

# Cabin crew collectivism: labour process and the roots of mobilization

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## **Abstract**

The protracted dispute (2009–11) between British Airways and BASSA (British Airways Stewards and Stewardesses Association) was notable for the strength of collective action by cabin crew. In-depth interviews reveal collectivism rooted in the labour process and highlight the key agency of BASSA in effectively articulating worker interests. This data emphasizes crews' relative autonomy, sustained by unionate on-board 'managers' who have defended the frontier of control against managerial incursions. Periodic attempts to re-configure the labour process, driven by cost cutting imperatives in an increasingly competitive airline industry, eroded crews' organizational loyalties. When BA imposed radical changes to contracts and working arrangements, BASSA successfully mobilized its membership. The article contributes to labour process analysis by emphasizing the collective dimensions to emotional labour, restoring the 'missing subject', but also articulating the interconnections between labour process and mobilization and the role unions can play in providing the organizational and ideological resources to legitimate worker interest.

## **Keywords**

British Airways, cabin crew, civil aviation, emotional labour, labour process, mobilization, strikes

## **Introduction**

This article examines aspects of 'the dynamic interaction of structure and consciousness' (Hyman, 1972) underlying the 2009–11 dispute between British Airways (BA) and its cabin crew and their union BASSA (British Airlines' Stewards and Stewardesses' Association). Conflict was precipitated by BA's resolve to transform crews' 'working arrangements' (Operation Columbus) through the introduction of a new 'mixed' fleet (BA, 2008). The trigger was the imposition of reduced crew complements across BA's WorldWide and Euro fleets. Crew regarded this unilateral action as a step change in managerial control and, inextricably, an unacceptable attack on their union. Resistance included 22 strike days, a degree of mobilization that contrasted with low contemporary levels of strike activity (Hale, 2012).

Facing employer intransigence and legal obstruction (Ewing, 2011; Prassl, 2011), as well as government opposition,<sup>2</sup> media antagonism and hostility from the pilots' union (BALPA), cabin crew demonstrated a commitment to collective action evident not merely in ballot votes, but also on the vibrant picket lines. The mass participation and carnival atmosphere at BASSA's strike headquarters at Bedfont football ground were commented upon in contemporary media reports (e.g. Richards, 2010). Such collectivism might be considered remarkable given the disparate and transient nature of the cabin crew's 'workplace' and the heterogeneity of a workforce apparently fragmented by multiple

identities including gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Accordingly, the principal aim of this article is to understand the roots of this collectivism.

This article does not purport to give a comprehensive account of the dispute's dynamics, nor does it analyse in detail the stages of worker mobilization (Kelly, 1998). Nor does the article provide an in-depth study of activism and leadership (Darlington, 2009), although these are important factors in the crew response. However, it makes a distinctive contribution by articulating the interconnections between labour process and mobilization, often understated in studies of industrial conflict. Accounts of the structures and processes of collective bargaining and the adversarial history of employment relations (Bamber et al., 2009; Blyton and Turnbull, 1994, 1998, 2004) are undoubtedly essential for explanation, but institutional industrial relations analysis can take us only so far. The article identifies deep wells of collectivism springing from the labour process, which generated social bonds and work solidarities and which BASSA was instrumental in shaping and could draw upon during the dispute.

The empirical problem (explaining the roots of crew collectivism) is investigated through the theoretical resources of labour process theory (LPT). In addition to utilizing core LPT concepts (labour indeterminacy, structured antagonism between capital and labour, forms of management control, the frontier of control, the logic of competitive accumulation) (Smith and Thompson, 2009), two specific and related labour process debates are invoked.

First, in acknowledging that cabin crew have frequently been characterized as archetypal emotional labourers (Hochschild, 1983; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Williams, 2003), the utility of emotional labour is re-examined in the context of a significant episode of industrial conflict, during which the employer encountered widespread resistance to its imposed redefinition of the frontier of control. The article seeks to challenge accounts of emotional labour that subordinate worker interests to the alignment of their emotions with the service (in the parlance of cabin crew 'the product'), the customer or client and/or the organization (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Tyler and Taylor, 2000). Following Bolton (2009) this article locates emotional labour firmly within LPT, but consistently emphasizes its collective dimension.

The second debate concerns the relationship of LPT to worker agency generally and to industrial conflict specifically. The problematic originates in Braverman's (1974) 'objectivism' and the attempts by 'second wave' LP theorists to restore the 'missing subject'. Subsequently, post-structuralists equated subjectivity with identity, asserted the totality of cultural controls and denied the possibility of collective resistance (e.g. Knights and Wilmott, 1989). Post-modernist and Foucauldian accounts were then challenged, notably by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995). Recent work develops this critique, accepting that 'identity is part of subjectivity, but not all of it' (Marks and Thompson, 2010: 332). These authors re-assert the importance of worker interest and insist that the caveat, 'not all of it', should 'include the range of agential practices associated with the self-activity of the labouring subject' (Marks and Thompson, 2010: 332) and that more attention be given to the mobilization of 'work-based grievances' (Marks and Thompson, 2010: 333). Missing from their account is explicit reference to collective agency and trade unions which, however weakened, should still be regarded as important mechanisms for enabling mobilization. This BA case contributes empirically and conceptually by integrating union collectivism with the LPT concern with labour agency.

