What's next after the transnational Ryanair strike?

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So there you are, a researcher who’s most comfortable behind a desk, at 7 o’clock, answering a stranded passenger in front of several press cameras. The Ryanair pilots and cabin crew members suddenly vanished at the sight of the approaching cameras, leaving me on the spot.

It is 28 September 2018 and what happened is that the Ryanair cabin crew and pilots were staging an unprecedented transnational strike, a bold move in a company that is notoriously anti-union and didn’t shy from firing unionized staff, closing activist bases or even pulling out of countries all together when they had to live up to social legislation (Gracos, 2019).

This time the staff decided to protest company policies again, yet now they did so together, transnationally, and with success. The company had to cancel numerous flights and, in the end, conceded to most of the demands of the strikers.

Pride and fear

The atmosphere was good on the picket line, yet the fear of retaliation was ever present. When non-striking Ryanair staff (managers) passed by, heads were turned away, and when cameras approached, the staff left me, a simple sympathiser, on the spot.

To understand this combination of pride and fear, some history and background is important. And the starting point is undoubtedly the character of the CEO of Ryanair, Michael O’Leary. In the 90s he declared that he would close the airline before negotiating with unions; he called the pilots’ unions a ‘busted flush’, and famously said that ‘hell would freeze over’ before he would negotiate with unions. And the company doesn’t stop with words only, as it is famous for its retaliation practices, including psychological pressure, lay-offs, base closures and so on (O’Sullivan and Gunnigle, 2008).

Yet in 2017 and 2018, two events broke the spell of a non-union Ryanair. First, the European Court of Justice decided that cabin crew based in Belgium had to follow Belgian law, rather than the Irish one. And second, at the end of 2017, pilot shortages and a historic planning stuff-up led to massive flight cancellations. As the pilots suddenly saw their structural-power position strengthened, they pushed for union recognition and collective bargaining and, to the surprise of many, succeeded without much of a fight.

Bolstered by the pilots’ success, cabin crew equally mobilized and in Portugal a three-day strike was called, but again, was ineffective. National level industrial actions had been staged earlier in Denmark, France and Ireland but all proved ineffectual. Part of the problem is that a strike in one base is easily circumvented as the company moves planes and staff from non-striking bases to effectively break the strike, even if some other countries declared their solidarity.

The International Transport Federation (ITF) and European Transport Federation (ETF) mounted a campaign under the banner ‘Cabin Crew United’ bringing together representatives of more than 21 countries resulting in a Charter with demands on working conditions, sick-pay, pay scales and the application of the home base law, rather than Irish law, for cabin crew contracts (ITF ETF, 2018).

A smaller group of unions (most of them also members of the ITF & ETF) decided that action was equally required and designed a transnational strategy including common demands, a common action and a pledge not to stop until all demands in all countries were met.

Hell still hot

The proof of the pudding was in the eating, with a first transnational strike on 25 and 26 July, another one on 10 August, and the main strike - on 28 September - included cabin crew from Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Backed by the larger international campaign including cabin crew, Ryanair saw itself obliged to concede to the demands for union recognition and the application of local legislation.

And to our knowledge, hell hasn’t frozen over yet.

What happened is that Ryanair staff (pilots and cabin crew) saw their power resources strengthened, both by contextual factors and by their own action. The shortage of pilots strengthened the
structural power of the pilots. Already, pilots (and definitely lead pilots) have structural power as they can decide whether or not a flight is going to take-off. But as the labour market for pilots got tight, their marketplace bargaining power increased significantly as they could more easily transfer to another air company if their demands were not met. The structural power of the cabin crew is lower. Flights can still operate if one decides not to work and the labour market for cabin crew is much less tight than for pilots. However, the court judgement increased the institutional power of the cabin crew. Ryanair’s demand for the application of the local law was not recognized by the European Court of Justice.

But most importantly, the staff capitalized on this by building associational power. They started organizing and mobilizing transnationally. Additionally, the years of negative press about Ryanair proved to be a strong source of societal power as everybody understood and sympathized with the strikers – even the stranded passenger that I had to talk to in front of the cameras.

One can only hope that the staff will manage to keep the momentum or institutionalize their power in the company. A battle has been won, but the war is far from over and already the company is trying to reinstall its ‘divide and rule’ strategy. The anti-union attitude of the company continues, as they recently sacked Czech staff members trying to form a union.

**Seeds of division?**

Paradoxically, one of the main demands of the transnational strike (to apply local instead of Irish legislation) might bear in itself the seeds of division between cabin crews based in different countries. Now that local law applies, employees at Ryanair are working objectively under different conditions depending on their base, which might undermine solidarity. Further, the strength of the strike was largely based on its grass-roots (and genuinely transnational) character. Now that unions are recognized, national institutions of social dialogue are to be installed which are marked by national traditions. This might prove to be an ill-fit with a genuinely transnational company such as Ryanair. ‘The Ryanair workforce is and thinks much more European than the unions are and do’ said a Ryanair organizer (De Spiegelaere, 2020).

Overcoming this might mean unions and staff will have to continue on the transnational path and not limit themselves to solidarity actions for national demands. It means that national union officers will have to look beyond their instincts and realize that Ryanair doesn’t play by national rules but has its very own transnational playbook. The highly mobile and international staff is ready for this. The future will tell if the unions are.

Hopefully, Ryanair will not only go down in history as the company that made flying dirt cheap, but also the company that created a genuinely transnational labour movement and fitting institutions. Yet, as it stands, this will not be thanks to the company management, but despite of it.

**References**


