

The Ryanair strike and the resurgence of international class struggle

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Ryanair pilots in Ireland, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany are expected to strike Friday in opposition to attacks on their pay and working conditions.

The strikes are over a range of issues. A large number of the pilots who fly for Ryanair are not employed by the airline. They are forced to form a one-person company and even set up a bank account in Ireland.

In that country, some 100 full-time pilots are striking over issues of seniority. In Germany, 400 pilots are opposing the increasing use of agency workers and demanding a higher base salary so that variable payments based on hours flown make up a smaller part of overall remuneration. They are also demanding higher sick pay and equal pay across German operations.

In Sweden, pilots are in dispute because the trade union involved has been unable to reach a collective agreement and claims that Ryanair is refusing to negotiate. In the Netherlands, workers are demanding a collective contract in which Dutch labour law is applied, including full-time jobs, improved sick pay and pension provisions. In Belgium, pilots are walking out in defence of cabin crew who struck in June and have faced intimidation by management.

Pilots in all five countries have voted in favour of strike action, with unions in the Netherlands and Germany yet to formally decide on when to strike. Pilots in the Netherlands expressed the common determination of pilots in all of the countries involved to fight back by voting by 99.5 percent for industrial action. German pilots voted for strike action by a similar margin.

Ryanair pilots in Ireland, where the company is headquartered, have already staged four one-day strikes this year.

The strikes must be seen in the context of a developing resurgence of the class struggle internationally. In a January 3 Perspective article, *World Socialist Web Site* Chairperson David North wrote that 2018 would be “characterized, above all, by an immense intensification of social tensions and an escalation of class conflict around the world.”

North continued: “The essential contradictions of the capitalist system ... are now rapidly approaching the point

where the further suppression of mass working class opposition to capitalism is impossible.”

This assessment is being borne out, with struggles erupting all over the world against attacks on workers’ pay, conditions and livelihoods, including the mass strikes by teachers in the United States, the strike by industrial workers in Germany, the fight by 50,000 university lecturers in the UK in defence of pension rights, and the strikes and protests by rail workers in France against pro-business legislation imposed by the Macron government.

Last month, an article in *Politico* referred to the initial Ryanair strikes as the harbinger of a “continent-wide rebellion” by cabin crew and pilots. This rebellion is gathering pace—as a global struggle against a transnational corporation employing 13,000 workers and operating from 86 bases in 37 countries across Europe and North Africa.

This has implications for the global airline industry. Carrying 130 million passengers last year, Ryanair is Europe’s largest airline by passenger numbers. It plays a critical role in setting new benchmarks of super-exploitation based on its business model of imposing low pay and long working hours.

Ryanair recruits staff at rock bottom rates of pay, using agencies to scour low-wage countries—particularly in eastern Europe—to hire cabin crew who can reportedly be paid as little as €10 a flight. According to information obtained by the ryanairdontcare blog, over 4,000 Ryanair staff are on zero-hour contracts, earning as little as €600 a month.

Ryanair cabin crew report that they work unpaid for up to five hours a day. The firm has maintained a policy whereby staff must be available for airport standby and are paid just £3.75 per hour. Pilots previously had to pay Ryanair a training course fee of €29,500, which was reduced only this year. However, “cadets” are still forced to hand over an upfront fee of €5,000.

The pressure placed on workers is intolerable. Last Friday, a Dutch Ryanair pilot with 10 years at the company, Jouke Schrale, was found dead in a staff car park at Malaga airport—reportedly having committed suicide shortly before

he was scheduled to fly a plane to Brussels. This is the second suicide of a Ryanair pilot since 2011, when Paul Ridgard, based at John Lennon Airport in Liverpool, took his own life.

The Ryanair strike shows that the struggles of the working class are reaching a higher stage of development and intensity, posing strategic issues before every section of the international working class.

In 1988, the International Committee of the Fourth International made a far-sighted appraisal of the impact on the future course of the class struggle of globalised production and the domination of economic life by huge transnational corporations. The ICFI wrote:

It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale.

The main obstacle to such an offensive is the nationalist, pro-capitalist trade unions, which function as an industrial police force on behalf of the corporations, banks and national governments.

Friday's joint action will take place due only to an incipient rebellion against trade unions that have worked for months to prevent such an outcome. Germany's Cockpit union did not announce a date for a strike because it was desperately seeking a last-minute, face-saving agreement with Ryanair.

Ahead of this week's strikes, the Sepla union, representing 500 of the 800 Ryanair pilots in Spain, announced that it would not be calling strikes despite failing to reach a collective bargaining contract with Ryanair. It would initiate legal action instead.

Some 25 percent of Ryanair's pilots are located in the UK. Throughout the latest wave of international strikes, the BALPA trade union, recognised by the company in January, has continued fruitless negotiations with Ryanair, seeking "an end to a fragmented pay structure, to reduce the number of contract pilots and the acceptance of seniority."

For its part, the Irish pilots' union (Ialpa-Fórsa) has agreed to third-party negotiations beginning next week.

Not only are the unions keeping pilots' strikes in the various countries separated from one another wherever

possible, they are also isolating pilots from Ryanair's super-exploited cabin crews. At the end of July, cabin crew workers held strikes for two days in Spain, Portugal and Belgium, with no involvement by the pilots.

In stark contrast, corporations such as Ryanair utilise the global economy to impose ever greater levels of exploitation. The company relies on the divisions between workers deliberately fostered by the trade unions on the basis of their reactionary perspective of economic nationalism. Ryanair has threatened to sack more than 100 pilots and 200 cabin crew workers based at Dublin Airport, with CEO Michael O'Leary warning that the company will move jobs to Poland from Ireland if they continue to strike.

The only way to combat this global offensive by the employers is for workers to mount a global offensive of their own!

Ryanair pilots, cabin crew and ground staff must break free of the grip of the trade unions and take the struggle into their own hands.

Rank-and-file committees must be formed, wholly independent of the trade unions. They must link up the fight of all Ryanair workers across all national divisions, while making an appeal for support from airline, transport and delivery workers across the globe.

This requires the adoption of a socialist, internationalist programme, as fought for by the ICFI, including placing the airline industry under public ownership, to be run democratically as part of a planned global economy based on human need, not the accumulation of private profit.

Ryanair workers in agreement with this perspective should write to the WSWS and share your experiences with your co-workers internationally.

Robert Stevens

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>