

German Ryanair pilots ready to strike

By Marianne Arens
1 August 2018

Following Ryanair strikes in Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Britain, approximately 400 Ryanair pilots based in Germany have now agreed to industrial action by an overwhelming majority.

Every single pilot who cast his or her vote in the ballot voted in favour of a strike. Four percent of its members, for whatever reason, did not vote, but the Cockpit union counted these as though they had voted “no”, announcing there was 96 percent approval for the strike.

In the Netherlands on Tuesday, Ryanair pilots voted by 99.5 percent, practically unanimously, for strike action. The enormous willingness to strike in Germany as in Holland is part of a European-wide and growing combat readiness and strike wave at Ryanair.

Last week, Ryanair pilots in Ireland stopped working, along with flight attendants in Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Italy. The Irish Ryanair pilots, who had not been on strike for decades, have already taken strike action on July 13, 20 and 24, and they announced another 24-hour strike for Friday, August 3.

The Irish budget airline was forced to cancel more than 500 flights and re-book more than 100,000 passengers. Last Monday, there were further interruptions and massive delays in Britain, which Ryanair blamed on “force majeure”, in other words, severe storms and delays in air traffic control.

However, the main reason for the interruptions to Ryanair flights is the deep dissatisfaction among its staff. The cheap carrier’s business model rests on low wages and suppressing the workforce. Those hired by Ryanair face temporary employment, bogus self-employment and insecure working conditions. In addition, conditions at Ryanair in terms of work safety, leisure and promotion opportunities to higher-paid jobs are totally unacceptable.

A large number of the pilots who fly for Ryanair are not employed by the airline but are forced to form a

one-person company. The online *Airlinegazette* says that, according to Ryanair, this is “less than 50 percent” of their pilots, but “a few years ago, it was around 30 percent.” In other words, the number of pilots not employed directly by Ryanair has increased dramatically in recent years.

Among cabin crew members, the “contractor” model applies across the board. Only cabin supervisors are permanently employed; all other flight attendants are hired by the low-cost airline through temporary employment agencies such as Crewlink.

As a result of these practices, the wages of most staff at Ryanair are a fraction of what pilots and cabin crew at other airlines earn.

A central demand of the European crews is that Ryanair in future employ them on the basis of their own country’s labour laws, and not those of Ireland, which has far lower standards in many instances.

Ryanair boss and Irish multimillionaire Michael O’Leary is taking harsh action against the strikes and plans to relocate part of the Ryanair base at Dublin Airport to Poland next winter as a form of punishment. Of 30 aircraft, 6 are to switch to the Polish Ryanair charter subsidiary Sun, endangering the jobs of 300 air staff, 100 pilots and 200 cabin crew members.

This clearly shows how important joint European action is: To force Ryanair to its knees requires coordinated international strike action by all Ryanair staff and a socialist programme. That the potential for this presently exists is shown by the industrial action of the Ryanair workforce in several European countries and the generally high willingness to strike.

The workforce increasingly recognises the necessity, and also the real possibility, of conducting a joint struggle to defend jobs, working conditions and pay. But in this fight, they are confronted with unions that represent the interests of the company against the workers. This can be seen particularly clearly in the

German union, Cockpit.

At present, Cockpit is negotiating only regarding the acceptance of a remuneration and framework contract without any concrete demands. Cockpit hails the fact that since 2017, Ryanair has recognised it as a collective bargaining partner alongside the far larger service sector union Verdi.

Against a background of a merciless competitive struggle in European aviation, Ryanair has decided to collaborate with the trade unions in order to deploy them as means of controlling the increasingly explosive development of the class struggle.

The Cockpit leadership assumes this role very consciously. In an interview, Cockpit President Martin Locher explained, “It is clearly evident that Ryanair management has no interest in agreeing to a contract with us, but is just playing for time”. As far as conditions for the employees go, Ryanair seeks “no improvement at all” but wants a contract that “largely preserves the status quo”.

Nonetheless, Cockpit is trying hard to come to an agreement with Ryanair. The union has yet to set a date for a first strike but states almost desperately, “We are giving Ryanair one last opportunity until August 6, 2018 to make a negotiable offer”. In an interview with *Airliners.de*, Cockpit President Locher said, “Our goal is not really to strike, but to achieve a collective agreement.”

Cockpit opposes any form of joint strike action that crosses the boundaries of companies and countries. Instead, it is working closely with the large corporations, and in particular Lufthansa, to bolster their position against their international competitors, at the expense of the workers.

By March 2017, Cockpit had concluded a long-term agreement with Lufthansa, which included a no-strike clause running till June 2022. In this agreement, Cockpit expressly assures Lufthansa of “structurally sustainable improved cockpit personnel costs”.

[PHOTO] Cockpit executive members with Lufthansa directors addressing a striking pilots’ meeting November 30, 2017 (left to right: Lufthansa Human Resources Director Dr. Bettina Volkens, then-Cockpit Chairman Ilja Schulz, Eurowings CEO Karl Ulrich Garnadt, Cockpit Negotiating Committee member Ingolf Schumacher and Lufthansa Board Member Harry Hohmeister).

At the end of its last strike at the end of November 2017, the Cockpit leadership brought Lufthansa’s three top managers onto the stage at a pilots’ rally. The managers were allowed to speak to the strikers, and Lufthansa board member Harry Hohmeister invoked the “unity of Lufthansa” against its opponents, who did not sit “on the board, but in the competition”, namely Ryanair. In response, the then-Cockpit Chairman Ilja Schulz said, “The enemy is outside—I agree with you! That’s why we have to close ranks.”

To advance their own interests against the large corporations, workers at all airlines must break with this nationalist perspective and form workplace committees independent of the trade unions, make contact with workers at other airlines and in other countries, and launch a common struggle against the worsening conditions of exploitation.

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>