

# Letter from a US airline worker and a reply

28 April 2005

*Below is a letter sent to the WSWs by an airline worker in response to the article "Judge imposes pay cut on United Airline mechanics", followed by a reply by Shannon Jones.*

What a great article. As a veteran airline employee with 30+ years (27 with TWA before it was sold out from under us), I know all too well what my Brothers and Sisters at UAL, US Air, Delta, NWA, and my present employer, American Air, are going through.

I only wish your article could be seen and heard by the general populace. Due to the current climate at all US airlines, it behooves us worker bees to work with management to right our sinking ship. But the cooperation must be both ways.

Unfortunately it is not. Therefore, my solution to the problem is quite simple. First, all the unions must get together and agree that there will be no turning back. SOLIDARITY is paramount.

Then they must convince their respective memberships that this is a do-or-die situation. Now the fun part. Let management, corporate America, the flying public, and the Bush administration know that unless air fares are raised, oil prices stabilized, and attacks on worker wages, pensions, and benefits cease, then within 3 days of this notification, not one unionized airline worker will report for work.

Yes, I would call for a general airline strike. Let's see if the discount carriers can handle the traffic. Let's see if truckers and rail roads can pick up the loss in commerce. They can't put us all in jail. And if they lock up one labor leader, then the strike will continue until his release.

If the government and big business want workers to return to wages and compensation of the 1920s and 1930s, then let the workers return to the early days of unionism. If our counterparts in Europe can entertain short general strikes with success, then why can't we?

Finally, as the editor of my local union lodge's newsletter, I would like your permission to use your article or parts of it in future articles for our newsletter.

In Solidarity,

BG

Dear BG:

Thanks for your comments on the article.

You note that you are the editor of the newsletter of your local union lodge and you would like to reprint portions of the article. The general policy of the *World Socialist Web Site* is to allow republication of articles as long as proper credit is given to the WSWs.

I would like to respond to some of the issues dealt with in your letter because I think they raise critical problems facing not only airline workers, but the working class as a whole.

In your letter you say: "First of all the unions must get together

and agree that there will be no turning back. Solidarity is paramount. Then they must convince their respective membership that this is a do-or-die situation."

Later on you propose a "general airline strike." You cite the example of Europe, where in a number of countries there have been one-day general strikes in response to attacks from the employers and the government on jobs and living standards.

I fully solidarize with your desire for an all-out mobilization against the assault of the airline bosses on jobs, wages and pensions. An industry-wide strike against all the airlines would have a major economic and social impact, and would encourage more general resistance to the attacks of big business and the Bush administration.

However, your e-mail suggests certain illusions on your part: first, that strike action, even industry-wide strike action, would, by itself, solve the problems facing airline workers; and, second, that the AFL-CIO might take the lead in organizing such action.

To deal with the second issue: the AFL-CIO as an organization is opposed to militant strikes, or anything that would upset the status quo. Just take a look at the statistics. Overall, strike activity has dropped to its lowest level in more than 60 years. In 2004, there were just 17 major strikes involving more than 1,000 workers. There were just 14 in 2003.

By way of comparison, there were 145 major strikes in 1981 and in 1974 there were 424 such strikes, involving 31.8 million workers.

The percentage of workers organized in unions has been falling for more than 50 years, and real wages have been in decline since the early 1970s.

This abysmal situation did not come about because workers were not willing to fight. Over the past 25 years there has been no lack of willingness to struggle on the part of the rank-and-file. However, strike after strike has been isolated and betrayed by the leadership of the AFL-CIO. The official unions have degenerated to the point of becoming little more than an extension of the corporate-government establishment.

The AFL-CIO leadership more and more seeks to defend its own income and privileges at the expense of rank-and-file workers by negotiating all kinds of perks for itself—company-funded joint programs, positions on labor-management committees, "employee stock ownership plans," slots on corporate boards.

The unions today routinely offer employers substandard contracts in return for the right to be recognized as bargaining agent. The maintenance of its dues income, not the defense of wages, jobs and working conditions, is the main preoccupation of the AFL-CIO.

