

Business

More strike calls cloud summer for European low-cost airlines

Staff in Spain and France announce new walkouts

PARIS: Europe's low-cost airlines are facing more strikes this summer as staff in Spain and France announced new walkouts on Tuesday. Trade unions representing Ryanair cabin crew in Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain have called for strikes this coming weekend, while easyJet's operations in Spain face a nine-day strike next month.

Damien Mourgues, a representative of the SNPNC trade union at Ryanair in France, said the airline doesn't respect rest time laws and is calling for a raise for cabin crew still paid at the minimum wage. Cabin crew will go on strike on Saturday and Sunday. A strike on the weekend of June 12 and 13 already prompted the cancellation of about 40 Ryanair flights in France, or about a quarter of the total. Ryanair's low-cost rival easyJet also faces nine days of strikes on different days in July at the Barcelona, Malaga and Palma de Mallorca airports.

The union said Tuesday that Spanish easyJet cabin crew, with a base pay of 950 euros per month, have the lowest wages of the airline's European bases. The strikes come as air travel has rebounded since Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted. But many airlines, which laid off staff during

the pandemic, are having trouble rehiring enough workers and have been forced to cancel flights, including easyJet, which has been particularly hard hit by employee shortages.

On Monday, the European Transport Workers' Federation called "on passengers not to blame the workers for the disasters in the airports, the cancelled flights, the long queues and longer time for check-ins, and lost luggage or delays caused by decades of corporate greed and a removal of decent jobs in the sector." The Federation said it expects "the chaos the aviation sector is currently facing will only grow over the summer as workers are pushed to the brink."

Aviation sector 'chaos'

In Spain, trade unions have urged Ryanair cabin crews to strike from June 24 to July 2 to secure their "fundamental labor rights" and "decent work conditions for all staff". Ryanair staff in Portugal plan to go on strike from Friday to Sunday to protest work conditions, as are employees in Belgium. Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary has been dismissive of the strikes.

"We operate two and half thousand flights



BERLIN: An airplane of Irish airline Ryanair approaches the BER airport near Berlin Schoenefeld. —AFP

every day," he said earlier this month in Belgium. "Most of those flights will continue to operate even if there is a strike in Spain by some Mickey Mouse union or if the Belgian cabin crew unions want to go on strike over here," he added in a

media conference. In Italy, a 24-hour strike is set to hit Ryanair operations on Saturday with pilots and cabin crew calling for the airline to respect the minimum wages set for the sector under a national agreement. —AFP

Crunch talks kick off on global pact to protect nature

NAIROBI: Negotiators from almost 200 countries will begin crunch biodiversity talks in Nairobi on Tuesday, working towards a much-delayed global pact to protect nature from the damage wrought by human activities. International efforts to protect the natural world - including the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink - have been severely slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, while the destruction continues at a frantic pace.

As the meeting kicked off, the UN confirmed that the thrice-delayed COP15 biodiversity summit - originally set for Kunming, China in 2020 - will now take place from December 5 to 17 this year in Montreal, Canada. Country representatives in Nairobi are tasked with hammering out details of a draft text outlining a global framework to "live in harmony with nature" by 2050, with key targets to be met by 2030.

Many hope the landmark deal, when finalized, will be as ambitious in its goals to protect life on Earth as the Paris agreement was for climate change - even if the United States is not a party to UN efforts to conserve nature. Proposals include a global commitment to set aside at least 30 percent of both land and oceans as protected zones by the end of the decade, as well as efforts to cut plastic and agricultural pollution.

