

Heathrow airport ground staff given ultimatum: Accept pay cuts or face redundancy

By Margot Miller
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Frontline staff at Britain's Heathrow Airport have been told they face the stark choice of either accepting pay cuts of between 15 and 20 percent or suffering job losses. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, these savage ultimatums have become the new normal in industrial relations.

On September 2, Heathrow issued formal section 188 notices, which means that after a 45-day consultation period the company can fire and rehire its workforce on company terms. This will affect half the airport's ground staff of 4,700, including engineers and security workers. Demands also include the end of the workers' final salary pension scheme.

Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd is owned by shareholders including Spanish multinational Ferrovial, Qatar Holdings, the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, the UK Universities Superannuation Scheme and Alinda Capital. The company says it will "guarantee a job" for whomever wishes to remain. Staff, however, could lose up to £10,000 a year. How far Heathrow is prepared to go in cutting pay is indicated by a comment in the *Independent*, which report of management's plans, "No one's salary will fall below the London Living Wage, it said." The London Living Wage is set at just £10.75.

Heathrow is London's busiest airport, but with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic travel and tourism ground almost to a standstill.

A spokesperson for Heathrow stated, "COVID-19 has decimated the aviation industry, which has led to an unprecedented drop in passenger numbers at Heathrow, costing the airport over £1bn since the start of March. Provisional traffic figures for August show passenger numbers remain 82 percent down on last year and we must urgently adapt to this new reality."

In March, one runway and two terminals were closed, and most flights were grounded. Most workers were retained at that point under the government's job furlough scheme, which ends in November. In June, the company launched a voluntary redundancy scheme, after slashing managerial roles by a third.

Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost across the travel and tourism industries in the recent period. This trend began before the pandemic, which has acted to accelerate efforts to cut costs in an increasingly competitive global market.

The threat to jobs and pay cuts at Heathrow follows the recent announcement at Gatwick, London's other main airport, of its intention to make a quarter of its workforce redundant. This amounts to 600 ground staff posts after a reduction in passenger numbers for August of 80 percent.

Gatwick, which is owned by VINCI Airports and Global Infrastructure Partners, announced 200 job losses in March and took out a £300 million bank loan, but later said it needed to reduce costs further. Chief Executive Stewart Wingate blamed the cuts on the "devastating impact" of the coronavirus on the airline and travel industries. At the moment, with 80 percent of the Gatwick staff on the government furlough scheme, only the north terminal is in operation.

In every case, the role of the trade unions is to push through redundancies and facilitate concessions, so long as they receive a place at the negotiating table.

Heathrow had been in negotiations with the Unite union for four months before the latest announcement. Unite official Wayne King said the airport's plans would "further undermine confidence in the industry... Our members have worked tirelessly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic." Appealing to Heathrow management to continue "already difficult negotiations"

he added, “To conduct industrial relations via the media in such a brutish manner is designed to create fear and panic in a group of key workers.”

The central pre-occupation of the union bureaucracy is not the interests of workers but to defend the interests of the aviation industry, the auto industry, the aerospace industry, etc. King added: “At a time when Unite is working hard to persuade the government to follow the lead of other European nations and provide specific financial support to the aviation sector to ensure that the industry and workers can survive the pandemic and thrive in the future ...”

Unite regional manager, Jamie Major, said of the Gatwick job losses, “This is a bitter blow for the workers and once again highlights the chronic failure of the government to support the aviation sector, despite promises way back in March that it would do so.”

Offering to help facilitate the attacks, he continued, “Unite will be entering into formal negotiations with Gatwick Airport to ensure that redundancies are minimised and that all redundancy procedures are fair and fully transparent.”

Last month, the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA) foisted a sell-out on pilots at British Airways (BA). The union recommended its members accept a deal in which 270 of BA’s 4,300 pilots would lose their jobs. The pay of the remaining workforce will be slashed immediately by 20 percent and fall to an 8 percent cut in two years and only return to where it is now at some undefined future point.

BA has also issued an ultimatum to cabin crew and ground staff to either accept redundancy, or a wage cut and inferior terms and conditions. According to Unite, some workers could face cuts in pay of up to 43 percent.

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey pleaded with BA chief executive Alex Cruz to work with Unite to ensure the continued profitability for the company. In mid-August, Cruz hailed the announced “significant progress” in talks with the unions. This is as more than 6,500 staff have already lost their jobs, including 4,500 cabin crew based at Heathrow and Gatwick, as the company seeks 12,000 redundancies.

Like other airlines internationally, BA, with the backing of the unions, is using the pandemic to justify long-planned cuts in jobs, pay and conditions, to gain the edge against international competitors.

Just weeks before, BALPA reached an agreement with Ryanair involving a 20 percent pay cut beginning in July. The sell-out deal means pilots have to work to more

flexible rota and leave arrangements, to the detriment of their well-being. Again, pay cuts are supposed to be gradually restored over four years. BALPA sold the pay cuts on the basis of saving 260 pilot jobs. However, 70 of these posts are still under threat if Ryanair closes its bases at Leeds/Bradford, Prestwick, Bournemouth and Southend as proposed.

In addition to slashing their workers’ jobs and pay, the airlines are agitating for a reckless opening-up of international travel to facilitate their return to profit-making.

The air transport industry has not seen the recovery in passenger traffic it hoped for since lockdown ended, aggravated by the government’s imposition of 14-day quarantine measures for travellers returning from virus “hotspots.” This has deterred potential holidaymakers from making bookings, leading to flights being cancelled during the peak summer holiday season.

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Heathrow Airport Chief Executive John Holland-Kaye urged the government to introduce swab testing for coronavirus of incoming passengers as an alternative to quarantining. An enthusiastic backer of the criminally irresponsible back to work drive, Holland-Kaye warns that UK business is in danger of falling behind its rivals.

“This [swab testing at airports] is starting to get their [Germany and France’s] economies moving again and, in fact, both Frankfurt and Charles de Gaulle airports carried more passengers over the last few months than Heathrow,” he said.

The interests of airline workers are diametrically opposed to those of the airline owners and chief executives, whose only interest in running these companies is the extraction of profit—whatever the costs to their employees. Unite, Balpa and the rest of the trade unions have proved again and again that they stand on the side of the employers.

Workers must break from these rotten organisations and form independent rank-and-file committees, in alliance with airline workers internationally, to fight back against the onslaught on their livelihoods and safety.

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