

BALPA pilots union enforces sell-out deal at British Airways

By Barry Mason
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British Airways (BA) pilots belonging to the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) have accepted a union recommended deal involving hundreds of job losses and massive pay cuts.

Under the deal, 270 of BA's 4,300 pilots will be made redundant. Those remaining will suffer an immediate 20 percent pay cut, which will supposedly reduce to 8 percent in two years. The deal also claims that pay levels will be restored at some indefinite future point "over the longer term." A part-time workforce is to be created in the form of a standby pool of 300 pilots on reduced wages, who will only return to their jobs as demand picks up in the aviation industry.

BALPA members voted by an 85 percent majority on an 87 percent turnout to accept the proposal. They did so with a gun pointed to their heads by the union.

BA, like other airlines internationally, is using the COVID-19 pandemic to impose long-planned cuts in jobs, pay and conditions, to gain a competitive edge in an increasingly cutthroat market. BA's owner, International Airlines Group, initially announced plans to cut 12,000 jobs from its current workforce of 42,000 and sack the remaining 30,000 to be rehired on reduced pay and worse conditions.

BALPA was in negotiations with BA for three months as the company finalised its assault on the workforce. The union agreed the rotten deal with BA in principle on July 6, but it only made it public on July 22, leaving just one week for its BA members to vote on the proposal and the union recommending a "yes" vote. Making clear that they had no intention of offering workers anything better, the union stated, "BALPA is recommending its members accept these proposals as the best that can be achieved in these incredibly difficult circumstances."

Given the ruthlessness with which BA and its partner

BALPA have imposed the pay cuts, no one should believe that they will ever be reversed. Instead, they will set a new benchmark for the industry.

Pilots' salaries represent a major financial cost for airlines. Experienced long-haul captains in the industry often earn £100,000 or more. BA has higher-than-average pilot salaries and an experienced long-haul pilot can earn £150,000. However, starting basic salary for a BA captain is about £75,000, according to BALPA. No doubt BA is looking towards shifting out its more highly paid pilots, in favour of employing those on lower pay.

This was the second sell-out deal in a matter of weeks negotiated by BALPA. It sealed a deal with Ryanair involving a 20 percent pay cut at the beginning of July. That agreement also committed the pilots to more flexible working rotas and leave arrangements. Again, the lost pay is supposed to be restored gradually over the next four years. BALPA justified the deal saying it meant that 260 pilot jobs had been saved. Yet 70 pilot posts are now under threat if Ryanair goes ahead with plans to close its bases at Leeds/Bradford, Prestwick, Bournemouth and Southend.

BA is pressing the advantage handed to it by BALPA and is engaged in negotiations with other sections of its workforce, including cabin crew, engineers and office staff. The company had issued an ultimatum to its non-pilot staff saying they must accept either redundancy terms, or a wage cut and inferior terms and conditions, by Monday, August 3. The company warned that staff opting for neither option may be cut loose with no redundancy package.

The Unite union represents many of the company's cabin crew staff, who have a long record of militant struggle against attacks by the company. It is already planning a sell-out.

On July 27, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey sent a letter to BA chief executive Alex Cruz on his plan “to fire and rehire thousands of your workforce on August 7.” The media focussed on McCluskey’s threat that Unite was ready to proceed to “industrial action with immediate effect.” But the main portion of McCluskey’s letter was a plea to Cruz to work with Unite as the only realistic way to ensure continued profitability for the company.

He wrote that Cruz and his management team had “dragged the good name of British Airways through the mud,” adding, “I have attempted for months to try to get you to understand the need to treat your workers with respect and dignity and this is the only way to get through this pandemic together.

“It is your staff, not you, that have for many years, built the good name of British Airways and contributed billions of pounds to its profitability year on year.”

McCluskey insisted that the union’s main concern was to avoid strikes and suppress its members’ opposition to BA’s attacks. “Instead of criticising Unite reps, you should actually listen to them ... and you might, at long last, realise that the only way to have a lasting peace and avoid months/years of industrial unrest is to work with us to achieve an acceptable way forward.”

On BA’s fire and rehire threats, McCluskey wrote, “We will work every hour between now and then [August 7], to convince you not to do so. You can take this letter as our commitment to do that.”

BA workers can have no confidence in Unite to lead a fight to defend their jobs and livelihoods. In July, the *World Socialist Web Site* highlighted a New Economics Foundation report published in consultation with the Trade Union Congress which showed Unite has already accepted a 10 percent redundancy level in the aviation industry. Yesterday morning on Radio 4, McCluskey declared “we will accept the pilot’s deal” secured by BALPA, complaining, “British Airways are not offering [Unite] the same deal.”

The attacks on aviation industry workers are part of an international assault. Last month, Emirates Airline announced plans to cut 9,000 out of its 60,000 pre-COVID-19 pandemic employees. In June, the Australian carrier Qantas said it would make 6,000 redundant while a further 15,000 staff would be stood down, out of a pre-pandemic total of 30,000. In May,

Qatar Airways revealed it would cut a fifth of its 45,000-strong workforce.

A FlightGlobal article noted that “it is in North America that the most stark examples of job-cutting are emerging.” United Airlines warned in July that 36,000 of its employees, representing 45 percent of its workforce, could lose their jobs. Air Canada has cut its workforce by 60 percent, or 20,000 jobs, as a temporary measure officially.

At the end of July, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), representing 290 airlines, said it did not expect global air travel to return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024. COVID-19 has reduced the annual \$1.3 trillion revenues of the airline industry by around \$460 billion, more than a third.

The collaboration of the unions with the aviation industry is likewise an international phenomenon. In July, the Icelandic airline Icelandair negotiated a new contract with the Icelandic Cabin Crew Association (FFI) after its members had rejected two previous deals. From an original 900 cabin crew members before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the airline will continue with just 200 as it restarts operations. Massive cuts have been pushed through at Lufthansa by the German unions Verdi, UFO and Cockpit.

The deals being signed by BALPA and other unions internationally make clear that workers are dealing with organisations that function as an arm of management, ensuring the imposition of pay and job cuts and attacks on working conditions. The role of unions in enforcing ongoing attacks on jobs and conditions has been accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis. In opposition to this hellish race to the bottom, BA workers must build rank-and-file committees, allied with workers in Europe and around the world, to defend jobs and conditions.

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