"What is important is increasing protection, restoration of degraded areas, trying to prevent the further degradation of natural habitats by infrastructure development and pollutions," said Linda Krueger of The Nature Conservancy environmental group. Doing so has become critical after countries failed almost entirely to reach a similar set of 10-year objectives set in 2010 under the UN's Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Delays

Delegates gathered in person for the first time in two years for talks in Geneva in March, but the meeting ended with many unresolved issues. The draft text is currently peppered with brackets on almost every line, which means there is not a consensus on the current wording. Further discussions were then scheduled for the June 21 to 26 Nairobi meeting, to prepare for the main COP15 conference. Initially set to take place in China in October 2020, COP15 has been postponed several times. A first largely ceremonial meeting was held virtually in Kunming in October 2021. One of the main tasks for delegates in Nairobi will be to clean up the "messy" draft text so it is ready for final discussions at COP15 when it goes ahead, said Li Shuo of Greenpeace. "The Nairobi meeting will answer one simple question - are we going to open COP15 on firm or shaky ground?" he told AFP.

Funding challenge

A major point of contention is finance for poorer countries seeing the most severe impacts on biodiversity. In Geneva, a coalition of countries from Africa, South and Central America caused a stir by calling for at least \$100 billion a year initially - similar to the money promised by rich countries to help poorer ones adapt to climate change.

By 2030 they said the support should rise to \$700 billion dollars annually. Wealthy countries have balked at the proposal but the issue will be at the heart of the discussions in Kenya. "A key challenge will be to rebuild trust on finance between developed and developing countries," said Oscar Soria, of the campaign group Avaaz. Without that he said it would be difficult to find consensus on the agreement's ambitious goals.

The Nairobi meeting is also expected to underscore the role of indigenous peoples, who steward land home to 80 percent of Earth's remaining biodiversity, according to a recent landmark UN report on climate change impacts. In Tanzania, a voluntary government relocation program ushering Maasai from the Ngorongoro Nature Reserve has been criticized by human rights activists. "This is exactly what should be avoided" under the new UN agreement, said Jennifer Tauli Corpuz of the non-profit Nia Tero, who is part of the indigenous caucus to the CBD. —AFP

Twitter deal remains deadlocked over fake users, Elon Musk says

DOHA: Business magnate Elon Musk said Tuesday that his \$44 billion move to take over Twitter remained held up by "very significant" questions about the number of fake users on the social network. Musk was reluctant to talk about the deal when asked at the Qatar Economic Forum, saying it was a "sensitive" matter. "There are still a few unresolved matters," Musk said by video link.

This includes whether "the number of fake and spam users on the system is less than five percent as per their claims, which I think is probably not most people's experience when using Twitter. "So we are still awaiting resolution on that matter and that is a very significant matter," the Tesla car and SpaceX exploration chief said.

Musk said there were also questions about

Twitter's debt and whether shareholders will vote for the deal. "So I think these are the three things that need to be resolved" to make the transaction happen. Musk said he wanted to get 80 percent of the North American population and half the world's population onto Twitter. "That means it must be something that is appealing to people, it obviously can't be a place where they feel uncomfortable or harassed or they will simply not use it."

"I think there is this big difference between freedom of speech and freedom of reach," Musk added. "You are allowed to yell whatever you want in a public space, more or less. But whatever you say, however controversial, doesn't need to then be broadcast to the whole country. "So I think generally the approach of Twitter should be to let people say what they want within the balance of the law but then limit who sees that based on any given Twitter user preferences."

He said that if the deal went ahead his role would be to "drive the product", saying this is what he did at Tesla and SpaceX. Musk said he expected Tesla's number of employees to fall by about 3.5 percent in



Tesla CEO Elon Musk

the next three months but the headcount would start rising again in a year. Asked about the next US presidential election in 2024, Musk said he had not decided who to back but that he was ready to inject \$20-\$25 million into a candidate's campaign. He has previously indicated he could support Florida's Republican governor Ron DeSantis. —AFP

Kellogg splits into 3 separate companies

NEW YORK: American cereal giant Kellogg announced Tuesday it is splitting into three independent companies, sending the group's shares up by eight percent in pre-market trading. One of the new firms will be focused on global snacks and North American frozen breakfasts, a second on cereal sales in North America and the Caribbean, and a third will specialize in plant-based foods, the group said in a statement. The yet-to-be-named entities will initially be known as

Global Snacking Co, North America Cereal Co, and Plant Co. The latter two will be created through tax-free spin-offs.