The article begins with a political-economic analysis of civil aviation and of BA, emphasizing the ineluctable drive to cost-reduction and the perpetual restructuring that have dominated the industry (Bamber et al., 2009). Firm strategy, at least among full-service carriers, has focused also on customer service excellence as a source of competitive advantage. Appropriately, then, the discussion considers the inescapable problematic facing management of how best to overcome the indeterminacy of

labour; the conversion of cabin crew labour power into concrete labour that delivers customer service excellence and is associated with the performance of emotional labour. The article reflects on BA's legacy control strategy of 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977) and turns to a critical evaluation of the emotional labour literature (e.g. Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Taylor and Tyler, 2000). Subsequently, the research methods are described, the principal data source being extended semi-structured interviews with cabin crew. Testimony is organized into four interconnected themes related to labour process (constraints on managerial control, erosion of organizational loyalties, informal collectivism, role of BASSA). The conclusion re-engages with LPT, locating emotional labour within a collective understanding privileging worker interest and potential for mobilization.

### **Political economy and labour in civil aviation and BA**

Underpinning the 2009–11 dispute was the decades-long transformation of civil aviation following US de-regulation, which sharpened competition and exacerbated the pro-cyclical demand characteristic of the industry. 'Legacy' airlines responded in diverse ways through merger and acquisition, code sharing, 'hub and spoke' networks, subcontracting, franchising and strategic alliances (Blyton et al., 2001). 'No frills' entrants exerted enormous pressure on full-service providers (Harvey and Turnbull, 2010) to reduce costs (Bamber et al., 2009: 167). Labour has been central to continuous restructuring, because it accounts for a significant proportion of total operating costs and, unlike most other costs (e.g. aircraft, fuel), remains potentially the only malleable element (Turnbull et al., 2004). A parallel strategic objective is to elicit from customer interactive staff the service excellence perceived to be a principal differentiator between competitors (Taylor and Tyler, 2000).

Indeed, the conventional explanation of BA's success, following privatization in 1987, was its innovative cultural change programme, *Putting People First* (PPF), which ostensibly transformed service quality. Cabin crew received intensive training on 'managing appearance, demeanour and feelings', the aesthetic and emotional aspects of their labour. BA's HR Manager insisted that profitability depended on crew using 'their hearts [to] engage in what we call emotional labour' (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004: 92). Yet, BA exemplified the industry 'paradox' of fostering employee commitment for customer service while reducing compensation (Bamber et al., 2009: 58) and it was the labour cost reduction imperative that dominated. Even at PPF's height, at least one bargaining unit annually was in dispute and employee discontent was widespread (Grugulis and Wilkinson, 2002). The explicit shift to 'market-led' realism materialized in the *Business Efficiency Programme* (BEP) pursued by CEO Robert Ayling from 1996. Implementing US\$1b savings provoked disputes with BALPA and BASSA. When BEP failed to deliver expected profitability, Ayling re-prioritized cultural projects (*Putting People First—Again*), including 'Theatre and Flair'.

Such developments prompt reflection on dynamic linkages between the political economy of civil aviation (at industry and firm levels) and the cabin crew labour process. From the perspective of LPT, BA's long-term control strategy was essentially 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977). Crew historically enjoyed considerable discretion when interacting with customers, albeit within broader parameters of management control. Exemplary customer service to achieve competitive success arguably enhanced the amount of discretion, notwithstanding that crew were subject to cultural-normative controls (Sturdy et al., 2010). Detailed direct control (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979) would be incompatible with the less tangible customer interactive skills associated with service excellence.

However, the harsh post-9/11 market constrained airlines' ability to exercise strategic choice in adopting either a 'high road' high-commitment, soft HRM model, or a 'low road' high-control, hard HRM paradigm (Bamber et al., 2009). This simplistic dichotomization was untenable given the unforgiving logic of cost cutting, even though the result might engender conflict with crew and jeopardize service excellence. The failure of *Putting People First—Again* in tough market conditions (Doganis, 2006) cast doubt on BA's ability to pursue unproblematically a labour control strategy centred on responsible autonomy. In response to 9/11, 18,000 jobs were lost (2001–6) at BA (Bamber et al., 2009: 36). 'To save the airline', as a union committee acknowledged, BASSA agreed to temporarily remove one crew member per flight. This complement was not restored when conditions improved and, consequently, crew believed BA was using 9/11 opportunistically to drive further rationalization, an impression confirmed in 2007 by proposals to reduce pay, pensions and sick-leave entitlement.

Historical analysis reveals a legacy of adversarial industrial relations and periodic attempts to marginalize BASSA (Blyton and Turnbull, 1994, 1998, 2004). In 1989, for example, BA changed contracts and encouraged the moderate breakaway, Cabin Crew '89. The most important dispute, though, was in 1997, prompted by BA's decision to restructure payments. Significantly, Cabin Crew '89 accepted BA's offer, leaving BASSA to fight alone and win an 80 per cent majority for strike action. Although management threatened to sack strikers and discipline 'stayaways', 300 struck and 2,000 reported sick in the celebrated 'mass sickie' (Whitelegg, 2003). Despite two decades of cost cutting that eroded working conditions, introduced inferior contracts and intensified work, the newly appointed CEO Willie Walsh resolved to radically re-configure work and contracts. When negotiations failed, BASSA voted overwhelmingly for a three-day strike; action was called off but overt conflict was merely postponed. Operation Columbus then articulated Walsh's strategy to transform working arrangements (BA, 2008). Heathrow-based crew would be transferred to a new 'mixed fleet' on 'closer to market pay and allowance rates'. An intensified double burden for labour was anticipated, the 'driving force' of cost cutting, combined with improving 'leadership, performance management, consistency of delivery and brilliance in customer service'. Most radically, 'brand-new agreements and reward structures' provided 'a golden opportunity to break down barriers to change, identified as a feature of the old prevailing collective agreements and relationships'.

