

Alitalia, Lufthansa may hold key

Roma. Lufthansa appears to be emerging as a key which may break the deadlock over a rescue plan for Alitalia but the German carrier continues to be tight-lipped over its intentions in regard to its Italian counterpart.

Lufthansa, in fact, is considered by Alitalia unions as well as members of the Italian government, first among them Premier Silvio Berlusconi, to be the ideal industrial strategic partner for a future incarnation of the failing national carrier. However, the German airline continues to reply 'no comment' in regard to what it considers to be "market speculation" while repeating that the Italian market is "very interested".

Again on Wednesday, as last ditch efforts continue to keep Alitalia from going into liquidation by the end of the month, Lufthansa refused to comment on "the latest developments in the situation".

When asked directly about reported overtures from the Italian government, Lufthansa spokesman Claudia Lange told the online daily [affaritalia.it](http://www.affaritalia.it): "We are obviously keeping a close eye on the situation because the Italian market is very interesting for us. However, I can say nothing about the most recent developments".

The German transport ministry on Wednesday also refused to comment on any interest of Lufthansa for Alitalia. Among the most recent developments is an apparent readiness by Compagnia Aerea Italiana (CAI), a government-sponsored consortium of Italian investors which offered to buy Alitalia's flight operations, to reconsider withdrawing its bid.

This came at the same time that unions representing the majority of pilots and cabin staff, considered responsible for torpedoing CAI's offer as they had with one from Air France last spring, suggested to CAI that it ally with Lufthansa now and allow the German carrier to handle contract questions as well as nuts-and-bolts operations.

The unions rejected CAI's business plan last week because it envisioned a single contract for all employees as opposed to separate contracts for pilots, cabin and ground staff, as is currently the case at Alitalia.

As a compromise, the pilots had suggested adopting the contract systems used by other European carriers, including Lufthansa, but CAI said this was unacceptable.

What could change this, observers said, would be if Lufthansa allied with CAI before and not after the acquisition, this giving it a voice in hammering out a deal with Alitalia unions. Time is running out, however, because Alitalia's government-appointed administrator Augusto Fantozzi must present a report to Italy's national aviation authority ENAC on Thursday detailing its prospects for survival. Based on this report ENAC could revoke Alitalia operating license next week, forcing Fantozzi to place the airline in liquidation.