

BA dispute

Mass meeting votes to put latest agreement to membership

Neil Cafferky

On 12 May at a mass members' meeting, Unite British Airways (BA) cabin crew voted to put the latest agreement between the union and management to a ballot of the membership. This appears to be the final chapter in one of the longest running disputes in Britain for a generation.

The original dispute was sparked off by management's plans to alter the terms and conditions of cabin crew. Chief among these changes was a reduction of in-flight staffing numbers and the introduction of new cabin crew on much worse pay and conditions.

These changes were imposed on cabin crew without the agreement of the union. In these circumstances cabin crew had no option but to fight in order to maintain the credibility of their union as a force that could effectively defend their interests.

But the cabin crew were unable to win a quick early victory. Among the reasons for this were the anti-trade union laws, the long delays in action and the failure to broaden the dispute across the entire workforce.

While the cabin crew and their elected representatives showed tremendous determination, serious question marks must hang over the conduct of the national union leadership during the course of this dispute. It is clear that management was able to impose change on cabin crew because they were isolated from other sections of the workforce at the company. This allowed management more time to organise to counter the dispute.

Management offensive

From the resulting stalemate management went on the offensive, refusing to substantially negotiate and embarking on a vindictive witch-hunt against union members.

Staff travel concessions were withdrawn from those who had taken lawful strike action while leading Unite stewards were disciplined and even sacked. Trade union facility time agreements were effectively torn up.

Documents leaked to the Guardian reported on management plans to sideline the main cabin crew Unite branch BASSA (British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association). The dispute had morphed into a battle to maintain the continued existence of the union among crew.

The union failed to reverse the imposed changes and since December the focus of industrial action has centred on pushing back management's witch-hunt against staff and limiting the worst effects of the impositions. This included the reduction in pay resulting from more lucrative longer haul routes being assigned to newer crew on inferior pay.

The key demands in the final ballot for strike action were the following:

The immediate restoration of staff travel concessions, in full, to the crew from whom they were taken by BA.

Binding arbitration, through ACAS, of all cabin crew disciplinary cases related to the original dispute.

The restoration of all earnings docked from crew who were off sick during strike dates.

Full and proper discussion of the



BA cabin crew fought hard against company attacks photo Paul Mattsson

trade union facilities agreement at the company with the immediate removal of all threats and sanctions made by BA in relation to this.

Reading through the terms of the new agreement it appears these demands have been partially accepted by the company. Staff travel will be restored once the agreement is implemented. On the issue of victimisations management has agreed to binding arbitration at ACAS.

Socialists are clear that ACAS is no friend of the trade union movement, nevertheless putting the final decision regarding disciplinarys in their hands is an improvement on the situation where the decision rested with management and was being used as a method to witch-hunt trade unionists. However it is unclear at the present time whether this covers sacked activists such as Duncan Holley, BASSA branch secretary, who took his case to an employment tribunal and lost.

The agreement also pledges to honour existing trade union facility time, a big concession from management who had previously been attempting to disrupt the operation of the union among cabin crew by often refusing to grant reps time off to carry out union duties.

Resilience

This is entirely due to the resilience of cabin crew under the most unbelievable bullying and harassment by an entirely vindictive management, not to mention constant vilification in the media.

However readers of the Socialist should be clear that as far as the original industrial dispute is concerned, cabin crew were unable to reverse the attacks. There now exists a significant cohort of new starters among cabin crew with much worse terms and conditions. They will exist as a separate bargaining unit to 'older' cabin crew on better terms and conditions whose numbers over time will diminish due to natural wastage.

It cannot be ruled out that management will return at a future date



Unite leader Len McCluskey photo the Socialist

looking for yet more concessions from cabin crew and will hope to play off different sections of cabin crew against each other. There are fears among reps in other sections of the BA workforce that the contract of new cabin crew may be applied to the rest of the company.

As the largest union in BA Unite was in a unique position to bring about a more united approach. It would be naïve to believe this could be easily done or that there were not pre-existing divisions amongst the workforce that management could exploit. Nevertheless there were a number of steps Unite could have taken in order to overcome this.

Union-busting

For example, once it became clear BA management was intent on union-busting, Unite could have called a meeting of all senior trade unions reps at the company to put the case for cabin crew to the wider workforce. During the course of this two-year dispute, other sections of Unite

at BA were also in dispute with management.

At the very least the union could have explored ways to coordinate action between the different sections. It would appear there was no attempt to do so and the opportunity of bringing the maximum pressure to bear on management was lost.

Although the joint agreement is littered with ringing phrases committing the company and management to a new era of amity and cooperation, this will prove to be short-lived as the global economy stagnates and oil prices continue to rise remorselessly. In order to maintain profit levels management will return at some point in the not too distant future demanding further concessions in pay, terms and conditions from staff.

Thanks to the steadfastness of cabin crew, workers at BA will have the benefit of strong union representation but the main lesson to be drawn from this dispute in the future is that isolation of sections strengthens the hand of management.

In brief

Strike at EHRC

Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) members in the Cardiff office of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) had solid support for their second walkout on 11 May.

PCS members are fighting back against the slashing of the EHRC budget by 68% and the staffing by 66%.

The Con-Dem government wants to close the EHRC helpline and run down the organisation that enforces the law and tackles discrimination.

This is part of the government agenda to let employers off the hook and give a green light to the worst employers to discriminate against workers.

PCS EHRC members in Cardiff fully understand how this battle fits in with the campaign to build for action to stop the attacks on our jobs, pay, pensions and the vital services that we provide.

Katrine Williams
PCS Wales chair

Saltend

Sacked Redhall construction workers are continuing their protests outside BP Saltend near Hull. Ten weeks after being locked out of work on the bio-ethanol plant being built for BP/Vivergo, the majority of workers reluctantly want to take a financial settlement.

But the employers are trying to force the trade unions to sign an onerous agreement that would prevent any worker from pursuing a legal case or further protest against the company. This is unacceptable to the workers who have fought to get their jobs back and now voted three times to refuse to sign up for this deal.

As we go to press on 17 May, Redhall workers in Hull will protest outside the courts when GMB national officer Phil Whitehurst is due to appear to face charges following arrest two weeks ago under Section 14 of the Public Order Act (POA). This arises from heavy-handed policing and blanket-use of the POA to restrict the right to protest because the workers had several times effectively closed down the BP site and blocked traffic.

Alistair Tice

Trades councils meet

At the Trade Union Councils' annual conference it was obvious that many trades councils have been in the forefront of the anti-cuts movement.

They have initiated coalitions against the cuts in many areas, involving local communities, as well as public sector workers. Socialist Party members in the National Shop Stewards Network have been the prime movers in many of these initiatives.

Motion after motion was carried unanimously, with commitments to campaigns against the government proposals high on the agenda. After the magnificent demonstration of 26 March, the main question asked was how will the TUC develop the obvious mood of resistance shown on that day?

The mood of the conference was shown by the voting for the Suffolk motion moved by Teresa MacKay. This listed among its demands the nationalisation of the pharmaceutical companies and was chosen as the trades council motion to go to this year's TUC in October!

Roger Mackay
Suffolk County Association of Trade Union Councils