These relationships reflected BASSA's increased influence. Having grown from 4079 members in 1990 to 9076 in 1997 (BASSA, 2012), BASSA did lose members in 1997, but resolved to increase bargaining power through recruitment. It achieved the '10,000 for 2000' target by 1999. New starts, non-members and Cabin Crew '89 joined in numbers, seeking protection from an increasingly aggressive management (interview, ex- BASSA secretary). BASSA and Civil Aviation Authority (CAA, 2004) data shows density increasing from 43 per cent (1991) to 73 per cent (2001) and 89 per cent by 2009. As a relatively autonomous branch of (now) Unite the Union, a notable feature of BASSA is that leadership and negotiating roles are held by elected reps employed as working crew. Part cause and part consequence of this powerful unionate occupational community is BASSA's immersion in crews' working lives. BASSA regulates 'rosters and scheduling, pay, hotels, allowances and all working agreements and conditions'.

The eventual conflict cannot be interpreted simplistically as the inevitable outcome of union intransigence in response to Walsh's cost cutting strategy. BASSA made concessions which came close to BA's desired £53m savings. By implication, BASSA, the regulator of these 'agreements', would have to be broken if working conditions were transformed. BASSA's fears were confirmed with the disclosure of a consultative document – Anonymous, 2006, cited in Ewing (2011: 8–9) – urging BA to

'force the issue with BASSA' by 'hitting the leadership ... where it hurts' (Ewing, 2011: 8–11). Action was precipitated by BA's *imposition* of crew reductions, which betokened BASSA's marginalization.

### **Emotional labour, political economy and labour process**

Blyton and Turnbull (2004) capture the contradictory dynamic shaping cabin crew labour, of delivering exemplary customer service while having work intensified through cost cutting. Full-service carriers vacillate between these imperatives, prioritizing customer care, empathy, professionalism and appearance, in short emotional and aesthetic labour, but shifting, sometimes abruptly, to privileging cost cutting, before re-emphasizing service quality. While it is tempting to separate these dynamics heuristically, it is helpful to conceive of labour as shouldering a *double* burden. Accordingly, emotional labour is one aspect of an integrated labour process.

In disaggregating emotional labour for the purposes of discussion the authors' conceptualization shares with Bolton and Boyd (2003) a concern with the indeterminacy of, and contestation in, the emotional labour process. For those authors, Hochschild's account of transmutation – how feelings are 'brought under the sway of large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive' (Hochschild, 1983: 19) – is 'absolutist' because it evokes 'deep acting' – a sincere performance altering the self. This totalizing alignment of internal feeling with organizational demands minimizes autonomy, agency and contestation. For Bolton and Boyd emotional labour increases autonomy and indeterminacy because workers 'own' the means of production. Yet, Hochschild also argued that for cabin crew transmutation had become untenable following the deregulation of US airlines and cost efficiencies in the late 1970s. This change led to increased 'surface acting' (workers consciously modifying emotions to meet organizational demands), emotional dissonance (discrepancy between felt and expressed emotion) and emotional labour being withheld.

In their more nuanced account Bolton and Boyd introduce four types of emotional self-management (pecuniary, prescriptive, presentational and philanthropic) that involve distinctions between the management of emotions (emotion work) and the commercialization of feeling (emotional labour). This conceptualization distinguishes between emotional labour as part of the capitalist labour process and emotion work as part of social interaction in the workplace, and workers move between the performance of commercial, professional and social feeling at work. While this may explain why the alignment of feelings with the organization and capitalist labour process is not absolute, it implies that workers compensate for organizational prescription by retreating into private emotional spaces removed from the market. The collective basis of labour and thus the capacity for collective resistance, which arises from the conflictual nature of the employment relationship, are overlooked. Indeterminacy and contestation are abstracted from the employment relationship rather than being integral to its contested nature. This separation becomes particularly untenable in the context of intensified market pressures and pursuit of competitive advantage, contexts and conditions which support the argument for an integrated emotional, physical and mental labour process.

Studies of intensified demands on emotional labour in diverse organizational settings include civil aviation. Curley and Royle (2013) show how a move to replace skilled emotion workers in the context of a shifting competitive climate has led to more instrumental performances and collective resistance. However, there remains a reluctance among many scholars to allow those who perform emotional labour to articulate their interests as *workers*. Rather, they can develop only a constrained collectivism, deriving from them sharing, with customers or clients, their dissatisfactions with degraded service delivery (Korczynski, 2001). For Tyler and Taylor (2000) such constrained collectivism

originates in an ethically driven (gendered) propensity to care for clients. In response, Brook critiqued this preoccupation with customer experience, as it theoretically forecloses 'front-line collectivism [as] emerging in response to the common class experiences of exploitation and domination by management' (2007: 372). For Marks and Thompson (2010) worker interest is fundamental. They argue that 'identity is part of subjectivity' (Marks and Thompson, 2010: 332), but it is the interaction between identity and interest that matters. They emphasize the importance of interest articulation for collective identity and reassert collective or class consciousness and ideology as having explanatory purchase. However, the potential of trade unionism for mobilizing collective interests should also be acknowledged within this formulation. The empirical account of BASSA's role in articulating and organizing worker interests emphasizes the significance of collective agency for the labour process, recalling the theoretical arguments made almost two decades ago by Martinez Lucio and Stewart (1997).

