

Unions step up sabotage of airline workers' struggles in Europe

By Robert Stevens
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British Airways (BA) lost a legal appeal Wednesday to prevent its pilots going on strike over pay. BA's parent company International Consolidated Airlines Group (IAG) first went to court the previous week, but its initial application was dismissed.

Were the strike to proceed, it would involve 4,000 pilots at Heathrow and Gatwick but affect flights from all UK airports, including Stansted, Manchester, Belfast, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Up to 140,000 passengers a day would be affected by the action.

The dispute takes place amid a growing mood of militancy among airline workers across the continent. More than 4,000 security guards, fire fighters, engineers and passenger service staff at London Heathrow are involved in a pay dispute after rejecting an 18-month pay rise offer averaging just 2.7 percent. The Unite union called off two planned days of industrial action set for July 26-27 and is asking its members to vote on a new offer of just 7.3 percent over two-and-a-half years.

On Friday evening, Unite announced that 88 percent of its members had rejected the new offer and 2,500 workers were prepared to strike next week. In response, Heathrow Airport announced the "pre-emptive" cancellation of 172 flights for next Monday and Tuesday.

In another dispute, security workers at London's Gatwick Airport are set to strike on August 10 for 48 hours in a pay dispute. The Unite members, employed by ICTS, scan passengers' luggage. According to Unite, most of the 130 workers are paid less than £9 an hour.

The British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA), which represents 90 percent of British Airways' 4,300 pilots, held a consultative ballot in June of its 4,000 members concerning BA's offer of an 11.5 percent pay deal over three years. Ninety-six percent of members voted down the offer. Due to the huge opposition, a strike ballot was held this month, with 93 percent rejecting the pay offer on a turnout of 90 percent. The Unite and GMB unions

representing other BA staff accepted the offer.

A strike would be the first by BA pilots in 40 years and their rejection of the deal in such numbers reveals a determination to end the constant lowering of pay along with productivity hikes imposed over the last decade.

BALPA noted that so concerned is IGA with keeping pay down that it is digging in its heels under conditions where just one day of a strike might cost it £40 million in revenue. BALPA said that based on figures BA presented in court, a strike "will cost far more" than it would take to settle the dispute.

But despite the overwhelming mandate, BALPA has refused to call any industrial action. Under anti-strike laws, BALPA has until January to take action, but it must give two weeks' notice. Despite headlines in the right-wing media that the union is attempting to bring BA to its knees during the height of the holiday season, BALPA has repeatedly declared that all it wants is a negotiated settlement.

As the Court of Appeal decision came through, BALPA General Secretary Brian Strutton said that BA taking the union to court "rather than deal with us across the negotiating table, has sadly wasted huge amounts of time and money that could have been put into finding a peaceful resolution." He continued, "Now the window for negotiation and compromise is closing fast."

BALPA called only for "a sensible improved offer" and a "small fraction" of BA's profits.

Strutton insisted that "BALPA wants to resolve this matter through negotiation and so we are not announcing strike dates... Instead, we have called on BA to hold further talks today [July 31] and for the rest of this week for one last try to resolve this dispute by negotiation."

On Friday, despite having secured no agreement after another three days of talks, the union tweeted, "Both sides have agreed to resume talks next week. In the meantime, BALPA will not announce any industrial

action dates at this time...”

Even if a strike were announced by the union next Monday, action could not legally take place until August 20, with the summer holiday season virtually over.

The deteriorating pay and conditions facing BA pilots and other staff constitute an indictment of the role of the trade unions, which have worked as an arm of management for years. Within the space of a decade, BA went from reporting a £230 million operating loss in 2009 to pre-tax super-profits of almost £2 billion in 2018, up 8.7 percent from 2017. BA’s owner, IAG, which also owns Spain’s Iberia and Ireland’s Aer Lingus, reported an overall pre-tax profit of £2.8 billion, nearly 10 percent higher than in 2017. Investors were awarded a “special dividend” of €700 million as a result.

Three years ago, BALPA accepted a sell-out pay deal that it and the company deemed vital for BA’s “survival” and return to profitability. BALPA referred to its rotten record in a July 22 press release: “BA is making massive profits as a result of the hard work and dedication of staff, including because of sacrifices made during hard times. Thankfully BA is no longer in a fight for survival so, like the airline’s senior managers and directors, pilots deserve a small fraction of that profit via, for instance, a profit share scheme.”

The unions are working in concert to head off any united offensive of airline workers at the UK’s busiest airports.

Last month, Unite called off the first day of a planned 17 days of strikes over pay against Easyjet at Stansted Airport. The 43 staff members involved in the strike action are employed by Stobart and work the Easyjet check-in desk.

The union put forward another pay deal to the workers after it held “positive talks” with the firm and “signed a recognition agreement with Unite for trade union collective bargaining purposes...” Yesterday, the union called off the strike after workers voted for a one-year pay deal, while the company boasted of having ended the strike.

The unions play the same role everywhere. On July 25, the AFPA union called off a scheduled strike by workers at Italian national carrier Alitalia. Some 113 flights to and from Italy were expected to be cancelled. The strike was pushed back to September 6 after the union concluded talks with the Transport Ministry. Several sources said the September action would be cut from 24 hours to just four.

This week, the ALPA union organised a token boycott of company events by Air Malta pilots in protest at the

courts upholding a legal injunction against the pilots banning them from taking industrial action in a dispute over conditions of work.

The airlines are responding to increased competition in a cutthroat industry by intensifying attacks on their global workforce. This week, Ryanair, Europe’s largest airline, reported a 19 percent fall in first-quarter profits over the same period a year ago, and a 21 percent increase in staff costs. In response, as revealed in a leaked video, the company said it expects to lay off hundreds of staff in the coming weeks. The firm had 500 too many pilots and 400 too many cabin crew and job losses were “unavoidable,” said chief executive Michael O’Leary.

As with other airlines, the prolonged grounding of Boeing’s unsafe 737 MAX 8 jet has forced Ryanair to reduce scheduled deliveries of the aircraft for next year, from 58 to 30. Ryanair said this will hit profits as any cost benefits from the aircraft it planned to accrue would be delayed until 2021.

Last summer, cabin crews and pilots from a number of European countries took part in a series of strikes against Ryanair’s low-wage regime.

The offensive by BA, Ryanair and all the other airlines poses the necessity for workers to begin to organise themselves independently of the nationalist unions and turn to a socialist, internationalist perspective that puts the interests of workers before the profit interests of the airline conglomerates.

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