

More than 100 Rome flights canceled by protest

Written by Associated Press
Thursday, 08 January 2009 14:29

ROME (AP) More than 100 flights at Rome's main Leonardo da Vinci airport were canceled Thursday by a ground workers protest against job cuts that are part of Alitalia's imminent relaunch.

The new, streamlined Alitalia starts operations next week. The new airline merges the profitable assets of the bankrupt national carrier with the much smaller Air One, and will include a foreign partner.

Airport officials said the protest by baggage handlers, check-in personnel and other ground staff had forced the cancellation of more than 100 outgoing and incoming flights by Thursday evening.

Italian media reported that some 400 workers participated in the protest, reportedly upset that some of them have not been offered jobs by the new management.

The new Alitalia will employ 12,500 people down from 20,000. Some 3,250 workers are being offered government guarantees of up to 80 percent pay for eight years; some of the others were on short-term contracts that are not being renewed.

Meanwhile, Air France-KLM emerged as the front-runner as Alitalia's foreign partner on Wednesday after Premier Silvio Berlusconi said Lufthansa, the other main contender, never made a firm offer.

Lufthansa spokeswoman Claudia Lange in Germany confirmed that the airline didn't make an offer per se, but was instead seeking cooperation within the Star Alliance. She also said Lufthansa's proposal hadn't been rejected, either, adding "This process isn't over."

Berlusconi met Thursday with a northern political ally and the Milan mayor, who share concerns about the future of Milan's Malpensa airport. Alitalia already severely reduced flights to and from Malpensa, effectively demoting it as a hub, as it sought to bring costs under control.

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Local politicians argue that northern Italy, the motor of the nation's economy, needs to have an international hub.

They favor Lufthansa, which has expanded operations at Malpensa, over Air France-KLM, which had made stripping Malpensa of its hub status part of last year's failed bid to buy the airline outright.

"There is a very advanced negotiation with Air France," Berlusconi was quoted as saying by the ANSA news agency after the meeting. "This does not mean that if in the coming hours Lufthansa will present a more advantageous offer to make up for the lost time it will not be taken into consideration."

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