## **Research methods**

Access was gained through BASSA. Data consists principally of semi-structured interviews with 50 cabin crew, all BASSA members. BASSA committee members volunteered as interviewees and provided contact details for additional respondents who, in turn, suggested candidates. A slight majority of interviewees were union reps/activists, although a significant minority saw themselves as 'ordinary members'. Individual interviews were conducted (between September 2011 and November 2012) on union premises, in hotel and restaurant rooms and in members' homes. Interviews lasted a minimum of ninety minutes but most were over two hours. Interview schedules were structured around distinct themes, including employment histories, changing work experiences, skill utilization and customer service, attitudes to BA, union involvement, employment relations and the 2009–11 dispute. Informed consent was obtained and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The schedule facilitated an analytic strategy based on a matrix of responses under each heading and sub-heading. The use of software tools (e.g. NVivo) was eschewed in favour of inductive evaluation of themes emerging from the narratives.

The gender, ethnic and age profiles of respondents were representative of the BASSA reps. BASSA's gender composition reflected the workforce: 64 per cent women, 36 per cent men (BASSA, 2012); and although reps were disproportionately male, women held certain leading positions, including BASSA Chair. Two-thirds of respondents worked long-haul (WorldWide), one-third short-haul (Eurofleet) at Heathrow, with one respondent being Gatwick-based. Of the respondents, 29 held senior positions (19 Cabin Service Directors, 10 Pursers) and 21 were main crew.

Since testimony mostly reflected the BASSA rep/activist base, which often maps onto seniority, longevity and working long-haul, a certain bias must be acknowledged. In mitigation, though, crew with these characteristics had been significant in sustaining BASSA's embeddedness in work routines and defending job controls and, therefore, delivered telling insights into the roots of mobilization. Informants are identified by pseudonyms. To ensure triangulation, observation of BASSA meetings, analysis of membership data and company-union documentation complemented interview evidence.

## Labour process and the roots of mobilization

### *Limits of control*

BA's strategic imperatives were mediated by on-board 'managers', Cabin Service Directors (CSDs). Several reported having 'complete autonomy', while others believed they enjoyed 'significant' discretion. Most crew had little direct contact with groundbased management, one having 'never had a face to face encounter' in 11 years. A purser reflected:

... crew have never been heavily managed. There's a high degree of responsibility given to crew to look after themselves and perform prescribed tasks. The team really knows how to deliver the product every time ... everyone fits into a well-oiled machine. (Brian)

This responsible autonomy (Friedman, 1977) was rooted in the CSDs' role, as distinct from ground management or IBMs (In-Flight Business Managers) and their occasional on-board forays. The CSD was 'accountable for everything ... once the cabin doors are closed', was the interface in manager-employee relationships and was central to labour control. Significantly, CSDs rose through the ranks and worked alongside crew.

I think the main advantage of the community is that nobody comes in as supervisor from another role, because we've all been there, we all started as crew, we all became pursers, some achieving CSD ... There's a mutual respect knowing we've done the job. Whereas in ground management, people come from completely different fields with the correct qualifications, but wouldn't have a clue about the airline industry. (Ethan)

CSDs influenced crew 'cultures' by conducting formal pre-flight briefings which were governed by CAA regulations and collective agreements. They made the introductions, allocated responsibilities and emphasized safety and service standards. Though responsible for overcoming the indeterminacy of cabin crew labour, they did so in ways that reflected their seniority and often union affiliation, rather than managerial authority. CSDs were vigilant in defending the 'frontier of control' between on-board autonomy and ground management.

There's very little you go to the IBMs for, because it's our management skills that motivate the crew to get the job done. All that micro-management bollocks that IBMs deal with ... If you are not pulling your socks up I say, 'Can I have a word? What's going on?' Someone says, 'My wife left me just before the trip.' Got it. It's being approachable. IBMs, who are they? Some bloke from Marks & Spencer's that's done a management course, who thinks they can micro-manage. We are a whole culture that people from the outside don't understand. (Quentin)

I have two mistresses to serve; loyalty to the customer service ethic *and* to the union, because it's part of the CSD's contract to enforce the industrial agreement. 'To support and enforce the agreements', yes. It's an interesting dichotomy, isn't it? (Bryan)

Detailed accountability to ground managers was tenuous: 'I have a yearly review so obviously have to justify my stats to that manager, but day to day I have no real interactive communication.' Key performance indicators (KPIs) took the form of Global Performance Monitor customer feedback forms which CSDs distributed, but were assessed only on numbers returned. CSDs did undertake crew appraisals; inflight assessments took place every 120 days flown and evaluated adherence to safety

equipment procedures, dress standards and crews' 'business acumen'. This supervisory requirement qualifies Bolton's assertion that the 'absence of the manager' defines the 'novelty of the aircraft working environment' (2009: 303), for CSDs formally did 'manage the aircraft'. It was not the presence or absence of an on-board manager per se that was decisive, but the contradictory manner of their management that enabled crew collectively 'to interpret, manipulate and implement the managerially prescribed rules of engagement' (Bolton, 2009). Many CSDs resented being 'part of the management system'. One explained, 'I'm for my passengers, but I'm for my crew.' Respondents described how BA's periodic attempts to impose direct control had been thwarted:

