

Federal judge bans strike by Seattle airport refueling workers

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US District Court Judge James Robart granted a request for a preliminary injunction last week blocking a strike by airplane refueling workers at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac).

Airplane Service International Group (ASIG) filed a federal lawsuit on October 5 requesting an injunction against its workers, who fuel 75 percent of the planes at the airport, in response to their overwhelming vote to walk off the job earlier that week. Two days before ASIG had promised Alaska Airline, its largest customer at Sea-Tac, that service would continue with the use of managers and refuelers from other cities.

The roughly 100 non-union workers voted at the beginning of October to strike in response to the suspension of their coworker, Alex Popescu, and, as well, ASIG's failure to address ongoing workplace hazards. Ostensibly suspended for yelling obscenities at supervisors, Popescu had been at the forefront of a campaign by the workers to expose severe safety deficiencies in the equipment used in refueling.

According to the *Seattle Times*, "Popescu said brakes on a truck were fixed only after he reported the problem to the Port of Seattle Fire Department. He was suspended, he said, after complaining about a truck whose drive shaft fell to the tarmac on a ramp where planes are fueled."

ASIG is a global contractor with operations in 83 airports scattered throughout North and Central America, Asia and Europe. In its lawsuit ASIG lawyers cited the Railway Labor Act, amended in 1936 to include airlines, as prohibiting strike action prior to dispute resolution efforts. Judge Robart's decision rejected the absence of a recognized union, as provided for in the law and argued by lawyers for the refuelers, and asserted that the act's purpose is to "settle all disputes" that may threaten interstate commerce.

Robart, appointed to the Federal District Court in 2004 by President George W. Bush, ruled that the dispute resolution process provided for by the act—a process that frequently takes years—must be utilized before a strike can be initiated.

Responding to the safety violations reported by the workers, the Federal Aviation Administration conducted an inspection of refueling operations at Sea-Tac. It found that "None of the operations that we observed showed any negligence or unsafe practices."

Numerous safety violation reports were submitted by the refueling workers. One stated, "I went to start truck with my foot on brake when truck started, the brake pedal went to the floor. This happened after the FAA said there were no problems at ASIG!!"

Another worker reported, "On October 4, when the FAA came to inspect fueling operation, ASIG management took several broken trucks out of service.... Until inspection these trucks were being used." The worker added, "I believe the company did this because the media came and the company wanted to show they were fixing everything." (These documents can be viewed [here](#).)

Working Washington, the group involved with organizing demonstrations in support of the refueling workers, and which was included in Judge Robart's ruling, has stated that it "will completely comply with the injunction." Working Washington is a coalition of various groups with primary support from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Although protesting low-wage jobs—refuelers are paid only \$10 an hour—and organizing among that layer of workers, its essential task is to maintain the subordination of workers to the Democratic Party.

While exhorting the readers of its web site to "get out the vote" and endorsing a variety of Democratic

politicians, Working Washington fails to call for unified industrial action of all airport workers against Judge Robart's injunction. Nor does Working Washington, or the SEIU, explain why, after four years of the Obama presidency, the conditions of workers have not only failed to improve but have, in fact, deteriorated.

As with the Chicago teachers' strike and that of the Detroit sewer workers, the main obstacle confronted by workers in the struggle against ever more oppressive working conditions is the unions. Workers must form rank-and-file committees to organize a unified industrial struggle and prepare for a political fight against the Democratic Party, which is prepared, as in Chicago and Detroit, to use every agency, the judicial system, the police, etc., to suppress any opposition to the dictates of the corporations.



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