US airline chaos: thousands of flights canceled for inspections

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Less than two weeks after grounding hundreds of its planes for unannounced inspections, top US air carrier American Airlines cancelled at least 1,500 flights Tuesday and Wednesday for reinspection of wiring in its aging fleet of MD-80s. The cancellations have interrupted travel for hundreds of thousands of people and seriously compounded the crisis in the commercial airlines industry.

In the past month, the industry has been wracked by scandals, mass flight cancellations, record fuel costs, and bankruptcies. These developments clearly reflect the economic crisis and collapse of infrastructure at large in the US and internationally, as well as the effects of decades of governmental deregulation and compromising of federal oversight systems.

In the past two weeks alone, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines abruptly grounded hundreds of planes and canceled flights for unscheduled inspections, and US Airways announced problems with some of its fleet after a wing part fell off one plane mid-flight.

The cancellations were in response to a directive from the Federal Aviation Administration requiring carriers to verify their compliance with airworthiness standards. This directive, along with several others the FAA issued in March, was part of an effort by the agency to appear more stringent in its safety enforcement after coming under congressional investigation for lax oversight.

Last week a number of FAA inspectors testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure committee on corruption and connivance between the agency and Southwest Airlines, which evaded years' worth of critical inspections on dozens of planes without penalties. Agency whistle-blowers reported suppression of warnings, orders to destroy inspection documentation, harassment by FAA and Southwest officials, and threats of job loss and death for reporting violations.

Among those testifying April 3 was Bobby Boutris, a safety inspector at the FAA's Irving, Texas field office, which oversaw Southwest. Boutris had discovered a multitude of violations of airworthiness directives at Southwest beginning in 2003. In 2007, both the company and the FAA stonewalled inspections of 46 Boeing 737 planes for signs of metal stress.

Boutris testified that his field office supervisor, Douglas Gawadzinski, along with higher-up agency officials, allowed Southwest to avoid penalties by later self-reporting the lack of inspections as though it were an error. Boutris was reassigned to different tasks after Southwest complained to FAA supervisors about him.

At least 6 of the 46 planes that had gone without metal stress inspections were subsequently found to have dangerous cracks in their fuselages. The planes operated at least 30 months past their inspection deadlines, transporting an estimated 145,000 passengers.

Boutris told the committee, "I have been asked by Southwest Airlines management to make a violation go away; in addition, I have been threatened by Southwest Airlines management that they could have me removed ... by picking up the phone." He also testified that this wife received a death threat against him in the mail after investigations into Southwest's safety violations became public.

Another FAA employee, Douglas Peters, likewise reported receiving a threat from a supervisor, who pointed at a family photograph as Peters was drawing up a report on Southwest's violations. Peters testified that his supervisor held up the photo and said, "This is what's important." Peters testified that he was told, "You have a good job here and your wife has a good job [also at the FAA].... I'd hate to see you jeopardize your and her careers trying to take down a couple of losers."

The whistle-blower testimony emphasized that the relations between the FAA and Southwest were not an exception, but indicative of the compromised state of the aviation safety system as a whole. In response, officials with the agency and within the industry have strenuously insisted that air travel has never been safer, even pointing at the belated inspections and mass flight cancellations as proof.

Southwest executives, including company chairman Herbert Kelleher and CEO Gary Kelly, who also testified April 3, asserted that "safety is the top priority" and portrayed the company's avoidance of inspections as a "record-keeping error" and a "compliance irregularity." They made clear that the company intended to appeal the $10.2 million fine that the FAA hastily levied against Southwest after the scandal was made public.

"We are currently experiencing the safest period in aviation history," the FAA's acting administrator, Robert Sturgill, similarly told the committee. "We have found ways to increase the accountability of all parties—the FAA included—and strengthen both the reporting role and the regulatory process."

The "reporting role" to which Sturgill referred is the voluntary reporting system commercial airlines are 'encouraged' to use to register inspections with the federal agency. In most cases, FAA inspectors do not inspect the aircraft. Instead, company or third party mechanics are charged with noting irregularities during maintenance, and FAA employees then review the submitted paperwork. This arrangement reduces vital safety procedures to optional company expenditures.

Such is the result of decades of privatization and deliberate dismantling of regulatory powers, the dangerous consequences of which are still unfolding.

As part of the post-Depression reforms in the United States beginning in the 1930s, the airline industry was regulated—and to a large extent, managed in its practical, day-to-day performance—through pricing and route controls set by a federal Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB). While far from eliminating the profit motive, reforms such as airline regulation prevented out-and-out gouging, provided workers with a decent standard of living, and preserved the structural integrity of the country's infrastructure for several decades.

