

It needs to be recognized that AA, certainly in relation to UFO (the situation with VC is currently more complicated), is an attempt to establish itself as the dominant union in the aviation industry. The following quote is unequivocal in claiming that it exists to challenge UFO's authority:

[The aim is] to wipe out the others [UFO]. I said that at the time. I said, 'we don't need yellow unions, we don't need management-friendly unions. We simply need an honest, participatory union... I mean, so, the back story was that we at Ver.di said, 'we have to do something in that area again [cockpit and cabin]. The conditions are getting worse from year to year.' The competitor organizations [other unions], you're not allowed to say yellow unions anymore, but actually it would be a very appropriate title at this point, if you'll pardon the expression, have messed it up. (AA respondent)

“Again” represents key word in the previous quote, an important to reference to the past. AA is an attempt to reestablish itself as an aircrew union. Here, it is worth referring back to WP3. In the past, the pilots and cabin crew formed collective bargaining arrangements with Ver.di's predecessors, the ÖTV and DAG, both bodies negotiating on behalf of UFO and VC respectively until 2000, the very year Ver.di was formed. The decision to remain independent, to refuse to be consumed by this new super union, ensured that Ver.di's role in the aviation industry was mainly restricted to ground-handling staff. At this time, the early 2000s, the low-cost-carriers were not as present in Germany as they are today, the industry continued to be dominated by Lufthansa. The transport arm of Ver.di attempted to rectify this situation, that is, focusing purely on ground handling staff by unsuccessfully launching an expensive campaign to recruit Lufthansa cabin crew between 2007 and 2008. The campaign proved fruitless and expensive. Costing 1.5 million Euro a mere 35 new members joined the union. Consequently, Ver.di decided, which the union now concedes was a major error on its part, to focus its aviation energies outside of Lufthansa and mainly on the ground:

In 2009, Ver.di should never have gone and said okay, 'we'll drop the Lufthansa cabin.' We should not have done that...(AA respondent)

The arrival of the low-cost-carrier required the union to reassess this position, to adapt to market developments. In the spring of 2019, this all changed when Ver.di took a strategic decision to reverse its previous stance:

Yes, that was a key question. I wasn't there then, though. At trade union conference the following question was posed: 'are we a ground staff union or are we an aviation union?' That must have been in March, April 2019. And there was a clear statement: 'We are an aviation union, and that includes flying personnel.' [Based on] the number of members at that time, we were a ground staff union and not a flying staff union, because the only companies where we were strong at that time were Easyjet and Ryanair. (AA respondent)

Until 2019, Ver.di had a niche in the aviation industry, this based predominantly on its successful campaign to organize Ryan Air workers in 2017, which was greatly aided by the change in the works constitution act that now assured aircrew had the right to a works council. Previously, this was only possible if it was laid down in a collective agreement. This

offered Ver.di an important issue to organize around. Today, with exception of Lufthansa classic Ver.di organizes cabin crew and some pilots in all the main airlines:

From TUIfly and Condor, to Eurowings and Lufthansa CityLine, to easyJet and Ryanair/Malta Air - in all German airlines ver.di is the largest collective bargaining union for cabin of the cabin crew. In all of them? No, in all of them, except Lufthansa. But we want to change that together with you! (Aircrew Alliance Boardmagazin 2021)³

Seen from this perspective AA signifies not only an attempt to knock down borders between employees imposed by airlines, but possibly most important of all it involves a commitment to rescind its previous 2009 policy position, that is, a new endeavor to organize Lufthansa cabin crew. In short, AA's long-term aim is to reverse nearly three decades of market liberalization.

Even though it had a clearly defined vision, the AA team was more than aware that the task ahead would involve addressing mistakes made in the past. The fact that Ver.di had walked away from Lufthansa 2009 left a bitter taste in the mouths of potential new members:

People in some areas still hold grudges against us because there was a time where as a union we did not offer our best performance. (AA respondent)

In addition to conceding that the union had made mistakes in the past, namely its decision to walk away from Lufthansa Classic in 2009, AA also recognized the need address the main issue that had motivated VC and UFO not to be part of Ver.di project, that of professional identity. The fact that both pilots and cabin crew refused to be subsumed into an organization that represented cleaners, waste personnel and kindergarten employees. In contrast to the tanker, a term used to describe Ver.di, aviation is an agile, luxury product, at least that is the perception of pilots and the cabin crew. As highlighted in the next quote, the tanker narrative was something UFO often used to good measure when organizing new members:

They would go into companies and say, 'we do this and that at Lufthansa here, we are fast, we are loud, we can do everything. And there you have the big tanker Ver.di, who actually can't get anything done, who let you down.' That's a nice narrative that they [UFO] created. That's what UFO did. (AA respondent)

Creating a new narrative involved a few steps. Firstly, changing the color AA would fly under, i.e. replacing the red of Ver.di with a multi-colored emblem. This entailed a modification of the Star Alliance insignia, specifically colored wings pointing inwards as against outwards. Secondly, this new body needed to be renamed, Aircrew Alliance substituting Ver.di. Thirdly, and possibly most important of all, AA needed to establish a chamber within Ver.di that would ensure it retained both its professional identity and autonomy. In short, AA had to address the tanker narrative. The message to aircrew employees was simple:

³ Aircrew Alliance Boardmagazin (2021) provided by AA.

