LUFTHANSA PILOTS PROPOSE FRESH TALKS WITH MANAGEMENT

News / Airlines

German pilots' union Vereinigung Cockpit has proposed fresh talks with Lufthansa management over early retirement benefits, a day after a court ruled a strike was unlawful because the union had overstepped its mandate.

The union and management have been locked in a long-running battle that has resulted in 13 strikes over 18 months. The dispute began over Lufthansa's plans to scrap a scheme that allows pilots to retire at 55 and keep 60 percent of their pay before regular state pension payments start at the age of 65, and tensions worsened when Lufthansa started a low-cost expansion drive through its Eurowings operation.

The union said it had offered three days next week for talks with management and that the negotiations would focus on the early retirement benefits.

"This agreement has the highest priority for us and we look forward to constructive talks," the union said on Thursday.

The focus on the retirement scheme comes after a judge at the federal state labour court in Frankfurt said on Wednesday that the union's reason for the latest strike was to fight low-cost

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expansion.

As the formal reason given by the union when it originally voted for strike action 18 months ago was the early retirement benefits, the judge said that Wednesday's walkout -- the second day of a two-day strike that forced the cancellation of more than 1,000 flights -- was not justified.

"We'll have a look to see if one of the proposed dates will work for us," a Lufthansa spokesman said.

Industry watchers have applauded Lufthansa, Germany's biggest airline, for standing its ground and pressing ahead with its plans despite the strikes.

The airline needs to lower costs to compete with fast-growing budget rivals such as Ireland's Ryanair (RYA.I). Aviation analyst CAPA estimates that Ryanair's costs are 60 percent below those of Lufthansa's main brand.

While strikes normally receive public backing in Germany, the pilot strikes have been criticised in the media, with accusations that the pilots are trying to hang on to outdated privileges to the detriment of the company and other employees that have already agreed to cost cuts.

"Fortunately for passengers and the other 115,000 employees, who don't enjoy the same benefits as the ladies and gentlemen of the skies, the judge sent the pilots back to the cockpit," German conservative daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung said in an editorial.

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