My take on the last four to five years is that management have very much tried to gain more control of the aircraft than ever before. They haven't succeeded. I would say you can't, unless you're actually on board ... I think the only way they could control was through being heavy-handed like they have been. Unfortunately, all that has done is to make us more stick together and go, 'You're not there on the day.' (Kath)

... they wanted to control the CSDs to control the crew by giving them tight job descriptions but it didn't work because most of us were not compliant. I have done virtually nothing that I was meant to. (Uri)

CSDs constituted an influential community limiting direct control. A critical number were BASSA activists/ reps, who encouraged a unionate culture among crew and resisted managerial incursions into frontiers of control they had helped to define. BA's crew reduction was acutely felt by CSDs, not merely because it diminished the resources at their disposal, but because they had to assume full crew duties themselves, something which further strengthened commitment to crew colleagues.

### ***Eroded organizational loyalties***

Over time, reconfigured customer service had the effect of undermining crew loyalties to BA and, as Hochschild had argued for US attendants, this mitigated the potential transmutation of private emotions. Some crew perceived customer interaction as part of BA's 'product':

Hard product is the tangible thing, like seats, trays, cups, the food, in-flight entertainment. Soft is how it's delivered, you, your personality, your interaction ... Yes, I would say we were part of the product. We complement and support the product. (Tony)

This identification of labour as part of 'a product' might imply commodification (as distinct from transmutation) and Talet suggested that the notion of a product had replaced what was considered a service and had consequently promoted detachment:

... before it used to be your presence, your uniform standard, was very important. That has been taken over by a product ... it's a false performance because you know that you're not going to be able to deliver the standard and quality ... I'll smile at you but I'm just about to hit you with a baseball bat. (Talet)

The crew role had been constructed by BA, BASSA and crew themselves in terms of professionalism and customer service. Yet, short-lived campaigns such as 'Theatre and Flair', in which actors trained crew to promote visible displays expressing 'individualism and flamboyance', were viewed sceptically.



Everyone was to be different. So rather than BA being staid, it was, go and do what you want within the bounds of acceptable service. I can remember coming back one Christmas and a steward said, 'Can I sing a carol?' You couldn't do that now. Two years later, it's like, 'No, there's the script, you have to read that exactly.' (Nathan)

'Theatre and flair' suggested an attempt to intensify emotional labour, the transmutation of private emotion for corporate use, 'trying to teach a personality'. Yet, when BA reverted to standardized interaction, crew opposed it: 'We are not like a robot or an alien where you've got no expression', 'doing your job [meant] banter between you and the customer.' Thus, there was a continuum between deep and surface acting, with crew moving contingently between the polarities.

At the same time the in-flight autonomy extended to emotional regulation (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) and constrained disassociation. Transmutation was also qualified because crew did not define their work solely in terms of emotional labour, but as multi-faceted. Certainly, performing emotional and aesthetic labour was important, but so too were physically and mentally demanding aspects; service routines, safety responsibilities and, crucially, the ability to endure long shifts over multiple time zones. Crew universally emphasized customer safety and aircraft security. Customer service was important, but was often described prosaically as routinized serving of food and drinks to prescribed service schedules. The significance of customer service varied according to job role, aircraft type, whether working long-haul or short-haul and in which cabin. Short-haul customer delivery was compressed to the point that crew almost 'threw' food at customers to meet tight timings. On long-haul greater space existed for customer engagement. Crew concurred that the job was physically demanding.

... fully laden trolleys can be 35 to 40 kilos and you are pulling it at five to 10 degrees ... plus trolleys can be unsteady. There's lots of physical aspects to the job. (Ibrahim)

Intensified rosters and shortened stop-over times took a physical toll, making it harder to perform emotional tasks. Emotional labour cannot be abstracted as a single defining aspect from an integrated labour process, reflecting Brook's (2013) assertion of a unified concept of human labour.

Some saw personal or social skills utilized as 'innate', 'instinctive', or an extension of personality and described customer interaction as a source of satisfaction, suggestive of 'deep acting'. Yet Brook's account of the complexity of emotional labour as a continuum between behavioural compliance and assertion of the self was apparent, as in this respondent's articulation of an 'emotional disposition' to customer service, albeit having to periodically 'flick the switch' or 'paint it on' when tired or experiencing personal difficulties:

Most of us, given the job we do, are people people ... so I would say a high percentage [of skill] is natural, but of course, three a.m., night flights, you've had a bill you can't pay. Then you do have to paint the face on. Everyone has down days but you can't let that show. 85 to 90 per cent of what you do is natural and comes from the soul and the other bit just gives you a lift when you're tired or having a bad day. (Tony)

The periodic necessity to 'surface act' undermined the concept of deep acting as innate and authentic. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) found 'deep acting' associated with personal accomplishment in customer service and surface acting with detachment. Crew described how commitment to BA had eroded and disillusionment with 'the product' had led to emotional

dissonance. Maureen had worked in Promotions, where 'We were seen as goody two shoes, I was Miss BA.' Like many, she was angered by BA's parsimony, its increasingly unsympathetic management and, ironically, apropos its periodic emphasis on emotional labour, the hollowness of claims to invest emotionally in staff.

