

Strike forces Lufthansa to cancel most flights

Action will likely cost the Airline about Dh500m

- By Nadia Saleem, Staff Reporter
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Dubai: Lufthansa Airlines has cancelled two-thirds of its global flights as its four-day pilot strike starts on Monday.

The Vereinigung Cockpit union planned the strike because pilots fear being transferred to the airline's subsidiaries, such as Austrian Airlines or Lufthansa Italia, and subsequently receive lower pay.

The German carrier tried to stave off the strike Sunday by saying it would offer job security to its 4,000 pilots until 2012 if the union would return to negotiations.

However, it said that talks would be based on condition the union will not seek undue influence on managerial decisions.

German Economy Minister Peter Ramsauer demanded both parties restart negotiations to avert a strike after talks were halted on Friday.

"We very much regret the industrial action being taken by the pilots union. Our focus is securing passenger travel plans. This is not easy with two-thirds of the fleet grounded," an airline spokesperson in Dubai told Gulf News.

The airline has cancelled about 600 flights. The last Lufthansa flight from the UAE, LH631, left early this morning for Frankfurt International Airport.

All UAE services have been cancelled until the four-day strike ends.

On a normal schedule, the airline operates a daily service between Dubai and Frankfurt with a jumbo Boeing 747, a daily service between Dubai and Munich with an A340-600 and also six flights a week between Abu Dhabi and Frankfurt.

An airline spokesperson said the operator had moved passengers to other flights, scheduled before or after the strike, and also on alternate airlines.

It is also offering to reimburse passengers who cannot change their flights to a different date and is willing to pay for alternate travel, such as ground transport.

The airline has said the strike will cost it about 100 million euros (Dh500 million) in cash, in addition to lost ticket sales and possible damage to its reputation.

Germany's economic recovery stalled at the end of 2009, and workers are becoming increasingly concerned that they could lose their jobs.

They are looking to employers for job security in exchange for concessions on pay, as carmaker Volkswagen has.

Engineering sector workers have also accepted moderate wage increases to help boost employment prospects.

The German pilots' move follows similar developments at rival carrier British Airways (BA), as airline staff battle to hold onto jobs in an industry battered by the global economic downturn.

A union representing BA cabin crew is re-balloting members after BA won a court ruling to prevent a strike that threatened to strand about a million passengers during the Christmas holiday. The new ballot closes today.

The union lost a court bid on Friday to stop the UK airline imposing cost-cutting plans.

— *With inputs from agencies*

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