However, regulatory controls over certain sectors of the economy—including the airlines and other transportation systems, electricity, communications, and other basic utilities—were only possible during the period in which American capitalism saw expansion. Beginning in the economic crisis of the 1970s, regulatory controls were peeled away in favor of so-called "free market" reforms.

In 1977, the Democratic Carter administration appointed Alfred Kahn, a vocal advocate of deregulation, to head the CAB. The following year, the administration enacted the Airline Deregulation Act, legislation sponsored by Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy (Mass.) that called for the elimination of CAB authority over airline prices and routes.

The law had the result of driving up competition between airlines, which swiftly undertook an effort to break airline workers unions in order to slash wages, benefits, and jobs. Beginning with the mass firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, the airline workforce and its living standards have been under continual assault. Bankruptcies and consolidations have had the effect of shedding tens of thousands of jobs, wiping out pension guarantees and drastically increasing workloads for employees over the past three decades.

At the same time, the quality and safety of air travel has plummeted. While airlines continue flying decades-old planes, flight schedules have increased substantially. Planes have been refitted to hold more passengers, fees have been added for checking more than one bag, and services such as in-flight food have been eliminated.

Flight quality declined particularly in 2007, according to the annual Airline Quality Rating survey. The report's co-author, Brent Bowen, told the Associated Press April 7 that 2007 represented "the worst year ever for the US airlines."

The survey registered a 60 percent increase in passenger complaints, most for canceled and diverted flights. The rate of on-time arrivals has dropped every year for the past five; last year, 29 percent of flights were late.

A fifth of the complaints involved lost or damaged luggage, and another 11 percent involved poor customer service. Bureau of Transportation Statistics data indicate that US airlines mishandled 4.4 million bags in 2007, up 8 percent from the year before.

The Airline Quality survey also revealed a significant rise in overbooking, with the rate of passengers being bumped from their flights rising by 13 percent.

The past year also saw an increase in unanticipated flight delays resulting in prolonged idling on airport tarmacs, with hundreds of planes taxied out and delayed for three or more hours every month, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

On March 25, the 2nd US Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a New York state law that required airlines to provide food, water, and serviceable bathroom facilities to passengers held on planes for longer than three hours before take-off. The law was passed after thousands of travelers were held on planes for as long as 10 hours in sweltering cabins and denied food and water last year at New York's Kennedy International Airport. The federal court ruled in favor of the Air Transport Association of America, the industry's major trade group, but justified its decision on the grounds that the state law interfered with federal authority.

Air travel conditions are likely to worsen in the coming year as fuel prices rise. In the last week alone, three airlines—ATA, Aloha Airlines, and Skybus—cancelled flights, cut thousands of jobs, and ceased operating. Ticketholders stranded by the folded airlines were spurned by other carriers, including American Airlines. Airlines are no longer required to honor tickets of their competitors because of the expiration of a key government protection in 2006.

As the *Wall Street Journal* commented April 8, "Airlines have a new attitude toward customers of failed carriers: It's your loss, not ours." American Airlines spokesman Tim Wagner told the *Journal*, "We didn't have a code-share relationship of any kind with these airlines, so anything we do to offer people a discount is basically out of the 'goodness of our hearts.' Any discount we give is revenue lost, and we won't be getting anything out of their bankruptcies. So in a $100-a-barrel oil environment, anything that any airline does is generous."

What is underscored by both the attitude of airline industry managers and by the crisis itself is the fundamental incompatibility of private ownership and rational organization. Exacerbating this incompatibility is another fundamental contradiction: the inherently international character of the airline industry, subjected to nationally fractured management by anarchistic and uncooperative corporate rivals.

The complexity of the international airline system is a feat of modern engineering and its operation requires the expertise of thousands of highly skilled workers. Yet under conditions in which society and the industry face rising economic crisis, the efficiency, safety, and quality of life for airline workers and passengers are all subordinated to profitability, with potentially disastrous results.

Like the economic crisis at large, the crisis of the airline industry requires a political solution, beginning with the building of an independent movement of the international working class. Along with other vital infrastructure, social and natural resources, proper management of the airline industry can only be realized through a reorganization of the entire economy on a socialist basis. Under the democratic control of workers, mass transit systems could be run as public utilities for the benefit of all, in cooperation and coordination with all other sectors of society internationally.