

## Health, safety and security: the everyday struggles of cabin crew workers in Aerolíneas Argentinas



### Health, safety and security: the everyday struggles of cabin crew workers in Aerolíneas Argentinas

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**03 June 2022** – The ICDD hosted the Public Talk: “Health, safety and security: the everyday struggles of cabin crew workers in Aerolíneas Argentinas”. The speaker, Dr. Sara Cufre, addressed the current crisis in aviation, marked by Covid-19 containment policies and accelerated flexibilisation, exploitation and overall precarity in the sector. Her lecture also explored workers' individual and collective organising and resistance to these detrimental trends.

#### Aviation Industry Models and Trends

Cufre stressed that the focus of her lecture is on how the cabin crew members resisted the process of intensified exploitation of their labouring bodies in the first period of the company's re-nationalisation between 2008 and 2015. The company initially tried to modify collective bargaining agreements and increase the workload, which caused open conflict with cabin crew workers.

Furthermore, Cufre outlined the broader trends in the aviation industry since the inception of low-cost companies, in the 1990s. Two industry models emerged: low-cost carriers (LCC) and full-service carriers (FSC). LCCs such as Ryanair are characterised by precarious working conditions and flexible working hours, while FSCs such as Aerolíneas Argentinas offer stable, well-paying jobs and have strong union traditions. However, “flexibilisation and undermining of decent working conditions are part of global tendencies in air transport, and Aerolíneas Argentinas is no exception”, noted Cufre.

#### Company History – Re-nationalisation

The speaker provided a brief summary of company history, underlining that it follows a typical trajectory for public companies in Argentina, including privatisation in the 1900s and subsequent re-nationalisation. In 2015, the new federal government intervened by implementing a new company management structure and a set of aviation policies. These policies deregulated the domestic market

and introduced new federal corridors in 2014. With more take-offs and landings required from workers, these policies increased the workload further and shortened the breaks.

### Daily Struggles of Workers and their Labouring Bodies

Daily struggles of workers, that is their knowledge, practices, and concrete actions are another key layer of studying the topic. Cufre explained that these struggles are not driven by union officials, but by union tradition, and that “capacity to work is inseparable from the concrete corporeal bodies and therefore not a commodity that is capitalist-produced”. Social reproduction theory is crucial, as it adds emotional and mental elements to the understanding of labour power in capitalist systems.

Furthermore, “labour power is not an abstract, but a socially mediated aggregate of corporeal capacities embedded in labouring bodies with their particularities, bodies that are socially and historically produced”, Cufre remarked. In this context, constant tiredness, headaches and other complex experiences cannot be viewed simply as work-related diseases because as such, they remain disregarded by mainstream occupational health perspectives.

“I view the relationship between worker-led actions, union tradition, and resistance practices through the body lens, as a totality captured by social reproduction theory, not as a narrow Occupational Safety and Health definition”, Cufre asserted.

### Intensifying Workload and Resistance Strategies

During the period of open conflict in 2012, the company found new ways of intensifying the workload. Cabin crew members responded by employing two strategies: “Not flying expired” and “not performing as cabin crew chief”.

The first strategy involves actions such as not getting on the plane, and it requires knowledge of aeronautical legislation, collective bargaining, and co-workers’ and colleagues’ support. The second strategy includes actions such as rejecting multitasking and it hinges on the ability to distinguish between professional qualification and de-facto multitasking. Cufre warned that refusal to work is difficult for workers, even more so for female cabin crew members, who tend to be subordinated to male, military-trained pilots.

### Organising and the Role of Union Tradition

Union tradition plays a vital role in overcoming these obstacles, as well as other everyday struggles of workers. Tradition takes the form of union delegates’ support, collective agreements knowledge and references to past struggles. In the case of Argentinian airlines during re-nationalisation, this tradition has led to greater resistance to company guidelines associated with productivity and effectiveness. Airline companies’ attempts to reinterpret collective agreements were met by more robust workers’ organising.

Organising of cabin crew workers, based on knowledge of labour rights, also disputed working hours and tasks, making strong claims about the meaning of a re-nationalised company. On the other hand, efforts to protect workers against fatigue framed the cabin crew’s own safety in the context of the safety of the flight. This is where union tradition comes into play again. “Without flight safety, no airline sells tickets”, stated Cufre, adding that “safety can be warranted only if labour rights are warranted”.

### About Sara Cufre

Sara Cufre is a researcher in the field of Labour Sociology and a union activist. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council in Argentina and she conducts her

research at the Center for Labour Studies and Research (CEIL). She also teaches Social Science Methodology at Del Salvador University (USAL).

She has combined her academic trajectory with a strong involvement in the workers' movement as a shop steward in one of the public sector unions in Argentina: the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (ATE). She also participates actively in the Global Labour University (GLU) network and since 2021 she is a certified online tutor for the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) at the GLU Online Academy.

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