'We can provide the infrastructure... We are ready to do a lot within the organization, up to the changing of the statutes. To provide you with freedom. Away from this tanker.' (AA respondent)

Consequently, although members pay their union fees to Ver.di, AA is an independent body, one with its own area influence, a container within Ver.di:

We are officially a special area... with almost complete autonomy. So, we are virtually an autonomous area. We are virtually duty-free. If you compare it to countries, we are a duty-free enclave within the country. (AA respondent)

When asked what this meant in practice the following respondent noted:

Well, we don't have to adhere to organizational elections. We don't have a four-year rhythm. We also have a collective bargaining area... They [collective bargaining commission for aviation companies] can form working groups for whatever they want, and they get funding for it... I have so to say, I can override the standards, consistently also override department standards and statutes. And I can do all that without being accountable to Ver.di. (AA Respondent)

As indicated in the interview, AA had to invest resources in convincing the mother ship, Ver.di, that there were practical arguments for such arrangement. The first, one that until recently meant that the works constitution act did not apply to aircrews, concerns the nature of the job, the fact that regional structures could not accommodate a workforce whose workplace is in the air and not on the ground. Next, an issue that all unions are increasingly taking more seriously due to the international nature labor markets, i.e. labor migration, is the fact that excellent English proficiency is a pre-requirement of representing aircrews. For example, it is no long prerequisite to speak German when working for Eurowings.

Section II: Relevant Actors

AA is a union project developed by Ver.di to create an exchange platform, initially for all non-Lufthansa Classic works council members and collective bargaining protagonist, where activists can meet to exchange ideas within and across companies. To achieve an in depth understanding of the main actors it is worth considering the approach followed by the then Ver.di officials when setting-up AA prior to its launch in December 2019. As already implied, Covid-19 played an integral role in exemplifying the necessity of a new union approach:

But of course, that was the idea behind it [AA], to say, 'hey, we're joining forces, because you can't do it alone.' And that has just become even stronger with the Pandemic curve. We were the ones who suddenly invited all the airlines' employee representatives to come. We were the ones who set up the portal for short-time allowance agreements. (AA respondent)

The ground work that was undertaken before the first meeting in December, involved asking pilots and cabin crew in October, September and November 2019 how Ver.di could help them. The answer was evident – namely the need for a joint platform that could facilitate branch level interaction irrespective of airline or position. What would eventually

become the AA, saw Ver.di officers study rigorously social media pages of individuals or working groups (Facebook and Whatsapp) of the various airlines in an attempt to ascertain who perspective partners could be, explicitly people who were already active:

As I said we looked at internal forums. That's where we've gone the furthest. Who is the loudest? Where are there criminal charges being taken against each other? We invited people who are also active in the company... (AA respondent)

These were eventually the people who would be invited to a meeting in December 2019. The major coup, though, involved encouraging UFO members to get involved, in particular Olivia Stelz, purser, and more tellingly UFO's representative on the Lufthansa supervisory board:

Yes, also people who are or were with the UFO at that time... At that time, they had an internal, very concrete conflict and we invited UFO people who were involved in their conflict. They then became members relatively quickly. At the beginning, they were not members at all. I had completed membership application forms in my drawer because everything was still secret and there was really a lot of fear of reprisals. Among other things, we brought UFO's member of the Lufthansa supervisory board. So, these were also high-caliber people. Olivia Stelz, who sat on the supervisory board for UFO and still sits there, but now no longer for UFO, but for us. So that is almost a regicide that we committed there. (AA respondent)

The first meeting was not easy, Ver.di officers, later AA officials, had to invest a lot of effort in building new bridges, that is, they had to admit that the union's previous policy of focusing merely on ground handling staff had been a massive mistake. Ver.di needed to be self-effacing, it had to eat humble pie:

People from all the all airlines sat in the room... So, this spirit alone, that really every airline was represented in Germany. Many or some of them don't even exist anymore. At that time, Germanwings, LGW and WDL and so on [were present] and a few of the smaller ones as well. And that made an impression [all the airlines]. It really did. as you can imagine it was also a very emotional and also partly a very loud event.

