

Canadian and EU Transport Unions Cooperate to Protect Aviation

On December 18, 2009, Canada and the European Union (EU) signed an “Open Skies” air transport Agreement, which provides a framework for progressively deregulating air travel between Canada and Europe.

What Does the Agreement Say?

Like other “free trade” deals, this Agreement says that the ideal system is based on “competition among airlines in the marketplace with minimum government interference and regulation”. While the Agreement makes reference to impacts on the environment, communities and labour, these are given only a secondary role. The aim of the Agreement is steady movement towards an unregulated, market-driven aviation system.

The Agreement sets down a step-by-step process to move from the current bilateral deals between Canada and the 27 member countries of the EU to a single deal, leading ultimately to unrestricted access to each other’s air transport market.

Ongoing negotiations can:

- raise foreign ownership limits from 25% to 49% to 100%
- expand reciprocal rights (fifth and sixth freedom rights to provide service to and from third countries, and ultimately full reciprocal access to domestic markets or “cabotage”).

The Agreement also provides for an ongoing Joint Canada/EU inter-governmental Committee to deal with issues and disputes.

What does the Agreement Mean for Canada?

This Agreement seeks to further extend deregulation of air transport (domestically in Canada since 1984), and follows on the 1995 Canada/US Open Skies Agreement, and deals signed with a number of other countries since then, most recently under the Conservatives’ “Blue Skies” policy.

As it empowers investors and weakens the authority of national governments, the Agreement will facilitate the consolidation and monopolization of the industry by a shrinking number of unregulated global mega-carriers.

It reduces our ability to protect Canadian air carriers, service to Canadian communities, safety standards, and the employment and working conditions of air transport workers.

The Agreement will make it harder (or impossible) to challenge the contracting out of work to locations with lower wages and standards, or the use of “flags of convenience”.

Increasing corporate power will exert pressure to create a “level playing field” at the lowest rather than the highest standards. There is even a question as to whether “temporary” foreign workers will be subject to the standards of the country in which they work. Under current EU law, they are not.

Our concerns are reinforced by the way in which the Canadian government negotiated the Agreement. In contrast to the EU, where the full spectrum of industry workers and their unions were consulted and given representation as observers, the Canadian government refused to consult with any worker representatives other than pilots’ unions.

The Canadian unions affiliated with the civil aviation component of the International Transport Workers Federation (including the CAW, CUPE, IBEW, as well as the IAM) have

been meeting with our union counterparts in the EU through the European Transport Workers Federation, so that the voices of all workers will be heard in this ongoing process.