It was just so false, it wasn't heartfelt the way they had been ... and I remember [at the last promotion] things were bad and you start questioning, can I do this, can I stand there and promote something I don't believe in anymore? And I couldn't.

Accounts demonstrated residual loyalty to BA or, more accurately, to an earlier paternalistic version of the company, but simultaneously, strong allegiance to BASSA. This longstanding dual commitment had always produced tension, but was fractured by relentless cost cutting.

In spite of everything, although I'm a staunch [trade] unionist, I love the company. Although the brand is shrinking, I love BA. I wouldn't have given my life to it otherwise, although I hate what it's become. I am a BA-ite, as most union people are. (Talet)

Crew described how they had 'treasured' 'our airline' and been 'proud to put the uniform on'. Rather than subordination to a company colonizing their hearts and minds, crew regarded themselves as the guardians of BA's image and 'product', who had once 'turned BA into the world's favourite airline'. BA had been 'hi-jacked' by those who put profit above service and devalued the professionalism of those delivering it. BA no longer provided 'the tools to do the work', resulting in deteriorating cleanliness, food quality and reliability of video equipment. Excellent customer service in straitened conditions was impossible.

It seemed that we once had people in management who were from a level of the Ritz. Then all of a sudden we had people in management who were from the level of McDonald's. And they wanted a product from McDonald's delivered by people from the Ritz. (Ellie)

Defying management instruction, crew continually apologized for the service and in doing so might invest greater emotion: 'You definitely have to put more of yourself in.'

You're constantly saying 'Sorry, sorry, sorry' and you think how many times can I say sorry? You don't have a video and there's a 10 hours' flight, 'Oh I know, but sorry.' Nothing was repaired, it was embarrassing and you would agree with customers. (Ursula)

While this could promote a more authentic relationship with customers, it could invoke disassociation. An older crew member, in describing his smile as 'a tool', gestured to instrumentality.

For normal punters, you're all smiling when they're coming on and they've paid for the ticket, they expect that ... it's a tool and that's one bit I hate about the job, I'll be unhappy pretending to be happy, that I like you even though I think you're a sack of shit if you've been rude to me. But it's part of what you have to do because otherwise you get pulled in ... It's like a mechanic needs a spanner. (Kenneth)

Some perceived the crew-customer relationship explicitly as an exchange of labour: 'Customers pay your wages, you have to be nice to them.' Testimonies conveyed the identification of crews' interests as workers as well as their advocacy of and alignment with customer interests.

Thus, limitations existed on BA's ability to stake 'claims on private territories of self' (Hochschild, 1983: x). While BA mobilized brand, image and reputation to secure attachment, these cultural controls were precarious artefacts. Crews' self-defined professionalism and disenchantment with 'the product' had subverted corporate cultural norms long before 2009. Workplace social relations and the collective framework provided by BASSA meant that what might otherwise have been experienced as depersonalized or individualized dissonance was directed at BA, allowing crew to assert their interests as workers.

### ***Informal collectivism***

Collectivism had an *informal* character, rooted in work solidarities and a distinctive labour process. The process of crew formation, an apparently unpromising basis for collectivity, actually generated meaningful solidarities. Crews were given schedules one month before flying, but colleagues' identities were revealed only at pre-flight briefings. Thereafter, individuals might not be rostered together for years. Yet, bringing together unknown colleagues in random combinations produced an indefinable chemistry.

Crew have got instant team spirit, you've never met someone before, you join them and you are immediately a unit that will have to save each other's lives. And that's so instilled in you ... a huge sense of community, that's something I've never had – only in this job. (Laurence)

Intense work routines, performed in cramped workspaces, demanded close interaction and lubricated the social bonds. 'The ingrained mentality of [how] you work as a team and pull all the stops out' built social cohesion. Prior to 2009–11 bonding was reinforced by social activities during long-haul stopovers. Commonly, an entire crew of 14–16 and pilots would meet after arrival for drinks at their hotel, often kicking off a 'room party' that lasted for the duration. Intermingling work and social intimacy created a distinctive occupational community, atypical in that crew shared neither residential proximity nor continuous work relationships. Yet, paradoxically, 'It is all centred around the workplace,' a transient space necessarily extending beyond the limits of working time. Crew repeatedly referred to themselves as 'family' or a 'community', or spoke of inhabiting a 'global village'. They spoke a common language – 'galley FM' – that suggested a mutual value system.

Bolton and Boyd categorize relations arising from 'unmanaged spaces' at work which might foster resistance, but also bonding and camaraderie, as 'presentational emotion management' as opposed to 'pecuniary' emotion management, to produce 'the profitable product of customer satisfaction' (2003: 297). This abstraction ignores emotional and physical work as social activity, whose collective basis is harnessed to organizational goals, but which contains possibilities for alternative solidarities. Rather than being removed from 'the sway of the organization', these social relations are integral to them. Attachments were strengthened by sharing adverse experiences through 'communities of coping, an important collective element to the (emotional) labour process' (Korczyński, 2007: 578), yet this transcended dissatisfaction with customer service, through being rendered collectively meaningful by BASSA.

## **Role of BASSA**

Formal collective organization was based on BASSA's joint regulation of the labour process, working environment and employment terms and conditions. Union-negotiated agreements encompassed every aspect of working life. As crew understood the significance of BASSA's influence over working conditions, their attachment to the union grew. The case of the previously anti-union Ursula, who became active in the dispute, is instructive.

