

BA strikes: management bluster and bullying as strike action spreads through Europe



British Airways cabin crews have struck for three days in a dispute which is quickly taking on the status of a set-piece battle between workers and management. With a general election weeks away, the political parties have attempted to outdo each other by laying into the strikers, with much of the media in tow.

Effects of the strike

Much media coverage has been given to the disputed amount of disruption caused by the strike. BA has claimed that 60% of its passengers have flown as normal, while Unite has said that only a few thousand passengers have been shifted. BA's spin machine has gone into overdrive, with BA chief Willie Walsh plastering himself all over YouTube (Walsh, who has described the union's offer as "morally wrong" took home an annual salary of three-quarters of a million pounds in 2009 despite BA making record losses, an increase of 6% on top of a boost to his pension fund).

Management is trumpeting the supposed success of its 'contingency plans', relying for the large part on scab labour, and chartered flights run on behalf of BA by other airlines. At this stage there is nothing in the way of critical analysis of BA's figures available, but a contributor to the 'Comment is Free' section of the website of UK newspaper The Guardian has done some work of his own analysing BA's claims of the number of flights affected by the strike on Sunday:

Okay guys, i've just sifted thru BA.com to get a rough idea of how many flights took off today, as the BA Walsh Spin machine is in overdrive, saying that 65% of the schedule departed. Garbage!

276 Scheduled BA Flight Departures From Heathrow for sat 21st

135 of those flights were cancelled.

that leaves 141 BA departures from Heathrow today right? Erm, no.

3 flights to Finland included in those figures operated by Finnair. Also...

20 flights to the Republic of Ireland operated by Aer Lingus (BA don't even fly to Eire from LHR!)

9 flights to Spain were Iberia aircraft.

4 flights included in those figures were BMI to Damascus, Tehran, Beirut and Almaty!

3 flights to BKK, HKG, SIN were Qantas.

That leaves us with 102 departures today. These figures include those wet leased aircraft, and flights that left as cargo only with no passengers. I believe the number of chartered aircraft was 23. Assuming they just operated one flight each (it's more likely they flew a couple each), that leaves us with 79 BA aircraft departing, some without and some with very few passengers. That's 28% of the schedule.

28% !!! That's a far cry from Walsh's 65%. It's there for all to see. Walsh's figures are pure fantasy. Keep strong and keep the faith. Don't believe a single word of the BA Hype.

On the other hand, 'independent rebuttals' of the union's figures well reported by the media, such as those on Steven Frischling's blog, have relied heavily on BA's own figures. At the same time, there has been little information to what extent the BA staff "reporting to work" are supervisors and staff

from other parts of the company taking on scabbing duties. Reports of stand-in cabin crew taking up their responsibilities of only a few hours' worth of training suggest this is the case, and is not surprising given the massive mandate that the strike received from Unite membership – an 80.7% yes vote to strike action on a 78.7% turnout. On the other hand, the paltry 'offer' Unite are fighting for which includes a 2% pay cut and the levels of management bullying will inevitably have led to scabbing by demoralised crew (more below).

Bullying

Meanwhile, management's bullying has reached new heights as BA carries through its threats to discipline anyone taking sick leave over the strike days. A seriously ill crew member on bed rest who is at risk of losing her baby has been suspended, as has a worker recovering from surgery. A worker off caring for a seriously ill child was instructed to bring the child to her disciplinary hearing. A number of crew members have been signed off with stress and depression, with one being sent to an urgent treatment centre. In every instance, BA's health services have overridden the decisions of GPs.

According to Unite, bullying against BA staff has also taken the form of suspensions for activities such as:

- Receiving and forwarding e-mails from their private accounts
- Discussions on union member only forums
- Holding private conversations
- Making a joke
- Expressing dismay regarding a graffiti board set up by BA management where staff were encouraged to scribble words of support for the company, on which was written "cabin crew scum."

BA management has also undertaken a campaign of bullying against union reps. A union rep responsible for running an online discussion forum for union members has been issued with a 45-page legal document demanding the identities of 32 crew members posting under pseudonyms.

BA bosses are also threatening to take away travel privileges from workers involved in the strike action. This has led to terror on the part of staff who rely on them to get to work – one statistic claims that a quarter of BA staff live abroad, relying on travel perks to do their jobs. The threat to withdraw these privileges is an attempt to scare workers out of taking strike action.