Although the name Ver.di had bad connotations for many actors across all airlines, but in particular Lufthansa, bringing relevant actors together would have not been possible without recourse to the service sector union's infrastructure and contacts to both the International Transport Workers Federation and European Transport Workers Federation. The federations, which had good contacts to employees amongst the low-cost carriers due to their role in campaigns to organize firms such as Easyjet and Ryanair, offered kudos to the planned launch of AA. This represented an important endorsement.⁴

⁴ As already implied such an offensive was primarily aimed at undermining UFO. AA claims to have good relations with VC. A key factor here concerns the fact that VC remains a power within Lufthansa Classic due to the fact that its members are seemingly less unhappy with its performance than their counterparts in UFO.

This initial event appears to have proven an unmitigated success, the above mentioned “spirit”, the feeling of togetherness, especially significant in the face of a pandemic lockdown, was taken over into the historical Frankfurt kick-off meeting in March 2020. At this meeting AA’s guiding parameters were established: making diversity visible, creating unity, encouraging and empowering participation, creating professional expertise committees as well as putting in place an airline-wide network. All these factors highlight the cross-functional character of AA. As discussed in the proceeding section, all these factors, many interlinked, involve developing a new way of organizing employees.

Section III: Industrial Relations

In some respects, AA could be considered a new departure in German industrial relations, or to be more precise trade union organization. A key aspect of AA’s approach involves steering away from a representative approach, the union speaking on behalf of its members. Instead, the emphasis is very much on ensuring pilots and cabin crew help mould the union’s policy. It was suggested, for example, that union activists today have no wish to either be a shop steward or have someone speak on their behalf. This participative narrative was expressed excellently in AA’s 2021 magazine, whereby the magazine emphasising the union’s grassroots character:

Normally, the first pages of a magazine always contain the words of important people: Board members, managing directors and editors-in-chief usually give their views here. It is different with us: It speaks for the grassroots democratic and participatory orientation of the Aircrew Alliance that the foreword to this magazine was written by members of our activist group from the Lufthansa cabin. Because with us the employees and their issues are in the foreground and not the board members or union officials. (Boardmagazin 2021)⁵

Central here is the role of information communication technology, i.e. WhatsApp, Zoom, Facebook or AA’s own App. Such platforms help promote an important factor, one that is central in such a diversified and mobile industry, transparency. It helps unify workers dispersed because of the nature of their job. It keeps them informed about developments within and outside of their company. This knowledge driven approach feeds into working circles that AA has set up across all airlines or the 200 WhatsApp groups that now exist. This digital platform certainly proved useful when the pandemic gridlocked the industry in 2020. For example, between March and to September of that year, Zoom helped bring together over 9000 employees, often leading to many 1on1 discussions. When undertaking the interview for this case study, the respondent went out of their way to exemplify the positive effect digital platforms had had not only on bringing aircrew together but creating a stronger bond between the union and its members. Pointing to their own phone they noted:

I immediately see when something sprouts up. I have here the most important means [smart phone]. Probably in the time I'm here, no idea.... Um, that is ok only 181 WhatsApp messages. It's exhausting, but it helps to organize this clientele, to ensure they have confidence in the union. I have a Condor WhatsApp group that now has 1,500 members. It's exhausting. But then you have the possibility that they can ask you questions at any time and that they get

⁵ Aircrew Alliance Boardmagazin (2021) provided by AA

answers, that their union is present, so to speak. And that's the real union idea behind it. Getting away from the representative principle. That's what UFO did for years. Their motto was "you fly, we take care, that works." We can't afford to do that because we we are a participatory union and everyone who wants to participate should participate. And if someone [member of the group] can answer a question, then he/she should please answer it. In most cases collegial consultation is much more effective. And if somehow is not sure then they message either me or tariff commission female colleague, applying the motto you might know the answer. This is how questions are are answered...

These digital tools have been helpful on a number of occasions – two especially highlight how they have empowered the AA. The first concerns a demonstration the union organized in front of the parliament building to lobby in favor of increasing the short-time working rate. The second involved successfully running a campaign to organizing of Aerologic pilots.

A key element to this process involves mass, getting people not only to access this communication platform/s but equally encouraging them to contribute to the discussion and debates. Again, this structure goes to the heart of AA's main aim - bringing people together from different airlines:

The other night in Frankfurt, I went to the Italian restaurant where the chairmen of the staff representatives of Lufthansa and Condor were sitting together. You wouldn't have experienced that three years ago, or four years ago. So that's the idea. We get people talking, get people exchanging ideas with each other, with each other. (AA respondent)

Another key component of the of AA's organizing strategy concerns the union in the pocket, namely the AA's App which was developed with the help of EU funding. The APP is designed so to ensure members can reach the union at all times:

I call it affectionately the union in the pocket, that is, the union for the pocket that you always have to have with you. [Important] especially for those people who can't just go to the local works council or who are sitting somewhere in the layover and now say 'I have a problem. I need a solution now.'