... by talking to people I realized that hotels were checked by BASSA, things like that. I also realized how many rules there were and actually most were in my favour. Then you talk to people who work for other airlines and you think actually, this is not bad.

Reps participated in discussions over 'products', staffing levels and decisions on 'special circumstances' for taking leave. The comprehensive and authoritative collective agreements were dubbed 'the bible'.

The WorldWide agreement is 56 pages and Walsh wanted to get it down to four ... there's not wasteful stuff in there, nothing ridiculous, it's for every eventuality. If a flight diverts from Hong Kong into Amsterdam, what do we do? How many days off? If you forget your passport, what happens to you? What happens to your roster because you've got a fixed life, well shall we wipe the rosters so she doesn't know what she's doing for two months? Oh but she's got childcare and all her arrangements are made. The agreements were there for the smooth running of the operation. (Brian)

Yet it was more than the formal agreement that anchored members to BASSA. The frontier of control was vigilantly policed by reps, to such an extent that members might question BASSA's regulation of apparent minutiae. One regarded BASSA's contestation of crew closing window blinds as 'archaic'. Tully, who became active during the strike, recalled disapproving of BASSA's rigid adherence to working hours' agreements when it prevented an aircraft from completing its journey on the same day it had been delayed by bad weather.

... it was harking back to the 70s almost, very militant ... but now increasingly I know what that was about ... because people have come through a lot and their families have lost jobs. I know it was meant for us and these things were won by BASSA and argued over for a reason, but sometimes you didn't always see that, when you wanted to get home.

This quote indicates tensions between the interests of the company, customer and/or individual worker and collective labour. BASSA legitimated and asserted its members' interests as workers, often articulating the 'common good' of airline and customers but, crucially, insisting on the crew's *collective* interests even if they sat uncomfortably with individual preferences. Sceptical members came to recognize the importance of defending these frontiers of control. Crew testified to BASSA's effectiveness and to reps' responsiveness and accessibility, wherever they were globally located.

We had offices at Waterside and T5 [Heathrow]. If you were down route and it was 4 a.m. and the company were saying 'Right, we know you should be woken up at 9 to do the trip but we're waking you up at 7', immediately you'd phone up, you'd talk to a rep and they'd say, 'I'm looking at the WorldWide agreement. No, they can't do it ... I'll get in touch with somebody and get back to you'. And they would get back to you. (Ellie)

The sense of BASSA exercising influence on behalf of members throughout their daily work lives permeated the interviews.

Every day crew phone BASSA and say 'They're trying to do this.' You'll go, 'No, they can't do that' and you'll stop stuff happening, so [members] see the power of the union as their voice every day. That is partly how BASSA get solidarity. (Olivia)

Activists were embedded in work relations. CSDs, two-thirds reportedly pro-BASSA, were instrumental in mediating and contesting managerial directives. They described one aspect of their job as ensuring compliance with the collective agreement. Illustrating their dual role, one CSD recounted how he informed crew at pre-flight meetings that he was also available in his capacity as BASSA rep. Before the dispute reps had paid facility time and BASSA's relationship with management ensured that issues were resolved swiftly and often informally. The close relationships between members and leaders meant that when BA removed facility time and rostered reps to marginalize BASSA the move proved counterproductive.

...as soon as we went into dispute mode, they closed the offices, which incensed the crew because we represented the crew, we are crew, they trusted us, we didn't sit aloof, we weren't hierarchical. It was brilliant going to work as a rep because crew were hungry for information ... you were surrounded by people wanting to know the ins and outs. (Brian)

BASSA's effectiveness confounded the false dichotomies of collective and individual union activity and of servicing and organizing and suggested more nuanced and dynamic relationships between these dimensions. BASSA provided comprehensive individual representation *and* the social basis for collectivism.

It's because the crew see us providing a service that BA never provides. We can be a problem solver, we can be a shoulder to lean on. We can be counsellors. We multi-task in everything we do. So we are always the first point of call to solve problems, something managers detest. Everything that managers should do, we are doing ... Yes, BASSA organizes as well. But it services members very well and they understand what you give them. (Ibrahim)

Union meetings could be sparsely attended in quiet times, but proposed changes to working conditions brought large attendances. Such was the scale of response to Operation Columbus that meetings were held at Sandown Park racetrack. An online forum facilitated widespread participation. BASSA's internal democracy was enhanced through amendments to its constitution following the 2007 dispute, by which decisions to suspend industrial action required ratification by members.

The union's organizational and representational capacity secured ideological legitimacy, so that when it called a dispute, members responded; 'You need to trust your reps and take that leap of faith.' A powerful illustration of BASSA's authority was its contestation of BA's narrative regarding finances. Walsh insisted that BA's perilous situation necessitated the 'mixed fleet'. However, crew accepted BASSA's version that these were exaggerated fears. 'Nobody believed Willie Walsh when he said that we were in a fight for survival,' a position confirmed when 2010's half-yearly accounts<sup>4</sup> showed £158m profit. Every respondent understood that the significance of reduced crewing lay in the fact and consequences of its imposition.

... when they removed the crew member, we said, well, they've just thrown out the format of negotiation. The old way of doing business has just been by-passed. You do understand what that means? Most of the crew got it, it was the imposition. (Brendan)

BA's action endangered joint regulation of work and BASSA's effectiveness, if not existence. Fundamental contestation was over 'the right to represent and the right to manage'. Crew understood that if Walsh was successful, the essence of what was more than a job, but a vocation that gave their lives meaning, would become unrecognizable as the legacy fleet withered on the vine.

