

Book Review

**Phil Taylor and Sian Moore (2019) *Cabin Crew Conflict: The British Airways Dispute 2009–11*. London: Pluto Press.
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*Reviewed by
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Since its deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s, the aviation industry has undergone significant restructuring. The consequences for labour have been considerable but are all too often overlooked by the public. British Airways (BA) needs no introduction, but how the legacy airline adapted to the liberalisation of aviation could well have gone unnoticed were it not for the collectivism of its cabin crew and their willingness not to bear the brunt of management's cost-cutting agenda, code-named Project Columbus. Relations between cabin crew employees and management deteriorated and things came to a head when BA cabin crew and its representative union, the British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA), voted for strike action in 2009. A bitter and intensive struggle lasting two years ensued. The anatomy of this struggle is laid bare in Phil Taylor and Sian Moore's co-authored book *Cabin Crew Conflict: The British Airways Dispute 2009–11*, which revives a rich research tradition in industrial relations on strikes.

British Airways "typified the corporatist high tide of the mid 1970s" but later became "emblematic" of neo-liberalism (p. 25). Therefore, this case raises broader questions for employment relations. The authors declare the work to be "partisan" (p. 12) and seek to build on the traditions of Burawoy and Bourdieu. The book is written in an accessible style so as to reach a larger audience. Replete with photographic evidence, the primary audience is, and rightly so, the BASSA membership. To this end the book is, as Len McCluskey, General Secretary of Unite the Union, notes in the Foreword, a "celebration" (p. xiv) of their steeliness in the face of employer aggression, government hyperbole and a hostile media. The question of "community" in mobilising workers' power resources is key to the analysis. First-hand testimonies of BASSA members are the backbone of the book and provide the reader with a ringside seat to a protracted workplace struggle, much of which played out in the public sphere. In short, this book is an in-depth documentation of a bitter industrial dispute and highlights the importance of workplace democracy and collectivism in the changing world of work.

The introductory chapter situates the book in relation to the extant literature on the strike process. Chapter 2 provides an account of the changing political economy of civil aviation and contextualises the broader BA employment relations landscape which culminates with the "mobilisation of a workforce diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, race and nationality" (p. 17). Chapters 3 to 6 present the permutations of the workers' struggle from the Project Columbus initiative to balloting the BASSA membership; from hostile counter-mobilisations and navigating the complex and pro-business legal system to exercising resilience and nurturing organisational strength through electronic and digital communication; and from twenty-two days of intermittent strike action to accepting the bittersweet agreement reached by negotiators, which is described by one participant in football terms as a "1–1 draw" (p. 119).

Chapter 3 traces the changes in the political economy of civil aviation with particular concern for the BA cabin crew and its organisational cohesiveness. Here “informal solidarities” (p. 50) metamorphosed into a united workforce with little choice but to withdraw their labour. The trigger was the appointment of a new CEO, Willie Walsh, who had transformed the Irish airline Aer Lingus and was himself keen on BA “adopting elements of the LCC [Low Cost Carrier] model” (p. 50). Central to Project Columbus is the reduction in staffing levels, greater flexibility, inferior terms and conditions, and ultimately a reduction in labour costs. Casting aside the decades-long tradition of joint regulation at BA, management, personified by Walsh, sought to side-line BASSA and implement dramatic changes unilaterally. “Preventing Walsh from breaking the union was essential for ensuring the maintenance of decent working conditions” (p. 71).

Faced with little choice, BASSA balloted its members for strike action at a time when the impact would be greatest, namely the Christmas period. The members voted overwhelmingly in favour. This process is the subject of Chapter 4, which highlights the legal requirements that must be satisfied before a strike can take place and the litigious tendency of BA to seek an injunction on technical grounds. The court injunction upped the ante and transformed the strike from a workplace struggle into a much broader political conflict for trade union and workers’ rights. Management vilified and victimised BASSA members, with the dismissal of the union’s branch secretary being the most symbolic. BA’s “strategy of decapitation” exposes the extent of the climate of fear designed to break the collective spirit of the workers. How BASSA went about organising the membership and “building confidence and solidarity” (p. 101) is covered in Chapter 5. A broad range of tactics were deployed by BASSA to raise the visibility of the campaign, rile management and maintain morale while on the picket line.

Chapters 3 through 6 are peppered with oral testimonials of participants, which brings the entire two-year saga to life not only in a very matter-of-fact way but also in terms of the emotional toll that overt workplace conflict can have on professional and personal relationships. In the end, it is the determination of individuals and their belief in the bonds of solidarity and the idea of fairness (rather than militancy) in the face of immense belligerence that shines through. Paraphrasing Marx, the authors note how “in the process of acting on the world to change it, people change themselves” (p. 143).

The conflict challenged public perceptions about likely candidates for strike action. Popularly seen as “just a bunch of girls or a bunch of gays” (p. 169 fn. 8), BASSA secured an agreement with management. Chapter 7 presents not only BASSA members’ responses to the outcome but also how it affected their perspectives on politics. There was “widespread disillusionment with the legal and political system, and with the Labour Party and the Labour Government in particular” (p. 118). Also, the transformative impact of the conflict on their identities as well as their well-being is discussed.

Chapter 7 is entitled “Conclusion”. However, rather than synthesising the preceding chapters the authors compare the BASSA strike to the iconic miners’ strike of the mid-1980s. While drawing such a comparison might make sense for the participants given the historical significance of the miners’ strike and its place in the British collective consciousness, the authors fail to follow their own advice, namely that “great care though should be taken in drawing comparisons” (p. 151). The differences between the two events are stark, and the authors are aware of this, but nonetheless comparisons are drawn, which is not very helpful. As the authors themselves note, it is “a different struggle in a different period” (p. 156) and in “the BASSA case, cabin crew possessed greater underlying bargaining power” (p. 151).

Cabin Crew Conflict presents a fascinating case of a changing industry and a quintessential company in the field. Following the liberalisation of civil aviation and the advent of low-cost

carriers, airlines have engaged in a veritable “race to the bottom”. Following a change in leadership, BA in 2009 *unilaterally* sought to introduce changes to the terms and conditions of cabin crew employment (p. 39). This triggered the recourse to strike action, which lasted much longer than initially anticipated. Twelve days turned into two years. The psychological pressure of BA’s “strategy of decapitation” (p. 41) was immense, as the multiple voices of a diverse workforce testify. The forging of solidaristic bonds is not automatic, and Phil Taylor and Sian Moore’s proximity to the BA–BASSA developments sheds light on a complex sociological process. Len McClusky states in the Foreword that he found this process a “joy to behold” (p. xiii). Taylor and Moore’s work does, however, raise an interesting question regarding inter-professional solidarity “Senior management”, we are told, “orchestrated divisions between strikers and non-striking cabin crew and other staff” (p. 43). The pilots in particular are singled out for their “antagonistic behaviour” (p. 43), which, in turn, limited the degree of support the pilots’ union, the British Airline Pilots Association (BALPA), could lend to BASSA’s campaign. The nature of this question was brought to light recently when Ryanair, after three decades of being vehemently anti-union, was forced into a U-turn following transnational action. This action was taken in the first place by pilots, and was then followed up by cabin crew actions. Yet why is it that solidaristic bonds are not established between occupations that share the same workspace? This is a question for future research. Notwithstanding this small scruple, *Cabin Crew Conflict* is a must-read for anybody interested in employment relations in an age of deregulation, collective action in times of anti-union legislation and media hostility, or even just taking a flight.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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