

Flight 1549 pilot tells Congress: Airline employees ‘hit by an economic tsunami’

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26 February 2009

Chesley B. Sullenberger III came to Washington Tuesday to testify before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "Sully" Sullenberger piloted US Airways Flight 1549 on January 15, steering the Airbus A320 to a dramatic landing on the Hudson River near Manhattan after a bird strike resulted in a loss of power in both engines. All 150 passengers and five crew members survived the spectacular emergency landing.

The veteran pilot received a standing ovation from the assembled politicians, who had invited him to Capitol Hill in hopes of squeezing a little more mileage out of the "good news" story, under conditions where reports of layoffs, foreclosures, growing social misery and inequality are dominating the news.

Sullenberger, however, chose the occasion to present a devastating account of the deteriorating conditions facing commercial pilots and other airline employees, as well as the grave dangers posed to air safety and the flying public. It was apparent that this was not quite what the politicians had expected from his appearance.

"I love my profession; I do not like what has happened to it," Sullenberger said. "I would not be doing my duty if I did not report to you that I'm deeply troubled about its future. Americans have been experiencing huge economic difficulties in recent months, but airline employees have been experiencing those challenges and more for eight years."

Airline workers have been hit by "an economic tsunami," he stated. "September 11, bankruptcies, fluctuating fuel prices, mergers, loss of pensions and revolving-door management teams who have used airline employees as an ATM have left the people who work for the airlines in the United States with extreme economic difficulties."

The pilot credited with the most stunning landing maneuver in recent aviation history recounted how US Airways has slashed pilots' pay and benefits. The airline sought bankruptcy protection in 2002 and again in 2004, before merging with America West. Pilots agreed then to an 18 percent cut in pay and retirements, the third round of cuts in two years.

Sullenberger said of his fellow pilots, "It is an incredible testament to the collective character, professionalism and dedication of my colleagues in the industry that they are still able to function at such a high level," after the endless series of concessions and givebacks.

Sully Sullenberger, 58, a former Air Force pilot, has flown for US Airways for 29 years. His decision to remain a pilot, however, has involved a large degree of personal sacrifice, motivated by his dedication to the profession. He told the House subcommittee, "It is my personal experience that my decision to remain in the profession I love has come at great financial cost to me and my family.

"My pay has been cut 40 percent. My pension, like most airline pensions, has been terminated by a PBGC [federal Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation] guarantee worth only pennies to the dollar." Sullenberger said he has been forced to take on a second job and work seven days a week to make ends meet.

He continued, "While airline pilots are by no means alone in our financial struggles—I want to acknowledge how difficult it is for everyone right now—it is important to underscore that the terms of our employment have changed dramatically from when I began my career, leading to an untenable financial situation for pilots and their families."

He recounted how when US Airways offered jobs to

laid-off pilots, 60 percent chose not to return to work. "Please do not think I exaggerate," he said, "when I say that I do not know a single professional airline pilot who wants his or her children to follow in their footsteps."

Perhaps the most chilling of Sullenberger's comments focused on the dangers posed to airline safety by the ruining of pilots' careers and working conditions. He said that the "current experience and skills of our country's professional airline pilots come from investments made years ago, when we were able to attract the ambitious, talented people who now frequently seek professional careers elsewhere."

He cautioned, "If we do not sufficiently value the airline piloting profession and future pilots are less experienced and less skilled, it logically follows that we will see negative consequences to the flying public and to our country."

He called for the development of a culture in every airline and aviation organization "that balances the competing needs of accountability and learning ... to detect and correct deficiencies before they lead to an accident."

This statement was particularly haunting. There is every reason to fear, given the current state of the US airline industry, that future crisis situations like the one that faced the crew of Flight 1549 will end not in triumph, but in tragedy.

Since the onset of deregulation of the airlines in the late 1970s and early 1980s, airline employees have faced a relentless assault on their jobs, wages and working conditions. At the same time, airline CEOs have amassed huge fortunes.

This assault on airline workers has been promoted by Democratic and Republican politicians alike. Deregulation was initiated under the Democratic Carter administration, beginning in 1977. In 1981, the Reagan administration fired more than 11,000 striking PATCO air traffic controllers, dismissing virtually the entire fleet of professionals trained to monitor air traffic.

Bankruptcy courts have ripped up contracts. The major or "legacy" carriers have pushed to slash costs in the face of competition from smaller, low-wage, budget airlines. Thousands of pilots have lost their jobs, and those remaining have seen their wages shrink dramatically.

According to airlinepilotcentral.com, an experienced

pilot on one of the "legacy" airlines earns anywhere from \$156 to \$197 an hour, flying an average of about 75 hours a month.

Regional pilots earn far less. One such pilot told airliners.net: "I personally make \$18,000-\$20,000 a year. I'm responsible for a 25,000,000-dollar airplane and fly hundreds of people safely to their destination every day... Most major airline pilots make around \$100,000. The average in the regionals is closer to \$50,000."

Ending his prepared remarks, Sullenberger emphasized the critical character of the human component in the airline industry: "In aviation, the bottom line is that the single most important piece of safety equipment is an experienced, well-trained pilot."

While the millions who followed with awe the landing of Flight 1549 would readily agree, the irony of the praise heaped on Captain Sullenberger by the congressional committee would also not be lost on the more astute.

The man hailed as a hero by the media and politicians exposed an uncomfortable truth. He should be commended not only for his skillful piloting of the Airbus A320 last month, but for speaking out on the horrendous conditions imposed on US airline workers and the dangers posed to the flying public.

The author recommends:

The social paradox in the "miraculous" rescue on the Hudson

[17 January 2009]



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