It was massive cost cutting, get rid of the expensive crew and break the union, because of the perceived hold that BASSA has with BA. (Genaro).

## Conclusions

This article reveals sources of collectivism that underlay BA's cabin crew's action during the 2009–11 dispute. The terrain of UK industrial relations seemed particularly infertile for the pursuit of strike action against a company that had resolved (since 2007) to degrade contractual arrangements, intensify managerial control and render the cabin crews' union ineffective. Crew might appear unpromising collective actors, fragmented by multiple identities and transient workplaces. Further, the precariousness of full-service airlines in markets increasingly shaped by low-cost carriers seemed to make BA's onslaught on costs and working arrangements an ineluctable necessity. Yet, worker activity cannot be read off from broader industrial relations trends, whether strike levels (Hale, 2012) or union density (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Such tendentious interpretation neglects an understanding of BASSA's role which overcomes the limitations of a purely structural explanation and engages with 'the sociology of industrial conflict' (Hyman, 1972: 106). BASSA's embeddedness in the totality of crews' working lives runs through their testimony and helps explain collectivism as rooted in the labour process.

First, senior management had been unable to impose direct control, a failure attributable partly to the 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977) of CSDs, but also to the fact that CSDs were highly unionate and disproportionately represented among BASSA reps. The CSDs defended a tangible 'frontier of control' and mediated 'managerially prescribed rules of engagement' (Bolton, 2009), ensuring that crews as workgroups remained relatively autonomous.

Second, analysis of the political economy of civil aviation and BA strategy reveals how the apparently contradictory imperatives of cost cutting and mobilizing emotional labour through service excellence have imposed a *double burden* on cabin crew. While the literature tends to separate these elements, abstracting emotional labour from the employment relationship (Tyler and Taylor, 2000), testimony affirmed an integrated experience of the labour process. While mobilizing emotional labour may have had purchase during PPF, two decades of demands to deliver more exacting customer service within straitened conditions undermined potential transmutation and fractured employee identification with the company. In the contest between 'personal' and 'social' meanings of work (Brook, 2013), BASSA legitimated crew's sense of their interests as workers *and* as advocates of customer service over the company's discourse – transmuted feelings were transformed into perceptions of commodification.

Third, insightful testimony illustrated crew's *informal* collectivism, rooted in work solidarities. Work routines generated social bonding which amounted to more than 'communities of coping' (Korczyński, 2003), as bonds between workers were imbricated by BASSA. The union transcended geographical dispersion and gave structure and meaning to crews' apparently ephemeral 'collectivities' through advocating their interests as workers.

Fourth, BASSA's role in *formal* collectivism, as joint regulator of working conditions, should not be understated. BASSA's legitimacy stemmed from its accessibility and representational effectiveness, which secured the profound trust of its members. Further, it provided an ideological framework through which BA's actions could be understood. When Walsh launched Operation Columbus crew overwhelmingly voted for strike action and became committed collective actors, because they grasped the implications of management's determination to break BASSA *and* to breach its defence of job controls.

This article confirms the importance of a collective dimension to emotional labour but adds to Bolton and Boyd's (2003) understanding of collectivism by locating it within the context of concrete and conflictual employment relations that includes trade unionism. Furthermore, while supporting Marks and Thompson's (2010) assertion of worker interest, the article goes further in connecting the labour process to collective, union organized mobilization and in emphasizing the significance of ideological frames and legacies within this process.

Final observations concern the study's generalizability to the airline industry and more broadly. Should this be regarded as an atypical case? Certainly, Oxenbridge et al. (2010: 193) conclude that the 'strength of union organization and a willingness to deploy industrial action' account for limits on unilateral management action in civil aviation. However, this verdict may be questionable for the low-cost segment. In respect of full-cost carriers, specifically, not enough is known of the scope of collective agreements and crew union densities. Whitelegg's (2003: 256) list of UK companies and recognition arrangements is outdated. Nor is there sufficient knowledge of the labour process, the nature of informal collectivism and the depth of union embeddedness in work routines in other airlines to make informed comparative judgement. Yet, this study suggests that collectivist employment relations can be defended from business strategy re-configuration around the low-cost model (Bamber et al., 2009).

Mindful of the dangers of inappropriately transferring contextually contingent factors to other sectors, workplaces and groups of workers, it is legitimate to ask what understanding the BA-BASSA dispute affords us concerning the roots of mobilization more generally. The principal lesson may be that the successful mobilization of workers in key disputes, such as cabin crew in 2009–11, depends on much more than the presence of formal collective agreements, no matter how robust. Minor acts of contestation, in which frontiers of control are defended and workers are represented, should be seen as myriad micro-mobilizations (McAdam, 1988), that cumulatively constitute an important resource for more demonstrable collective action when management initiate major restructuring and trigger significant conflict.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to express our appreciation for the critical and insightful comments of the three referees and for Mark Stuart's exemplary editorial guidance. The greatest debt of gratitude must go to the British Airways cabin crew who gave so much of their time to be interviewed in the midst of

their demanding flight schedules. Finally, our thanks go to BASSA and personally to Louize and Duncan – total respect.

## Funding

Seed corn funding was received from the Universities of Strathclyde and Leeds.

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Taylor and Moore 19

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