Industry-wide action

An ongoing dispute with BA baggage handlers, also Unite members, could lead to further strike action. Negotiations have been ongoing for some time - planned 48 hour strikes at the Christmas/New Year period were postponed by Unite to allow talks to continue. Meanwhile, Europe faces a wave of strike action in the air industry. Air France crews walk out for four days beginning Sunday, in defence of pay and conditions. Baggage handlers, cabin crews and pilots at Italian firm Alitalia struck for four hours at the weekend.

TAP Portuguese Airlines pilots will strike on the 31st of March, while pilots at Lufthansa, Lufthansa Cargo and Germanwings will begin a four-day strike on April 31st.

The union's offer

With the press laying into the striking cabin crews, the Tory party invoking the spirit of Thatcher and the need to challenge the "entrenched interests" of the Trade Unions, and the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Transport Secretary describing the actions of the Labour party's biggest donor as "reprehensible" and "deplorable", it could be easy to buy into the guff about a "Spring of discontent", mirroring the industrial unrest which brought down the last Labour government.

Unlike many of the strikes of the "winter of

discontent" of 1978-79, which were an attempt to secure better remuneration for workers in the wake of a nationwide pay freeze under Callaghan's government, this strike is entirely defensive. When picketers hold placards saying "we offered a pay cut!", there are clearly problems. Unite's offer to BA accepted the company's terms of reference entirely, and the need for frontline staff to pay for the company's woes. The dispute is over the imposition of these attacks, and the precise form they take, not the necessity of the attacks themselves. Unite has acted like a junior management partner, angry at being sidelined. A pay cut is unlikely to be what BA crews imagined they'd be fighting for when they delivered an overwhelming mandate for strike action. Nonetheless, with all the political parties united on the need to impose austerity on the working class in coming years, the struggle of the BA cabin crews deserves support and solidarity.

This article was originally posted by Django on libcom.org

New Social Centre for Belfast

Warzone Collective originally sprang to life back in 1984 loosely inspired by the anarcho-punk movement but largely by their own self-determination to create a social space they could call their own. Punks were generally not welcome in many of the city's venues and gigs kept moving from Belfast's Harp Bar, to the Manhattan and the Labour Club in Waring Street among others but nothing seemed to last.

Many of the city's punks had also been attracted to Just Books, the community bookshop in Winetavern Street where many became exposed to anarchist ideas and libertarian philosophies; as well as venturing to the Anarchy Centre in Long Lane where the legendary anarchist band Crass played in 1982 pushing the DIY agenda and inspiring people to get out there and do it. Both the Anarchy Centre and Just Books were set up by Belfast Anarchist Collective.

The opening of 'Giro's' by Warzone in 1986 created an autonomous hub not just for punks and anarchists but anybody with an interest in an alternative to the mainstream. As well as being a venue and drop-in centre, vegetarian cafe and anarchist library, gallery and screen-print workshop among many other things it was also a focal point for numerous campaigns and organisations from squatter's support groups to Anarchist Black Cross. In 1991 the group moved to a larger building and established a recording studio and practice space, on top of everything else, offering bands a cheap alternative to rip-off venues across the city, and a non-sectarian space where you didn't leave your politics at the door but brought them in and argued your corner. Throughout this period it was the only openly non-sectarian venue in the city.

During the 17 years the centre ran, thousands of people passed through the doors and many were introduced to creative and radical ideas often for the

first time. In a city that taught you to keep your head down such self-empowerment and grass roots community organisation was a social and cultural achievement.

In 2009 Northern Visions TV, a local Belfast station, filmed a documentary on the group to be released later this year.

When Giro's closed at the end of its then current lease in late 2003, the volunteer pool had dwindled and many people had moved on but it left a gap in radical Belfast culture. Some talked about getting it going again while others felt that times had changed. In 2007 a few people began to get beyond the talking and organised meetings. At the same time it transpired that Just Books were also looking to reopen new premises so it was agreed to pool efforts.

In 2010 new premises were secured at Clarence Street in Belfast and the new social centre is beginning to come together.

Hopefully it will once again provide a focal point for grass roots organisation in the city. That depends on people getting involved and taking on the responsibility to make it happen rather than relying on others. Warzone Collective is open to anyone - a committee is elected at the annual AGM to run administrative aspects but anyone can get involved - the collective is run on anarchist lines though not everyone involved would identify themselves as anarchist.

The centre does represent an opportunity to bring together disparate groups and like-minded individuals to build an alternative in the city. With unemployment soaring and small business collapsing while City Fathers dig up the city to bring fine new paving to our commercial heartland, and with self-appointed paramilitaries still trying to dig a grave for imagination the time could not be more right. Hope to see you there.

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