This has not happened because of a few bad leaders. The

problem is the inability of the trade unions to meet the challenges of a global economy. Companies are able to shift production rapidly to different areas of the globe, and thereby force US workers to compete with lower-paid workers in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The only way the working class can fight corporations that operate on a global scale is to adopt an international strategy. But the AFL-CIO, like unions all over the world, is based on a nationalist program. This leads it to defend the “national interest” of the corporate elite of the US. It seeks to convince American workers to give up one round of concessions after another in the name of making US companies competitive vis-à-vis their overseas rivals. The AFL-CIO attempts to cover up its betrayals by ranting against China, Japan, Mexico, etc., blaming them for taking “our” jobs.

This brings us to another critical issue: strike action by itself, no matter how courageous and militant, cannot halt the relentless attacks by the corporations. That is because the problems facing the working class are political in character. The reality is that workers face a fight not just against one or two “rogue” employers; rather they confront a crisis-ridden capitalist system that is leading society into a dead-end.

The profit drive of the multinational corporations is incompatible with the basic needs of millions of working people. While the working class creates the wealth of society through its labor, only a small and decreasing fraction is returned to working people in the form of wages. The rest is controlled by the corporate elite, which is accumulating obscene wealth while living standards are stagnating or falling for the vast majority of the world’s population.

Private ownership of giant corporations and the division of the world into rival capitalist nation states is in conflict with rational economic development. The result is enormous waste and misallocation of resources. One clear expression of this is the air transport industry, where the airlines are locked in a cut-throat battle for survival at the expense of workers and the traveling public.

The enormous and growing gap between rich and poor is leading to the breakdown of whatever remains of democracy. The two big business parties and the corporate media speak in the name of the wealthy elite, shamelessly lying to the public while excluding other political viewpoints. The US government runs roughshod over the rights of working people, slashing jobs and social programs while awarding huge tax breaks to the rich and undermining basic civil liberties.

The drive by transnational corporations to dominate sources of oil and other raw materials has already produced the illegal US invasion of Iraq, and raises the danger of larger and more horrific conflicts involving the major industrial powers.

In your email you talk about the “success” of general strikes conducted by the unions in Europe, and hold them up as examples American workers should follow. However, you should be aware that the unions in Europe have increasingly capitulated to the attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

In France and other European countries, the unions have endorsed one- or two-day general strikes. But these are always

conducted as little more than protests, designed to let workers release steam. The unions have kept these actions isolated and under tight control, deliberately seeking to prevent them from becoming the spearhead of a mass social movement against the corporations and government authorities.

What is needed is the reorganization of society on the basis of a new social principle—the satisfaction of human needs, not profit. This requires that the working class take political power into its own hands and reorganize economic and social life in its own interests, rather than the interests of the rich.

To carry this out, the working class must build a political party of its own—a party that fights uncompromisingly in the interests of the working class against big business and the entire capitalist order—that is, a party that fights on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The AFL-CIO is completely opposed to this. It is tied hand and foot to the two parties of Wall Street, the Democrats in particular. Take the recent campaign to elect John Kerry. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and his cohorts show no shame in squandering millions of dollars collected from workers’ dues to elect this anti-worker big business politician.

Kerry came out in support of the war in Iraq and failed to distinguish his policies in any significant way from the pro-business agenda of Bush. After losing the election, the Democrats have provided the votes to enact a series of pro-corporate measures, including limits on class action lawsuits and a bankruptcy law written by the credit card industry.

In Europe, America and all over the world, the old union organizations have become one of the greatest obstacles to the independent mobilization of the working class. The first serious steps by workers to wage a fight in defense of their basic rights bring them into conflict with the bureaucratic union apparatuses.

What is required is the building of new, democratic workers’ organizations. This requires in the first place that the working class be organized in its own political party. This is the perspective fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.

I urge you to consider these points. A number of excellent books providing analysis from a socialist standpoint of the experiences of the working class and the trade unions are available from Mehring Books. I would recommend, in particular, *Globalization and the International Working Class*.

Shannon Jones

For the *World Socialist Web Site*



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**