Kellogg is aiming to complete the split by late 2023, subject to approval by US regulators. "These businesses all have significant standalone potential," Kellogg's chairman and CEO Steve Cahillane said in a statement. "An enhanced focus will enable them to better direct their resources toward their distinct strategic priorities," he said. The giant behind such household names as Corn Flakes and Rice Krispies said North American Cereal and Plant Co. would remain headquartered in Battle Creek, Michigan. The Global Snacking will have dual headquarters-in Battle Creek and Chicago. —AFP



ARLINGTON: Kellogg's cereals, including Special K, are seen at a store in Arlington, Virginia. —AFP

Indigenous people protest over fuel price in Ecuador

QUITO: Thousands of Indigenous people and members of other disgruntled groups marched into Ecuador's capital on the eighth day of fuel price protests Monday, accused by the president of seeking only "chaos" and his removal. President Guillermo Lasso extended a state of emergency to cover six provinces, with a nighttime curfew in Quito, as he seeks to curtail demonstrations that have seen roads barricaded countrywide, cost the economy tens of millions of dollars and left dozens of people injured.

"With this decision, the welfare of citizens is safeguarded in the face of violence. At the same time, the rights of those who demonstrate peacefully are protected," the government said. On foot, on motorcycles and in crowded trucks, the Indigenous protesters began a peaceful march towards the city center from Cutuglagua, an area in southern Quito where they have been steadily growing in number since Sunday.

A hundred Indigenous people also entered the city from the north. The powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie) — credited with helping topple three presidents between 1997 and 2005 — called the protest as Ecuadorans increasingly struggle to make ends meet. Indigenous people comprise more than a million of Ecuador's 17.7 million inhabitants, and their protest has since been joined by students, workers and others feeling the economic pinch.

"We have reached out, we have called for dialogue, but they do not want peace," Lasso, a former banker in power since May 2021, said in a video on Twitter Monday. "They seek chaos. They want to eject the president." At least some in Monday's crowd—a number of whom waved Ecuadorian flags, wielded sticks or carried their children in their arms—said the president's ouster was precisely what they sought.



QUITO: Demonstrators block a road near El Arbolito park in Quito, on the ninth consecutive day of protests against the government. —AFP

"We are the people and we will stay here until the end," Victor Taday, a 50-year-old Indigenous resident of Quito originally from Chimborazo province, told AFP. It was time for Lasso, he said, to "go away". Police say 63 personnel have been wounded in clashes and 21 others briefly held hostage since the protests began, while human rights observers reported 79 arrests and 55 civilians wounded.

'Zone of peace'

A state of emergency declared last Friday has allowed Lasso to mobilize the armed forces to maintain order, suspend certain civil rights and declare curfews. On Sunday, Ecuadoran police requisitioned an Indigenous cultural center in Quito to use as a base for protest monitoring. The center had sheltered thousands of Indigenous people during 2019 anti-government demonstrations that left 11 dead and more than 1,000 injured but forced then-president Lenin Moreno to abandon plans to eliminate fuel subsidies.

The Salesian University, in the north of the capital, decided on Monday to "open the doors" of its facilities as a "zone of peace and humanitarian shelter" for the indigenous people and called "to stop actions and attitudes that interfere or alter the processes of dialogue and the search for solutions." Oil producer Ecuador has been hit by rising inflation, unemployment and poverty exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Fuel prices have risen sharply since 2020, almost doubling for diesel from \$1 to \$1.90 per gallon and rising from \$1.75 to \$2.55 for gasoline.

Conaie demands a price cut to \$1.50 a gallon for diesel and \$2.10 for gasoline. It also wants food price controls and a commitment to renegotiating the personal bank loans of about four million families. Ecuador's parliament Monday evening voted 81 to 56 in favour of a resolution demanding the government conduct a "serious, clear and honest" dialogue and calling for a round table seeking solutions that would include the UN, Red Cross, local universities and the Catholic Church. —AFP