The union in the pocket APP apart from closing the time and space gap between AA and its members, equally has the advantage that it offers the following opportunities: it can create a constant dataflow, i.e. through membership surveys, help promote a unified approach to campaigning and organize and encourage membership involvement.

Conclusion (between 2-3 pages)

Like in other countries the liberalization of the aviation industry, in particular the arrival of low-cost carriers has had a major impact on working conditions and the character of industrial relations. Concerning the later, Germany, possibly with the exception of one other project partner, Denmark, has experienced a major shift in the balance of power between employer and employee representatives. As discussed in WP 3, the tradition of single union bargaining, one site one union, and the emphasis on branch level collective bargaining is absent in the case of German aviation. The firm level, and in many cases the plant level is where negotiations take place. As for unions, the post war arrangement put in place to stop

inter-union competition was cast into the history bin once VC and UFO rejected the offer to join the newly formed service sector union Ver.di in 2000.

The move to set up AA is an attempt to reverse the neo-liberal agenda that pits workers against each other. A chance to overcome professional and company divisions that have become only too apparent as airlines battle over ticket prices. For this reason, AA’s strategy emphasises unity as opposed to division. Its ultimate goal, one that could pose an existential threat to UFO and VC, is to sign a branch level collective agreement.

Certainly, it is impossible to put a time scale on how long it will take to return German aviation back into the fold of agreements that cover a whole industry. Nevertheless, this creative approach, one that has learnt to utilize social media as well as promote a new narrative is already bearing fruit. The latter is composed of two important elements: first a willingness to accept that mistakes were made in the past, i.e., Ver.di’s decision to focus solely on ground handling staff. Added to this newly founded commitment to organize people in the sky was the need for the union to adapt, too. This involved investing in digital organizing processes as well as creating space within the union. Often referred to as tanker, AA is an attempt to accommodate members within Ver.di who have no fixed on the ground workplace and as a consequence often lack access to traditional union structures

Second, a commitment to promote grassroots union structures – to heat up the airwaves not only between AA and its members but equally to facilitate discussions among employees within and across companies. The benefits of such a strategy that tear down walls, often cosmetic boundaries created by employers, now means that in some airlines cabin crew and pilots are represented by one delegate (Gruppenvertretung). For example, such a practice is already in place at Easyjet and Condor.

Ironically Covid-19 was an unforeseen catalyst that highlighted the need for AA. It is fair to say that no other branch faced such an existential threat as the aviation industry did. For this reason, the lockdown, which led to redundancies, a fall in pay and an uncertain future laid bare the weakness of division along professional and company lines. It demonstrated the need for unity.

Case-study evaluation

Please, evaluate your case study by using the following indicators and give a brief explanation of your evaluation

Criteria	Evaluation on a scale of 1-5 (1=minimum 5=max)	1	2	3	4	5
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Innovation	<p>Explanation: to what degree does the topic/subject analysed in the case study deviate from existing practices and legal frameworks? Why the case study innovative?</p> <p>AA is an innovative attempt to address the problem of inter-union bargaining that emerged with the arrival of low-cost-airlines.</p>					

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Criteria	Evaluation on scale of 1-5 (1=minimum, 5=max)	1	2	3	4	5
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transferability	<p>Explanation: to what degree can the results/lessons learnt in the case-study transferred along the air transport value chain? other sectors? other countries?</p> <p>In countries where inter-union competition exists some lesson can be gleaned by AA's use of social media, and linked to this the emphasis placed on promoting grassroots membership participation. However, there is a need to consider that the launch of was closely linked to rectify mistakes made and specific to Ver.di.</p>					

Criteria	Evaluation on scale of 1-5 (1=minimum, 5=max)	1	2	3	4	5
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inclusiveness	<p>Explanation: to what degree does the topic/subject analysed in the case-study see the involvement of partners and public actors?</p> <p>International transport federations played some role in the launch of AA.</p>					

Criteria	Evaluation on a scale 1-5 (1=minimum, 5=max)	1	2	3	4	5
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Covid-19 causality	<p>Explanation: to what degree is the topic/subject analysed in the case-study directly related to the Covid-19 outbreak?</p> <p>Although plans to launch AA were in place prior to Covid, the pandemic helped further emphasize the need for such a body.</p>					