

American Airlines workers indicted for drug smuggling: critical issues behind the headlines

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Last Wednesday federal agents arrested 58 people in Miami, Florida, for the most part American Airlines and Lufthansa Sky Chefs workers, on charges of drug and weapons smuggling. In pre-dawn raids at Miami International Airport and suspects' homes the workers were rounded up, handcuffed, hauled before waiting press photographers and brought before a federal judge, who issued multiple indictments for conspiracy, importation and distribution of drugs and weapons trafficking.

The indictments were the result of two-and-a-half-year sting operations carried out by US Customs officers and agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF). A spokesman for BATF said the workers were involved in stashing illegal drugs from South America aboard American Airlines flights to a number of cities in the US.

The spectacle of manacled workers with their heads bowed being hauled into court was prominently displayed on the front pages of newspapers across the country and beamed to TV audiences around the world. It was a troubling and degrading sight. In the statements of federal officials and the reports of media anchors, there was a note of satisfaction that ordinary workers should be, apparently, caught in the act of transporting addictive drugs for money. All of the reports cleared American Airlines of any wrongdoing.

Notwithstanding the organic bias of the media against workers, this event raises serious questions about the state of American society and its mores in general, and the crisis of the workers movement in particular.

Given the political and ideological climate in the US, it is by no means unthinkable that some workers, even those holding relatively decent-paying jobs, could lower themselves to the level of drug smugglers. Few ruling classes in history can match that of the US when it comes to the naked pursuit of self-interest and the flaunting of greed. No segment of society is left unscathed by the corruption of politics, the media, the arts, intellectual life and every other aspect of human relations.

America is the land, par excellence, of the quick buck and

the lure of easy money. Its official heroes are entrepreneurs and speculators who, catapulted by the bull market, turn a modest stake into a vast fortune overnight. For the masses there is the stupefying dream of hitting it big in the lottery.

Behind the glitzy facade there is the stark reality that confronts the vast majority: stagnant or falling living standards, longer hours of work, the ever-present threat of downsizing, rising debt, daily indignities on the job, a hostile political system staffed by scoundrels who openly serve big business. Is it any wonder that, under certain conditions, the anger, frustration and desperation born of such conditions should find a perverse expression in anti-social forms of behavior?

The media, of course, never considers the experiences of American Airlines workers that form the background to the present scandal. American Airlines is a typical US corporation. It is ruthless in the subordination of its workers to the demands of the banks and big shareholders. It has waged a war on its workforce for the better part of two decades, using layoffs and the threat of layoffs to impose cuts in wages and benefits, speedup, forced overtime, split shifts and all of the other measures that fall under the euphemism "labor flexibility."

BATF spokesman Ed Halley, seeking to underscore the rapacity of the suspects, told the press, "These people [i.e., baggage handlers and ramp workers] make \$17, \$18, \$19 an hour with their regular jobs and they still weren't satisfied." Such wage levels, in fact, provide at best a modest standard of living for a family in the US. They can hardly insure financial stability or provide for a decent retirement, especially in a business environment that rewards corporate downsizing with a rise in share values on Wall Street.

Workers at American have never recouped what they lost in wage concessions and other give-backs, initially presented by the company as temporary sacrifices to help it weather bad times. Meanwhile, they have seen the company's profits soar and its top executives reward themselves with huge salaries and bonuses.

In 1998 Donald J. Carty, the chief executive officer of

American's parent company AMR Corp., received a total of \$9,598,031 in salary, bonuses and stock options. That sum equals the annual pay of 239 ground workers.

When American Airlines workers have demanded some of the benefits from the company's profit bonanza, they have gotten the back of the hand. The entire political establishment—the Clinton administration, the courts, the media—has lined up behind the company.

Over the past decade American Airlines employees have been forced to walk out on two occasions, and in both cases the Clinton administration has intervened to break their strikes. In November of 1993 the flight attendants struck. After five days Clinton imposed binding arbitration, ordering the attendants to return under new work rules that had been unilaterally imposed by the company.

In February of 1997 the pilots struck against a derisory pay offer and the company's demand for greater power to shift routes to its lower-paying commuter subsidiary. Within minutes of the walkout, Clinton invoked emergency provisions of the 1926 Railway Labor Act and ordered the pilots back to work.

Earlier this year American Airlines pilots launched a sick-out to oppose management moves, in violation of the contract, to delay bringing lower-paid pilots at a newly acquired subsidiary up to the pay and benefit scale of existing pilots. The company obtained an injunction and a federal judge levied a \$45.5 million fine against the union, denouncing the pilots as “extortionists.”

These bare facts go a long way in explaining the accumulated anger and frustration of American Airlines workers. They do not, however, suffice to explain why these sentiments should find such a backward and retrograde expression as the apparent involvement of workers in a drug smuggling operation.

Here the decisive factor is the betrayal of the workers by their trade union organizations. Time and again the unions at American Airlines have joined with management in imposing concessions. The Transport Workers Union, which collects dues from the ground workers, earlier this decade signed a contract granting American Airlines \$130 million worth of give-backs.

Every strike or work action has been called off or undermined by the union leadership. The primary concern of these thoroughly corrupt organizations has been to protect the interests of the union bureaucracy, whatever the costs to the rank-and-file workers.

The concessions and defeats of the past 20 years are the culmination of decades in which the American working class was dominated by a politically reactionary and venal labor bureaucracy. Its legacy is the disintegration of anything that can seriously be called a workers movement. The outright

sabotage of workers' struggles combined with the bureaucracy's promotion of anti-communism and opportunism have had a destructive impact on the political consciousness of broad layers of workers.

The events at American Airlines are symptomatic of the resulting decline in class consciousness. The crimes of the labor bureaucracy have dealt a blow to workers' sense of class solidarity. They have fostered instead a sense of atomization, in which workers feel they confront a hostile world as individuals. Such an outlook can become a breeding ground for cynicism and the worst forms of opportunism.

At the same time there are powerful objective forces working against such retrograde moods and tendencies. The intensity of class divisions in the US and, indeed, internationally, must inevitably find a more healthy expression in a new upsurge of working class struggle. There are already signs that American workers are beginning to shake off the setbacks of the past and assert themselves, not only against their employers, but also against the trade union bureaucracy. In the past week alone flight attendants at Northwest Airlines have rejected a contract agreed to by the union leadership, and teachers in Detroit have defied their union officials and gone out on strike.

There will be no lack of opportunities for the working class to demonstrate its enormous social power. But the disturbing, even tragic episode at American Airlines must serve as a reminder that there is no evading a thorough-going critique of the political and ideological foundations of the old trade union organizations, and the elaboration of a new strategy to forge a political movement for the mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.



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