

AVIATION INDUSTRY CRISIS

• FIGHT RETRENCHMENTS & PAY CUTS • ABOLISH OUTSOURCING • INDUSTRY-WIDE R12,500 MINIMUM WAGE
ORGANISE & FIGHT FOR SOCIALIST NATIONALISATION OF THE INDUSTRY

The cost of the Covid-19 industry-wide shutdown is being passed to workers in unpaid wages, compulsory leave and retrenchments. Comair has followed SAA and SA Express into business rescue. Cabin crew and pilots are under threat. So too are workers in outsourced and contracting companies that depend on the airlines. This includes maintenance and component manufacturers, engineers, cargo and logistics workers, catering and retail workers, security workers, administrators and IT workers, cleaners, ground- and baggage-handling workers etc.

If the aviation industry continues in private-ownership, run according to capitalist market principles, aviation workers face a disaster. Those companies that survive the pandemic will downsize their workforces. Some will use 'business rescue' to hit the re-set button on wages, workers' rights, and to weed-out trade unions. No amount of bad weather will make the ANC-government change course with the state-owned airlines. Introducing "strategic equity partners" in a "new" airline (i.e. the partial-privatisation of whatever remains of SAA after business rescue) will just entrench the profit motive and the exploitation of workers.

Workers need to loudly declare that enough is enough! A campaign must be built uniting **all** aviation workers – in every company and every sector, from baggage-handlers to pilots. This campaign must demand the **socialist nationalisation of the entire industry**. Wasteful, job-destroying and wage-lowering competition needs to be abolished. The liquidation and privatisation of SA Express and SAA needs to be halted. The privately-owned South African airlines must be nationalised. **All of them must then be integrated into a single publicly-owned airline**. The parasiting bosses must be kicked-out across the industry. Outsourcing must end. All contracts and tenders should be cancelled and workers and services brought in-house. Outside of management, this process should not lead to the loss of one single job. A living wage of R12,500 should be introduced.

Lessons

The unity of Numsa and Sacca in the struggle at SAA and the week-long strike in November showed the power of organised

workers. But the more experienced Numsa leadership lacked a clear **alternative** for the industry and **programme for struggle**. The leadership's opposition to outsourcing and commitment to public ownership was inadequate when it stopped at the SAA check-in desk.

The ANC-government allows the private sector to profiteer from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) through consulting fees, outsourcing and contracting. Whilst this policy bled SAA dry, SAA was also expected to compete in an industry organised entirely according to the profit-motive. This sacrificed all the possible advantages of public ownership. The failure to put forward a bold **socialist** alternative, not just for SAA, but the entire industry, allowed the Numsa leadership to be swept along by the employers' capitalist logic. The consequence was one concession after another, including, in the end, on public ownership itself. Other unions have consciously collaborated with management. **It is vital that workers learn the lessons of this.**

Organise

A united front of trade unions organising in the aviation industry is needed to lead a struggle for socialist nationalisation. Unfortunately, because of bureaucratic rivalries it is highly unlikely that such a united front will be initiated from the top. Workers urgently need to create facts on the ground to cut across this and prepare themselves for a struggle to save the industry.

Shop stewards and trade union and worker activists in **every airport** should build a **workers' forum**, uniting workers regardless of union affiliation. Genuine trade union leaders will support the workers' initiative. These forums must be broad, including workers involved in every aspect of aviation, regardless of company – from pilots and cabin crew to baggage-handlers, security guards and cleaners. These forums could then link-up and co-ordinate on a national basis.

This approach will be vital in the struggle to fight retrenchments in small- and medium-sized contracting companies. If workers are isolated fighting company-by-company, the bosses will have the upper-hand. Workers need to adopt the principle "an injury to one, is an injury to all". If one company initiates retrenchments, workers from all the companies at the airport must be prepared to down tools.

Capitalist Competition

The pandemic may have put the final nail in the industry, but capitalist competition had already built its coffin. Like many modern industries a 'market' and 'competition' had to be artificially created. Many of South Africa's eight airlines were 'spun-off' from their 'parent' company. Many outsourced and contracting companies only do business with the airlines and airports. They have no 'independent' existence. 'Competition' also has to be artificially maintained. In 2019 SAA was ordered to pay R800 million to Comair for "anti-competitive conduct".

The purpose of breaking-down and parcelling-up the aviation industry is to create as many taps as possible from which profit-thirsty bosses can drink. To justify their parasitic existence we are told that private ownership and competition is more efficient. But what is efficient about allowing wealth that could be used for higher wages or job-creating, safety-boosting investment

to be skimmed-off at every step? Capitalist competition turns industries into leaking buckets constantly having new holes drilled in them. For the bosses "efficiency" means squeezing-out ever bigger profits for themselves at the expense of wages and worker rights. Now the same bosses are screaming for state support!

The ANC-government copied this capitalist 'worst practice' at SAA. They refer to themselves as 'the shareholder'. They appoint a CEO and a board with a mandate to run the airline as a profit-making business. Every decision is a slave to this priority – workers and passengers, jobs and safety be damned. So 'profitable' parts are 'spun-off'. Every job possible is outsourced. This adds a new level of parasitism. All the bosses drinking from SAA's taps are extracting their profit from government taxes that could be spent on hospitals, schools and service-delivery. This is where the R32 billion in so-called 'bailouts' has gone.

The trade unions must reject the ANC-government's capitalist SOE model. The 'board' of a publicly-owned aviation industry should be composed of representatives of workers, their trade unions and passenger groups. It should be integrated with other SOEs according to a democratic economic plan. This would reduce waste and achieve scales of economy whilst protecting jobs, wages and workers' rights. Socialist nationalisation should be extended to support SOEs. Sasol and Engen should be nationalised to reduce aviation fuel costs. Such a project must be part of the development of an integrated, publicly-owned and affordable public transport system.

Such a sweeping alternative poses the question of the political vehicle needed to carry out. Aviation workers must support the creation of a socialist mass workers party.

Contact the Marxist Workers Party to be connected to our members and activists in the aviation industry and join the struggle for the socialist nationalisation of the aviation industry.

At OR Tambo contact Bongani on 073 923 8423 or Mduwazi (Malamulele) on 079 515 9011. Elsewhere 081 366 7375.