what follow-up" the strike should have, said Sandrine Techer, the secretary for the National Union of Commercial Air Crews (SNPNC).

The decisive question posed to the striking workers is

to prepare politically for the challenges of a long-term struggle. In what will be a political confrontation not only with Air France but with French President Emmanuel Macron and the European Union, the allies of Air France workers are workers across Europe and internationally who are also increasingly entering into struggle.

The Air France strike is part of a European and international wave of strikes against the counter-revolutionary offensive of the capitalist class to slash real wages and social benefits in order to enrich themselves and finance militarism and war. While Air France claims it has no money for raises, Macron is smashing France's Labor Code, slashing taxes on the wealthy (ISF), and announcing a €300 billion defense spending program.

Workers are mobilizing throughout the region, including in Iran and Turkey, where metalworkers obtained a 20 percent wage increase. Hundreds of thousands of metal, auto and electricity workers have gone on strike in Germany, while autoworkers have taken strike action in both Romania and Serbia. In Greece, the working class has taken strike action and joined protests against the austerity diktat of the European Union (EU) and the pseudo-left Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government. And teachers are mobilizing in both Britain and the United States.

The previous struggles of Air France workers demonstrate that it is impossible to mount a serious struggle on a purely national basis, under the control of the union bureaucracies.

Air France could not have slashed jobs and frozen wages for so long without the complicity of the trade union officialdom. In 2014, pilots went on strike against the plan to build Transavia, a low-cost

subsidiary of Air France that would hire pilots and other workers at wages well below those of their fellow workers at Air France. The pilot strike lasted 14 days and cost Air France hundreds of millions of euros, threatening not only the company, but the deeply unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government of then-President François Hollande.

The PS feared that this strike, which was widely popular, could push broader layers of workers to take strike action, in France and across Europe, including workers at Lufthansa who were struggling for wages and pensions at the time. Then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls intervened to demand an end to the strike. The National Airline Pilots Union (SNPL) completely capitulated, calling off the strike on the pretext that “it is our duty to preserve the future of our company and to bandage its wounds before the damage [the strike is causing] becomes irreversible.”

The SNPL added that the unions had a critical role to play to impose and obtain agreement for restructuring plans: “Management cannot by itself implement the development of Transavia-France. It cannot either by itself implement its 'Perform 2020' plan.”

By calling off the strike when victory was in reach, the SNPL opened the door for a broad wave of attacks on the workforce. And various petty-bourgeois parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party and Workers Struggle (LO) applauded the sell-out. Now, Transavia workers have wages that are 25 to 30 percent lower than those of Air France, for 30 to 40 percent more flying time. A year after this betrayal of the pilots strike by the SNPL, Air France announced thousands of layoffs.

The current contract will in fact lead to cuts in pilots' compensation. The bonus for night flying will fall from 50 to 40 percent, working times while on the ground will be calculated in a less favorable way, and preparation time on the ground will be cut by half.

The day of action organized by the trade union alliance aims to contain the rising anger and legitimate distrust of Air France workers of both the company and the unions. Workers must be warned that the confederations making up the trade union alliance that called yesterday's strike have negotiated the labor law with Hollande as well as Macron's anti-worker decrees. They will oppose the determined political struggle against Macron that will be needed to defeat Air

France.

Techer said, “It is not one day of strike action that will make management reflect on its position, unfortunately! [An] important rolling strike has been carried out for over a month among some of the maintenance workers, but without results.”

Similarly, SNPL officials said, “The strike will get tougher. ... Pilots will mobilize in solidarity with the other layers of staff in order to get wage increases to deal with inflation, but they also have other specific demands” which are still not met.

Workers seeking to fight to improve their working conditions and their wages must take the struggle out of the hands of the unions and independently organize rank-and-file committees for an international and political struggle.

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